

ROMINA DE SANTIS, technical adviser at Master Builders WA answers your questions about home building



THE QUESTION

We have recently moved into a two-storey home with a feature staircase in the entry. We have never lived in a two-storey home before, but obviously visited plenty. Every time I go down the stairs, I get this terrible feeling I am going to fall at the end. I thought this was because there is no handrail for the last three steps that follow a comfortable landing. We measured the height of the steps and they are shallower than the rest of the stairs. I called the builder and they assured me this is OK. Is this correct?



THE ANSWER

Staircases in homes are often used as a striking entry feature, allowing designers and builders to be creative. But because of the risk for slips, trips and falls, stairs also have very strict provisions for the safety of occupants. They have specific construction tolerances to adhere to for the treads and risers, require the installation of handrails and balustrades with maximum openings to provide safe movement, and limits to the number of consecutive steps without the inclusion of a landing.

However, the Building Code of Australia does not require a balustrade or handrail for the portion of a stairway with a difference in level less than one metre, so this is why there is no handrail at the bottom of your staircase.

Because you have a landing before those last three steps, the Code allows you to change the rise and going (tread height and depth) in the separate flights.

As long as the heights are consistent through each flight (separated by a landing) and meet a ratio between 550 and 700 – calculated by multiplying the height of the tread by two and adding the tread depth, i.e. 2R (rise) + G (going) – the stair meets the requirements of the Building Code.

Although your design and construction sounds compliant, it might still be confusing because you would program your gait for the stairs as you descend and do not expect the difference (even if only slight) for the end of them.

There are a few things you could do:

- ✦ Include a handrail for the last three steps, but it is probably not going to flow with what you may already have or look out of place with a long landing. The handrail acts as something to grab if you feel unsteady (but it's not a long way to go).
- ✦ Consider changing the material on one of the flights so it triggers a reminder of the difference, as visitors may also experience the same feeling on the way down the stairs.
- ✦ A plant, artwork or statue would help in defining the two separate flights.
- ✦ Putting a contrasting nosing strip to the edge of the tread will also act as a visual cue to the tread position.
- ✦ Good lighting will assist in keeping the stair safe.

For more information about building, visit the Master Builders A-Z Building Information Directory at www.abnrcw.com. If you have any questions about home building or purchase issues, email cradine@abnrcw.com

PICTURES: BGPiX; ANTONIS PAPANTONIOU

OPPORTUNITY IS STILL KNOCKING

Our economic forecast is brighter than many people may imagine, says Master Builders director, Michael McLean

THE economic downturn in Western Australia was inevitable following our unprecedented mining boom and subsequent population increases and housing approvals. Nevertheless, “doom and gloom” is hardly on the horizon.

That’s why Master Builders teamed up with Engineers Australia, Consult Australia, Australian Institute of Architects and Australian Institute of Building to eschew the naysayers and identify some imminent building activity hot spots.

“Future Opportunities for the Built Environment” was the name of the joint forum we hosted to give our members a deeper understanding of the prospects that lie ahead.

Here’s an overview of what the future holds:

- ✦ The Metropolitan Redevelopment Authority has a solid construction program over the next two years that will generate more than \$150 million to builders in 2016-17 alone. Particular opportunities will arise around the Midland Health precinct, including a new medical school for Curtin University.
- ✦ Transforming the Government’s \$453 million investment in Elizabeth Quay will occur over a longer period via the Ritz Carlton hotel, residential towers and offices.
- ✦ Lend Lease will commence its first residential tower in the Waterbank land development on the Swan River near the Causeway in 2017. This \$65 million project will yield 267 apartments, with more than 300 to follow in subsequent stages.
- ✦ Forward works have commenced at Scarborough Beach as part of a \$100 million investment over the next two years. A beachfront swimming pool and new life saving club will bring renewed life to this popular beachfront location.
- ✦ A huge construction and expansion program is on the cards for various shopping precincts, including Mandurah Forum, Rockingham, Ellenbrook, Midland, Galleria and Whitford City. An investment of \$750 million has been allocated to improve Garden City alone. Vicinity will be the main

developer of most of these multi-million-dollar projects, as well as a 25,000sq m Direct Factory Outlet at Perth Airport. These projects alone will provide jobs for more than 5000 building workers and apprentices over the next three to five years.

✦ LandCorp is also investing heavily in some exciting projects, including the Cockburn Coast development, which will create about 5000 new dwellings over the next 15 to 20 years.

Other LandCorp developments that will boost new housing supply include Claremont on the Park, Shenton Park Hospital

Redevelopment, Parkside Walk Jollifont, Broome North, Middleton Beach in Albany, Koonhaha Bay in Bunbury, Crossroads Industrial in Forrestdale and the Western Trade Coast in the southern suburbs.

✦ Building Management and Works, the government agency responsible for overseeing the building of schools, hospitals and other public sector projects, is forecasting a lower construction budget of \$400 million in 2017-18.

✦ With people living longer, aged care is a growth area for builders who can construct additional aged care facilities or convert older homes to enhance mobility for the disabled. With the number of people reaching 100 likely to grow from 5000 to 50,000 in the next 30 years, “ageing in place” is becoming a higher priority to the housing industry.

The ongoing challenge for the building industry is to ensure it has the skills and labour to build the type of infrastructure our economy and community need in the future. Although some sectors of the building industry might be struggling at the moment, there are lots of new opportunities ahead that will continue to stimulate building activity over the foreseeable future.

From my experience, this is a great time to be thinking of building a new home.



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