

# WOODSHOP NEWS<sup>®</sup>

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Shaping the Successful Shop<sup>™</sup>

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The first manual of procedures for shop employees takes shape

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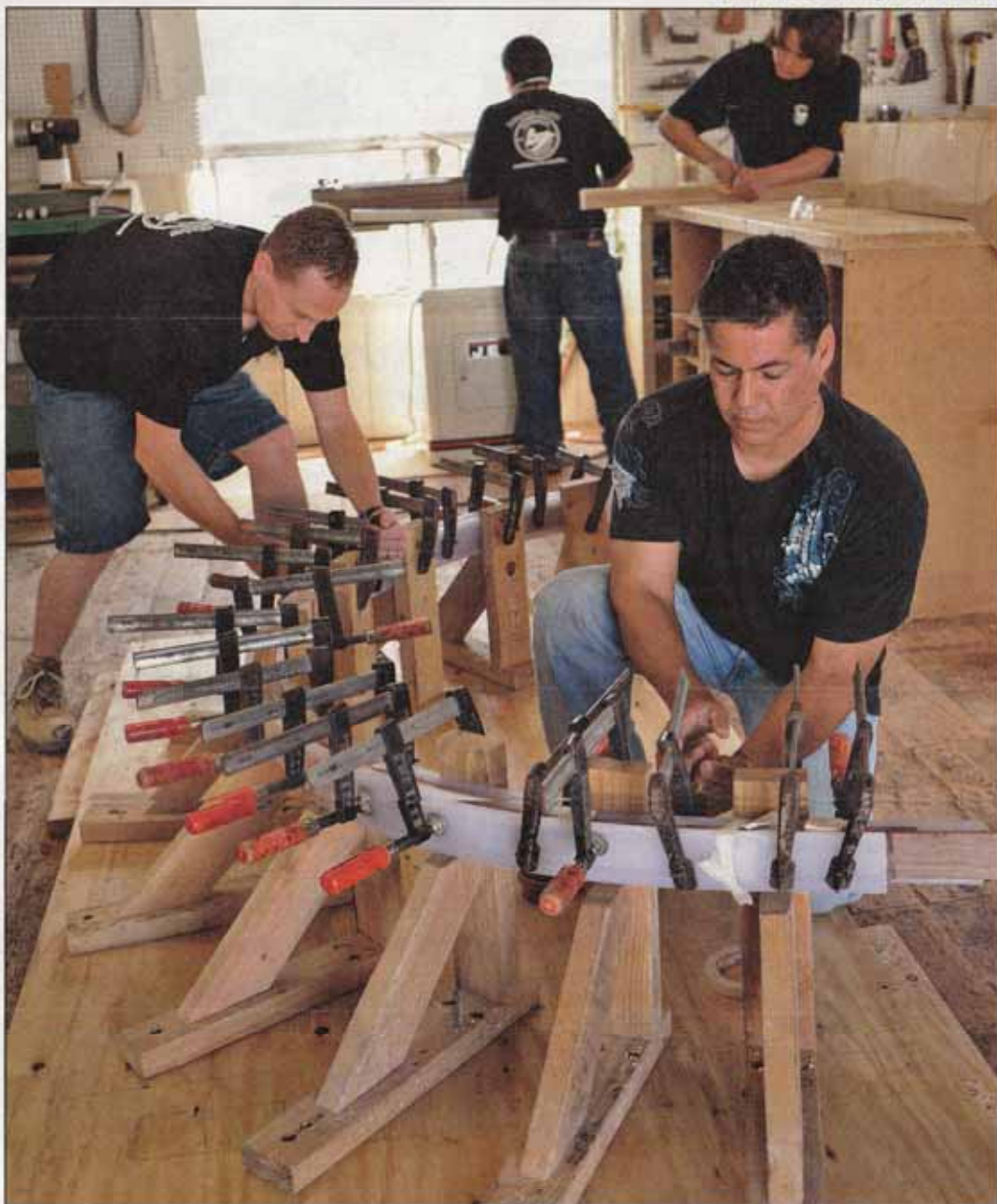
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## Step by step

San Clemente Woodworking is a custom stair shop in San Clemente, Calif. Owner Ed Estrada, right, says that while the stair business is not as competitive as the cabinet business, having highly skilled employees is essential.



WOODSHOP NEWS 1-4 OCT 10

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BY JENNIFER HICKS / STAFF WRITER

# STEPPING UP TO THE CHALLENGE

South California shop masters the intricate craft of building quality staircases for high-end clients

**F**ounded in 1986, San Clemente Woodworking in San Clemente, Calif., has built a strong reputation for providing custom staircases to residents and building contractors throughout Southern California.

