

How Screened Porches Bring the Outdoors In

Growing concerns about bug-borne illnesses and overexposure to harmful rays have boosted the appeal of the screened porch, which offers a protected, front-row seat to nature.

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Before air conditioning became widespread, the screened porch was considered a necessity in many areas as a respite from intense heat, especially as a safe, cool place to rest at night. Then, as different notions of "outdoor rooms" for all sorts of uses caught on, its popularity waned.

Now the screened porch is re-emerging with gusto on different styles of homes, in a wide range of prices, and all over the country, from warm climates to cold. In northern Minnesota, just below the Canadian border, builder Matt Balmer's Lands End Development company builds mostly vacation homes. "We're finding that consumers want them in their new houses without exception, [and] are also adding them on to existing homes," he says. In much warmer San Antonio, many of Lake Flato Architects' projects, mostly new homes, include at least one and sometimes two screened porches. "We love how they expand clients' living space to enjoy morning coffee or watch a sunset with a cocktail," says Rebecca Bruce, an architect and associate with the firm.

This time around, heat is not the only impetus. It's joined by bugs and the serious health issues they bring. Mosquitoes represent the number one pest concern for home owners because of the Zika virus, says Cindy Mannes, vice president of public affairs for the Pest Management Association in Fairfax, Va., which represents 7,000 pest management companies.

Second on their list of health concerns are ticks. Lyme disease is no longer just along the East Coast, where it flourished in the past. The ticks that carry it have been found in the Midwest due to the recent mild winters, which allowed them to live through the season and thrive, Mannes says.

Enter the screened porch — a functional, attractive alternative. "You feel like you're outdoors, but you're safely indoors," says architect Lou Balodemus, a principal in his eponymous architecture firm in Washington, D.C., a city that can be both hot and bug-filled. Similarly, the developers of Heritage Harbor Ottawa, a 142-acre marina community in the southwest Chicago area, find their location on the banks of the Illinois River translate to a desire for insect abatement strategies. And that's why 80 percent of the condos and town homes they've built so far have a screened porch. "We're by the water so it helps keep insects away, but the porches also add a nostalgic touch since so many associate them with their parents' and grandparents' homes," says Tammy Barry, the firm's director of marketing.

Whether your clients are searching for a new place with a screened space or they're looking to market their listing with a nod to the outdoors, buyers and sellers alike need your expertise. Talk over these considerations with your clients, as well as the importance of hiring a professional skilled in screened-porch construction.

Location

Screened porches provide their greatest enjoyment when they take advantage of nature, light, and views. But it can be tricky to do that with existing homes, and it's often easier to incorporate a screened porch in a new house instead, says Chicago architect Julie Hacker of Stuart Cohen and Julie Hacker Architects. The porches tend to be used most if located adjacent to or near a kitchen since they serve a casual eating—and living—function.

However, they also should be oriented so they won't block views and light from adjacent, interior rooms. Skylights in a ceiling may compensate, Balodemus says, so may windows in the side walls of adjacent rooms, when possible. In warm San Antonio, the pros at Lake Flato Architects try to place porches where they may catch a breeze. And though it may not be technically deemed a screened porch, a detached building with screens is another option for those who have the land and don't want to sacrifice light.

Materials

Since the porch may get damp, it's important to build it using weather-resistant materials and extend eaves 2 to 3 feet away from a roof to decrease rain coming in through the screens, says Connecticut-based architect Duo Dickinson. Good weather-resistant floor choices are flagstone, porcelain, and certain woods like ipe, cedar, and teak. Dickinson staples screening to floor joists before laying a top surface to keep out insects from the ground up, since many live and hide underneath where they can damage semi-outdoor surfaces without being detected.

But your clients don't have to be limited to only outdoor materials. Dallas home owner Misty Quinn and her architect, Will Snyder of Boerder-Snyder Architects, decided on a fancier floor of black-and-white polished granite and Carrera marble to fit the elegance of her 1939 Georgian-style home. "The porch opens to a formal living room and kitchen and, when we have parties, we like to open all the French doors and have people circulate through all three rooms," she says. Quinn painted existing brick walls the color of interior rooms to meld spaces visually. Many other screened porch walls and ceilings are framed in wood, sometimes in old-fashioned bead-board style. Architects at Lake Flato often suggest steel options that enhance its crisper, more contemporary designs while also offering more durability.

Screens

Yes, even the screens have evolved. Openings have gotten larger and the mesh finer, both reflecting a contemporary influence. Designers are also working to minimize pieces that frame and support both screens and room structure. "Why break up screening with vertical and horizontal elements that block the view?" asks Chicago architect Allan J. Grant.

And improvements in technology and design permit home owners greater flexibility, too, since some companies design screen systems on retractable tracks. With the push of a button on a remote control, the room is opened to nature again. John Forehand, president of the Orren Pickell Design Group outside Chicago, which now includes screened porches in 90 percent of its custom homes, likes to use this type of retractable option, especially from companies that almost conceal the track.

Size

As with any room, the porch should be large enough to accommodate a home owner's plans for how to use the space. Quinn's porch measures an ample 16 by 20 feet to reflect its use as overflow space for large parties. But they also wanted it to work functionally for casual lounging and snacking after swims in the family pool. "This way, family and guests aren't going in and out of the house in wet suits," she says. Broker Ann Peterson, ABR, SRES, of Ann Peterson Realty Services in Rochester, Mich., warns her clients against being overzealous and building a screened porch that takes up the entire yard and eliminates the beauty of the site.

Furnishings

In their earlier iterations, screened porches included just the basic furnishings, typically wrought iron or wicker chairs and tables. Some home owners still prefer that no-frills approach. But the overall ramp-up in the style and complexity of outdoor furnishings is showing up in screened porch choices, too. Many are almost indistinguishable from their interior room counterparts. Upholstery is just one example. "There's a lot more choice than the original Sunbrella stripes," says Susan Fredman of Chicago's Susan Fredman Design Group.

Consumers are also faced with decisions about whether to include outdoor rugs, fireplaces, TVs, dimmable lighting, portable heaters, art, window treatments (for both shade and privacy), and wind protection. Some may want cooking equipment, but caution your clients that thorough venting is crucial to avoid fire hazards, and that some communities won't permit such features for that reason.

Return on Investment

How much screened porches help resale is unclear. Peterson says many of her firm's buyers consider them to be an important extra area for entertaining and enjoying the outdoors. But salesperson Kimberly Cantine, with H.H. Hill Realty Services Inc. in New York's Hudson River Valley, says while her buyers may love having the amenity, they won't include it in their must-haves. "Few tell me 'I want a screened porch' when they're looking," she says. In her experience, buyers are more excited to see a nice deck or stone patio. "Some out-of-town buyers are even suspicious if a home has a screened porch and think it must be a buggy area. So buyers comparing two identical homes in the same location may be willing to pay more for the one with the screened porch, but may be just as happy to pay less for the one without."

But the overall consensus appears to be that when home owners do gain a screened porch, they usually get plenty of use out of it. "We added one on the back of our house, which is small, and it opens up the entire house to the outside," Forehand says. "My family, including my teenage sons, find ourselves congregating on the porch much more than I thought possible."

Bringing the Outdoors In

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Porches in Disguise

This home, designed by Orren Pickell Design Group in Lake Geneva, Wis., uses retractable screens on the French doors leading to the two rear decks. They're clad in eye-popping red to match the windows.



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