

by Mark Clement

Making an Old Porch Look New

To maximize your profits, plan for surprises and use the right tools and materials

Where I live, there's a vein of old houses whose porches have become a mainstay of my business. They're challenging, and not just because every porch is different — hugely different in some cases — but also because the skills required to work on them are so different from the skills used to build decks. Sometimes I'm ripping tapers into 8 miles of sleepers so I can level a slab to receive a wood floor. Other times, I'm trying to figure out how to stretch screen like they do in a factory. Some porches require custom molding fabrication and, no joke, plaster repair and in the same breath, a French drain and landscaping.

Because no porch is the same (at least among those I've done), the best advice is to go in with your eyes open, have

the right tools, and don't be optimistic with your pricing — it's better not to get the job than work for \$2 an hour.

Expect the Unexpected

It may seem obvious, but deck builders need to change gears when estimating old-porch work — old porches are way more complicated than most decks. The keys to profits on porch rehabs are to take the time to do an accurate estimate and to prepare the client for the unexpected.

It can be tempting to hurry through an estimate, saying, "Okay, 100 feet of 1x8, 100 feet of 3½-inch crown, three squares of shingles ..." That's a recipe for disaster. Sure, you may need 100 feet of some size of trim board, and what you measure is 1x8. Look closer.

It could be the soffit you plan to replace is bowed and you'll need to custom cut a slightly curved 1x8 out of a 1x10. And if the soffit is bowed, it's likely because of an underlying structural issue that shouldn't be glossed over. The 3½-inch crown you're looking to match is probably not the same profile your supplier carries now. And while it may be clear you need to replace three squares of shingles, if they've been leaking, is there rot you can't see? Do the flashings need replacing too? You get the picture.

I start by looking at the porch carefully, from the bottom up. For example, in my area, stone stairs commonly abut the framing. Right away, I know the adjacent joists and flooring will have started to rot. Another tell is peeling paint,



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or outright rot, on trim (**Figure 1**). If it's along the floor, count on deteriorated joists. If it's along the ceiling, look closely at the shingles. I always bring along a ladder when looking at a porch job so I can get up on the roof. You can't always spot spongy roof sheathing from below, but it's obvious when you walk on it. Don't count on reusing the old counterflashing, particularly on stuccoed houses. It might look fine from below, but closer inspection often reveals old galvanized metal that falls apart when you touch it.

Even add-ons that seem simple might not be. On the job I show here, the customer wanted a ceiling fan. On a porch on a new house, I could probably cover that with a \$500 allowance. Not here. The existing wiring for the porch lights turned out to be knob and tube, so it wasn't a simple matter of tying in. The electrician had to run new wiring back into the house, which meant opening up a plaster wall and replacing an old switch. With the plaster repair and painting, that fan ended up costing closer to \$1,200.

In addition to finding as many problems as you can before giving a price, you've got to manage your clients' expectations. After your initial survey, share with them the bevy of hidden problems you'll likely uncover, such as inadequate existing structural connections and members, knob-and-tube wiring, deteriorated flashing, and hidden rot and rust. More important, make them aware that these things will add to the initial price.

Plan the Job

This project is an example of a simple "remove and replace" porch trim job that wasn't so simple. A leaky roof needed replacement, and that leaky roof had led to lots of rot and peeling paint. The job ran the gamut from re-trimming to re-inventing structural connections to on-the-fly design decisions.

Decks are straightforward — you start at the ground and work up. The sequence for porch rehabs depends on the condition of the existing structure. Sometimes all the old work goes into a trash bin, and I start from the ground, like with a deck. I also start from the ground if the roof is sound, even if new shingles are part of the project. That way, the project is sheltered for its duration. But if the roof needs major work, I'll usually start there, assuming of course that the existing framing is sound enough to support the new roof. That eliminates the chance of dropping tools or materials onto a new porch floor.

Once the rough work is done, I call in the electrician, if need be. Then I turn to the trim, and just before painting, to work such as new doors or windows on the house. Each step is placed in the sequence with the idea of minimizing the risk to the work that's been finished (**Figure 2**).



Figure 1. One of the first clues about trouble spots on old porches is peeling paint. Because paint often peels because its substrate is wet, start there when identifying leaks.



Figure 2. A rolling scaffold helped the author reach the porch ceiling for everything from demo to protecting the windows. Protecting the worksite is part and parcel of renovation work. Include protective materials such as OSB, plus the time to hang it, remove it, and trash it, in your proposal.