Owner Ed Estrada, along with his brother Nick Estrada, operates the business with a half-dozen skilled craftsmen with expertise in bending rails, turning and precise duplication of architectural designs. There are those who would argue that building stairs ranks up there with boatbuilding on the woodworking degree-of-difficulty scale and, while a staircase doesn't have to carry a crew across an ocean, it does have to meet building codes.

"Everything is completely exposed, there's nothing hidden," says Ed Estrada of his craft. "We minimize the use of trim, which I personally think hides mistakes. We also have to meet required safety codes. There are codes with cabinets which are more industry-standard-oriented, but with stairs you have codes on attachments. If someone leans on a rail and goes over, it can be pretty dangerous."

The shop primarily serves clients within Orange County. Clients are mainly comprised of residential homeowners requesting new staircases or staircase repair, as well as building contractors. Commercial clients are less prevalent, but are catered to on occasion.

## Chasing opportunity

Estrada, who is originally from Los Angeles, began building custom staircases in 1982 as a member of his local carpentry union. He worked for S&S Homes of the Central Coast in Arroyo Grande, Calif., where his apprenticeship sufficed as formal training. There, he learned everything about the building and carpentry trades, from framing to cabinetry to finish work.

"The company I worked for had their own training program, as did all other union companies that were hiring apprentices. They worked with me step by step, little by little, letting me do things on my own until they thought I was ready to work on a house myself."

Estrada says he knew instantly he had an affinity for hands-on work, particular-

ly with staircases. By 1989, he was living in Sunset Beach and had started his own one-man custom stair-building

business. He actively recruited clients by going door to door.

"That's probably why we are still in

business. That helped us develop a strong reputation by word of mouth."

In 1989, Estrada was expecting his first son and he had to make ends meet. His stepfather offered to rent him his garage in San Clemente and the family moved. At that point, Estrada had quite a bit of work with a considerable amount of high-end clients.

## Steady work

San Clemente Woodworking completes approximately 100 jobs per year and specializes in freestanding staircases. About 25 percent of the work comes from contractors and builders, and the remaining residential clients are those who've discovered the business via word of mouth or through the company Web site. Estrada can drop a couple Hollywood



## SAN CLEMENTE WOODWORKING

**Owner:** Ed Estrada

**Location:** San Clemente, Calif.

**Annual gross income:** \$700,000 on average

**Number of Employees:** 7

**Size of Shop:** 2,300 sq. ft.

**About:** San Clemente Woodworking is committed to

high-quality work-

manship in all of its custom projects. The company specializes in custom staircases, and iron and wood staircases, curved staircases and hardwood floors. The company is one of the largest custom staircase builders in Southern California.



names as clients, including comedian Sinbad and actor Alec Baldwin.

The shop has also completed several stair projects in office buildings. While Estrada says he'll never turn down work, these jobs tend to be rather mundane since there is little opportunity for creativity.

The designing is where the fun comes in, says Estrada, who works with a dynamic range of styles. The process starts with Estrada making a visual appraisal of the client's home to determine their personal aesthetic taste.

### Good location

Estrada has rented his current shop, located in a residential and commercial neighborhood, since 1995. The shop measures about 2,300 sq. ft. and there's a 500-sq.-ft. storage garage across the street.

"We don't have CNC machines or anything like that. We have shapers, table saws — just about every hand power tool you can imagine," he says.

- The list includes:
- Grizzly 24" drum sander
  - Two 10" Delta Unisaws

*continued on next page*



Ed Estrada is a hands-on owner who has decided against incorporating CNC machinery into his shop.



Employee John Flagg attaches a cap to a newel post.

"When I'm going to be designing for someone, I go to their house and see the style of architecture of their home and even look at their furniture. People usually tailor their furniture to their personal taste, even if it doesn't necessarily go with the exterior or interior architecture of the building ... so the furniture's a real indicator of what they might want."

Typically, Estrada will hand-draft a floor plan, but rarely does he create an elevation sketch or preview of the staircase itself. He works with clients by means of a standard checklist that spares parties the headache of a myriad of choices.

The checklist, which also serves as an estimate sheet once all of the client's selections are tallied, includes the following items in one column: handrail, curved rail, wall rail, balusters, newel post, end treads, wall treads, cap, stringer skirt, wall skirt, volute, turnouts, starting cap, starting step, solid treads and shoe rail. The next several columns offer wood choices, such as oak and maple, to allow clients options for matching or contrasting their chosen stair components.

"I created this estimate sheet to make the process easier. We go down the list and I pretty much educate them on staircases at that point. If you just dump a client with a set of brochures and not get them on track, they'll wander all over the place changing their minds. This saves time. We go down the list and discuss each item."

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