

Design

Making Guardrails Look Good

by Katie Hutchison

An exterior guardrail presents an opportunity to explore a house's design themes in detail. All too often, designers and builders opt for an ill-considered stock railing that technically performs the guardrail function but neglects the spirit of the building it serves. A well-designed guardrail should

reflect a home's architectural context.

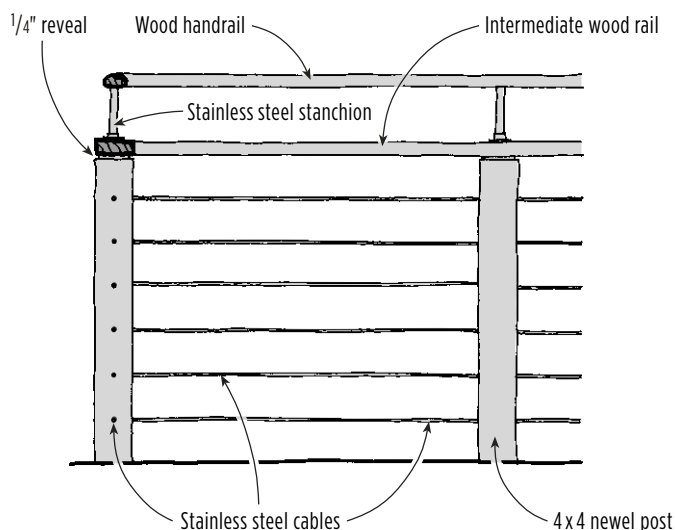
The following examples provide a range of exterior-railing options for a variety of house types.

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Contemporary Cable Rail

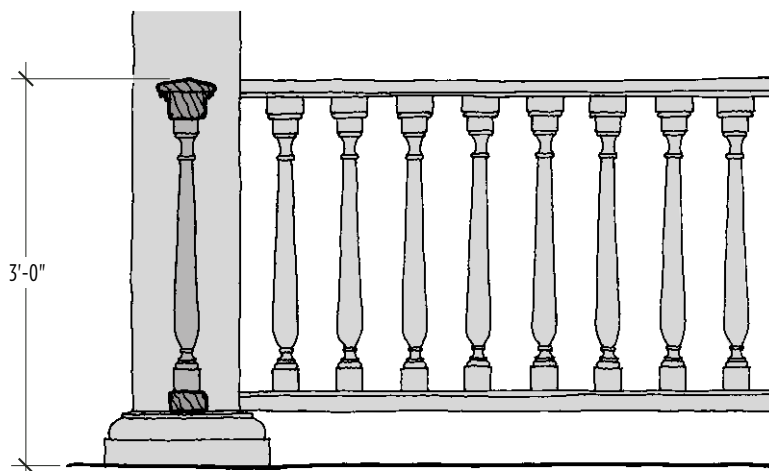
This contemporary system uses 1/8-inch stainless steel cables that run through holes drilled into intermediate newel posts (as spans allow). They terminate at surface-mounted fittings with turnbuckles. The continuous top rail — designed to transition into a handrail at the deck stairs — contributes to the assembly's streamlined appearance, which recalls familiar boat railings.

When priorities dictate an unobstructed view, a contemporary design, and a feeling of openness, this largely transparent guardrail is a good choice.



Traditional Turned Balusters

Turned wood balusters are typical of traditional 18th- and 19th-century porches, balconies, and widow's walks. Originally, these railings tended to be stout, measuring about 2 feet tall. Today, however, residential building codes generally require 3-foot-high guardrails, which can result in the elongated turned balusters shown here. Unless the homeowner is doing a period-specific renovation or reproduction, I don't usually recommend this type of guardrail.



