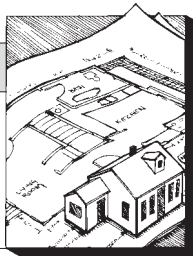


## Some Thoughts About Ceilings

by Gordon Tully



**Figure 1.** This eaves detail dramatizes either a high ceiling or a cathedral ceiling (shown dotted) by creating a lower one along the windows. The cove needs metal bracket supports between the light fixtures so as not to break the wall plane. Setting the cove further into the room (bottom) lets you hang the cove on cantilevered 2x4s supported by the ceiling joists, but reduces the area of high ceiling.

Ceiling design is sadly neglected in most houses. The reason for this, I suspect, is that most people design houses as two-dimensional jigsaw puzzles, which they simply extrude into the third dimension. Thinking of houses in 3-D from the outset will always get you involved in ceilings.

### Separating The Ceiling

In ordinary houses, the joint between wall and ceiling is simply a paint break, and one of the greatest occasions for drama in architecture is thrown away. The simplest way to differentiate a ceiling from the walls is with moldings. In fancy architecture derived from Roman and Greek precedents, the wall is subdivided with pilasters, paneled, and topped with crown molding. The ceiling then becomes a separate element resting atop the walls; it can be adorned, but it is clearly a separate element.

Our watered-down version of this is a little crown molding. While the molding helps separate the wall from the ceiling, to me it seems a sad echo of grand ideas from the past.

A more visually powerful joint is one characteristic of the Craftsman tradition of the late 19th Century: Run a simple rectangular band around the wall a foot or so below the ceiling. You can add a Victorian touch by running a band of wallpaper or stenciled trim above the molding, or you can simply run the ceiling paint down the wall to the trim. Either way, the ceiling takes on a third dimension, becoming a sort of vault. The trim can line up with the window and door heads to help unify the room, and, if properly shaped, it can be a picture rail.

Another excellent detail is created by dropping the ceiling around the

edges and installing recessed lighting in a cove where the ceiling jumps up, as in Figure 1. Frank Lloyd Wright made this idea famous. Generously proportioned, this detail often works beautifully. Wright nearly always created a wide outside soffit as well, which became an extension of the inside soffit. One disadvantage of this arrangement is that outside light is partially blocked.

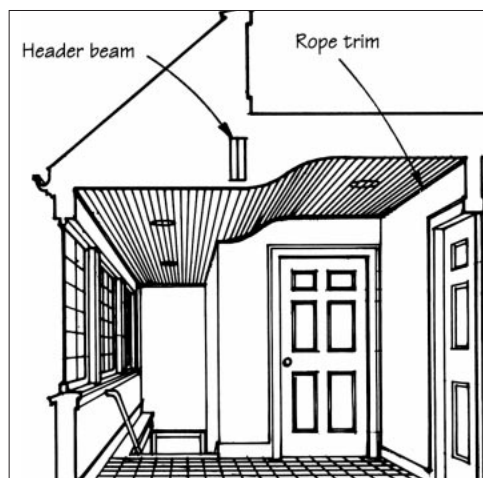
Coffered or beamed ceilings also create drama, especially in a space with limited ceiling height. False or real beams provide a visual background that makes the ceiling itself seem higher. One problem with beams and coffering is finding a way to support the beams visually, without pilasters or panels on the walls (see "Building With Style," 1/91).

### Rooms As Sculpture

Churches and other public buildings often tap into another tradition of building, in which ceilings are an extension of the walls below. When the ceiling grows out of the walls, the space becomes sculpture, in a sense, rather than a simple box, and all the rules change.

**Cathedral ceilings.** The most common sculptured residential ceiling is the so-called cathedral ceiling. False cathedral ceilings should be enhanced in some way, such as with a perimeter of cove lighting or a robust system of false beams.

True cathedral ceilings — those that follow the structure — are honest expressions of the building underneath. But unless the roof has been designed well, you are likely to create an ugly space if you merely let the room bounce off the roof. It is difficult to roof a building properly, let alone do so in such a way as to create a fine interior space. But that



**Figure 2.** In this renovation of a seaside cape, we enclosed a long porch ending in a basement stair and joined it to a small, rectangular room to make a new entry.

is exactly what you must do to make good architecture with true cathedral ceilings.

During my solar years, I struggled with the problem of making pleasant rooms underneath large, steeply pitched solar roofs. I finally came to the conclusion that it was impossible — at least for me. Spaces with single-slope ceilings are usually awkward — the steeper the slope, the more awkward the space. While there are exceptions, try to stay with a simple double-pitched shape, keeping the two sides symmetrically pitched.

**Raised ceilings.** Curiously, simply lifting the ceiling in one room creates an intensely sculptural effect, because the volume of each room can now be separately identified. You can enhance the sculptural effect by vaulting or beveling the raised edges, but don't overdo it as you may create a space with bad acoustics. If the house has high ceilings, you can accomplish the same effect by lowering the ceiling in some rooms.

The Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, one of the great Modernists, made some gorgeous ceilings out of narrow slats of wood, shaped into undulating curves. I recently used this trick to create a step-up in the entry hall of a seaside house (see Figure 2). The effect was appropriately nautical, especially when the contractor suggested a terrific way to create a molding that follows the curve: Use a braided rope.

### Punching Holes

Another way to get variety out of the ceiling is to punch through to the roof or second story. The chief occasions for doing this are to create a well up to a roof light or clerestory window, or to create a double-height lobby or living space with a balcony on one or more sides.

Skylight wells can be treacherous design objects. If you have to go up very high, you need to create a shaft that gets wider at the bottom, to let enough light into the room below. However, if the opening gets too big, you may have trouble with the "figure-ground" relationship. What this means is that you need to firmly

establish who's boss — the ceiling or the hole. If the hole is boss, the ceiling becomes just a rim around the hole, and you now have a sculptural space with a cathedral ceiling and all its attendant design problems. If the ceiling is boss, the hole must be small enough to leave the ceiling basically intact.

A lot of the subtleties in architectural design revolve around figure-ground relationships, so I can't give you any simple guidelines. Your innate visual sense will often guide you.

### Mixing Material

You can also create a good effect by installing wood strips around the ceiling, parallel to the walls and set in about a foot or two, depending on the size of the room. These strips are useful for screwing in hangers for plants and lights.

Ceilings certainly don't have to be made of plaster or gypsum board. Modernist architects often enhanced white rooms with natural finish boards on the ceilings and floors. The house I recently purchased, built in 1916 with vaguely Craftsman interiors, sports a small room entirely clad with V-grooved boards. The walls, floor, and very low ceiling are all stained dark, and the room feels exactly like the cabin of an old wooden boat; we use it as our master bedroom. With properly placed task lighting, you can actually see in a room like this, and the effect is wonderful.

Another option for a wood ceiling is to use planking for the upper floor, supported by wood beams or false beams covered with gypsum board. Remember to install a sound-deadening layer over the planking, and also remember that this idea can play utter hell with electrical and mechanical lines (although the gypsum board-clad beams create places to run services). The effect can be very grand — you get coffers and a wood ceiling for not much extra cost, and without sacrificing headroom. ■

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