

Combining Decks and Patios

by Bruce Zaretsky

I've been a landscape design/build professional for more than 35 years, and I've seen a lot of trends—water features, outdoor lighting and sound systems, outdoor kitchens—become the newest must-have, then gradually level off as just another item to add to the design palette. But year after year, decks have remained a constant, one of the few features that are invariably included in our landscape designs.

This isn't surprising; after all, most homes are built with the first floor a couple of feet above the ground, so occupants need a way to move between the house and the ground level. Because decks serve this function so well, many home builders include them as part of the package, though those decks are usually simple rectangular affairs built with treated lumber to keep building costs down.

But I like to include decks in my projects because of their design potential. Multiple levels, curves, and angles that are problematic to execute above grade with traditional hardscape materials are easily incorporated into a deck design, with one important caveat: Our client has to be willing to pay the price.

Bang for the Buck

In my area, decks are considerably more expensive to build than other outdoor surfacing options. Depending on the design, an average ipe deck (my preferred decking material) costs my clients about \$45 per square foot, and decks costing \$50 and more per square foot are not unusual. Simple pressure-treated decks can be had for \$30 to \$35 per square foot, but most of my landscape clients aren't looking for a 14x14 rectangular PT deck. They don't have unlimited budgets,



The cost per square foot to build this bluestone patio was less than half that of the adjacent ipe deck. The deck has wide steps that allow traffic to flow easily between levels and that can serve as amphitheater seating around the pool as well. Omitting the railing (okay on decks lower than 30 inches above grade) helps unify the two areas and prevents the railing from inadvertently becoming the deck's main architectural feature.

though, so we still need to be conscious of cost when designing their backyard living spaces. Our strategy? Incorporate a brick, stone, concrete-paver, or poured-concrete patio into the deck design. This allows us to cost-effectively provide large entertainment spaces and introduce interesting design details while maintaining easy egress from the house.

A patio is half as expensive as a comparable deck, with costs in our area ranging from \$12 to \$22 per square foot, depending on materials and details. This assumes that the patio is at ground level; a raised one can easily approach the cost of a deck. Including a deck in a patio project—or vice versa—adds value and allows our clients to have the best



The upper deck offers a private space for sitting and reading the newspaper or for bad-weather grilling. On the lower patio, larger groups can gather, socialize, eat a meal, or just hang out.



A boulder casually inset into the stairs becomes an impromptu handrail and a place to set a cup in a pinch. Little details like this add dramatic flair, yet are relatively easy to execute.



Angles make a space appear larger and more dynamic and can be used to create a nook that doesn't interfere with traffic flow. Note that the deck and patio surfaces have been "flip-flopped" on this project, which features Brentwood stone countertops that look like petrified wood, a travertine terrace, and cumaru decking.



When a patio is a continuation of an upper deck area, inlaying the same stone into the deck creates uniformity between the upper and lower levels. Plantings are used to temper the hard surfaces.

of both worlds: a deck surface to walk out on and perhaps a place to grill or to read the newspaper, and also a larger hardscaped area for entertaining.

Practical Details

Even when landscaping clients don't include a deck on their wish list, it's often a practical solution, at least in the Northeast. Here, we have to deal with winter, and since many of our clients don't let a minor inconvenience like a foot of snow keep them from grilling, we like to incorporate a small grilling terrace at

or near the same level as the rest of the house. This way they can run out, throw a steak on the grill, and run back in the house before icicles form on their noses.

When designing combination deck-patios, we try to blur the lines that separate the two spaces. A simple detail like a boulder in an unexpected spot creates a Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired illusion that we have built the deck into a stone outcropping that was just too big to be moved.

Often, we'll inlay a portion of the deck with the same type of stone that's used for the patio, which visually ties all the

elements together. We've also added traditional landscaping details—such as stone fire pits and water features—to our wooden deck designs. Blending decks and patios like this adds a "wow" factor to our projects and allows us to create the coolest design for the least possible cost. ❖

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