

Making a room under a deck

As an architect specializing in small-home design, I'm always looking to get the most out of the spaces people have available in and around their homes. With this in mind, I often see a great opportunity to gain outdoor space under raised decks. With a little thought and a little extra effort and material, this under-utilized area can add to the appearance, comfort, and value of your home.

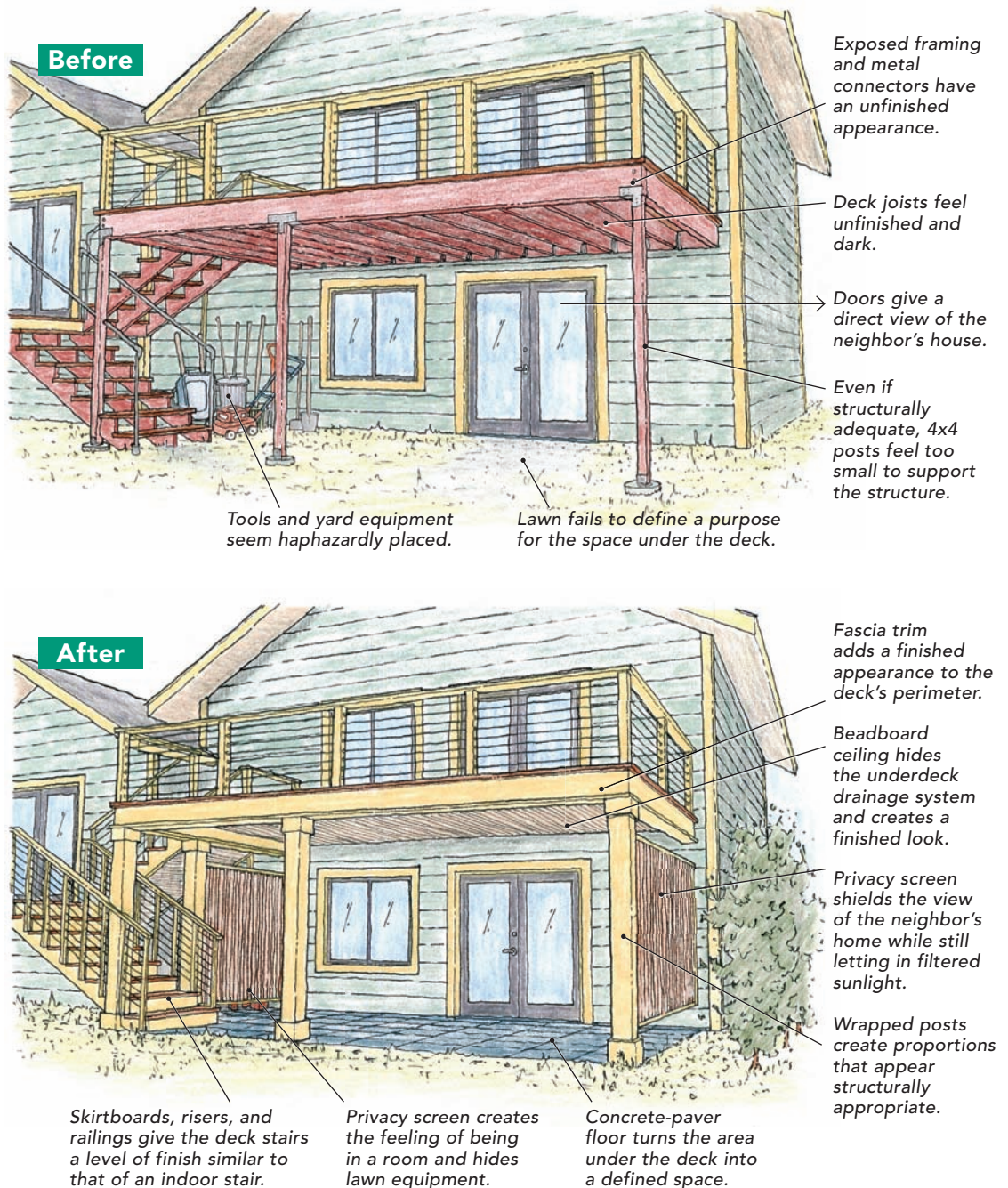
Not only is this a project for capturing additional outdoor living space, but defining the area under your deck will also add character. Let's face it—the spaces under most decks are less than attractive. If there are doors or windows looking out below the deck, this is true when viewed from the outside as well as from the inside. Creating another room outside the house allows us to perceive the house as larger.

