Sturdy Details for Wood Columns

by Albert Fink

The former owners of this two-story brick Federal house attempted to transform it into a "colonial" — a popular house style in that region of Virginia — by adding on a full-height front porch with columns. The author was called in to replace the rotten column surrounds.

Somewhere along the line, someone had tried to "improve" this perfectly good central Virginia Federal brick house by adding on a portico with huge (20x20-inch) box columns. I was called in to replace the original wood columns, which had been built around 6-inch steel posts. The columns were poorly flashed at the top, and set right on the masonry at their bases, with no ventilation provided. By the time I saw them, the wood was cupped, twisted, and rotting — really in terrible shape.

I first suggested to the owner that we downsize the new columns to 12x12 inches for better scale. And we added some details to ensure that the new columns would last for a long time.

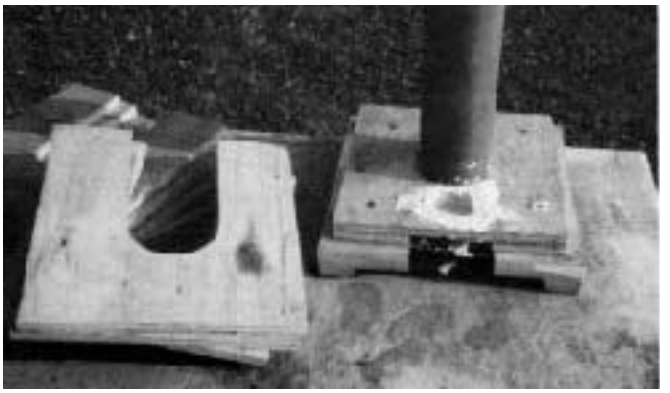

Figure 1. *The columns rest on aluminum plinths (at right), slotted so they could be slipped around the steel posts. At left is a stack of the plywood supports the author devised for fastening the wood columns to the steel posts.*

For the bases we used readily available aluminum plinths. These have raised feet to allow for drainage and ventilation at the bottom (see Figure 1). A 6-inch-wide slot cut in each one allowed us to slip the plinths onto the columns.

To give us a secure way of fastening the wooden column surround to the steel posts, we devised a system of 1/2-inch plywood supports. These were cut out so they could be slipped around the steel posts in pairs, one from each side. We tacked them together with a finish nail gun and drove wedges between the post and the supports to hold them snug (see Figure 2).

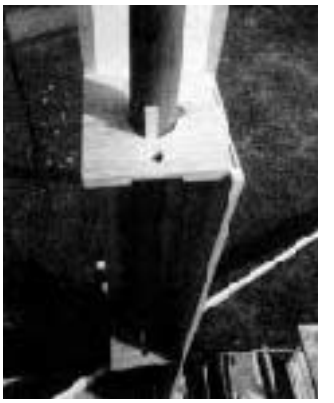

Figure 2. *To provide a snug nailer for the wood column, the author slipped two plywood supports, one from each side, around the steel post. He nailed the supports together, then drove in wedges to secure them. Note the biscuit slots in the end of the pine 1x12 at right.*

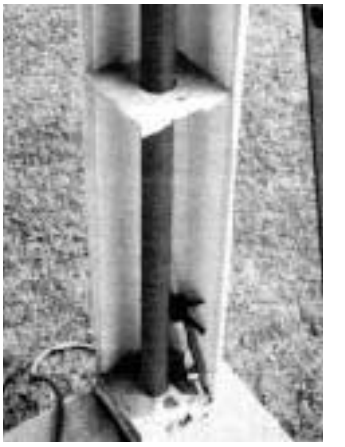

Figure 3. *The author used clear 1x12 southern pine for the wood columns. He sealed and backprimed the boards, leaving the edges untreated for good glue adhesion.*

Figure 4. *Lots of trips up and down the ladders made for slightly risky work.*

We used select 1x12 yellow pine, which we sealed and backprimed (see Figure 3). Biscuit-joining the butt joints gave a seamless finish appearance.

A good flashing job and ventilation outlet at the top finished up the columns. It was high work and entailed many trips up and down the ladders (see Figure 4), but everyone was satisfied with the result.■

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