

Front Porches That Work

by Robert Gerloff

I'm tapping out these words on my laptop while sitting on my front porch and watching the world go by. I love our front porch; time spent hanging out here is a mini-vacation from the stresses and worries of life — not to mention a welcome break from the damn telephone.

But not all front porches work as well as they could. I'm lucky to live in an older neighborhood full of wonderful front porches, but many new houses have porches that seem to have been built purely for their marketing value. As long as the real estate agent or sales department can point out that the house *has* a porch, the reasoning seems to go, it doesn't much matter whether the porch is a living, functioning part of the house or just a useless ornament (see Figure 1). Here are some important points to keep in mind when building or remodeling a front porch.

sitting on the porch the power to decide whether to greet or ignore someone passing by on the sidewalk. To be lower than someone walking by on the sidewalk is to feel exposed, vulnerable, and unsafe. On the other hand, a porch that's too high provides too much separation between those on the porch and those passing below and makes desired conversation awkward.

A good front porch should be on the same level as the main floor of the



Figure 1. A well-thought-out porch is designed with occupant convenience and comfort in mind (left). The tacked-on, inappropriately dimensioned version above, on the other hand, is less a true porch than an over-sized covered entryway.



Depth and Height

A good front porch should be at least 8 feet deep. A porch much narrower than that can't support a decent "sitting circle" — the loose ring of chairs that allows friends and family to face each other while talking. Conversely, a porch more than 12 feet deep or so is too spacious to provide the sense of intimacy that a porch should and places the windows too far into the shade.

Ideally, the porch floor should be between 24 inches and 36 inches above grade. The lower end of this range places the eye level of someone sitting on the porch higher than the eye level of someone walking by on the sidewalk, putting the sitter in a position of strength and safety (Figure 2). This gives someone

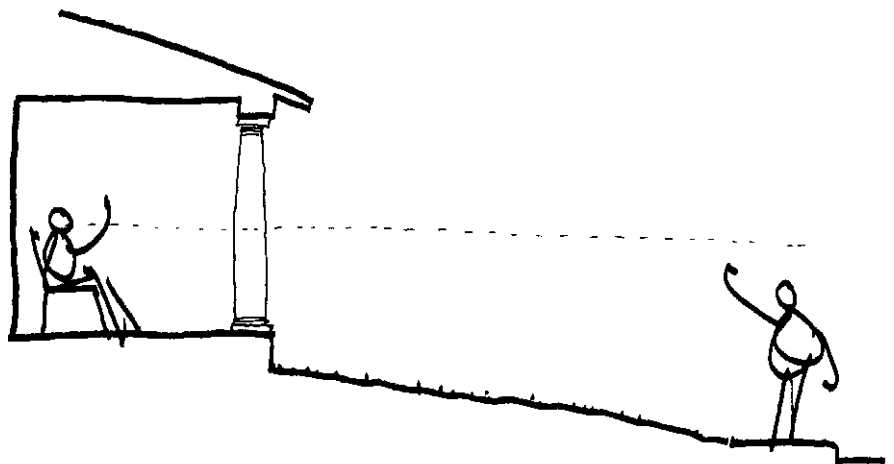


Figure 2. Placing a porch floor between 24 and 36 inches above grade raises the eye level of someone sitting on the porch above that of people passing by. That allows for some conversation between porch and sidewalk but puts the sitter in a comfortable, secure position.

Design

house (Figure 3). A step from porch to front door that is higher than the 1½ inches or so necessary for the storm door to clear a welcome mat will isolate the front porch from the rest of the house. The more the front porch feels like an extension of the main house, the more likely it is to be used.

Steps and Railings

Steep, narrow steps isolate the front porch from the outdoors. Wide, shallow ones — say from a minimum of 6 feet wide to the width of the entire house, with risers no higher than 6 inches — invite the outdoors in. Wide, shallow steps are also a great place to set potted plants, take family photos, and relax

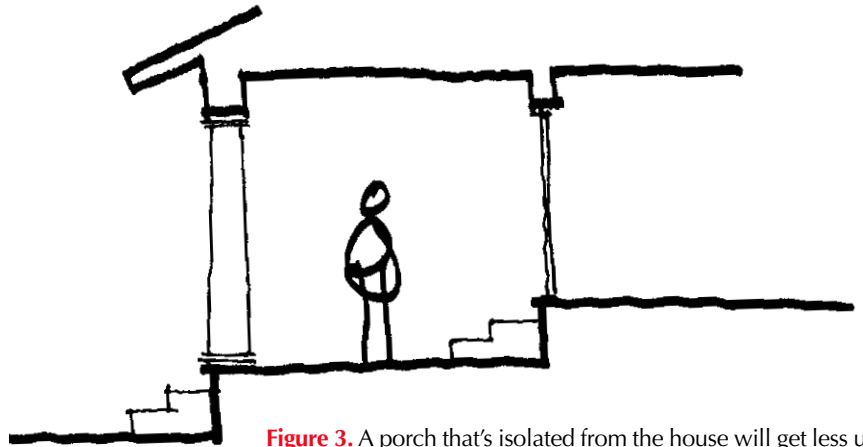


Figure 3. A porch that's isolated from the house will get less use than it otherwise might. Plan the grade so there's no need for more than one very low step — ideally, no more than an inch or two — between the porch floor and the indoor living space.

