# Solid-Looking Posts For Raised Decks

by Elaine Laney

In the North Carolina mountains where I have my design practice, there's practically no such thing as a flat building lot. Many sites drop 20 feet or more along the side of the house, and it's not uncommon to find basements with sweeping views of distant mountains.

Those sorts of slopes are a challenge in any number of ways, including one that I see again and again — how to design a good-looking back or side deck in a setting where the support posts are much more prominent than the deck itself. For a deck that will be reached from an upper level, that can be an issue even on a level site.

## Perception vs. Reality

Because outdoor decks are subject to very heavy live loads, building codes require them to be solidly built. The problem is that even a deck that's perfectly adequate structurally often looks insecure if it's elevated well above the ground.

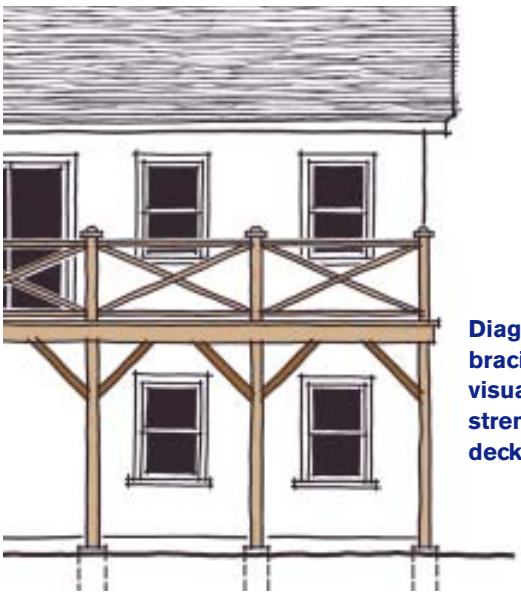
Under my local code, for example — in an area unaffected by seismic concerns — unbraced 4x4 posts have a maximum allowable height of 8 feet, while 6x6s can extend for up to 20 feet. In either case, though, the resulting deck will look frail and insubstantial, like a granddaddy longlegs spider.

## Braces and Bases

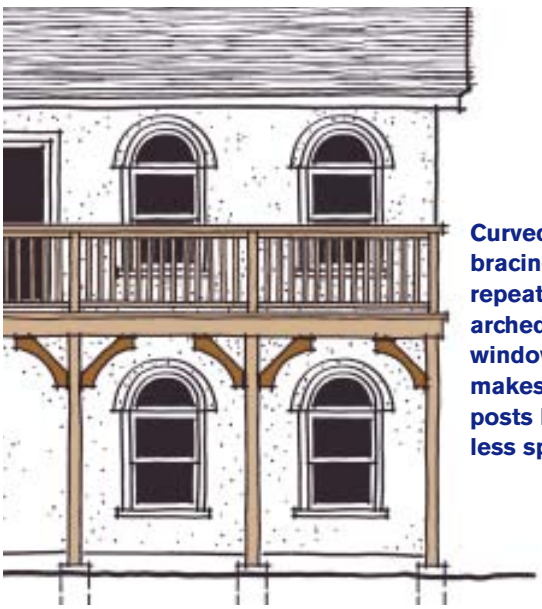
Beefing up the posts to a larger size than the code requires will help a little, but there are other ways to firm up the appearance of an elevated deck.

One simple approach is to add diagonal bracing between posts and girders, even though it may be unnecessary structurally (**Figure 1**). Its presence shortens the apparent height of the posts and

**ADDING BRACES**



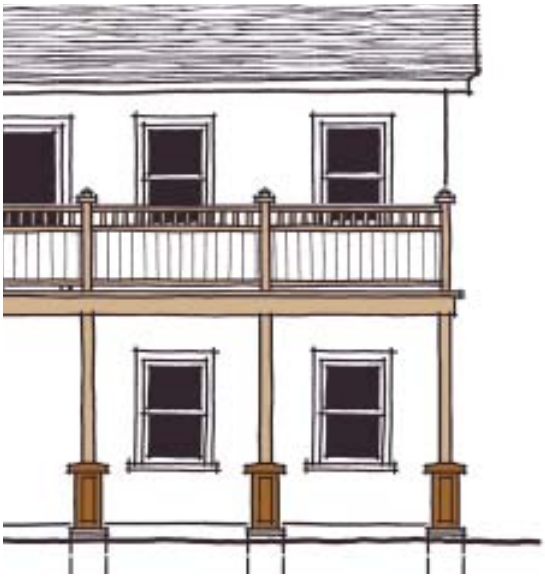
**Diagonal bracing visually strengthens deck posts**



**Curved bracing repeating arched windows makes deck posts look less spindly**

**Figure 1. Diagonal knee braces, though structurally unnecessary, give otherwise spindly-looking posts a more substantial look. These can be simple angled braces (top), or a repetition of a design element found elsewhere on the house (bottom).**

## SUPPORT PEDESTALS



Boxed-in deck posts appear to be standing on raised piers

seems to spread the load, both of which help tie the deck to the site. Bracing alone is usually adequate for posts up to about 8 feet in overall length.

Longer posts will look much better if they stand on substantial-looking raised piers, or are boxed in to look as if they do (**Figure 2**). If a house is sided with brick or stone veneer, you might consider mounting the deck posts on masonry piers faced with the same material. In most cases, a fairly utilitarian approach will do just fine — this is a back deck, not an elaborately finished front porch.

