

# chicago homes

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Porches that bring  
the outdoors in

## Screen gems



Charles Page Builders created this three-season porch, which opens to a gathering room and kitchen.

**By Jeffrey Steele**  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Forty years ago, when the young Charles Page was first designing and building custom homes, he faced a pesky problem. The houses he built were going up amid the forests and marshes of suburban Riverwoods. Mosquitoes there were so thick, "I got to

*"It's like a sign that says, 'Welcome.'"*

— Steve Melman, National Association of Home Builders

the point I just ignored the bites," Page recalled.

"The first home I ever built for myself was in Riverwoods, and it had a screened porch. Keeping the mosquitoes out

was the main reason. I found people loved them. And just about every home I ever built in Riverwoods had a screened porch, off the family room and the master bedroom."

Americans have mastered new mosquito abatement techniques since then, but screened porches are more popular than ever. Builders like Page, founder of Winnetka's Charles Page Architects and Northfield's Charles Page Builders, report large percentages of homebuyers

Please turn to **Page 5**



No matter the design characteristics, screened porches are typically built with informal gathering and entertaining in mind. In 1992, 42 percent of new homes had one or more porches, federal statistics show. But by 2008, 60 percent had one or more.

AIMEE SANTOS/KANSAS CITY STAR PHOTO

## Bring the outdoors in with screened porches

Continued from Page 1

are itching to have one.

After all, screened porches can provide protection from insects, shade from the sun and shelter from the rain, while still letting their owners feel they're savoring the natural world outside. And given the many architectural approaches now available, the design possibilities are as big as the great outdoors.

"People are thinking about how they want to use the space they live in," said Court Airhart, president of Airhart Construction in West Chicago, whose new town home models at Wheaton's Mackenzie Place offer screened porch options.

"They're saying, 'I'm going to use a screened porch. I want to do more outdoor living.' A patio gives them four to five months (of warm weather use). But you have rain days, buggy days that limit that timeframe. So people choose screened porches to extend their outdoor enjoyment."

Screened porches' growing prevalence is also likely driven by the popularity of porches in general. So said Steve Melman, director of economic services for the National Association of Home Builders.

In 1992, when the U.S. Census began tracking new home characteristics and noting, among other details, the presence of outdoor features, 42 percent of new homes had one or more porches. But by 2008, the U.S. Census found 60 percent had one or more.

"Why? Obviously it's a throwback to the days when every home had a porch," Melman observed. "It shouts out to neighbors, 'I'm here, and ready to engage.' It's like a sign that says, 'Welcome.'"

Because screened porches are usually around back, that welcome isn't given to the whole neighborhood, but only to nearby neighbors, Melman added.

A screened porch, he said, offers "a little more solitude, calm and quiet as opposed to socialization." But it's also the kind of place well-suited to accommodating parties and more informal socializing.

Screened porches can be as customized as the houses themselves.

They can offer, for instance, vaulted ceilings, beadboard paneling and interior trim. Many of the porches showcase floors of Trex decking, while others have floors of stained or stamped concrete or ceramic tile.

Another builder taking pride in his company's screened porches is Jeff Samuels, president of Northbrook's Samuels Homes.

He said many of his clients purchase parcels in thickly-wooded areas near ravines, lakes, ponds or golf courses. "When the setting is that nice, it's virtually a given that a screened porch will be added" to the custom home, Samuels said.

Screened porches have traditionally been rectangular, but octagonal designs with a pergola-like feel have won converts. "What's wonderful about that is you can do all kinds of great ceiling detail," he said.

*"Having those porches really contributes to encouraging social gatherings in the rear of the homes."*

— Dave Smith, Cambridge Homes

"You've got beams that taper up all the way to the center peak, to give you a kind of turret feel. Some will have a trussed beam look, others a drop beam with ceiling fan."

As for Page, the screened porches he builds are often designed with informal gatherings in mind. The porches have space for tables and chairs, and places to position bartenders and caterers, he said.

Page's screened porches tend to feature decorative beamed ceilings that contribute to "a more outdoorsy feel," he said. They also include wood decks that stand up well to moisture, and many boast built-in fireplaces on interior walls to make them more comfortable in early spring and late autumn. Ceiling fans are an obligatory feature. They're a must on hot, humid days, Page said.

Screened porches play a dual role at Cambridge Homes' Carillon Club, an active-adult development in Naperville, said vice president of sales and marketing Dave Smith. Buyers can have their rear porches screened in to better enjoy the open spaces spreading out from the back of many homes. Adds Smith: "Our active-adult communities are very social, and they don't have fences. Having those porches really contributes to encouraging social gatherings in the rear of the homes."

Screened porches aren't the most complex structures ever devised. But experts know building them effectively requires attention to detail. For instance, thought must be given to the function of the porch. If it's to be used for a private lounging area, a location off a bedroom may be favored. But if there's to be socializing on the porch, a setting close to the kitchen is crucial, said Curt Langille, head of Lake Geneva, Wis.-based Lanco Development Co.

Another consideration is that screened porches can limit the light entering a home. That's why they often include skylights. And the home itself may benefit from a solar tube transmitting light from the roof, Langille said.

Building a screened porch atop an existing patio is a mistake too many make, builders say. "It's not a proper foundation, and you can wind up with construction problems such as shifting, or roof leaks," Samuels explained.

Finally, it's essential the screened porch appear part of the actual house. "You need to integrate the same brickwork, same siding, same clay tile, cedar shake or asphalt shingle roof as the house has," Samuels said.

That way, "it all ties together, and doesn't look like it's tacked on."