

Chapter 5. Porches

Context & Character

Historically porches were popular features in residential design. From the period of the Classical Revival of the nineteenth century to the Craftsman and Period Revivals of the early and middle twentieth century, architects have integrated porches into their buildings. A porch protects an entrance from rain and snow and provides shade in the summer. It also provides a sense of scale and aesthetic quality to the facade of a building. A porch catches breezes in the warmer months, providing a space for residents to sit and congregate. Finally, a porch often connects a house to its context by orienting the entrance to the street.

Many architectural styles and building types, including Victorian and Craftsman styles, developed with the porch as a primary feature of the front facade. Porches often emphasize the design expression of the house, such as the Prairie style porch, which usually echoes the horizontal orientation of the house. Because of their historical importance and prominence as character-defining features, porches should receive sensitive treatment during exterior rehabilitation and restoration work.

With some more recent, mid-century architectural styles, for example Minimal Traditional, the porch was not a characteristic feature. In such cases adding a porch on the primary facade may be out of character with the building.

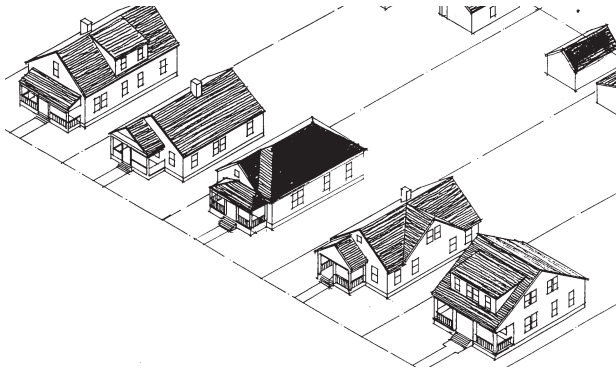
Design Objective

Where a porch has been a primary character-defining feature of a front facade, this emphasis should continue. A new (replacement) porch should be in character with the historic building, in terms of scale, materials and detailing.

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The porch still helps to define the character and style of many of the city's historic buildings, although some may have suffered insensitive alteration or been removed over time.



Porches take many forms and have various functions: they orient buildings to the street, integrate a house with its context and are often a key catalyst for social interaction.



Typical porch components



In this porch, grouped slender columns support an entablature and the gable above. These are key architectural features that should be preserved.

Porch Features

Porches vary as much as architectural styles. They differ in height, scale, location, materials and articulation. Porches may be simple one or two story structures. A porch may project or wrap around much of the ground floor, and may often have elaborate details and finishes. Although they vary in character, most porches have a few elements in common:

- roof
- steps
- columns
- balustrading and railings
- architectural details

These elements often correspond to the architectural style of the house. Therefore the building's design character should be considered before any major rehabilitation or restoration work is carried out.

Porch Deterioration

Because of constant exposure to sun and rain and the fact that a porch is open to the elements, it decays more quickly than other portions of a house. Much deterioration is caused by rain spilling onto the porch from the main roof of the house. If this water does not drain away, then deterioration occurs. Furthermore, if the water is not then channeled away from the foundation of the porch its footings may be damaged. One type of damage is "rising damp," a condition in which masonry absorbs ground moisture and begins to decay. Other problems include weathering of features such as posts, columns, steps and decorative detailing. Peeling paint is a common symptom. In some cases the porch itself may experience sagging or detachment from the house due to settling of the house and/or the porch.

5.1 Preserve an original porch whenever feasible.

- Replace missing posts and railings when necessary.
- Match the original proportions and spacing of balusters when replacing missing ones.
- Unless used historically, wrought iron, especially the “licorice stick” style that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, is inappropriate.
- Consult Chapter 2 for appropriate materials for masonry, wood, metal and other porch materials.

5.2 The historic materials and the details of a porch should not be removed or covered.

- Removing an original balustrade, for example, is inappropriate.
- Original materials and surfaces, like ceilings, eaves, and columns should not be covered or obscured.



The porch may form a principal characteristic of the composition.



A porch creates attractive shaded semi-private outdoor living space.



Elegant classical proportions and detailing mark the entrance.



Bungalow porch with battered (tapered) columns.



Square columns in various designs create detailed variety and a visual richness in this complementary sequence of full-width porches.



Wood columns and balustrades were commonly replaced with thin “wrought iron” railings and posts in the 1950s. This compromised the proportions and architectural integrity of the house.