Before designing the space under a deck, be sure to address the challenge of waterproofing the underside of the deck with a manufactured or site-built drainage system. From a design point of view, it's also important to evaluate the space to be sure you are comfortable with its opportunities and limitations—specifically that headroom, access, orientation, drainage, utility runs, and so forth all work in your favor.

The key to making this all work is transforming the space under the deck so that it has

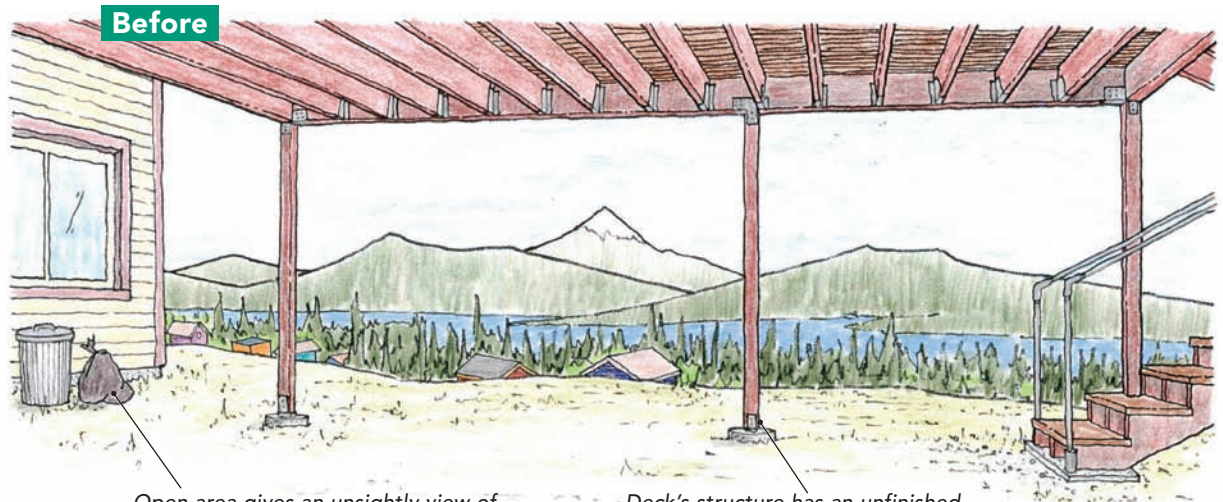
LOOKING IN: The whole house looks better

Not only did this remodel create an inviting, usable living space under the deck, but the details dress up the overall elevation of the house.



LOOKING OUT: The view comes into focus

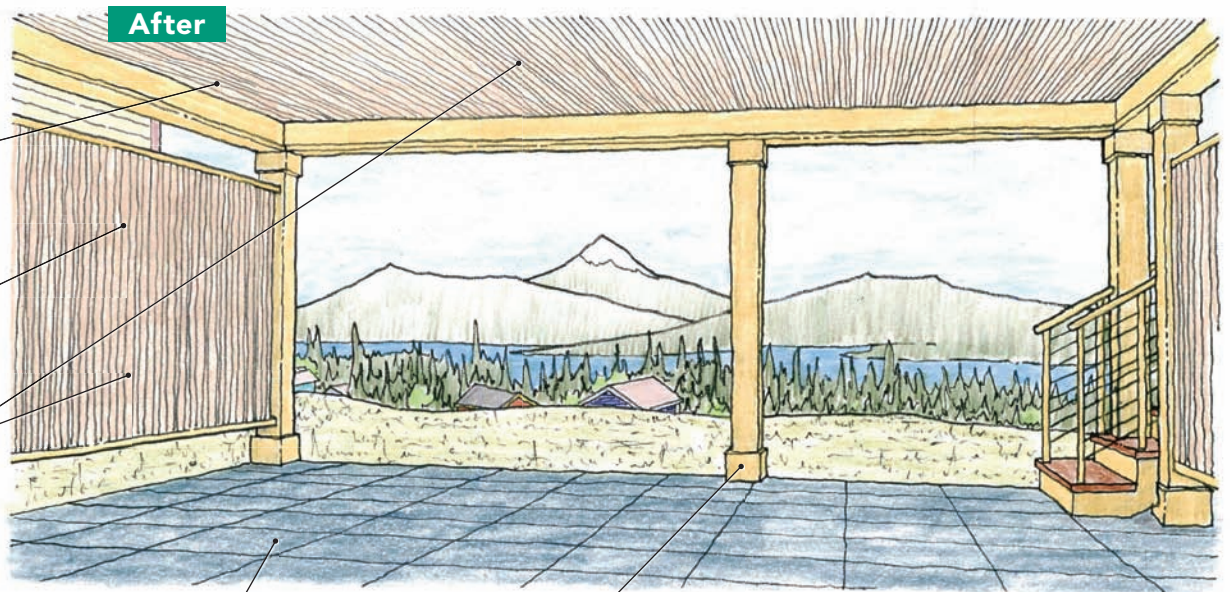
Similar to using windows to frame particular views from inside the house, the details of the new deck hide storage, block the view of the neighbor's house, and direct your attention to the distant landscape beyond, extending the sense of spaciousness inside the house.



