

An architect's time-tested  
principles help you plan  
an inviting porch

# Porch Appeal

BY JAMES M. CRISP



If there's one icon of American architecture, and one that calls to mind a more leisurely time, it's the porch. I grew up in the South, where porch sitting is a part of the culture. Even now, some of my most peaceful, introspective times are spent sipping coffee and looking out over the river on the porch of a guest house I stay at when visiting family back in rural Louisiana.

A porch is a great place to take in a view, watch your neighbors, observe weather changes, or just keep an eye on the outside world. It serves as a transition point between the inside of a house and the great outdoors. It can give you shelter without forcing you inside. It can create distance where you might want some—from a busy street, for example. And it can function beautifully as an outdoor room.

Over the years, as I've designed homes with porches, I've asked myself what makes one porch more pleasing than another. Why do some porches invite gathering and conversation, while others don't? And what is it, exactly, that makes a porch sittable? I've learned that attention to certain design principles and practical matters will point you in the right direction if there's a porch in your future.

### What makes you want to put your feet up?

Porches are nice to look at, and that's part of their charm. Of course, different styles appeal to different people, but for a porch to be visually pleasing, it should adhere to a few basic design principles:

**Appropriate scale is critical.** A porch should never do battle with a house. It should be visually subservient to the main structure and not overpower it (photo below).

**Proper proportions provide balance.** Vertical components should always appear appropriate to horizontals. Posts, for example, should look substantial enough to be carrying the roof. Sometimes, this means making posts larger than what is structurally required (photo, p. 52).

**Style is never arbitrary.** Everyone has a favorite porch style. Some like simple stone structures, while others prefer elaborately detailed porches with gingerbread trim. Whatever you like, the details of your porch should always be dictated by what already exists. Formal columns will look out of place on a simple, spare farmhouse. Likewise, a grand, formal home will not be enhanced in any way by a contemporary, featureless porch. An exact match is not always necessary, but

**IN THE BALANCE** *It's small all right, but this porch is just the right size for a diminutive island cottage. Its steeply pitched shed roof and rail detail lend it substance and visual appeal.*





## A PORCH GLOSSARY

**BALUSTER** One of the small individual upright posts that support the upper rail and sometimes connect to a lower rail.

**BALUSTRADE** The entire railing enclosing a porch, staircase, balcony, or deck, made up of a series of vertical balusters.

**GINGERBREAD TRIM** Ornate wood decoration common on Victorian homes.

**HEADER** Horizontal framing member situated above the porch posts.

**LATTICE** Decorative, openwork wooden panels often used to fill the space from the porch floor to the ground.

**NEWEL** The post at the top or bottom of the stairs.

**ORNAMENT** This includes millwork, moldings, gingerbread trim, and other detailing added for decoration.

**PEDIMENT** A low-pitched gable often used as a porch roof.

visually the parts should blend to read as a whole.

**Views are something to aim for.** The location of your porch may be predestined by your site—or your desire to look out onto your street—but if there is a choice, it is always best to focus on a view. Remember, the porch is a place where you can connect with your surroundings. If no view is readily available, creative landscaping or a strong focal point, be it an arbor, tree, or garden bed, can be just as effective. I like balustrades (see glossary at left) because railings provide a sense of enclosure and protection. But if you have a particularly stunning vista, and the distance to the ground isn't too great, you can do without railings and really open up the view (photos above and p. 54 bottom).

**Size makes a difference.** I've seen very narrow porches attached to some newer houses, but they don't look appropriate—and they certainly don't look comfortable.

When designing a porch, I like to make it at least 9 feet deep. Some say that 6 feet is adequate, but I like 9 feet because it gives you enough room for large chairs and even a small dining table and chairs, while leaving room to pass. I know there isn't always space for such a deep porch, but another option is creating a bump out on a corner that can work as a larger, more comfortable gathering point.

**Lighting is more important than you think,** so consider how you will use your porch. If it is just for sitting and talking, low levels of ambient light will suffice. If there is to be a corner for reading or eating, task lighting will be needed. Sconces and recessed can lights



**MORE ROOM THAN PORCH**  
*The author designed this enclosed porch to serve as an extension of a rural home's living space for three seasons out of four.*



**THROUGH THE ROOF** *A covered porch substantially cuts down on the natural light that enters a house. Here, the problem was solved by leaving some roof sections open to let light in.*

**MATCH, DON'T MIX** *The logs used for this porch have the same rustic, timeworn appearance as those used to build the cabin. Anything else would have seemed out of place.*

that are rated for exterior use can be installed in porch ceilings and walls. Consider multiple switches as well as dimmers for flexibility.

