



PUBLIC INFORMATION HANDOUT

RESIDENTIAL DECKS



San Francisco
Planning



Mayor

London Breed

Board of Supervisors

Shamann Walton, *President*

Connie Chan

Catherine Stefani

Aaron Peskin

Gordon Mar

Dean Preston

Matt Haney

Myrna Melgar

Rafael Mandelman

Hillary Ronen

Asha Safai

Planning Commission

Rachael Tanner, *President*

Kathrin Moore, *Vice President*

Deland Chan

Sue Diamond

Frank Fung

Theresa Imperial

Joel Koppel

San Francisco Planning Department

Rich Hillis, *Director of Planning*

Elizabeth Watty, *Director of Current Planning*

Rich Sucre, *Deputy Director of Current Planning*

Claire Feeney, *Planner, Southeast Team*

Monica Giacomucci, *Senior Planner, Southeast Team*

Xinyu Liang, *Senior Planner, Southeast Team*

Eugene Lau, *Planning Intern, Southeast Team*

Updated November 2022

Diagram renderings by Eugene Lau

Cover photo by Jenn Vargas (Flickr)

All photos are Creative Commons designation



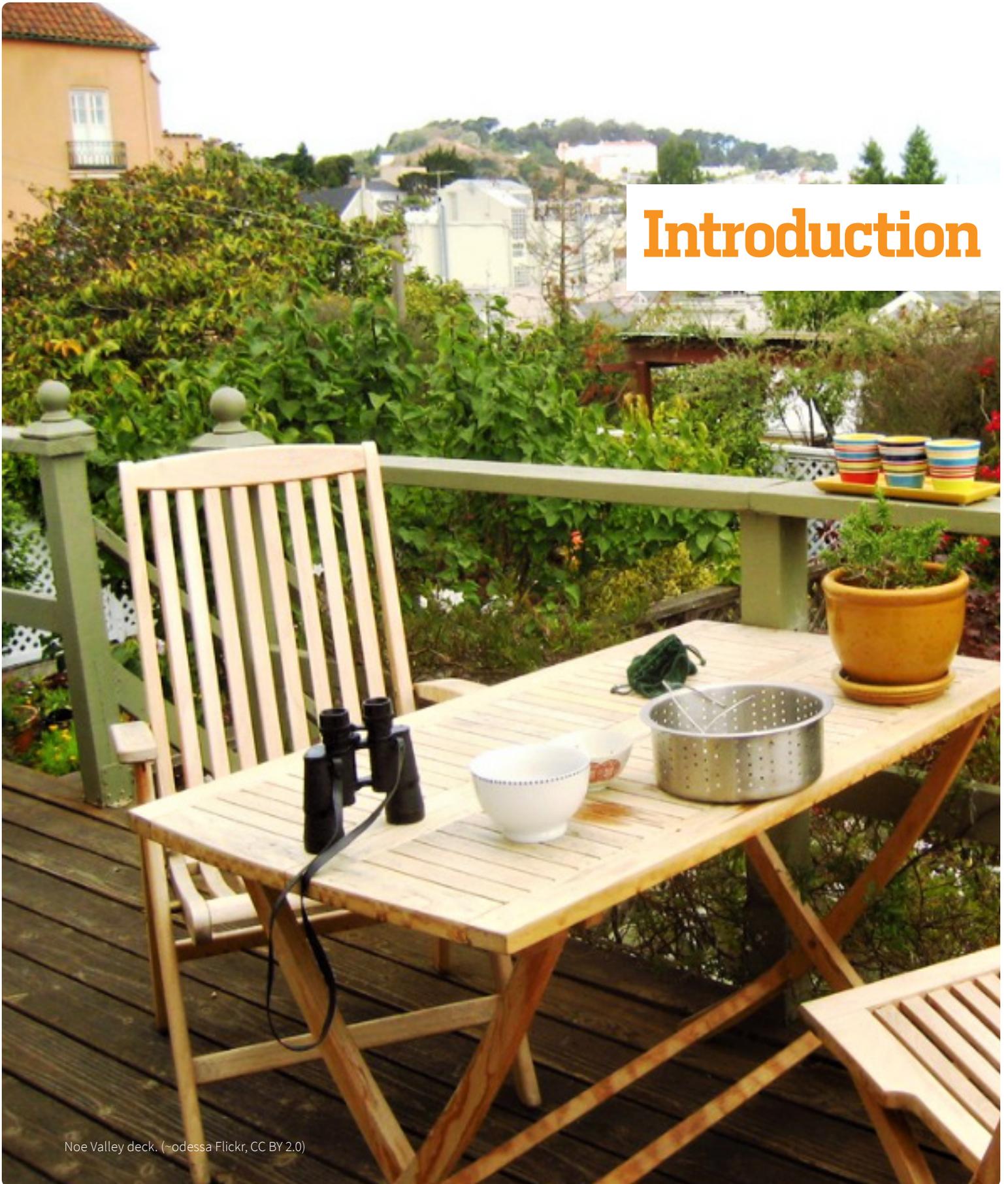
San Francisco Planning Department
49 South Van Ness Avenue, Suite 1400
San Francisco, CA 94103

