

Building a Better Deck

by Jamie Fisher

While a deck affords some of homeownership's simple pleasures, designing a deck is not always a simple matter. This is no wonder, for while you are creating a new living space, you are also trying to join house to landscape without compromising either one.

A deck I recently designed illustrates some of the issues and considerations that typically come into play. The house,

sented several serious problems. First, while a long, narrow deck works okay on a cruise ship, it's pretty worthless on a house, for by the time you accommodate tables, chairs, umbrellas, the hot tub, the barbecue, and other typical deck items, there isn't much room for people to move around.

Second, the sloping terrain of this lot put the deck's front edge about 14 feet off

Proposed Deck

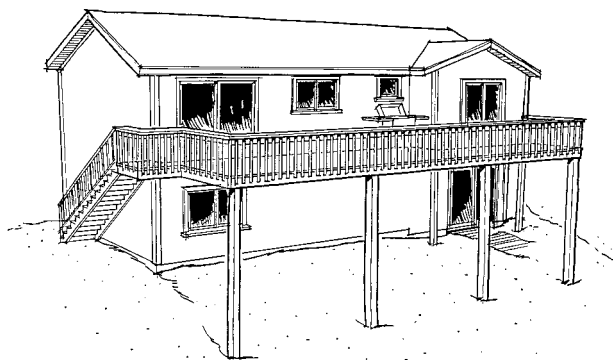


Figure 1. The original deck design for this house overlooking Puget Sound not only failed to connect the house to the surrounding landscape, it also obscured views from the house and blocked light from the walkout basement.

a nondescript one-story with a mid-level entry and a full daylight basement, sits on a large, steep, heavily wooded, south-facing rural lot overlooking Puget Sound. The owner, wanting a large deck to take advantage of this dramatic setting, came to me with a design calling for a single large platform (see Figure 1). The proposed deck ran the entire length of the house to allow access from both the dining room and the master bedroom. To keep the square footage reasonable, the depth would be about 12 feet. A stair at the west end led to grade.

While straightforward and relatively economical to build, this design pre-

sented several serious problems. First, while a long, narrow deck works okay on a cruise ship, it's pretty worthless on a house, for by the time you accommodate tables, chairs, umbrellas, the hot tub, the barbecue, and other typical deck items, there isn't much room for people to move around.

Third, running the deck in front of the master bedroom would have meant that anybody could walk up to the bedroom door and stare in. This possibility would make the room feel less remote, probably necessitating drapes or privacy blinds.

Finally, and most serious, this deck would have spoiled the view it was designed to enjoy. Think of standing at the kitchen sink or lying in bed in the master bedroom. Without the deck, you

can look out the window at the Pacific Northwest forest in the foreground with the water beyond. Once the deck is built, however, the foreground is dominated by the deck and its attendant clutter, and even the more distant view of the Sound must be glimpsed over and through the guardrail. While not quite as bad as the soldier who destroyed the village in order to save it, the deck certainly diminishes an amenity in the process of capturing it.

A Step-Down Does the Job

Now consider the revised deck shown in Figure 2. Here, only a small 10x10 landing remains at the main-floor level, just outside the dining room door, where it provides room for a small table and a couple of chairs. The main deck is down seven risers, at a level between the main floor and the daylight basement. The master bedroom accesses the deck from its own small stair and landing.

This scheme offers several important advantages. It retains a convenient outdoor eating area adjacent to and level with the kitchen. But lowering the main deck 4½ feet not only allows the main deck a more squarish design, making it more flexible in supporting all manner of social interaction, it also opens the view from the kitchen window. And putting the deck itself closer to the ground reinforces its connection to the landscape, making it a more inviting place to hang out. Holding the deck back from the east end of the house preserves the master bedroom's unobstructed view, as well as its privacy. A secondary but significant benefit is that the basement workshop windows again receive light.

In short, this redesign better meets the deck's original purpose — tying the house to the outdoors and providing a way to enjoy the landscape — without compromising the views from the house. It will also look much better — far less monolithic and obtrusive — from outside.

Think Landscape

This example illustrates well the importance of thinking of a deck as landscaping rather than as simply another room or as a platform for view-

Redesigned Deck

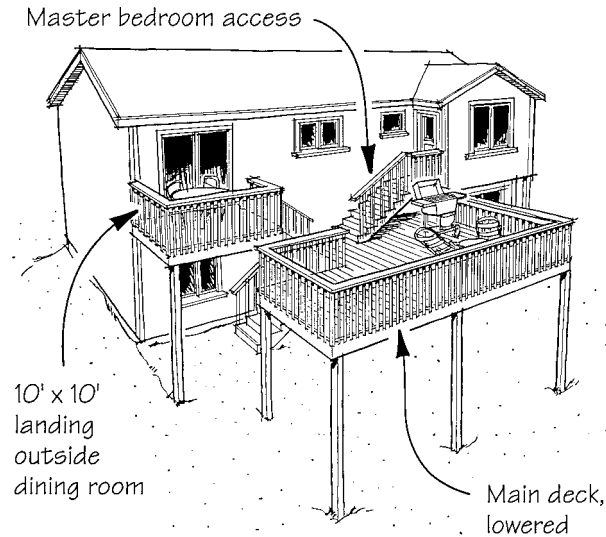


Figure 2. The redesigned deck retains the most essential feature of the original — convenient access to an outdoor eating area — while connecting the main part of the deck more closely to the landscape below. Dropping the deck's center portion also opens views from the house, preserves the master bedroom's privacy, and allows some sunlight into the basement.

ing nature. Obviously a deck will be flat, and obviously you will furnish it. But I find deck design goes best if I think of the deck as an extension of the ground plane.

I try to keep a deck as low as possible,

preferably within 30 inches of the adjacent grade — the height above which a code-complying guardrail will be required. Below that height you can do what you want for edge protection, including planters, benches, or noth-

ing at all, which is a much more interesting range of options than a 36-inch-tall, 4-inch-spaced balustrade.

Deck Aesthetics

Decks are about structure. They are honest, straightforward expressions of simple construction. Houses, on the other hand, put on airs and make claims to style. Successful designs accept this distinction, while those that try to bridge the inherent differences risk diminishing both the house and the deck.

Decks, being casual, belong in the backyard. If your view and solar orientation suggest a deck in your front yard, resist the temptation. Build a porch, a patio, a terrace, or even a veranda, but build a deck only if you have a rustic cabin or if you can keep the deck well away from the main entrance.



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