

Adding Curb Appeal and Function With a Deck

by Scott Smith

**Balance what the customer wants
with site and budget realities**

Since each customer's home, yard, needs, and budget are different, each deck I design is unique. When the budget or topography puts a severe damper on the design, the challenge is to find a compromise among materials, size, and complexity that still meets the customer's needs.

Our experience as professional deck builders gives us the ability to see possibilities that prospective customers don't. One key to turning prospects into customers is to discover their needs and communicate solutions. I start by asking how the homeowners plan to use their new deck. Do they want it for entertaining or for privacy and peace? How many people do they have over for barbecues? If it's an entry deck, do they want it to say "welcome to our home," or are they just covering up an eyesore? And how do they feel about maintenance? Most of my customers want low-maintenance products, to keep the deck looking good for the long run.





Figure 1. A featureless backyard with no real entertaining space can be easily improved by the addition of a deck.



Figure 2. An area for a grill and some built-in planters satisfied both husband and wife. Rails on the higher section protect their youngster from falls.



Figure 3. A bench provides seating for the grillmeister's audience. Using two steps where one would have sufficed makes the level change more visible and therefore safer.

Following are examples of three decks that I designed and built to solve specific problems.

Dressing Up a Dysfunctional Backyard

The first deck I'll discuss replaced a marginally functional patio slab that was a step down from the back door. The backyard had no appeal and the slab was too small for most uses (**Figure 1**).

My design needed to provide areas for the husband to barbeque and for the wife to entertain small groups and do some planting. Both of them wanted a low-maintenance deck that had two separate levels. I also had to consider their small child, who could fall off an upper deck level.

With these constraints and a limited budget in mind, I designed a small deck on two levels with railing, bench rail, steps, and planters (**Figure 2**). The white aluminum Ultra Rail railings (Metals USA; 410/752-6900, metalsusa.com) offer a look of security and balance, prevent the grill from falling off the deck, and give the lower deck vertical dimension. The bench with a seat back helps to keep the young one from inadvertently taking a tumble over the upper deck's edge and affords comfort and relaxation for the adults who visit (**Figure 3**).

The transition between the two levels took some thought. I decided to place two steps between the deck levels. One step would have worked, but the eye tends not to pick up a single step down, which increases the likelihood of someone missing the step and falling or tripping. The planters further mark the elevation change; they also create a nice-looking transition while at the same time separating the two areas. Locally sourced stainless steel inserts inside the planters furnish "never worry" potting containment for plantings.

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EverGrain composite fascia matching the EverGrain decking (Tamko; 800/253-1401, evergrain.com) was installed on the perimeter and on the stair risers to give the deck a formal, finished look.

Shade and Shelter Increase a Deck's Useful Season

In my next example, the back of the house faces west. The sun beat on the wall and caused the home to be too hot in the summer; during the rainy

season (nine months), there was no protection from the rain. So it was usually either too hot or too rainy to use the original concrete patio, which wasn't large enough for entertaining anyway. This made the customer's backyard largely unusable for much of the year.

This customer wanted protection from heat and rain, a place to put a new spa, a covered portion of deck, and an uncovered area with benches to give the deck more class and function.

Budget was much less a consideration than it was with the previous deck, and I had some freedom to be creative (**Figure 4**). I designed the large open-beam roof to be the focal point of the backyard. For style and elegance, I added locally sourced decorative metal connections to rough-sawn Douglas fir beams (**Figure 5**) and installed 2x6 T&G pine car decking for the roof and ceiling. I curved the front of the covered end of the deck to help soften the angles of the house and the roof; the squared-off angles on the opposite end of the deck give proportion and interest to the design.

Benches form a barrier at the edge of a deck when railing is not required, but with an open feel (**Figure 6**). The curved bench adds a touch of class and usually becomes a focal point for guests. Skirting and fascia of the same material as the decking, Azek Deck in the brownstone color (877/275-2935, azek.com), contribute a clean, elegant look and hide any eyesores under the deck. The skirting also keeps pets and other large animals out from under the deck.

Making an Entry Inviting

The customers in my final example wanted to enhance the curb appeal of their home and make it more welcoming. Entries to split-level homes like



Figure 4. A roof shades a west-facing deck from the sun, and in the rainy season, provides protection for soakers in the hot tub.



Figure 5. The author designed decorative metal plates to dress up the timber connections in the roof.



Figure 6. Benches define the edge of the deck without impeding the view as railings can.

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this one are challenging (**Figure 7**), as they often look narrow and uninviting. In this case, an adjacent second-story deck made the entry feel even tighter and overshadowed. Additionally, the second-story deck was cantilevered out from the house with non-treated 2x10s that extended beyond the roof eaves and were rotting on the outer ends (a common problem in the Pacific Northwest).

The customers wanted a new entry

deck that was elegant, inviting, and not too large. They love the look of wood but didn't want the maintenance that it entails in our climate. She loves flowers and wanted planters. He wanted lighting for safety and ambiance, and a place to visit or relax in the front yard. Both wanted to increase the value of their home with something above average. Though budget was a concern, I had some leeway to be creative.



Figure 7. The old entry to this split level was uninviting. On the upper deck, the ends of unsheltered cantilevered joists were rotting.



Figure 8. A round entry deck adds interest and focus, shifting the emphasis from the stairs to the front door.



Figure 9. Planters fill an awkward space below the eaves and tie the deck to the ground.

I designed a two-level entry with a 12-foot-diameter round deck to add character to and soften the lines of the house and landscape (**Figure 8**). I also cut off the rotted portions of the cantilevered joists on the upper deck, then installed new decking and rails. What remains is sheltered below the home's broad overhanging roof.

The new front-door landing at the head of the stairs is large enough for guests to comfortably stand while waiting at the door but small enough to be an accent to the lower deck level. The 6-foot-wide stairs say "welcome to our home, we want you here," and the combination composite and metal baluster railing adds simplicity and elegance to the look of the deck while forming a safety barrier. It's constructed with Fortress round black pickets (866/323-4766, fortressiron.com), Fiberon post sleeves and skirts, and a deck board for the top cap.

I ran the Horizons decking (800/573-8841, fiberondecking.com) at a 45-degree angle to add interest. The lower deck shifts the emphasis from the stairs to the entry and is open and inviting to guests. The curved bench not only forms a barrier at the edge of the deck but is also a place to sit and a focal point. A single step off the back side of the deck accesses the yard, and lights in the risers make climbing the steps at night safer.

Stacking the planters up the inside of the deck added interest and vertical dimension (**Figure 9**). Steps would have run out of headroom under the eaves of the house, so the planters also fill in the hole that would otherwise have been left between the garage and the deck. Running the planters clear to the ground gives a finished look and matches the skirting under the rest of the deck. ♦

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