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## Eight Columns Are Enough

BY BRUCE WENTWORTH

Several years ago I designed and built a new rear porch for the 1923 house in Washington, D.C. that I own with my wife, Eryl. The new porch has become a favorite space and serves as our outdoor living room in good weather. But it took a great deal of effort to build a porch that we could genuinely enjoy.

### Our Old House

Our house was designed by architect Arthur B. Heaton and was among a group of five houses speculatively built in Northwest D.C. It is a modest house, what could be called "Builder-Tudor-Style." Previously owned by a couple with the U.S. State Department, the house had been rented for 15 of the 20 years they owned it and got little attention aside from a new slate roof, which I greatly appreciate. But aside from installing the new roof and painting the exterior brick white, the original owners performed minimal maintenance on the house. A slap-dash 1967 kitchen and bath remodel was unappealing.

An architect discusses design solutions he conceived for his own porch addition



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So, when we moved into the house in 2001, we began a three-year remodeling saga: kitchen, bathrooms, windows, HVAC; you name it, it had to be done. As we got the serious remodeling work behind us and made progress with a new brick-walled garden, we decided that it was time to build our long-awaited back porch—the fun stuff.

### The Design Concept

We decided to make the porch a bit whimsical with hints of “garden folly,” which are architecturally sympathetic to the house and yet serve the purpose of providing a space to relax and view our brick-walled garden. To reduce maintenance and enhance my architectural vision, we agreed that it was necessary to use high-quality materials throughout, including red wood columns by Chatsworth, a custom-made cedar wood louver panel to control sun exposure, copper roofing, and powder-coated aluminum and tempered glass railings. An existing elevated 12' x 16' stone terrace with steps that had been added in the 1967 remodel had a brick foundation that made financial sense to keep. The elevated terrace, perfect as a garden viewing perch, received new 2" thick flagstone for the new porch floor. It was a practical beginning for a bit of architectural indulgence.

### The Plan

As with many aspects of life, what seemed simple at the start got complicated as the design's floor plan emerged on paper. For example, the kitchen's triple-casement window provided a wonderful garden view from the kitchen but overlapped the existing terrace, making it impossible to place a column or pilaster at the corner where the porch met the house. And, being a casement window, it had to swing-out for ventilation, requiring any column to be placed precisely to provide space for the casement window to open. After many attempts to come up with a solution, I decided not to solve this problem in a traditional way (with four columns, one at each corner), but concluded that eight was the number of columns needed.

Placing the columns 24" from the rear wall of the house allowed clearance for the casement window to open and created a natural and uncluttered appearance. The columns were grouped in pairs to frame views at the north and south. A column was

placed at each outer corner and a final pair of columns at the east elevation to frame the garden view. Each pair of columns frames the view and embraces railings at two locations. At the south elevation the pair of columns frames a louvered wall panel (to control sun exposure and provide privacy).

An existing seven-riser set of brick stairs allows guest to walk directly into the garden from the porch.

### The Elevations

I decided that a porch for the back of our house should be an addition to love, and the classic temple-like form worked well for this addition. Doric columns, which are round with appealing entases (slight convex curve in the columns' shafts to correct the visual illusion of concavity produced by a straight shaft), were a must. The hammered metal railings with tempered glass do not impede garden views. A classic entablature capped with crown molding provides an elegant elevation. Success is shown with a limited number of architectural components working together to mark a special place called the porch.

### The Ceiling

A good porch has a high ceiling that allows hot air to rise and a breeze to stir. A pair of Casablanca ceiling fans increases the air flow, too. And, keeping the nine-foot ceiling height proportionate to the old house made sense. Framing the ceiling is a classic beam detail that sits on the columns and wraps four sides of the porch.

The porch's location could easily have blocked the sunlight from the dining room, so a custom skylight by Renaissance Conservatories was installed to admit light. To accentuate the skylight's sunlight penetration, the ceiling design tapers up on four sides of the skylight, in a hopper-like shape, that minimizes the skylight's depth well and adds aesthetic interest.

A ceiling is not a traditional porch ceiling without wood bead board, which accommodates the unobtrusive recessed lighting. We chose to paint the porch ceiling a classic white instead of the traditional robin's egg blue because we liked the cleanness of the white and blue seemed a bit too serious for our porch.

### The Roof and Skylight

A big concern was the dilemma of maximizing the porch's ceiling height and minimizing the height of the new roof so as not to compromise the master bedroom window above it, which offers the only garden view from the second floor. Add to that challenge, an existing, projecting second-floor box-bay (oriel) window that needed to be harmonized with the design of the rear façade. It was a complicated convergence of architectural forms and requirements.

The roof solution involved creating a slightly sloped roof with built-in, concealed gutters. A low hip-shaped skylight, custom fabricated by Renaissance Conservatories, is flashed and trimmed in copper to unobtrusively occupy its location. Flat-seam copper roofing was specified to make the roof watertight and to be attractive when viewed from the master bedroom window. Built-in copper gutters are concealed behind an entablature, which eliminates the staining problem caused by runoff seen on many porch roofs. A bit of whimsy was introduced with two custom-made spun-

copper torch flame finials. Fashioned after a finial design I had seen years ago, the new copper finials were mounted on the roof upon ziggurat-like plinths.

### House Love

We don't always get our dream house and perhaps the house we have is not quite the one we want. But I do know this: If owners invests enough of themselves into a home, both financially and emotionally, to make it the best it can be, the home will become a part of them ... and it will be enough. You will fall in love with your old house. It may take a while, but it will happen and you will enjoy it for many years to come. ■

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