www.sfplanning.org

Residential Decks

Introduction	4
Overview	5
Deck Types	6
Deck Less than 3 Feet Above Grade	7
Deck on Posts / Cantilevered Deck	9
Deck on Existing Structure	11
Roof Deck	13
FAQs and Resources	15
Frequently Asked Questions	16
Resources	19

Introduction



Residential decks are a popular component of building design to provide access to air and outdoor space, especially in dense urban environments.

While decks are allowable as an addition to many residential homes, the Planning Code and Residential Design Guidelines outline certain regulations for decks to minimize potential adverse effects on building design, privacy, light, noise, and safety.

Note that all decks over 30 inches require a Building Permit and all decks over 3 feet also require Planning Department review.

TIP: Visit the Permit Center in person or email PIC@sfgov.org for a Planning consultation and TechQ@sfgov.org for Department of Building Inspection (DBI) information before starting a project.

Please review this document for more information about commonly allowed residential decks and expected procedures before construction.

Types of Decks

A. Deck Less than 3 Feet Above Grade *Page 7*

Decking is commonly used to create patio spaces. This type of deck generally requires no review from the Planning Department if it is less than 3 feet above grade.

B. Deck on Posts/ Cantilevered Deck *Page 9*

This typically includes a deck that is attached to the home either in the front or rear and is structurally elevated on posts or beams. Cantilevered decks, such as balconies, are also attached to the side of homes but they are only supported by beams.

C. Deck on Existing Structure *Page 11*

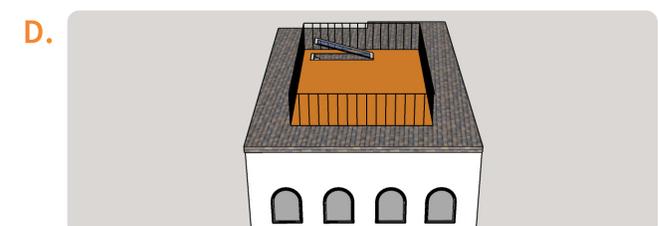
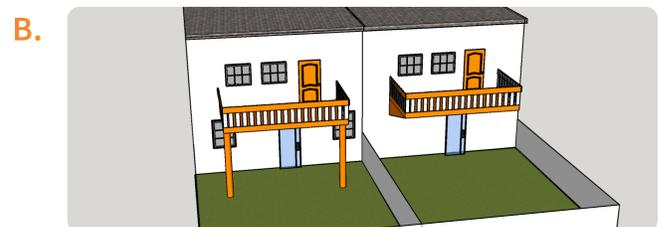
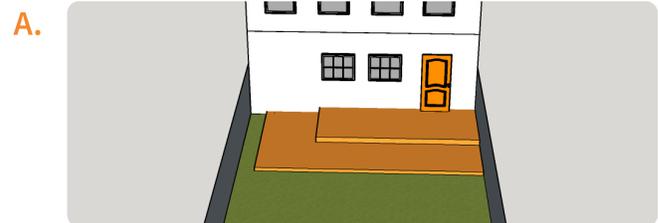
This is generally a deck above an existing portion of a home or a part of an existing mid-story addition.

D. Roof Deck *Page 13*

Usually roof decks are decks at the highest roof surface.



