

# Sunday Independent

## ARCHITECT'S CLINIC

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### How can I improve my outdoor stairs?

**Q** WE are seeking to increase the safety and enhance the look of a very 'ugly' outdoor staircase. We do not have vehicular access at the front of the house due to the proximity of a road so we use the back — the garage is underneath. Would it prove costly? We would appreciate any expert advice.

**A** THE staircase in your photo (right) does indeed look very utilitarian. Outdoor stairs are generally the least preferred option for access to upper floors, mostly because of the effects of weather. When it rains they get slippery, and being outside they have to be made of materials which withstand the weather. But there are many ways that external stairs can be made attractive. We need only think of stone farm buildings or the plaster staircases of the Greek Isles. With no budget limitations, we could imagine virtually anything!

#### MAKING IT MORE BEAUTIFUL

In this case, you might consider the two aspects of safety and beauty. Beauty will be relatively easy. The trick is to make the stairs into something either more solid, or more transparent. More solid might mean filling in the undercroft and replacing the metal rails with a solid rendered finish — like a framed structure that is finished in a cement board that is then plastered. This would make the stairs much more sculptural.

If you do not want to infill the area below the stairs, just the balustrade and hand-rail could be made solid, again giving a sculptural effect. Neither of these options would be very expensive. Alternatively, you could remove the metal balustrade and replace it with glass, which would give a very modern look to the stairs. This would be quite expensive and may not suit the aesthetics of the house.

If you are considering changes to your home, work with a registered architect. You can find one on [ria.ie](http://ria.ie), the registration body for architects in Ireland.

#### MAKING IT SAFER

What both of these options do is hide the surface of the steps themselves, reducing their impact on the eye. You could also consider painting the concrete (with non-slip paint), which would be relatively cheap; or face the steps in stone or tile (again, non-slip), which would be more expensive.

Treating the surface would help the safety side, as would highlighting the top step and



bottom step in a contrasting colour. If the width allows it, a handrail fixed to the side wall of the house would also help with safety and could be as elegant as the budget would allow.

The best way to make virtually any stairs safer is to reduce the number of steps. This means that you fall a lesser distance if you trip. In this case, it would be expensive, as it would mean inserting a landing near the half-way point and constructing a new stairs below that point. This would require extra area. While it would be better to have two flights of 7/8 steps with a landing between them, these stairs have 15 risers, which is not unusual.

In summary, I think that the most effective solution is to enclose the metal railings and make the balustrade solid, install a second handrail on the wall of the house and paint the concrete with non-slip paint, with contrasting colours on the top and bottom step.

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