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At this Duxbury home, the screened porch designed by Will Ruhl serves as a transitional space between the new part of the house and the pool area (below).

Enjoying the outdoors from inside

Screened and covered porches offer beauty and comfort

By Jaci Conry
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Ah, the screened porch. The notion conjures up thoughts of lazy, hazy summer afternoons spent sipping sweating glasses of lemonade while lounging on a pillow-strewn wicker couch.

Screened and covered porches have been a part of New England residential architecture for years, and with good reason: They offer one of the best ways to combat summer heat — and be sheltered from pesky bugs —

while still affording the opportunity to enjoy the sights and sounds of the outdoors.

Though there's a difference between today's porches and those of yesteryear, says Will Ruhl of Boston's Ruhl Walker Architects. Screened porches on older houses were typically afterthoughts, square boxes added quickly on to the back or side after construction.

"Now they are usually designed to be integrated with the rest of the home as a continuation of the living space," says Ruhl.

In a 19th-century Duxbury home his firm recently renovated and expanded, Ruhl conceived a screened porch that serves as a transitional space between the new part of the house and an outdoor pool area. Accessible with sliding glass doors from the dining room as well as the interior stair hall, the porch is open to the outdoors with screening on the other two sides. While the porch is unheated, the screens can be swapped out with glass panels, which allows it to be comfortable in the shoulder seasons.

While the porch blends seamlessly with the interior of the home, it's treated as an outdoor space: The floor is made of sustainably harvested mahogany — "The same material that would be used on an outdoor deck, and finished with a clear varnish that needs to be reapplied every few years," says Ruhl.

Not only does the porch provide a sheltered spot to appreciate the outdoors, since it's oriented toward the shady north side of the yard, the interior of the house gets natural ventilation.

"When the sliding glass doors are open to the dining room, the breeze rustles in and the house breathes," says Ruhl.

Indeed, says Cambridge architect Maryann Thompson, "a screened porch is a great addition to a house that doesn't have air conditioning," who recommends installing a ceiling fan to circulate the air and to keep the porch from becoming musty.

When Thompson designed a second-story screened porch off of the kitchen and on the edge of an expansive cedar deck for a home in Aquinnah on Martha's Vineyard, she had two objectives in mind. She wanted to provide an outdoor space that was conducive to al fresco dining in the evening and protected from bugs, and she wanted to offer a cool perch from which the modest ocean view could be taken in during the day.

While typical screened porches would have with gabled roofs, Thompson designed this one with a roofline that projects upward. "It feels really expressive, as if it's opening up to the view," she says. The raised roofline allows for an overhang to shield the porch from rain and also works to filter in sunlight. "Screened porches and the rooms adjacent to them can be really dark, particularly those built a long time ago," says Thompson, who adds that the porch's lofty ceilings keep the space feeling light and airy.

Not all porches need to have screens: covered, open-air porticos, offering shade and a prime spot to appreciate the landscape, are just as thoughtfully conceived these days, says Cory Desjardin, whose Boston firm, New England Design & Construction, overhauled a dilapidated porch on a house in Newton. The homeowners sought a focal point where they could dine that would lead into their stone patio and lush backyard. The porch takes cues from the architecture



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

A Newton porch by Cory Desjardin features mahogany decking and skylights, as well as heaters to allow for fall use.



CHUCK CHOI (ABOVE AND LEFT)

This second-story screened porch on Martha's Vineyard was designed by Maryann Thompson with a raised roofline for a better view.

of the house: the hip roof emulates the one that tops the home, and columns, similar to those at the front entrance, were also incorporated.

While the homeowners opted to use mahogany on this porch, Desjardin says a variety of materials are available for outdoor decks and porches.

"It all depends on how much

maintenance you want to be responsible for." The quality of composites, he points out, has greatly improved. "There are products that look and feel like wood that will last 20 years or more."

Most of Desjardin's clients are looking for their outdoor areas to include distinct elements.

"They want extra details, an

intricate pattern — something extra to give it their own mark," he says. "To give this porch an artistic element, each piece of the mahogany decking was cut at a 45-degree angle and laid in a dovetail pattern."

The ceiling is sheathed with mahogany wainscoting, in which two white-trimmed skylights are inset, bathing the

space with sunlight and views of the treetops. A ceiling fan creates a breeze on hot days. And when the weather cools, electric heaters and down lights installed in the ceiling allow the porch to be enjoyed deep into the autumn.

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