Roof deck with view of Coit Tower. (Brad Coy, Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

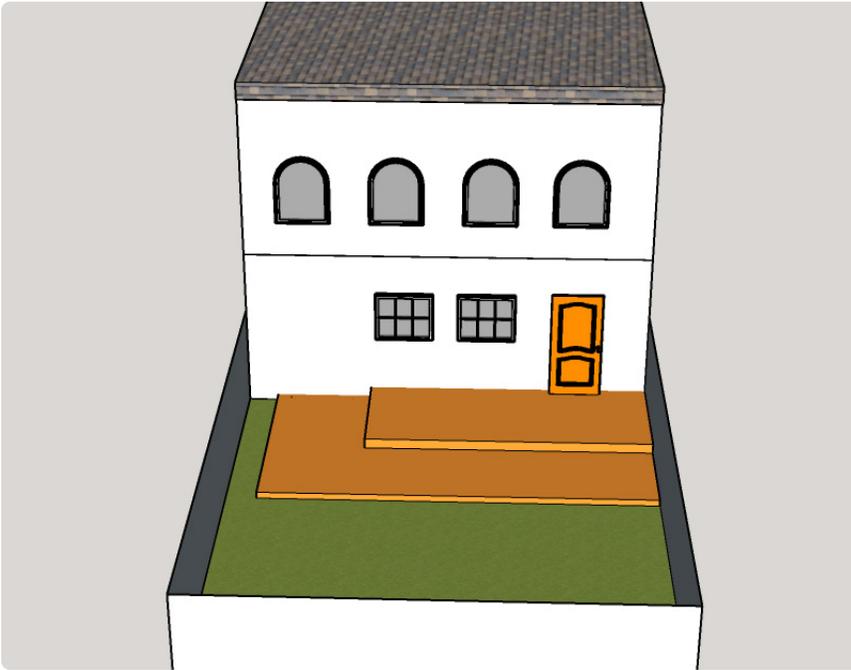


Deck Types



Furnished roof deck. (Zillow)

Deck Less than 3 Feet Above Grade



Definition: Raised decking and/or any outside flooring that can supplement an outdoor area with a patio-like space.

TIP: This type of deck may not need Planning review, as long as the design is less than 3 feet above natural grade. However, it may require a Building Permit if it is over 30 inches tall.



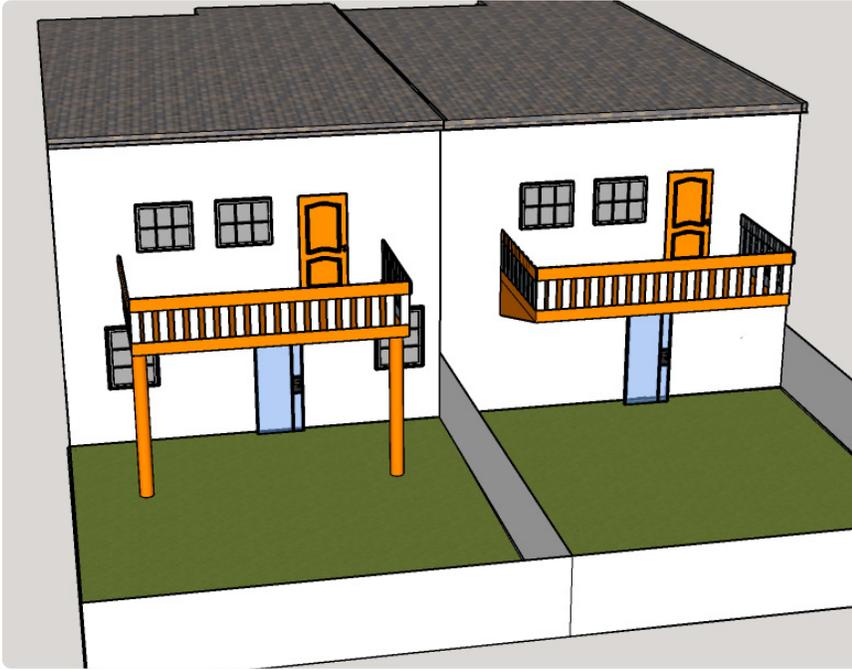
At-grade deck with shade structure. (Frank Montero's, Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

Deck Less than 3 Feet Above Grade

Permit Process

Review Process			
	No Building Permit Needed	Building Permit without Planning Review	Over the Counter
Less than 30 inches above natural grade	✓		
30 to 36 inches above natural grade		✓	
Most decks above 3 feet when the rear yard slope is over 15%			✓