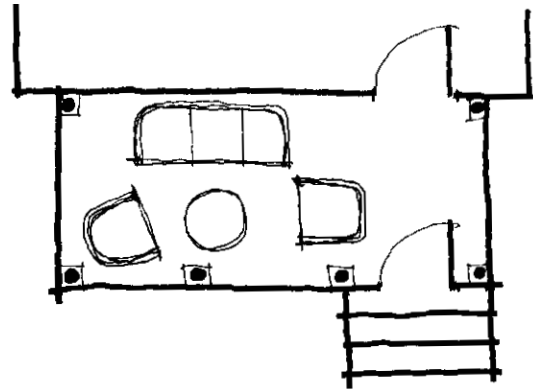
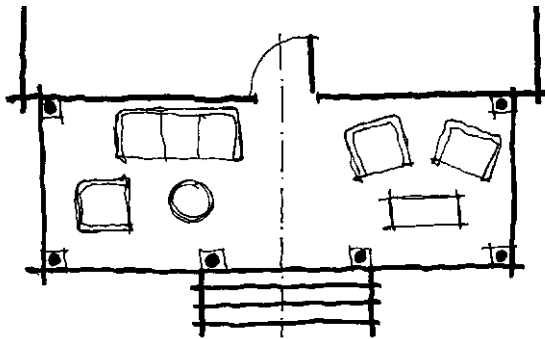


Figure 4. Stairs that are centered on the main entrance tend to split the porch in half, making it seem smaller and making conversation awkward for more than a very small group (left). Moving the stairs to the side makes the space much more comfortable and inviting (right).

from mowing the lawn when you don't feel like stepping all the way up to the porch itself.

The position of the steps is another important consideration. If possible, a porch should be entered at its edge, not near the middle. Centered front steps look wonderful from the street and play to many designers' love of symmetry, but they invariably cut the sitting area into two disconnected sections (Figure 4). Steps near an edge, on the other hand, allow for a big, welcoming sitting circle in the center of the porch.

Enclosing a porch with a light, airy

railing, rather than a solid parapet, offers a better view of the outside world, especially if the railing is low enough to see over easily (Figure 5, next page). But things can get tricky when the local code requires a guardrail: The standard 36-inch guardrail will obstruct the view of someone lounging in a wicker chair, and standard 2x2 balusters at 4 inches on-center are difficult to see through. (The new *International Residential Code* requires a code guardrail only when the porch is 30 inches or more above grade.)

One possible solution is to push the guardrail down to 30 inches and run a

continuous handrail at the required 36-inch level. Another is to use inconspicuous cable rails, if stylistically appropriate. If no guardrail is required, consider building a flat-surfaced railing at a height of 24 inches — just the right level to sit on or set down a glass of iced tea.

Orientation and Exposure

A front porch should be oriented to the street and human activity. Most Americans are inherently social creatures. We love to know what the neighbors are up to, who's walking by on the sidewalk, who's dating the younger

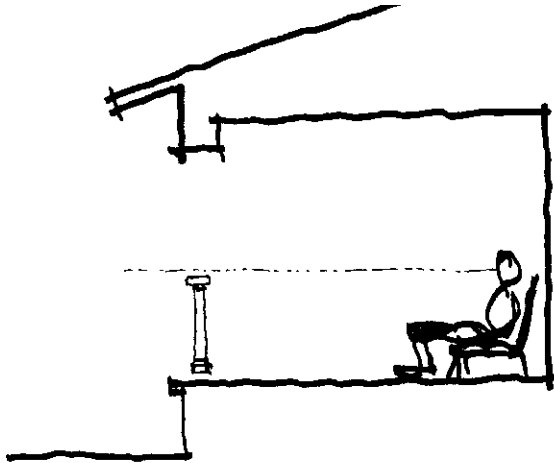
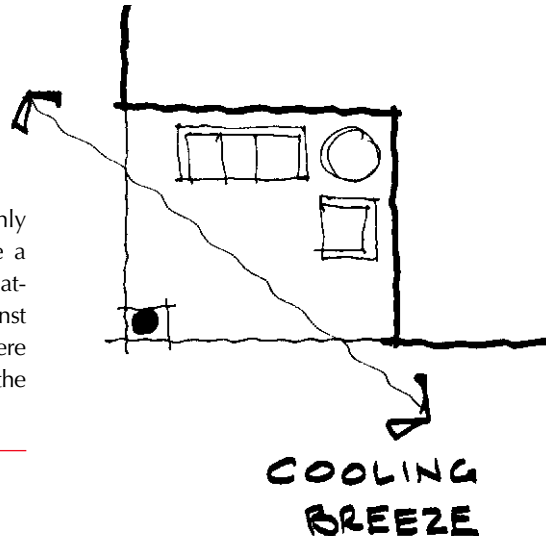


Figure 5. A standard 36-inch guardrail, required by code under some conditions, will obstruct the sight line of someone sitting on the porch, making it difficult or impossible to see what's happening at ground level.

Figure 6. A built-in porch with only two exposed sides feels more like a room than a true porch. Because seating tends to be concentrated against the house walls, those sitting there miss out on the cooling effect of the evening breeze.



Olson girl. Unlike private indoor living areas, a good front porch should be seen as a semi-public room that allows for some give and take with the outside world. It can't fulfill that purpose unless it's open and visible.

To retain the feel of an open outdoor room, a porch should be exposed on three sides. A two-sided porch that's tucked into a corner of the house seldom works well. It feels enclosed, making it too much like the inside of the house. And from a purely practical standpoint, it doesn't enjoy the total airflow of a porch that's open on three sides (Figure 6).

For the same reason, porches should be open to the elements or, at most,

screened to keep out mosquitoes. In theory, a storm-window-enclosed "three-season porch" can be used earlier in spring and later into autumn, but the reality is that adding any glass — no matter how much or how wide the windows open — is the kiss of death. The wonderful feeling of sitting outside is lost, and in the summer, when the porch should be most heavily used, the glass traps heat and makes it unbearably hot. The sad reality is that most three-season porches just get used for storage. 

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