

Handsome Handrails

by Rosanne Minerva

In September's column, I discussed how to integrate a deck into the overall design of a house. In this column, I'll focus on handrails — another element that if carefully thought out can add to a house's visual appeal.

Railings serve an obvious and important utilitarian purpose. People lean against railings and children climb on them, so foremost they have to be strong. Understandably, this is often your first concern as the builder. But railings are also one of the more visible details on a house, so it pays to think about their aesthetic design as well.

Horizontal Tie

A railing creates a horizontal band that helps to visually organize and tie together a house design. Railings are a good way to break up the monotony and verticality of

Three Railing Styles

Contemporary



Traditional

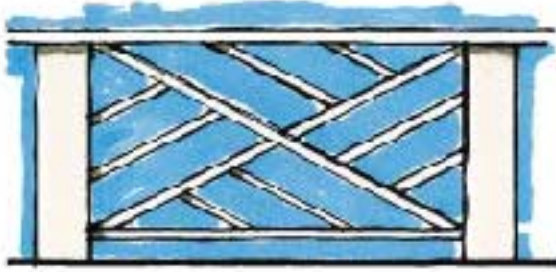


Rustic



Use a deck railing that matches the style and period of the house. The railings shown here can easily be built from stock lumber.

Historic Designs



When it works, borrow from the masters, and don't be afraid to depart from convention. Shown here are a railing from Monticello, designed by Thomas Jefferson (top), and a whimsical railing from Boston's Henderson Boathouse, designed by Graham Gund.

a tall elevation (much the way the balconies on old triple-decker homes do). Because of its horizontal lines, a railing that extends off the main house can also help anchor a building to the surrounding landscape.

A nicely detailed railing can also enhance a house by:

- creating visual interest and a focal point on the exterior — often missing on the rear of a house
- providing an opportunity to add a touch of whimsy or “gingerbread” within the limits of the house style
- repeating a detail from somewhere else on the house — a front entry railing, for example — to give continuity.

Borrow From the Best

Look around at railing designs and try to figure out why the good ones are successful. It could be the materials, the scale, the rhythm created by the repeating pattern of railing sections, or how the railing relates to and adds to the overall house design. Don't be afraid to copy an idea that you like. There are many famous railing details, both traditional and contemporary, that can be adapted for your specific design.

As with any detail, use a style that is in keeping with the style and period of the building. Don't put a '70s-style horizontal board railing on a colonial or Victorian house. 

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