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Building Scene

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Models in the Long Lake Meadows Subdivision in Troy feature the return of front porches.

Porches of old: a 2nd living room

(AP)After years of being cut off from the outside world in centrally air-conditioned ranch homes, Americans are unlatching the screen door and catching a summer breeze from a porch swing, rocker or glider.

The front porch is a selling point for many new houses and is being restored rather than closed in or lopped off of older house and inner city rehab projects, according to Renee Kahn, co-author of "Preserving Porches" (Henry Holt and Co., $18.95).

Kahn, a housing preservationist and director of the Historic Neighborhood Preservation Program in Stamford, Conn., says the porch, exposed to the elements, is often the first part of a house to deteriorate. But removing it is usually destructive to both the building's and the neighborhood's character.

"The condition of its porches telegraphs the state of a neighborhood better than anything I know," Kahn says. "Unattractive porches are a clue to a deteriorating neighborhood.

"If you paint and repair it regularly and keep water from accumulating, a porch will easily last 150 years or more."

Victorian porches were often enclosed during the winter with temporary panels of glass between the columns and rails and likewise screened to minimize the insect problem in summer.

BEFORE THE ADVENT of large metal screens, wood blinds, shutters, lattice work and draped fabric panels were put up to shield the porch from too much sun and insects. The use of striped canvas awnings dates back to the late 19th century. Reproductions of these old fashioned items can be purchased today.

If you have a porch in need of repair, Kahn suggests:

- Start by doing research on your own house. There are sometimes marks on the facade where parts were once attached. Most old houses were built from standard plans. Look around the neighborhood for houses of similar style that still have their porches.
- Books on old building styles are invaluable. "Preserving Porches," for example, pictures and describes characteristic porches of each of the main architectural styles of the 19th century and early 20th centuries.
- Consult a historical society for help. Local preservation groups may have photographs of old neighborhoods and lists of craftsmen specializing in restoration.
- Look for a sympathetic contractor. "A good carpenter understands that getting the details right is essential," Kahn says.

Once the basic structure has been restored, it's time to furnish the porch.

"OLD PHOTOS show porches furnished with hammocks, wicker furniture, potted plants and even oriental rugs on the floor. Some porches had shutters or blinds to shelter you from the elements," Kahn says.

Reproductions of old wicker, rustic twig, cast iron and metal wire porch furniture and planters are being marketed widely, and grass or sisal rugs are readily available.

Porches didn't really get started until the 19th century.

"Occasionally," says Kahn, "they were added to houses built prior to 1830, but mostly in the South where the climate encouraged sitting outdoors."

Though we associate the porch with small-town life, it wasn't until 19th century industrialization that it came within reach of the middle class. Hand-carved "gingerbread" trim could now be stamped out yards at a time, and cast or wrought iron, once custom-made by a blacksmith, was mass produced.

Central heating and electric lights, which were in use by the end of the 19th century, eliminated the need to keep the porch from blocking out the sun. So porches became even more like a second living room, often shaded by awnings, screens and a flower trellis or two.

"Until World War I, front porches were an architectural and social necessity," Kahn says. But they were gradually replaced by a side or back porch or dropped altogether.

In the building boom after World War II, suburban developers dispensed with exterior frills for the sake of economy.

Porches make mini comeback

By Doug Funke
staff writer

Many architects, builders and home buyers haven't given much respect lately to front porches.

But at least one builder here has found that customers will respond to front porches if offered as options on new houses.

John Bollan Jr., vice president for the Troy-based family company, doesn't know *exactly why there's an* interest, and he doesn't expect that it will become a trend.

But buyers seem to like the option on his models in the Long Lake Meadows Subdivision, Troy.

"I suppose a porch is more traditional minded and I suppose our customers are more traditional than contemporary," Bollan said. "This particular ranch (Meadowlark) is long and wide. From that standpoint, a covered porch gives it a little more warmth."

Bollan conceded that his porch evolved more from a design perspective than to serve as functional space.

But many of the porches, up to 20 feet long, on houses built by Bollan in Troy are well decorated with chairs, benches, planters and wall hangings that seems to indicate people spend time there.

Robert Stensen has lived in a Bollan model for three years.

"I GREW UP in Detroit in an old-style bungalow with an old-style porch across the whole house," he said. "I don't know if the relationship is there that caused us to buy this house, but it (porch) caught our eye."

His wife Luanne's decorative touches include an Adirondack chair, a couple of planters and a wreath

Tom and Mary Tsacoumangos moved into a new house less than a month ago and already have some planters out.

"I like front porches," she said. "Next year, we'll put maybe a park bench in and landscape."

"We traditionally sell to the second- and third-time home buyers," Bollan said. "They've already been in homes. They know a great deal about homes, what they want. They're buying laterally. It may be similar to what they have, but it's newer, cleaner lines, different things added on."

Porches, once considered primary social settings, now are regarded as entry enhancers. A couple of reasons — larger, fancier models and lifestyle changes — account for the downturn.

PORCHES EXTENDING across the front of houses limit design possibilities, said Robert R. Jones, a West Bloomfield builder.

"In our communities, the front of every house is different," he said. "I think if you put a front porch in, you've dictated what the design is going to be. For us, it would be lethal. How many ways can you design a big front porch?

"And the demand isn't there," Jones added. "People don't use it. When people come home from busy days, they want privacy, serenity, time to unwind."