Before

Open area gives an unsightly view of the neighbor's house and garbage.

Deck's structure has an unfinished appearance, similar to that of an unfinished basement.



After

Beadboard ceiling running perpendicular to the house directs your view to the mountains.

Privacy screens block unwanted views and suggest walls that define the space as an outdoor room.

Directional lights on the privacy screens and ceiling add interest at night.

Pavers create a defined footprint and mimic the tile flooring used inside the house.

Post bases and caps on wrapped posts add decorative elements to the space, suggesting a level of finish similar to that of indoor rooms.

a roomlike feel. This means creating and defining a floor area, adding the perception of walls, and designing an appealing ceiling plane. The same concepts can also be applied more broadly when adding any outdoor living area to the house.

Flooring defines the space

Ideally, the floor area has about the same footprint as the deck above and can be finished with gravel, poured concrete, concrete pavers, wood, or composite decking. For

gravel, a border edging to contain the stones and define the footprint is important. A concrete pad will be more interesting if it is scored with a pattern (perhaps mimicking tile), has a sanded finish, and/or has an integral or applied color added to it. Many concrete-paver choices are available, but I recommend keeping it simple by choosing materials that are already used in other parts of your property whenever possible. This will help tie the underdeck design to the rest of the house. Decking is also an

option, particularly duckboards, which are tile-like sections of decking installed on grade that are removable for cleaning.

With the flooring defining the space, the trick with privacy screening is to give the impression of walls without creating a dark and dreary area under the deck. Where you can, try to bring daylight into the space. This may not be as important in a hot climate where an oasis of shade is desirable, but in most areas you'll want the space to feel as light and cheery as you can make

it. You can use semitransparent privacy screens—angled slats, for example—to make the space feel contained and comfortable. In this way, you can hide undesirable views such as the neighbor’s trash cans or your yard equipment, and block wind or harsh light while still keeping the space feeling open and bright. Plantings can also be used to accomplish this goal, as well as to help define the space.

Dressing up the deck posts and beams helps to make the space feel substantial and finished as well. A raised deck supported by 4x4s or steel posts may be structurally sound, but may make people feel uneasy about being under or near a structure that appears inadequately supported. By wrapping the columns and beams with trim, you can give perceived heft and strength to the structure. You can even go a step further and add a base to the posts and perhaps a cap piece to suggest a level of finish similar to that found inside the house.

A ceiling is the finishing touch

In some cases, the underside of the decking may be a perfectly suitable finished ceiling, but if you have created a true living space, you’re likely looking at the drainage system and so will need to install a finished ceiling. Deck joists offer endless opportunities for attaching the ceiling material of your choice. Common options include tongue-and-groove beadboard, plywood with battens (to conceal seams), and corrugated metal. Here, too, take cues from other materials and finishes used on your house. If it is a directional material, I often like to install it perpendicular to the house. This draws the eye to distant views, further helping to expand the perceived size of the space.

Upgrading the lighting is also worth considering. Unless it is strictly used for utilitarian purposes, I would avoid simple overhead fixtures on the ceiling. These tend to create harsh and uncomfortable lighting conditions. Instead, think about lighting the surfaces using sconces or uplights shining toward the ceiling and then highlighting elements such as the posts, privacy screen, or plantings. Also consider low-voltage landscape lighting and its potential for inviting people to enter the space.

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