### United We Stand

Isolated post bases work well, but look even better when linked with a low wall or planter, which need not be more than 18 to 24 inches high. The wall — which can double as a seat at the edge of a lower-level terrace — carries the viewer's eye horizontally and helps counteract the unrelieved vertical lines of the posts themselves. Further embellishment on this theme takes only something to link the paired

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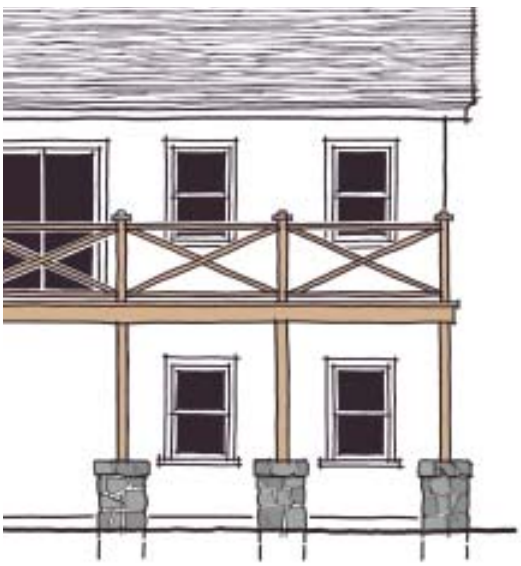

Masonry piers shorten deck posts

Raised support piers connected by low wall providing built-in seating or planters

**Figure 2. Boxing in the lower third of a 6x6 post creates a pedestal effect (top), while masonry support piers permit the use of shorter posts (bottom left). A low wall with built-in seating strengthens the effect (bottom right).**

or grouped posts together visually — a railing, some trellis or latticework, or a design detail elsewhere on the house repeated to give continuity to the whole.

Another way to add interest and an appearance of solidity is to group three posts at the corners of a deck, with individual intermediate posts as needed (**Figure 3**). That's illogical structurally, since the posts near the center of the span actually carry most of the load. But because the eye is initially drawn to the edges of things to define their shapes, adding support at the corners is more effective visually. ❖

*Elaine Laney is a designer in Hendersonville, N.C. This article was reprinted with permission of* JLC The Journal of Light Construction.

## GROUPING CORNER POSTS

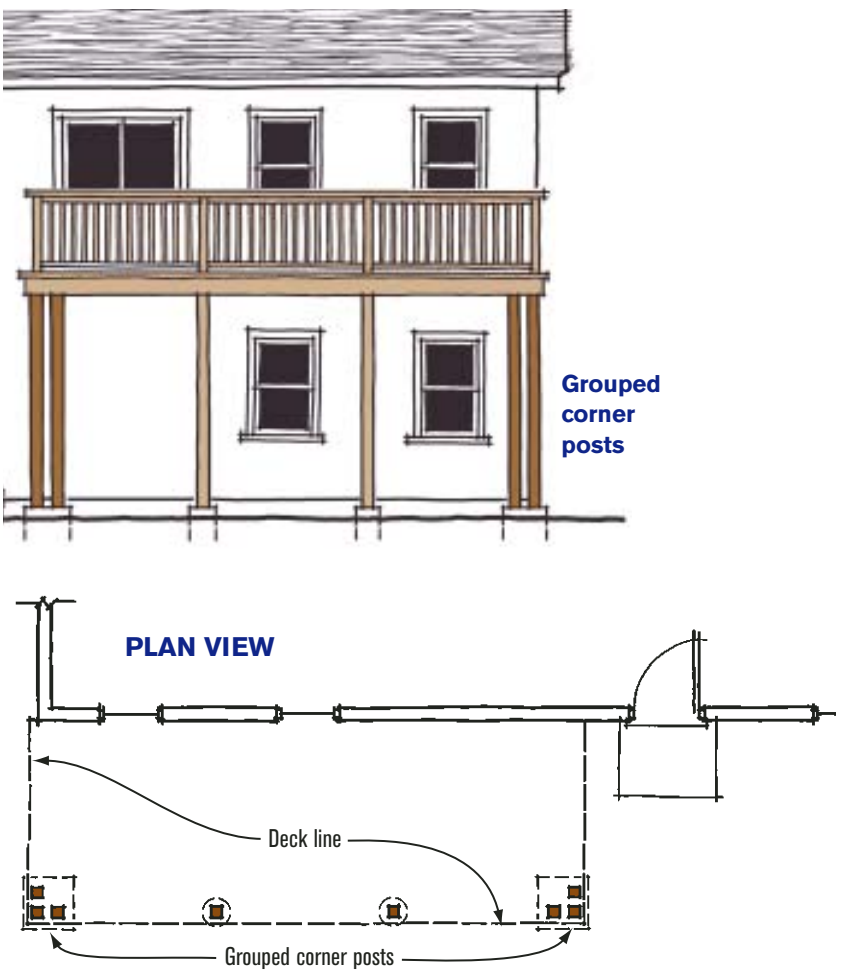


**Figure 3. Grouped corner posts have much of the visual mass of solid columns, but are more appropriate to the casual nature of a deck.**