Deck on Posts / Cantilevered Deck



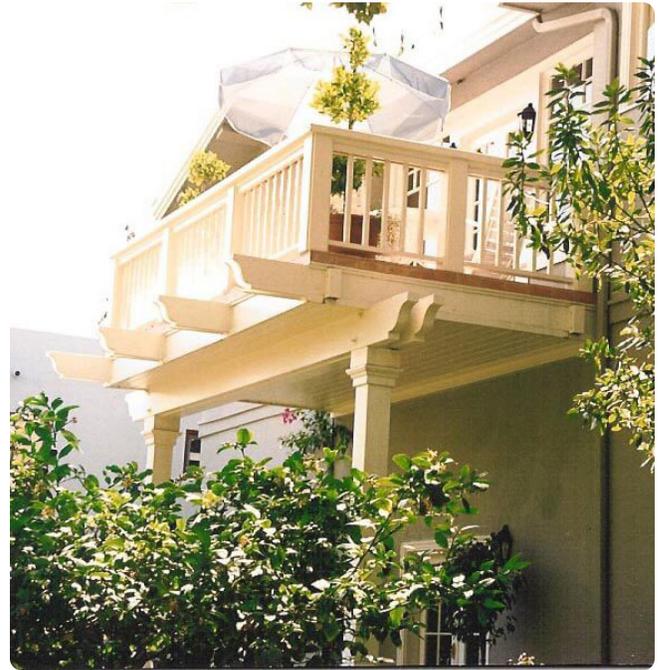
Definition: Decks on Posts are attached walkable platforms commonly affixed to the rear of a home and are supported by posts and beams.

Definition: Cantilevered decks, such as balconies, are also attached walkable platforms, but they are only supported by beams.

TIP: If the proposed design is under 10 feet tall (excluding railings), typically setback at least 3 feet from the nearby property lines, and within the Buildable Area of your property, then it should be approvable over the counter.



Cantilevered decks. (Darrel Godliman, Flickr, CC BY 2.0)



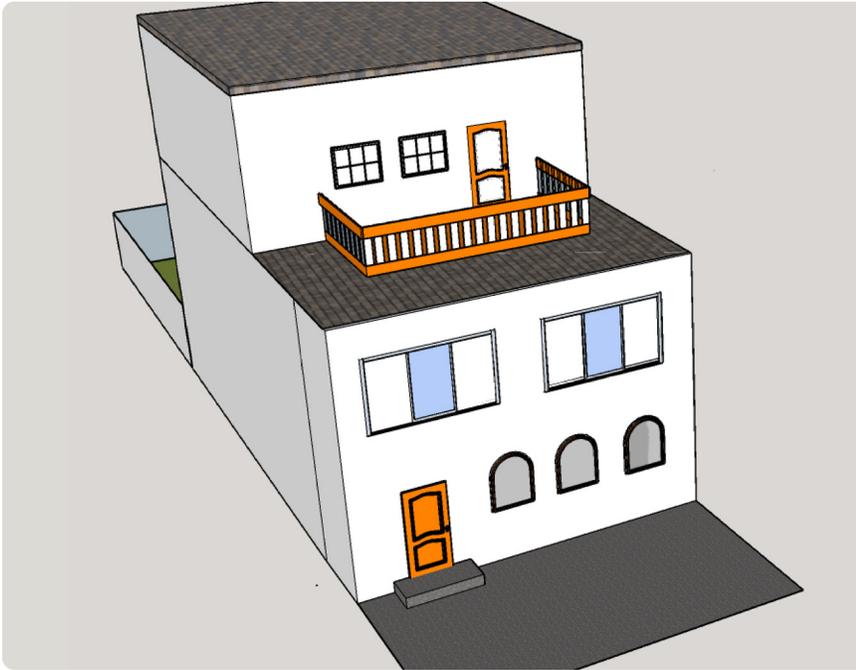
Deck on posts. (iStock)

Deck on Posts / Cantilevered Deck

Permit Process

Review Process			
	Over the Counter	Intake Permit	
		Pre-Application Meeting	Section 311 Neighborhood Notice
Decks on Posts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less than 10 feet • Within Buildable Area • Any required firewall is less than 10 feet tall 	✓		
Cantilevered Decks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any height within limit • Within Buildable Area • Any required firewall is less than 10 feet tall 	✓		
Decks on Posts above 10 feet		✓	30 Day Notice
Located within required rear yard		✓	30 Day Notice
Requires firewall that is greater than 10 feet tall		✓	30 Day Notice

Deck on Existing Structure



Definition : Decks on Existing Structures are generally walkable platforms built on top of habitable spaces, such as a rear addition or a roof area that is on the same level as an existing room in the house.