Don't forget that a porch impacts interior space. Adding a covered porch can cut down substantially on the natural light that enters adjacent rooms. One way to solve this problem is to include skylights or leave some roof sections open (top right photo). Finally, since a porch is a transition space, it is smart to design landscape lighting so that it leads pedestrians comfortably from the walkway to the porch.

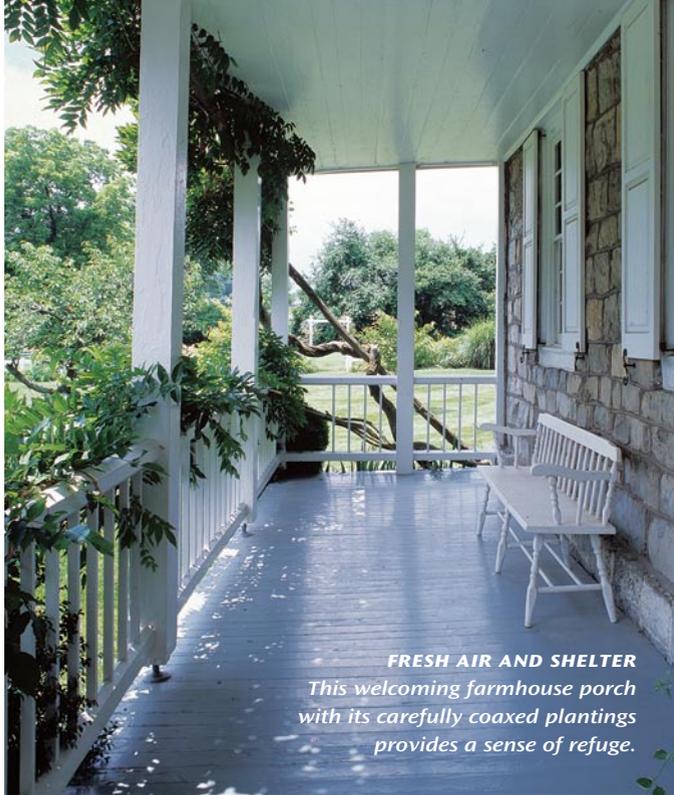
**Public and private spaces need to be determined.** Do you want your porch to be approachable and neighbor-friendly? Create a large and prominent entry to the space, use open lattices, provide good lighting—all of these details make people want to step up and take a seat. A more enclosed porch that keeps people from looking in will make the space more private. You can also gain a sense of enclosure by using trellising, closely spaced columns, or shutters.

### Minimize the effects of weather

It's important to site your porch carefully, because prevailing winds and the orientation of the sun influence how and when a porch is



Photos: top right, [davidduncanlivingston.com](http://davidduncanlivingston.com); bottom, Jason McConathy



**FRESH AIR AND SHELTER**  
*This welcoming farmhouse porch with its carefully coaxed plantings provides a sense of refuge.*

used, as well as how it holds up over time. There are other things you can do to keep the weather at bay:

**Create partial enclosures for protection.** You can semi-enclose a porch with side walls, trellising, or multiple posts.

**Pay attention to structural details.** Slope the floor of the porch for drainage and keep it open enough for adequate ventilation.

**Buffer with landscaping.** Trees and hedges can protect a porch from winds and driving rains as well as provide seasonal shade. Trellising and vines growing up the posts will also work.

**Keep your porch sufficiently above grade.** This is especially important if it's made of wood, because wood can rot due to moisture from the surrounding soil.

**Select weather-resistant materials.** Some woods, like cedar, ipe, and mahogany, have an inherent ability to withstand weathering. In addition, a number of new wood alternatives, like plastics and composite materials, require far less maintenance than natural wood does. Of course, you can also choose other, more long-lasting materials, such as brick, stone, or tile.