Porch design is usually a notable part of the architectural style and composition, articulating building orientation and scale, while emphasizing intricate detailing and craftsmanship.

Porch Alterations

Many porches have been altered or removed. Some have had minor changes, such as roof repairs or repainting, while others have been altered to the degree that they have lost much of their character. In many cases a porch may have lost character-defining features, such as balustrades, posts, columns and decorative brackets. These are features that usually define architectural styles, and that may have been replaced by incompatible substitutes. For instance, wood columns and balustrades were commonly replaced with thin “wrought iron” railings and posts in the 1950s. This alteration compromised the proportions and architectural integrity of the house. In the mid-twentieth century, it was also fashionable to remove the front porch completely. Since the 1950s, it has also been popular to enclose a front porch to create an interior room, which destroys its historic character and function, and compromises the architectural integrity of the building.

Porch Repair

After discovering structural or cosmetic problems with a porch, one should begin to formulate a strategy for its treatment. The most sensitive strategy is to repair the porch. This treatment is preferred, rather than replacing the porch altogether. In most cases it is in fact easier, and more economical, to repair an existing porch or porch elements (usually constructed of very durable materials) rather than to replace them. This approach is preferred because the original materials and craftsmanship of a porch contribute to the historic character of the building. Even when replaced with an exact duplicate porch, a portion of the historic fabric is lost.

Porch Replacement

While replacing an entire porch is discouraged in favor of its repair, severe deterioration may render it necessary in some cases. When a porch is to be replaced, the first step is to investigate the current porch to determine its history, as well as to ascertain which features, if any, are original. The second step is to research the history of the house to determine the appearance and materials of the original porch and in doing so search for:

- Written documentation of the original porch in the form of historic photographs, sketches and/or house plans;
- Physical evidence of the original porch, including “ghost lines” on walls that indicate the outline of the porch and/or holes on the exterior wall that indicate where the porch may have been attached to the front facade;
- Examples of other houses of the same period and style that may provide clues about the design and location of the original porch. Sanborn insurance maps may help with location.

The most important aspects of the project involve the location, scale, and materials of the replacement porch. It is not necessary to strictly replicate the details of the porch on most “contributing” buildings. It is important, however, that new details be compatible with the design of the original porch and the style of the house.

A rear porch may be a significant feature, including a first or second story sleeping porch. Historically, these served a variety of utilitarian functions and helped define the scale of a back yard. Preservation of a historic rear porch should be considered as an option, whenever feasible; at the same time it is recognized that such a location is often the preferred position for an addition.



Repair original elements of the porch and consider reinstating original features which have been lost.



The detailing of a porch, whether entablature and columns or this jigsaw ornamentation with intricate balustrade, should be preserved.



Intricate detailing is reflected on the porch and elsewhere on the building.



This porch reconstruction drew inspiration from historic details.



Enclosing a front porch will significantly compromise the architectural integrity of the house.

Maintenance Tips for Porches

- Maintain drainage off of the main roof of the house, as well as off of the roof of the porch.
- Channel water away from the foundation of the porch.
- Maintain a good coat of paint on all exposed wood surfaces.

5.3 If porch replacement is necessary, reconstruct it to match the original in form and detail when feasible.

- Use materials similar to the original where possible.
- On contributing buildings, for which no evidence of the historic porch exists, a new porch may be considered that is similar in character to those found on comparable buildings.
- Avoid applying decorative elements that are not known to have been used on the house or others like it.
- Matching original materials is the first choice. Yet if detailed correctly and painted appropriately, new materials such as fiberglass columns and composite decking may be acceptable alternatives.
- The height of the railing and the spacing of balusters should appear similar to those used historically.

5.4 The open character and integrity of a historic front porch should be retained.

- Enclosing a porch should be avoided.
- Restore a previously enclosed porch to its original open character whenever feasible.

Additional Information

Inappropriate Porch Replacements. Washington, DC: Technical Preservation Services, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, 1999.

www.nps.gov/tps/standards/applying-rehabilitation/its-bulletins/ITS09-Porch-Alterations.pdf

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Sullivan, Aleca and John Leeke. *Preservation Briefs 45: Preserving Historic Wooden Porches*. Washington, DC: Technical Preservation Services Division, National Park Service, US Department of the Interior. 2006

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