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Figure 3. Because porches imply roofs, rehabbing them means you need to work efficiently at a height. Ladder brackets are a great way to support scaffold planks and don't take up a lot of space when you store them.



Figure 4. Efficient demolition is as important as efficient construction. Stanley's Fubar III makes quick work of rough tear-out.

Demolition Tools

Far more than deck building, old-porch work calls for an arsenal of tools. Removing and replacing soffit, fascia, crown, and gutters require getting up to a height that's usually between a 6-foot step ladder and an extension ladder. And you can't trap the work behind ladder rails, so ladders can't touch the actual work. Pipe staging or pump jacks would be ideal but expensive, unless you use them all the time. I use Stabilizer ladder brackets (Werner Co.; 888/523-3371, wernerladder.com). The brackets are affordable and don't devour shop storage, and I owned the ladders anyway (**Figure 3**).

The first power tool I reach for and one of the last I put away is a recip saw. In old houses, there's a constant

supply of blocks, nails, and rotten wood. Because of the tight spaces, and because the saw is always out, I want it to consume as little space as possible. Ridgid's Fuego is my main demo-recip saw for this reason — and for its awesome power (see *Tool Kit*, p. 52). The duck-billed head on the FuBar III (The Stanley Works; 800/262-2161, stanleytools.com) plunges mercilessly behind claddings, and it's ideal for stripping beadboard — or anything else (**Figure 4**). Two other tools I use all the time on porch jobs are my angle grinder (**Figure 5**) and my SoniCrafter (**Figure 6**). The SoniCrafter (Rockwell; 866/514-7625, rockwelltools.com) saved me hours and effort over the course of this project.

I demolished this porch before the new lead-paint regulations came into effect. If I had to drape this project with



Figure 5. For working on stucco-clad houses, an angle grinder is invaluable. Here, the author cuts in a kerf for flashing. Other uses include cutting around old moldings so they can be removed without damaging the stucco.



Figure 6. The versatile Rockwell SoniCrafter uses various vibrating blades for tasks ranging from plunge-cutting to cleaning up spilled construction adhesive to sanding.

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Figure 7. Placing the miter saw and tablesaw close to each other allows the miter saw's table to serve as an outfeed support for the tablesaw.

plastic, I might still be working on it — and it wouldn't have done anything except raise operating costs.

Because a successful porch remodel hinges so much on having not only the right tools but also access to them, I optimize the tool set-up. I use both a tablesaw and a chop saw. Setting up the tablesaw and miter saw within about 6 feet of one another means they can share infeed and outfeed support, and I can tarp them at night (**Figure 7**). I keep a trash bucket close by. A 10-outlet powerstrip is positioned on a sawhorse leg so I don't have to run a bunch of individual cords.



Figure 9. Reproducing an old-house look is fairly easily done on site by using a variety of router bits to shape 1-by stock.



Figure 8. Re-trimming over a gnarly old frame with PVC was easier than using wood. Wood is inevitably slightly cupped or warped; the dead-flat PVC made it easier to wrangle tight miters up in the air. Cleats held by Rockwell Jawhorses made it a one-man job.

Finishing Up

For durability, I prefer to use PVC 1-by for the fascia, soffit, and casing; and urethane molding (Fypon; 800/446-3040, fypon.com) for features such as crown. Per Fypon's recommendations, I glue all joints with urethane-based PL200 (**Figure 8**). The PVC material cuts well (no tear out) and takes paint wonderfully, and routed edges look "real."

Where I build, most homes are clad in stucco. So in addition to nary a straight line due to house settling, poor-quality remodeling, and the like, there are no straight lines on the façade to terminate trim. Or no current molding profile matches the existing one. Or what existed is horrible. I find these problems are best solved by fabricating casings, which I do with built-up 1-by. A router adds beads, coves, and chamfers (**Figure 9**). When trimming around existing openings that have settled over time, butt joints are a lot easier to get tight than are miters.

I admit it — I paint. We could have a whole business-model discussion about this, but for me it works. I don't have to depend on a painting sub to show up and then return for touch-up. The paint I like is a key element to making me look good to my customer: Benjamin Moore (benjaminmoore.com) semi-gloss. Gloss is tempting because it makes the moldings pop out visually, but it also highlights the flaws in any old surfaces that remain. And really, the point to rehabbing an old porch is to make it look like it did when it was first built. Along with your work, the paint should be a unifying element. ♦

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