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GROUND IN LINCOLN PARK

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Front porches

Charm, comfort and a
cricket serenade

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COVER STORY

A shady retreat



A front porch designed by Richard Becker, of Becker Architects Ltd. Becker advises clients to budget for lighting and not to overlook the design of stairs.

The venerable front porch, nearly killed off in the '50s, enjoying a renewed surge in popularity

By Leslie Mann
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Like pieced quilts and chair rail, the front porch was born of practicality. It provided grandma and her front rooms shade from the hot sun.

Although two acronyms nearly killed the front porch in the 1950s — TV and AC — it is enjoying a renaissance, thanks to the New Urbanism movement and a renewed appreciation for all things grandma.

More than a collection of square feet, the front porch is the

architectural version of a hug, the hyphen between our indoor and outdoor spaces, the green room that separates our public and private lives.

In 2007, 62 percent of new homes had porches, up from 50 percent in 1999, according to the National Association of Home Builders. The South and West are the most porch-crazy regions, with the Midwest close behind.

The front porch ranked higher than the patio and rear porch on buyers' wish lists in the builders' "The New Home in 2015" report. "It changes the tempo and pace

of your life," said Gail Warner, a public relations consultant who bought a house with a front porch in a planned community in Fort Mill, S.C., in 2007. "We're out there in the evening with our porch mayor (pet dog), having a glass of wine and talking to the neighbors. We all have front porches here, which means we all know each other. When a neighbor needs help, we galvanize."

Before moving to Fort Mill, Warner and her husband lived in a porchless town house. "Nine years there, and I never knew my neighbors," said Warner.

The couple's house also has an upstairs front porch that she calls her "ponytail porch" because the added distance from it to the sidewalk gives her privacy.

"There's an unwritten law that if you're on your upstairs porch, you're not dressed and not ready to be social," said Warner. "But if you're on your downstairs porch, everyone's welcome."

The front porch is one of the features that helped sell 21 of 26 houses in nine months at the SchoolStreet Homes development in Libertyville, said developer John McLinden. The Craftsman-

and bungalow-style houses, which start at \$525,000, showcase architect/author Sarah Susanka's "Not So Big House" tenets.

Curb appeal

Even homeowners who do not use their front porches want them for curb appeal, said Jason DeBaker, managing principal for Orren Pickell Designers & Builders in Lake Bluff.

"The front porch gives the house a warm and inviting feel," he said. "It's a romantic addition to the house's design. Most of our

buyers plan to be in their houses for a long time, but when they do sell it will add to the architectural appeal of the house."

DeBaker's custom-home buyers gravitate toward traditional beadboard ceilings and wooden railings but favor specialty flooring such as bluestone tile or ipe wood.

The more the porch proliferates, the more the design stays the same. Many of today's front porches parrot those perpetuated by painters Norman Rockwell and Edward Hopper or echo those from iconic American homes, including George Washington's Mount Vernon and Thomas Jefferson's Monticello. Or they are smaller versions of the 660-foot porch (the world's largest, it claims) that defines Mackinac Island's Grand Hotel.

Compared with interior rooms, the front porch gives you more bang for your buck, said Richard Becker, of Becker Architects Ltd. in Highland Park.

"The foundation and roof are major costs," he said. "But you don't have the expenses of windows and mechanical systems."

Material choices determine the porch cost from there. Ceiling options include exposed rafters, decking and beadboard. Flooring can be concrete (more interesting now, thanks to stamping and dyeing), wood, composite or tile.

Be sure to budget for lighting, advised Becker, so the porch has ample light for evening activities. Don't overlook the design of the stairs, he added. "They set the stage for the porch, so they matter."

Becker especially likes the new woodlike composite flooring choices from the decking industry.

"They last a lot longer than wood, don't fade and you can get railings to match," he said.

Front porches have moved up the list of remodeling homeowners' must-haves, said Bruce Pinsler, of Galaxie Home Remodeling in Lincolnwood.

"Due to the economy, people are spending more time at home," he said. "The front porch gives them an extension of their living space."

Accessorize your outdoor living space with a wooden, wicker or metal porch swing. Rocking chairs and outdoor gliders are just as fine for watching the world go by. Add character with bright, colorful cushions that are weather resistant.

Porch additions

Neighborhoods and municipalities have minimum set-back requirements that can add red tape to front porch additions.



TAPCO GROUP PHOTO

Louvered colonial shutters, ceiling fans and rocking chairs give front porches an extra dose of curb appeal.



Porches at West Point Gardens in Elgin fit with the trend toward traditional home design and meet homeowners' desire for a casual lifestyle.

Some also limit the percentage of the lot that can be covered by structures.