**VIEWS WITH ROOM TO SPARE**

*A spectacular site like this one deserves nothing less than a wide-open porch with no balustrade to block the views.*



## Breaking the rules

Architectural details can be as important as getting the dimensions right, but as soon as I consider a rule or guideline for a perfect porch, I think of a great porch that breaks those rules. My in-laws live in an 18th-century farmhouse that has been expanded over time. Their porch (photo below) is narrow—5 feet at the widest point—and the railings are below the minimum height required by code. The screen door swings the wrong way, making the space even tighter. It is also one of my favorite porches and is used more than any other porch I know. Why?

The low rails invite you to sit on them, or prop your feet up when sitting on one of the wicker chairs. The center of the porch is open and looks straight down the long farm drive. Sitting on the porch, you can anticipate the arrival of friends long before they drive up.

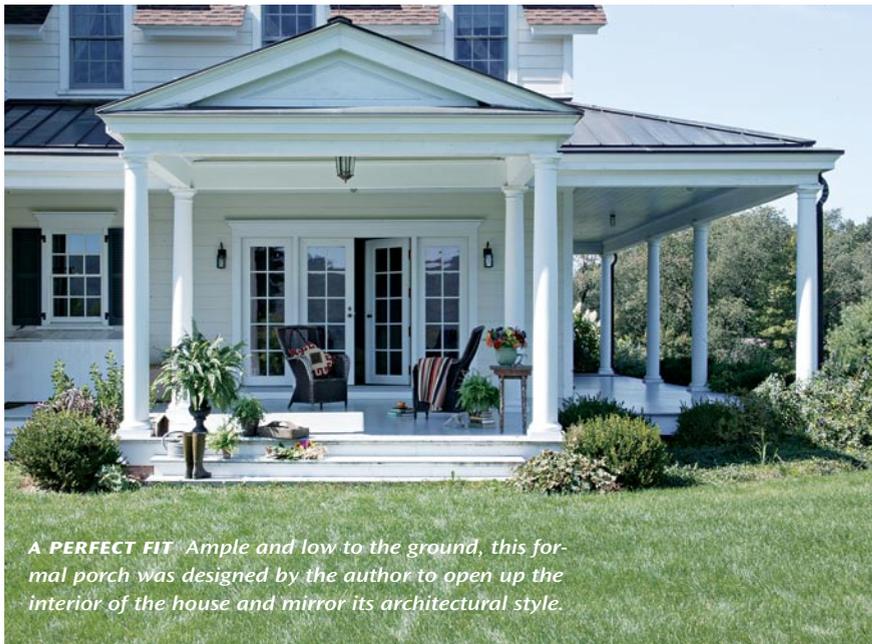
The porch also overlooks an ideal picnic spot under a cluster of shade trees and a field where many a softball game has been played. Grandparents and grandchildren, friends and neighbors all feel at home on this porch because of where it is, not because of how it's made. **H**



*WELCOMING* This cozy old porch is constantly in use.

*James M. Crisp is the principal in Crisp Architects in Millbrook, N.Y. One of his favorite pastimes is, not surprisingly, sitting on a good porch and watching the world go by.*

*For contact information for the architects whose work is pictured here, see Resources, page 82.*



*A PERFECT FIT* Ample and low to the ground, this formal porch was designed by the author to open up the interior of the house and mirror its architectural style.



*INSIDE OUT* A hardwood floor and a colorful, painted interior combine to create a cozy feeling in this screened porch.

## WHEN YOU'RE READY TO BUILD

**O**nce you have a general idea of size and style for your new porch, it's time to enlist the help of a builder who can refine your plans and outline construction options that affect both cost and appearance. Here are a few things you'll need to discuss:

**LOCATION** Your preferred view may be impacted by siting concerns such as water and gas lines or a septic system.

**FOUNDATION** The choice will likely be concrete piers or a continuous masonry foundation resting on a poured-concrete stem wall. The less expensive piers typically support pressure-treated posts that in turn hold up floor framing. This results in an open framework below floor level, which can be enclosed with lattice. A masonry foundation, which can be faced with brick or stone, lends a more formal appearance and is the logical choice if the porch is to be insulated for three-season use.

**ROOF** The roof form should harmonize with that of the main house. Costs vary with design; a hip roof is likely to be the most expensive, followed by a gable roof, then a shed roof. Inside, an open ceiling that exposes roof framing is light and airy, but it also requires more care on the part of the builder. —*Scott Gibson*