"It's a question of privacy," concurred Irv Tobocman, a Birmingham architect. "The front is the non-private part of the house. Given the two choices, would you rather sit at the front or rear? Most opt for the rear."

Large porches were scaled down when smaller new houses were built in cookie-cutter fashion on small lots after World War II. But the porches were still well used. Young families, plenty of children, sidewalks, living in close proximity fostered a sense of community.

NOW WE have subdivisions — not neighborhoods — with larger houses on larger lots, sometimes no sidewalks and certainly fewer kids.

"These days, quite frankly, in many communities people six doors away don't know each other," Jones said.

Also, a sense of cocooning has developed. People seem to want to be left alone in their secluded yards or master suites after work.

Television, especially with dozens of cable options, has replaced people watching as a pastime. And who needs to sit on a porch to cool off with air conditioning?

"If we want to be outside, decks, patios and terraces have moved to the back yard," said Bob Bryce, a West Bloomfield architect. "I guess it's for privacy."

"We never asked what drives people to pick a house with a covered porch," Bollan said. "It (porch) gives us an avenue of changing the front a little bit and we find it caters to our customers so we stick with it."

RANCHES AND other architectural styles are best suited to longer porches. Styles with several peaks and roof lines aren't as amenable. "Tudors, the towering look you try to create, doesn't lend itself to a horizontal porch," Bollan said.

There are other exceptions to the general rule that people don't seem to want porches.

"We're doing a house on Maple Road with a nice entry, a little front garden so you go from the sidewalk through the garden to the door," Tobocman said. "It's possible we'll develop a front area for people to sit on a porch so they can be part of the street scene."

Bryce has a front porch on his West Bloomfield home on a site opposite a lake.

"I have a beautiful natural front yard with a stream running through. I like the feeling I get on the front porch looking at the yard. It's not necessarily a socialization thing, but a nice environment. The dogs watch the kids. It gives them something to look at."

But on balance, front yards are smaller than rear yards. You can do more exciting things, creativity, in the rear," Bryce said.

Buyers buying, builders building

By Doug Funke
staff writer

Steadily declining interest rates plus some incentives offered by builders to break the logjam of pent-up demand apparently have sparked an uptick in the new housing market here, several builders reported.

"Low interest rates have dramatically helped the new housing market," said Bernard Glieberman, president of Crosswinds Communities in West Bloomfield. "We had a record quarter (55 sales), and this quarter will be another (70 sales).

"These interest rates are a real opportunity for people to buy," Glieberman said. "You have two things working at the same time. You have very good prices and low interest rates."

Thirty and 15-year fixed mortgage rates now can be obtained at 8⅞ and 8½ percent, respectively. Rates were three quarters of a percentage point higher on both options as recently as July.

A ¾ percent swing on a 30-year $100,000 mortgage translates to $54 per month.

"We've had two of our best months ever," said Michael Horowitz, president of The Selective Group in Farmington Hills. "Number one, it's very aggressive pricing. Number two, we're competitive. And number three, we have a good product.

"PEOPLE SEE this as a good time to buy for value, and interest rates are icing on the cake," Horowitz said.

Selective signed slightly more than 30 sales contracts during the past two months, said Ellen Whitefield, marketing director.

"Every site sold a lot in both September and August," Whitefield said. "I think lowering of interest rates certainly had something to do with it."

Selective, which has projects going in Plymouth, Farmington Hills, West Bloomfield and Bloomfield Hills, had been offering some extras earlier this summer to stimulate demand, but less so now, she said.

Glieberman said he's sold about 150 condominiums in Westland, with a starting price at $76,000, in less than a year. Affordability plus the lowest mortgage rates in years make for a great combination, he said.

"Tremendously more people are able to buy today," Glieberman said. "The biggest thing and the whole thing is the (mortgage) payment has dropped dramatically."

Crosswinds also is now building in Farmington Hills.

LOWER INTEREST rates have led to more activity at a couple of projects involving Burton/Katzman Development of Birmingham.

"We are beginning to see sustained interest in the lower end of the market — a condo project in the low $90s (Walled Lake) is getting a significant amount of traffic," said Lawrence Goss, executive vice president.

"In Brighton, more on the upper end at Pine Creek Ridge, we're getting a lot of interest from builders who want to buy lots on a spec basis," he said. "I attribute that to more confidence in the economy and interest rate certainly is a factor."

But traffic hasn't transcended to a dramatic jump in sales, Goss added.

A corresponding drop in rates for builder construction loans apparently doesn't have as great an impact on housing starts. Construction rates are tied to the prime interest rate financial institutions charge their most credit worthy customers or consumer mortgage rates.

"BUILDERS AREN'T in a speculative mood today," said Michael Lubig, manager of the mortgage department for Standard Federal Bank headquartered in Troy. "Everyone is taking a pretty conservative approach today."

Al Marshall, manager of business development for First Federal of Michigan, agreed.

"There's probably less speculative model loans today," he said. "Builders are still shy. They're not confident about the economy."

"It (construction loan rate) doesn't affect whether I build or not," Glieberman said. "Demand affects it."

But he conceded that lower carrying costs, worked into the price of a home, can be beneficial to buyers. "It would be a factor," he said.

"You're not going to say, 'Interest rates are down, let's go build a few specs,'" Whitefield said. "We like to keep a very steady pace. We don't do spec building based on (construction loan) rates."