



Carpenter Sean Kelly built this space-saving and attention-grabbing spiral staircase in the two-story studio he shares with his family.

Spiraling through space

In a roundabout way, these finely crafted spiral staircases could be the next big thing for small, sensible and stylish spaces.

By Joel Gorthy
Photos by Collin Andrew
SPECIAL PUBLICATIONS

Sean Kelly pauses at the second-floor landing. He lets his eyes swirl down the spiral staircase to the floor, some 17 feet below.

The woodworker who installed the spiral stairs in this airy two-story addition to a south Eugene home, Kelly seems to lose himself for a moment. He says gazing at the sweeping shape gives him the sense of “traveling through time.” And building these precisely wrought structures, which allow him to conquer vertical space in a tiny lateral footprint, sometimes conjures what he describes as a “metaphysical” feeling.

A spiral staircase has the artistic power and functionality to become a focal point, “like a piece of furniture your house,” says Kelly, who uses salvaged native hardwoods for his stairs and the commissioned furniture he also builds. Long intrigued by the awe-inspiring and space-saving potential of spiral stairs, Kelly built a black oak-and-cherry prototype in his own Eugene home, a 776-square-foot “secondary dwelling unit” that is a model of efficiency.

With many homeowners interested in creative infill development and expanding existing homes rather than buying new, Kelly says he foresees a surge in demand for space-saving solutions, including spiral stairs.

“In some cases, if you’re doing a second floor, you’re limited to a spiral staircase or you’re going to lose one-third of your space” if you build straight stairs, he says.

In Kelly’s home, for example, the compact stairs allowed architect Will Dixon to design a studio-style floor plan with a bathroom, office nook, kitchen and living space on the first floor, which opens to a bedroom and viewing porch above. While the residence is

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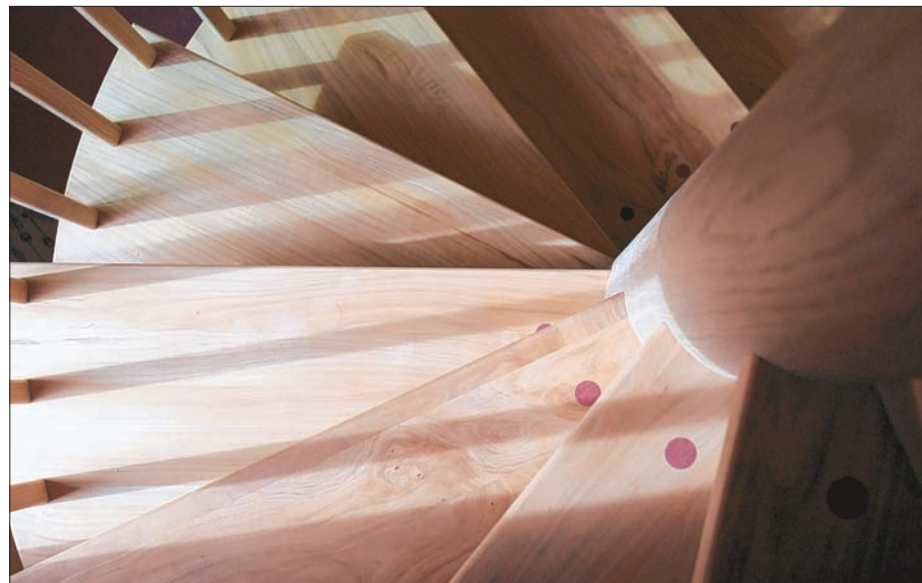
cozy for Kelly, his partner, Brianna, and their son Dillon, 2, the two-story design would not have been possible in such a tight footprint — in the backyard of the main home, which the family rents to tenants — without the spiral staircase.

Choosing spiral stairs for a sensibly sized new home or addition can make long-term financial sense, Kelly says, despite the higher initial costs versus building straight stairs. Kelly says his spirals — on which he collaborates with mentor Kevin Delay, of Rutledge Staircase & Handrail — might cost from \$8,000 to \$20,000 to build and install, depending on the wood species used, the overall height and other variables.

“People are starting to want to build with more quality than quantity,” Kelly says, which can mean smaller homes that cost less to build, heat and cool.

In his pursuit of a solid and beautiful spiral design, Kelly has pieced together a custom lathe for turning center columns as long as 18 feet. Each column is comprised of 14 staves laminated together to form the round shape.

He also had a saw blade fabricated just for the exacting cuts that allow a seamless marriage of each rib to the central post. The ribs, or support pieces beneath each step, can be seen when looking up at the staircase. “It looks like the ribs grow right out of the center column,” Kelly says, making these stairs



With an exacting fit, each riser looks like an organic extension of the center column on these stairs, which Kelly recently installed in an addition to a Eugene home.

all the more appealing to “people who want something unique and artistic.”

The staircases also are marvels of precision. For the components to unite from top to bottom, Kelly and Delay — who crafts the handrails — work within a margin of error of less than 4/1,000 inch along spiral’s length.

“Every single component you see is structural, and the weight translates all

the way down the whole staircase,” adds Kelly, whose design is backed up with engineering certification.

To prove his point, Kelly does several pull-ups from a riser on the stairs at his house. While the staircase is a vision of fluidity, the structure hardly quivers.

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Sean Kelly turns the center column for his next spiral staircase on his custom-built lathe.

At the Home & Garden Show

Woodworker Sean Kelly, who specializes in building spiral staircases, and his mentor/collaborator, Kevin Delay of Rutledge Staircase & Handrail, will be available for consultation at the March 11-14 Lane County Home & Garden Show. They will have information, portfolios and more — even a small version of one of their spiral staircase collaborations — for visitors to see in exhibit No. 121 (see map, Page 6).

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- www.skwoodworker.com
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