TIP: If your deck is built within the Buildable Area and is setback at least 3-5 feet from the property lines, then it is likely approvable over the counter.



Deck on Existing Structure



Deck on existing one story addition. (Jeff King and Co)

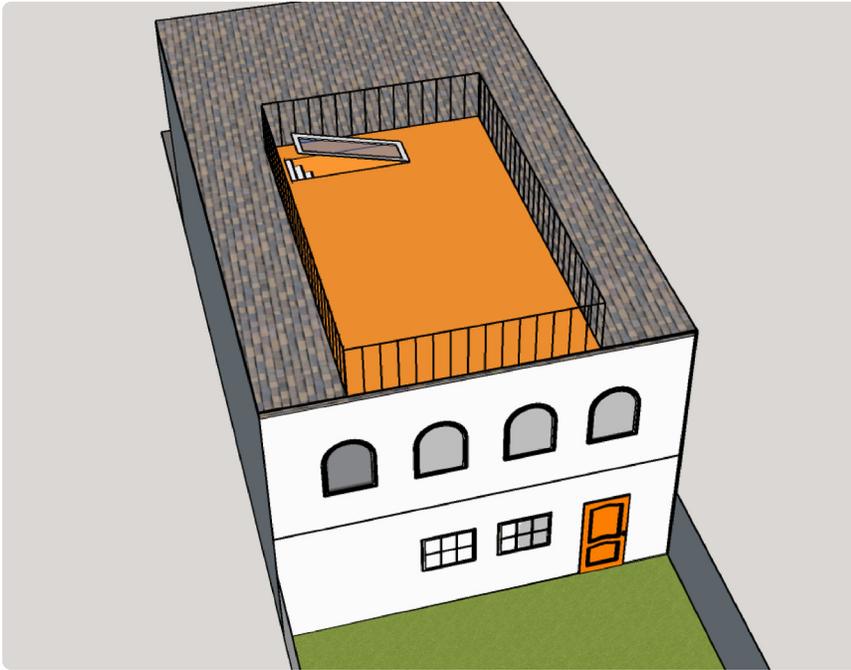


Deck on top of addition. (Jeremy Levine, Flickr)

Permit Process

Review Process			
	Over the Counter	Intake Permit	
		Pre-Application Meeting	Section 311 Neighborhood Notice
New Deck within Buildable Area and no firewall required, setback 3-5 feet from property lines	✓		
On legal non-complying structure			10 Day Notice
Requires firewall that is greater than 10 feet tall		✓	30 Day Notice

Roof Deck

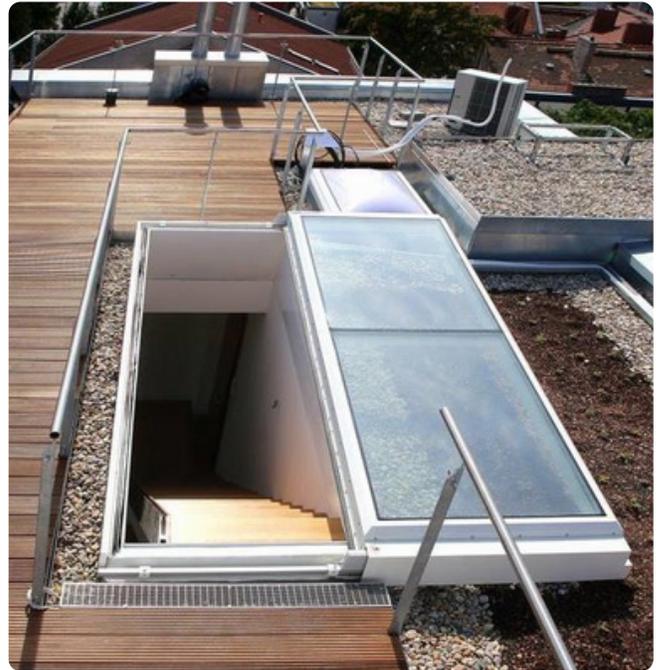


Definition: Typically, an open walkable flat surface on top of a home with an internal access point (e.g. staircase or roof hatch) or an external access point, like a spiral staircase, outside the house.

