

# From Porch to Patio



## *The Desire for Privacy and the Need for Community*

by Richard H. Thomas

*For two decades Richard H. Thomas has observed and pondered the evolution of "porch to patio." He has photographed porches in eastern Iowa and southwestern Wisconsin, and has celebrated front porches in his community of Mount Vernon, Iowa, by helping create a local "parade of porches" and a videotape on porches. His essay "From Porch to Patio" was well received when it first appeared in The Palimpsest (July/August 1975), so we invited him to revisit the subject for today's readers. This is a revision of that essay.*

—The Editor



**B**road front porches once were so common on American homes that we tend to take them for granted. Yet their prevalence a century ago tells us something about ourselves. Two assumptions are basic to understanding the role of architecture, and specifically the front porch, in our lives. First, domestic dwellings in their construction and design reflect the prevailing cultural





notions of what a "home" should be, of what the owners perceive essential to their life style. Second, a house is not only a shelter but also a cultural statement of how personal space and social life are organized.

The century between 1860 and 1960 saw many changes in technology, values, population, land use, consumer habits, and social structures. These changes were

sometimes rapid and accompanied by tensions between the desire for privacy and the need to be public enough to enjoy the benefits of community life. Some of these changing notions of privacy and community are especially apparent in the domestic architecture chosen by the upper classes, those who were the architectural style leaders and arbiters of culture. We see additional evidence

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SHARL HORN/CATTS

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SHSI: SCHWINN COLLECTION (IOWA CITY)

**Three women rock on the front porch of the Charles Kelly home in Red Oak.**

sions of architectural design, it is enlightening to focus on one facet of the total home, namely the porch, and its gradual move from the front to the back of the home, where it became first the patio and now the deck. This narrow concern leaves untouched crucial elements in domestic architecture, such as room arrangement or the evolution of the 19th-century par-

lor into the modern den or family room. Concentrating on the porch, however, helps us consider how an increasing desire for privacy has both modified and been reflected in changing house design. The evolution of porch to patio also suggests new forms of social relations with one's neighbors, and, in turn, shifting ideas about what is meant by a sense of community or belonging to a particular place.

A central feature of the changes over the last century is

how speed compressed both time and distance. In the late 19th century, most gentry-class homes were built on large lots. The homes faced the street and were viewed by passersby on foot or from horse-drawn vehicles. One approached and passed at a slow pace, with plenty of time to comprehend an entire house and its intricate ornamentation.

Part of our failure today to appreciate the grandeur of these older homes is attributable to the speed at which we now travel.



Many of these homes that have survived are often crowded by newer structures and are surrounded by less open space. At a car's speed of 25 or 30 miles per hour and with the distractions of traffic, a passerby's viewing time is reduced to approximately six seconds. The 19th-century passerby on foot or by buggy had far more time to appreciate the architecture and the ornamental features of the home, many of them clustered on the porch.

There was also sufficient time for passersby to notice the presence or absence of a home's residents on the porch because the porch represented an opportunity for social intercourse at several levels. When family members were on the porch, they might merely wave or exchange trivial greetings to those passing by. On the other hand, they might also invite passersby to come up onto the porch for extended conversations. In other words, family

members were very much in control of this social interaction, because the porch was an extension of their living quarters or private space.

While the porch served the function of letting others know that one was available for limited forms of interpersonal exchange, it served many other functions as well. The gentry homes were intentionally designed to provide space for entertaining guests, and large front porches were many times the location of social gatherings. A porch meeting with friends did not require cleaning the house and offered social time without formal

arrangements. Furthermore, a well-shaded porch provided a cool place in the heat of the day for women to enjoy a respite from household chores. Older persons derived great pleasure from sitting on the porch and watching the world go by or enjoying the grandchildren or neighborhood children at play.

Because the porch was a special zone that mixed both private and public space, it provided courting space, within earshot of concerned and protective parents. Being within the general confines of the house afforded some privacy, yet the watchful eyes of neighbors and proximity to parents kept the space public. The porch swing permitted a courting couple to sit together in an acceptable environment, and many a proposal of marriage was made there.

Lest we overglamorize the porch, we need to recall that not all porches were on the front of houses or blended public and private space. Small, upper-story porches had the very practical

**Furniture makes an inviting social space on this porch, circa 1906.**

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**Simple or elegant, small or large, most midwestern homes up through the early 20th century had front porches.**

COURTESY JAMES BERANEK







SHSI: SCHWINN COLLECTION (IOWA CITY)



purpose of providing a second-floor outdoor area for shaking a dust mop or rugs and providing cross-ventilation. Sleeping porches gave relief from the summer heat. And back porches functioned as service entries and private space.

Even the humblest homes could not do without some form of a porch. It was a pervasive architectural feature that disappeared slowly. Americans seemed to cling to the porch even as styles changed.