But, Becker said, after sitting on a municipal board for six years, he saw fewer objections to porch additions than other requests.

"Typically, the neighbors see it as a good thing," he said.

Before you hire an architect or builder, learn the lingo from "On the Porch," by James Crisp and Sandra Mahoney. This primer describes porch parts and warns you of potential code complications.

While front porches often grace homes with traditional designs, architect Mark Frisch's Wilmette house is thoroughly modern. Its front, side and back porches are integral to the design of the house, which was drafted by Demeter Building Workshop LLC in Chicago.

"Architecturally, the front porch differentiates the first floor from the second, so the house isn't boxy," said Frisch. "But in terms of lifestyle, it gets me outside. I read, I talk to the neighbors."

While Frisch's wife and their Labrador retriever prefer the back porch's sunny exposure, Frisch prefers the front porch's shade.

"If it's over 60 degrees, I'm out there," he said.

Even off-site-built (sometimes called pre-cut) houses feature front porches as prominent features in their designs. Companies such as OakBridge Timber Framing and Estemervalt Log Homes cater to the second-home market, where the front porch spells "time to relax." Connor Homes' "new-old" models replicate early American houses from the East Coast, most with front porches.

Will the front porch endure or will it succumb to obsolescence? It has survived AC and TV, so it shall endure, architects and builders agreed. It enjoys esteem that extends beyond its original purpose.

Like the good-night wave from the front door, the creak of the swing as teenagers court and the crickets' evening serenade, the front porch tells us that, for now at least, all is OK.

HOUSING COUNSEL

Seller's fee not disclosed in real estate contract

By Benny L. Kass
INMAN NEWS

Q My husband and I signed a contract in November and put \$1,000 down. The real estate agent put financing as "n/a" (not applicable) because we were preapproved by our bank. He sent us to a bank, and the loan was approved, with a great interest rate and no points. Then problems started.

The underwriter said a road maintenance agreement was needed, which was not disclosed in the contract. We told the other side we want out and to give us our money back. The agent said an attorney was working on the road maintenance issue with 28 families.

We still have not gotten our deposit back, and the agent says if we pay the seller's fee of \$500 for the attorney doing the road maintenance agreement, they might release us from contract.

I filed a complaint with the Department of Real Estate because of the nondisclosure of road maintenance, and they said there is no violation. Now the home inspector is calling us, wanting his money, and we have told him the agent still has it. We did sign a release of contract designating where the \$1,000 should go, and when we called the agent, he said the owners are still thinking about it.

Do we have any options left other than paying even more money for an attorney? This has been a nightmare.

A Does your state require sellers to disclose known conditions of the property? If so, and if the road condition was not disclosed, I believe you have a good case against the sellers — not the real estate agent.

If your state doesn't require disclosures, you should call the attorney involved with the 28 other families. Ask why you must pay the \$500. The attorney is not representing you, and the seller would pay that fee regardless of who buys the house.

You should also discuss this with your own attorney. It may very well be that the road maintenance issue is a cloud on the title, which would have prohibited you from buying in any event. Generally, there is a provision in real estate sales contracts that the seller is conveying good and clear title. Under

these circumstances, because the seller may not have had clear title to convey, you should get your money back.

There is, of course, a good lesson to be learned from your experience. Even though you had a preapproval letter from a lender, you still should have included a financing contingency in your sales contract.

Q I'd like to know if a deed-in-lieu of foreclosure is possible in the following situation: I am the sole mortgage holder on our house. I listed it as a short sale for a year to no avail. I am recently divorced, but my ex can reside in the house. Both of us are on the deed.

In our divorce settlement, because the house mortgage is in my name only, he must allow me to try to sell it. I spoke with the bank, and a deed-in-lieu is an option I would like to pursue. However, does my ex-husband need to be involved with any of the official documents in the deed-in-lieu process?

A First, a quick explanation of a deed-in-lieu. This is a process whereby your mortgage lender agrees to take back the house instead of (in lieu of) spending the time and money foreclosing on the property. Some lenders will agree to this, especially if there is only one mortgage on the house.

Have you discussed the situation with your ex-husband? Does he understand that he will probably have to move out, whether it is sold or the deed is given back to the lender?

Keep in mind that even if you have the absolute right to sell, your ex will have to sign any deed. Although you are the only one on the mortgage (in some states that is called a deed of trust), he still has an ownership interest in the property and will also have to sign the deed.

If you believe you can sell through a short sale, whereby you will not get any of the sales proceeds, I believe you would have the same right to give the deed back to the bank.

But before you proceed down either path, make sure that your ex will be on board. Talk with your divorce lawyer to confirm that you have the right to do a short sale. If so, then I think the deed-in-lieu will also fly.

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