TIP: Planning encourages roof decks to be setback at least 5 feet on all sides.



A roof deck with setbacks and an external staircase in Dolores Heights. (Zillow)



A roof hatch that would not require public notice. (iStock)

Roof Deck

Permit Process

Review Process			
	Over the Counter	Intake Permit	
		Pre-Application Meeting	Section 311 Neighborhood Notice
Features such as railings, parapets, landscaping, and roof hatches	✓		
3-5 foot setback from building edges and lightwells and within Buildable Area	✓		
Expansion past Buildable Area on existing legal noncomplying structure		✓	10 Day Notice
Stair Penthouse		✓	30 Day Notice

FAQs and Resources



Balconies on Sanchez Street. (Google Maps, 2021)

Frequently Asked Questions

Why are setbacks encouraged for most decks?

- » Elevated decks can potentially have adverse effects on neighboring properties with respect to noise, privacy, and light reduction. Planning recommends at least a 3 foot setback and encourages a 5 feet setback when a deck proposal starts encroaching on a neighboring property's existing enjoyment of light and privacy.
- » In addition, the Building Code requires firewalls if new construction, including a deck, is built close to or against shared property lines. Firewalls are protective barriers that slow the spread of fire from one building to another. Generally, if you build a deck within 3 to 5 feet of a neighboring property line, then it may trigger a firewall. Please check with the [Department of Building Inspection for more information](#).

What can my deck look like? Are there any design rules?

- » All decks above 3 feet are subject to the [Residential Design Guidelines](#). These Guidelines regulate where decks can be built, how they look, and what materials can be used.
- » Deck design needs to fit the size and character of your own home and should be minimally visible from the street. Deck design also needs to be sensitive to the other yards and outdoor spaces nearby, the size and character of adjacent buildings, and your neighbors' privacy.

Don't decks require railings?

- » Yes, many decks require hand railings for the safety of occupants. Open railings are allowed without public notice if they are no more than 42 inches tall.



Typical trellis as deck covering. (Jeremy Levine, Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

I want to have a wind screen or shade structure on my deck. Are there additional rules?

- » If your deck proposal includes roofing or another type of covering, like a pergola, then it may trigger Neighborhood Notification.
- » If your deck is at grade, a roofing or a shade structure does not need public notice if it is less than 8 feet tall, enclosed by walls on no more than 50% of its perimeter, and is less than 60 square feet. If all of these conditions are met, then the deck can be approved over the counter.
- » If your deck and shade covering are on the roof, on top of an addition, or on posts, then it will usually require public notice due to the height. Most residential properties have height limits of 35 or 40 feet.
- » Wind screens on roof decks are typically allowed to be up to 6 feet tall, even if that is above the height limit, but they may require 30-day public notice.
- » At grade, wind screens are typically allowed to be up to 10 feet tall without requiring public notice.

What if my deck doesn't meet the Planning Code?

- » If your deck design falls outside of a property's Buildable Area, it may not be allowed or may need a Variance.
- » There may be unique conditions on a property that make it difficult for a project to meet all of the Planning Code requirements, otherwise known as property hardships. In those instances, someone may request that the Zoning Administrator grant a Variance from Code provisions. Variance requests are not guaranteed and may be denied.

Read More | » [Refer to the Variance Supplemental Application for more information.](#)

My deck needs notice. What process do I need to follow?

- » If a project requires neighborhood notice, it cannot be approved over the counter. The design must be submitted as an "intake permit" to the Planning Department. There, a Planner will work with you on the design of the project and will help with the neighborhood notice.
- » Please note that projects that only include a Code-compliant deck are often eligible for over the counter review. If your project proposal includes decks or firewalls over 10 feet tall or building expansions, it will usually require a Pre-Application meeting and 30-day public notice.
- » During public notice, a concerned neighbor, property owner, or community group may file a Request for Discretionary Review (DR) of the permit. This may require a public hearing and review by the Planning Commission which can take months.
- » [Read more about neighborhood notice requirements and processes in ZA Bulletin No. 4 - Public Notification for Building Permits in Residential and Neighborhood Commercial Districts.](#)

Read More

I think my home may be a historic resource. Does this affect my plans to add a deck?

