

## Stairway to the Stars

Zepsa's woodworking wins A-list following

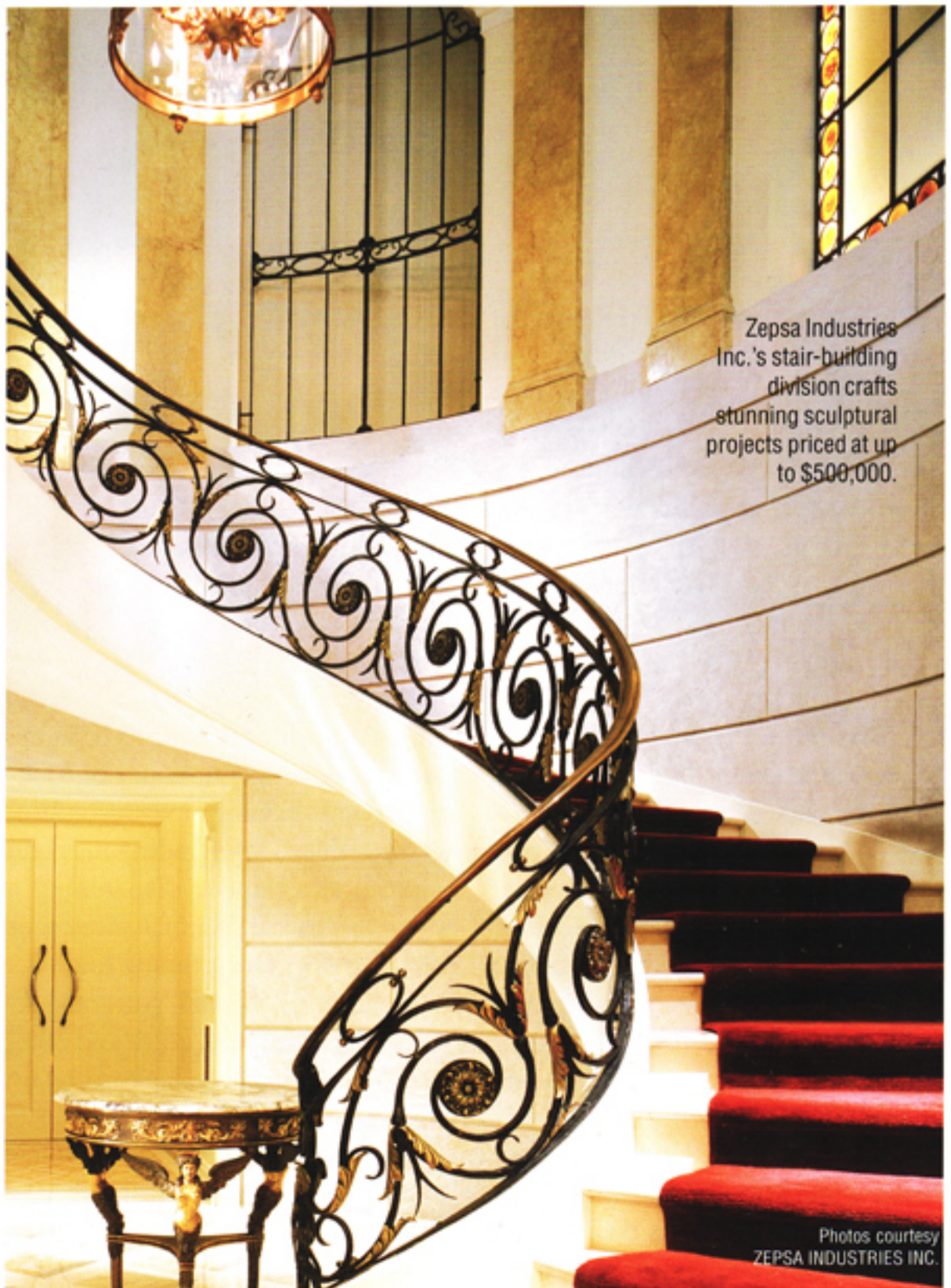
by Bea Quirk

**W**hen Ed Zepsa emigrated from Yugoslavia to Chicago some 40 years ago, little did the 10-year-old know the love of wood he took from a family of furniture makers would grow into a business that outfits the interiors of homes for the stars.

Zepsa came to Charlotte in 1981 and started Zepsa Industries Inc. on a modest scale — working alone out of a garage. Today, he and a staff of 75 are housed in a 75,000-square-foot space and post more than \$10 million in annual revenue creating high-end architectural woodwork for estate homes.

His customers live in mansions of 20,000 to 40,000 square feet that cost up to \$50 million. Zepsa's clients — whom he describes as "Fortune 400, billion-dollar types" — have included the likes of singer Mariah Carey, cosmetics magnate Estee Lauder and rockers Jon Bon Jovi and Bruce Springsteen.

"The world is getting richer, and there's a lot of wealth out there,"



Zepsa Industries Inc.'s stair-building division crafts stunning sculptural projects priced at up to \$500,000.

Photos courtesy  
 ZEPSA INDUSTRIES INC.

