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# **Planning Decks & Patios**

*by James R. Ziglinski, C.R.*



Are you considering expanding your living areas to the outdoors? A well-thought-out patio or deck can be a great physical and emotional break-away from the everyday games one must play to survive in today's fast paced world, especially if the project is of your own design. But how do you get such a project off the ground? What should be considered, and what should not?

Planning may sound like a formidable task. However, it really doesn't have to be. All you need to do is use "common sense" and take it one step at a time. You may find it to be more fun than a chore.

Your first step should be to gather the family and discuss what your needs will be, how the deck or patio will be used, and what each person expects of the area. All ideas should be placed on paper, no matter how large or small, how practical or outlandish. Elimination can come later. Next, contact your local building inspector to get information regarding zoning restrictions and building code requirements. This, in itself, may start to thin out some of the ideas you have on paper. Then walk around your property. Find out where you would like to place this personal break-away.

Here's where you must not restrict yourself to "two dimensional" thinking. The biggest mistakes start when inexperienced planners place decks or patios only in areas that can be accessible by existing doors, patio sliders, or by opening up a window area. They do not consider the exterior environment, items such as sun, wind, foliage, or privacy from neighbors. Even noise from the neighborhood, and mosquitoes too, should be a consideration. In some cases, where property allows, patios and decks are placed away from the confines of the house completely - total independence and a retreat, so-to-speak, from telephones, walls, and reality.

Once the site has been chosen, you can go back to your ideas list and use it as a tool to consider what will suit your needs and budget. A patio or deck? Then, what materials do you wish to incorporate? If a patio, will it merely be a slab of rectangular concrete? A huge, man-made stone without personality or dimension? Will it reflect your artistic eye or merely be as bland as an upside down orange crate? Remember this is your own "Fantasy Island." Throw away any and all restrictions except those placed upon you by the codes or inspectors.

For example, a patio in concrete can have life by merely moving around expansion joints to form a geometric pattern. Or add texture with a small stone finish or edge framing instead of just a traditional brushed texture. Shape is a very strong stimulus. Allow it to fit the landscape, flowing around trees, shrubs, or gardens. Incorporate the natural resources to complement the patio or even accent, not clash.

Decks need the same consideration. The materials used should complement the surroundings. One of

the most ludicrous designs to class with its surroundings is a band shell (in my opinion). If it works for you, then it's fine. But consider Washington Park's band shell in Milwaukee. I feel it has about as much personality as one of those mermaids that sit on a mantel with a clock in her navel. A huge sea shell in the heart of an inland city. Even though it has the practical function of directing sound, old Neptune must be rolling in his wet grave. The rolling hills, natural valley and large shade trees would have been complemented in a much better fashion (in my humble opinion) than with that white horse perched in the center of the park. Although the shape lent to its function, the materials and color could have been much more imaginative. This is what I mean by "two dimensional" thinking. There is nothing in the world that says a band shell must be a shell. That type of thinking was O. K. for its time, but it is far outdated by now.

The same holds true for your deck or patio. They do not have to be like the neighbors' or the ones seen in books. Put your own imagination and dreams to work for you.

Now, getting off my soapbox and back to the topic at hand, once you have your functional list, site, and materials in mind, it's time to sketch out what you envision. This is the point when you may wish to call in a professional contractor if you do not understand the structural needs. However, you should at least have the basic ideas on paper for him/her to start with.

Now you can check out budgeting, contractor, installation costs, and financing if necessary. Once again, I must remind you of my past Wisconsin Home Gallery article regarding "selecting a contractor." Remember, this is your personal getaway. You should feel as comfortable with the men constructing it as you can be with your own family and/or friends. Price alone cannot always be the ruling factor. Quality and professionalism, you may find, last much longer. Let me pass on the saying that all of you may not have heard yet: "The bitterness of low quality remains long after the sweetness of low price has been forgotten."

The last item many people forget to do is to sign and date one of the deck rail boards or stamp and score the concrete this way. After all, it's your imagination that has come to life. Personalize your ideas.

If you have any questions or wish further information, please contact me at my office and I will be happy to assist you. Further, if there are any projects you would like to plan and would like me to cover them in these pages in the future, please call or send me a note on your special topic, or ideas as well as any comments you may have, pro or con. I can be reached by contacting my office during regular business hours.

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We hope this information has been helpful to you! If you have any further questions, please visit our website at [www.aroundyourhouse.net](http://www.aroundyourhouse.net), or contact Jim at Around Your House.

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