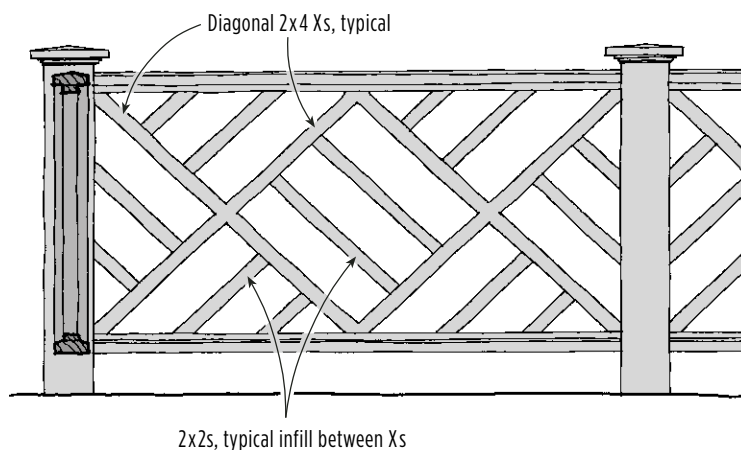
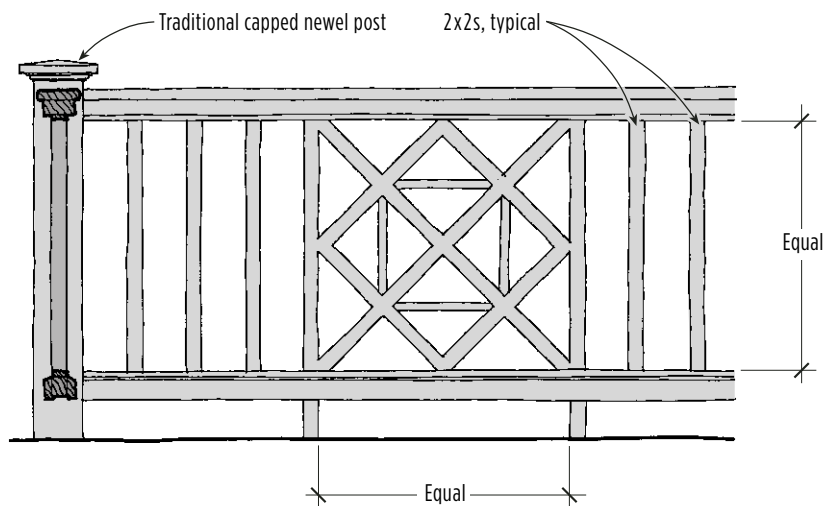
Transitional Linear Guardrails

Creating a unique design in the center of a guardrail can subtly enliven a long and otherwise monotonous run of vertical wood 2x2 balusters. The pattern can incorporate the same components used in the rest of the structure.

The railing shown at top right has crisp, clean lines; the heavy top and bottom rails create strong horizontal boundaries for the pattern in between. Its formal feel derives from its symmetry and static geometry. It's a "transitional" design because it bridges the gap between traditional and more contemporary guardrails.

Composed of 2x4s and 2x2s, the second example of a transitional linear rail, shown at bottom right, is more graphic in nature. The 2x4s establish primary diagonal Xs and the 2x2s fill in, completing the pattern.

A busy railing like this is a nice foil to a simple house form. The top and bottom rails are not as heavy as in the previous example, which helps to lighten the overall look. A continuous top rail — rather than one interrupted by newel posts — would make it less traditional.



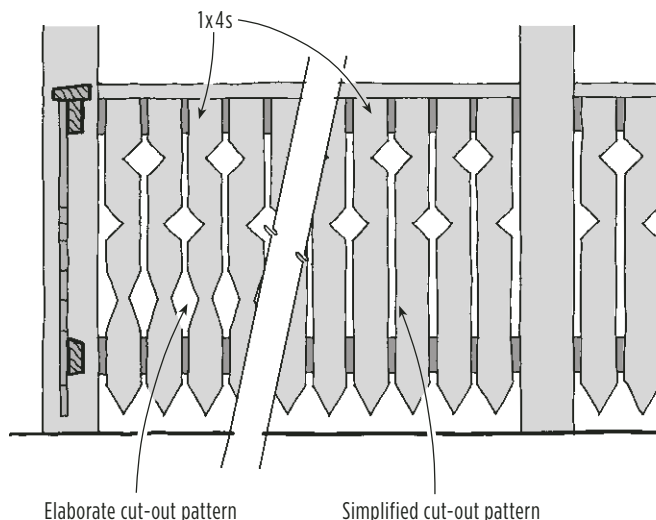
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Carved Plank Rail

Of all the guardrail examples, this playful rendition is the most enclosing. The cut-outs alleviate the opacity; the more there are, the lacier the effect, as seen to the left of the break lines in this drawing.

The placement of the top and bottom rails suggests a fence more than it does a guardrail, adding to the structure's informal feel. It also means that each side of the railing looks different.

Such a whimsical design might complement a small cottage or modest camp.



Eclectic Carved Plank Rail

While still informal, this is a more sophisticated pairing of cut-out planking and linear balusters. Here, the pattern alternates between opacity and transparency. A continuous top rail helps keep the arrangement simple and more contemporary.

Unlike the previous example, this railing looks the same from both sides. It suits a variety of home designs, from older cottages to new custom homes that highlight wood craftsmanship.