- » If your home is 45 years old or more, it may be considered a potential historic resource. The Planning Department recommends that decks on potential or designated historic resources be designed so that they are minimally visible from any public right-of-way. If your deck will be visible from a public right-of-way, further review by a historic preservation planner may be required.
- » You can look up your home on the San Francisco Property Information Map and review the Historic Preservation tab for more information. You may also request feedback from a preservation planner on your proposed deck by emailing PIC@sfgov.org.

I need to repair or replace my deck. What do I need to know?

- » Decks may be repaired and/or replaced in full as long as they are still compliant with the Planning Code. If the existing deck does not meet current rules, then it may be repaired up to 50% of the building materials. If someone proposes to repair or replace a non-compliant deck beyond 50% of building materials, it may require a Variance.

What is Buildable Area and how do I determine it for my property?

- » Depending on your property and the zoning and height districts, you may have requirements for a front setback, side yard, rear yard, and/or a height limit. The "Buildable Area" is the space inside the required setbacks, yards, and height limit.
- » Proposals to build into these required setbacks and yards will generally need additional review by Planning. Decks located outside the Buildable Area may require a Variance unless they qualify for exemptions known as "permitted obstructions" within Planning Code Section 136.

Read More

- » [You can find out more about Buildable Area and exemptions in ZA Bulletin No. 5 - Buildable Area for Lots.](#)

How do I determine how high my deck is? Where should I measure grade?

- » Deck height is measured from grade at the actual location of the deck up to the walkable surface of the deck. Grade is the natural ground surface itself and cannot be altered.

Read More

- » [Sloping properties and hilly terrain can have additional height measurement requirements. You can find out more in Planning Code Section 136.](#)

Which Planning Code sections are most relevant to residential decks?

The following Code sections have detailed regulations about what is and is not allowed.

- » [Sec 132 - Front Yard Requirements](#)
- » [Sec 133 - Side Yard Requirements](#)
- » [Sec 134 - Rear Yard Requirements](#)
- » [Sec 135 - Open Space and Exposure Requirements](#)
- » [Sec 136 - Permitted Obstructions \(e.g. "Pop Outs" and at-grade decks\)](#)
- » [Sec 260 - Height Limits](#)



Furnished roof deck. (Open Homes Photography)

Resources

Planning Department

- » Planning Counter at the Permit Center
49 South Van Ness Ave, 2nd Floor
San Francisco, CA 94103
- » Phone: 628-652-7300
- » Email: pic@sfgov.org
- » Permit Center Website:
<https://sfplanning.org/planning-counter>

Department of Building Inspection

- » Email: dbicustomerservice@sfgov.org
- » Phone: 628-652-3200
- » Technical Questions Email: TechQ@sfgov.org
- » Department of Building Inspection:
<https://sfdbi.org/permit-services>

Resources

- » [Find My Zoning on the Property Information Map \(PIM\)](#)
- » [Residential Design Guidelines](#)
- » [Neighborhood Notice Information Packet](#)
- » [Intake Project Application](#)
- » [Variance From the Planning Code Supplemental](#)
- » [Project Review Meeting Application](#)
- » [Resources for Homeowners Seeking a Permit](#)
- » [Better Roof Policy](#)
- » [Zoning Administrator \(ZA\) Bulletin 5: Buildable Area for Lots in RH, RM, RC, AND RTO Districts](#)



Rear elevated deck on slope. (Fabrice Florin, Flickr, CC BY 2.0)



San Francisco
Planning

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:
Call or visit the San Francisco Planning Department**

Central Reception

49 South Van Ness Avenue, Suite 1400
San Francisco CA 94103

TEL: **628.652.7600**

WEB: <https://www.sfplanning.org>

Planning counter at the Permit Center

49 South Van Ness Avenue, 2nd Floor
San Francisco CA 94103

TEL: **628.652.7300**

Planning staff are available by phone and at the Planning counter. No appointment is necessary.