Part of the resistance to abandoning the porch as an essential element of the home can be attributed to the primary group relationships that permeated both the large and small communities. Americans valued knowing their neighbors and being known by them. The porch was a place to be

seen while still within the perimeter of one's home or private space. It had an additional advantage of being a platform from which to observe the activities of others. The porch, therefore, facilitated and symbolized a set of primary group relations and a strong bond to the community, which 19th- and early 20th-century Americans supposed was the way God intended life to be lived.

By the turn of the century, an ever-greater selection of porch styles was available to the home builder because of a well-established millwork industry, new building materials and techniques, cheap labor, and the publication of house plans in books and magazines. Yet at the same time, cutting-edge architects like Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Burley Griffin, and others



were searching for a new architecture that would become distinctly American. Although architects from the emerging Prairie School

**Left:** Two girls while away summer on the front porch of the Baptist parsonage in Red Oak. **Above:** Small, second-story porches allowed for airing a house or shaking a dust mop. **Below:** A 1911 postcard from Battle Creek shows off a front porch with a turret and carries this proud message on the back: "I painted this house. You see how bright it looks. That is the class of houses I have painted this summer. Only half of the house shows. Papa."



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all found clients in Iowa for commercial and private buildings, much of the gentry continued constructing homes along the lines of the past three decades, expressing their power and wealth through large, elaborate homes.

But American homes also began to reflect a shift in size and formality. The expanding middle class, as well as the upper class, began to embrace less formal and more economical housing. They chose spare Craftsman styling over 19th-century opulence, and modest bungalows and prefabricated homes over inefficient and costly Victorians. Still, most of these more modest structures continued the tradition of the front porch.

After World War II, the population explosion, postwar economy, national demand for housing, and large federal subsidies for veterans all contributed to a massive building boom. Unlike the earlier streetcar suburbs, this new suburbia was driven by a need for moderately priced homes that lent themselves to mass production. In these new planned communities, land was costly, labor expensive, and architects were often the employees of large development corporations whose profits rested heavily on standardized plans and constructions.

The resulting "bedroom communities" often lacked established social structures and the ingredients for building a sense of com-

**T**he extravagance of porches like this one on the H.W. Bathke residence in Sumner, Iowa (left) gradually gave way to more straightforward treatments, such as this bungalow porch (top right), and then abbreviated or closed-in porches (center and below; from Cedar Rapids and Remsen, Iowa). Meanwhile, garages became more visible as they moved closer to the house and street.

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BOTH PHOTOS: SHSI (IOWA CITY)





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**A** traditional front porch maintains the character of an older home in Decorah. Below: An exchange between porch and buggy in West Branch, about 1912. Right: Along with suburbia, came attached garages, walled patios, and backyard decks—dramatically changing the streetscape.

was surrounded by walls or open on several sides, its location in the rear of the house provided privacy by creating barriers to the more informal public contacts once facilitated by the front porch.

It should be noted that many architects were able to find patrons in the new upper middle class who were anxious to separate themselves from the prefabricated or mass-produced communities and wanted homes that reflected status. Professionals, particularly doctors, lawyers, and rising business executives, could afford both innovative architects and enough land to ensure privacy. In many of these professionally designed homes, the patio achieved a prominent place at the rear of the house and opened onto a large, landscaped area with a commanding view of the city or countryside.

munity. The inhabitants were generally of the same age and economic status, which created a bland social environment. High mobility rates and neighborhood turnover worked against community building.

Many suburbanites were refugees from the city, seeking single-family dwellings that would

maintain the privacy afforded by the anonymity of urban culture. One way of achieving privacy was the patio. Like the front porch, the patio was an extension of the house but far less public. It was easy to be hailed by a passerby from the porch, but exceedingly difficult over the high fence of the backyard patio. Whether the patio



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It is an old cliché that "a man's home is his castle." If that was true, the porch was an open drawbridge across which many passed in their daily transitions from private to public space. The modern home designed without a porch gives the impression of a closed drawbridge, suggesting that the royal family is tired of the world and seeks only the companionship of immediate family or intimate peers in the private space of the patio or deck.

In this transition from porch to patio, there is an irony. Nineteenth-century families were expected to be public and fought to achieve their privacy. Some of the 19th-century sense of community was achieved because of this expectation for forms of social interaction that the porch facilitated. Twentieth-century men and women have achieved a high degree of privacy in the patio, deck, or condominium balcony, but in so doing have lost daily touch with a sense of community. In their hurried flight from commuter vehicle to the sanctuary of the home (now often through an attached garage), they have little time for informal neighborhood contacts, without which a sense of community is difficult to establish and maintain.

Yet the tension between the need for privacy and the desire to belong to a community is still with us. Resolution of this seemingly ever-present conflict will continue to be reflected in the design of whatever we call home. ❖

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