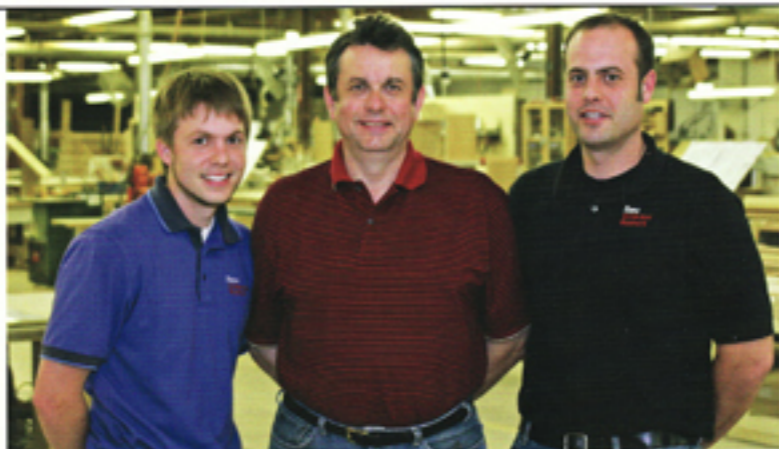
Zepa says. "Houses are getting bigger and bigger and more lavish."

In recent years, the firm has expanded the scope of its work to include the interiors of world-class yachts that stretch 160 feet or more with price tags starting at about \$20 million. The company has completed five nautical commissions in the last four years. In addition, the company has begun making custom furniture for clients.

When Zepa takes on a project, it's usually not a single piece of work. "We take on the entire interior — it's all the woodwork — including cabinetry, molding, trim, mantels, coffered ceilings, doors and stairs. We do the design and engineering, fabrication and final installation," he says. "We approach interior woodwork like fine furniture — bench-built and handcrafted with a studio sensibility and high level of skill.

"Our work is truly custom to the bone, not just customized," Zepa adds. "For us, everything starts with the raw lumber and an innovative, creative design. Then we fabricate a one-of-a-kind project that's a reflection of the designer's intent." Zepa has divisions for architectural woodwork and stairs. "Stairs are a specialty of ours, and sometimes we'll just do a staircase for a home," he says. "These are elaborate sculptural creations, with monumental stair work and hand-carved posts, balustrades and railings — often the centerpiece of a grand foyer." A single staircase may start at \$20,000 and exceed \$500,000.

The process for creating a staircase or the woodwork for an entire house is similar. Typically, a designer or architect approaches the company



Family affair: Ed Zepa (center) relies on sons, Peter (left) and Brian, who oversee the woodworking and stairway divisions, respectively. His wife, Maripat, is office manager.

with a project. It's not uncommon for Zepa to never meet the homeowner, but representatives will visit the shop and attend meetings.

The company's conceptual drawings are turned into working drawings, which can take up as many as 500 pages. Revisions and design changes are common. The staff will fabricate the tooling required to make profiles in wood. Field conditions are surveyed and measured, which can take a month.

The hardwoods and exotic veneers needed for a project are then ordered. But it's not simply a matter of looking through a catalog or visiting a lumberyard. Zepa says finding the right material can require dispatching a buyer to Africa, South America or Russia to select a particular log.

"At this level of detail, you are looking for grain, texture, color and other aesthetic nuances to achieve a certain look," he explains.

Besides standard American woods including walnut, mahogany and cherry, the firm uses such exotic species as ebony, imbuia, aniegre,

pearwood, makore and sapele.

For a home's interior, 30 craftsmen will spend six to nine months to build all the pieces, which then go to a team of 15 finishers. Options include distressing, faux finishes, glazes, varnishes and shellacs. Every surface receives a hand-wiped oil finish.

The woodwork is then wrapped, crated and sent to the project site, where installation requires three to four months. Everything is hand-fitted and hand-cut. The entire process typically takes about a year, although some projects have lasted as long as four.

The cost ranges from \$20,000 to \$5 million.

Creating the interior of a yacht is similar, but it's more challenging. "There are no right angles or square corners — everything is twisting and curving," Zepa notes. "The woodwork is part of the building of the hull, and technical systems are integrated into it. Everything has to be a lightweight material, and everything also has to be removable. And because the ship is constantly turning and tipping and under stress, everything has to

have special latches, hardware and construction details."

Zepa says only a handful of companies in the world compete for such intricate residential woodworking. "Putting it altogether at this level of execution in a one-stop shop is hard to find." Craftsmen with the necessary skill are difficult to find, he adds. The company also hires young workers interested in the craft to teach. "We grow our own, so to speak. We want to ensure the long-term survival and expansion of the trade craft."

Like his father's furniture shop, where he worked as a teenager, Zepa's company is very much a family enterprise.

His wife, Maripat, is the office manager, and his sons also have leadership roles. Peter runs the architectural woodwork division, and Brian manages the stairs division.

Zepa says the wealthy patrons he serves tend to live in enclaves in the Northeast, as well as resorts such as West Palm Beach and Naples, Fla., and Aspen, Colo.

The firm does about one or two projects a year in the Carolinas. "But I'd like to do more," he says.

To learn more about Zepa Industries, visit [www.zepa.com](http://www.zepa.com). ♦



Top Flight: Zepa Industries caters to the top of the market with its cabinetry, trim details and stairs.