



# Trimless Detailing: What's Missing?

by Gordon Tully

Most of us have become accustomed to seeing featureless gypsum board interiors with window openings, skylight wells, plumbing boxouts, and other shapes wrapped in drywall without trim. While such trimless detailing has a modern look that some find appealing (the architects who popularized it are called Modernists), it can also leave you feeling like something is missing from the picture.

Take a look at Figure A. The first drawing depicts a common element I often use: a skylight at the top of a deep well that connects a flat ceiling to a pitched roof. Now look at the second drawing, in which a collar of trim has been added. To my eye, the trim adds a great deal to the design.

The trim defines the ceiling as a plane with a known and familiar thickness — the depth of the vertical piece of trim. Without it, the building does not make structural sense to us. Is the ceiling a massive structure as suggested by the thickness of the well, or a flimsy skin as implied by the surface of the gypsum board?

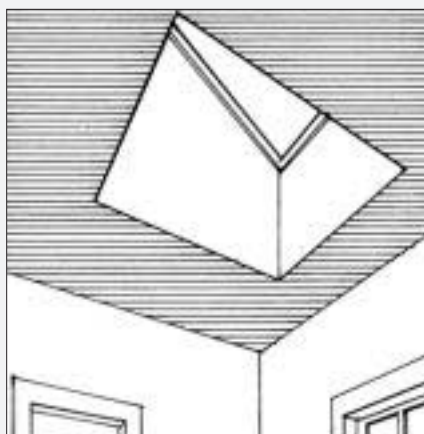
Although we know that the real ceiling structure may be thicker or thinner than the one implied by the trim, the trim satisfies our immediate experience of what is in front of us, and that is what counts in design. The real structure has to satisfy the code, but the implied structure has to feel right and look right to our eyes.

## Where Walls Meet Ceilings

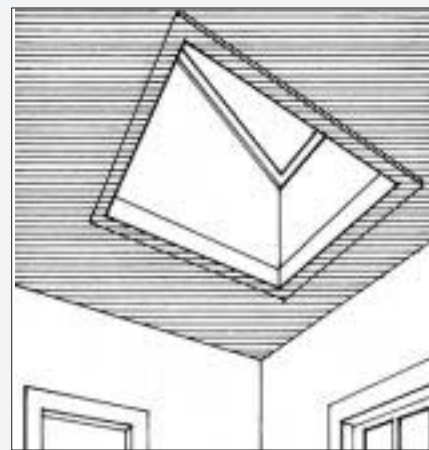
Look at the example in Figure B. Here is another common element: a boxed-in duct tucked into the joint between wall and ceiling. Again, something is wrong, and again a resolution that satisfies my visual sense is shown in the second drawing.

The joint between a wall and ceiling is a crucial one. In traditional Classical architecture, this joint is enhanced with important, sometimes very elaborate, trim: a crown molding

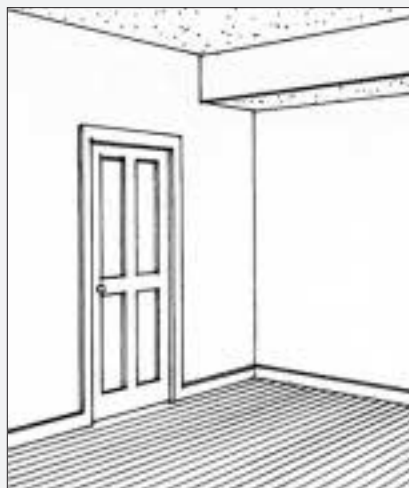
### A. Trim for Skylight Well



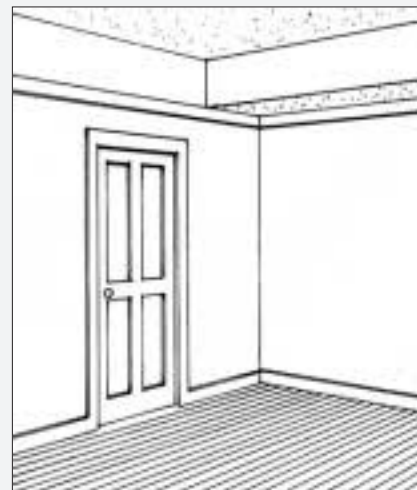
*Is the skylight well at left a hole cut into a massive block of material or a skin wrapped over an undefined structure? Adding the trim band, below, defines a ceiling plane with a reasonable thickness, and clarifies the image.*



### B. Ceiling Trim Band



*The duct boxout at left visually weakens the crucial joint between wall and ceiling. The added trim band, below, defines the top of the wall, and lets the boxout float above like a cloud in the sky.*



or perhaps a complete entablature derived from the colonnade running around a Greek temple. This gives us a clue. The classical molding is there to help transfer the visual weight of the ceiling onto the strong support of the wall.

In a room without this trim, the walls don't seem very strong. Instead the whole room feels fragile, like a shell. Such rooms are so common we accept them for what they are: cells inside a larger structure that serve as mere containers for our furniture. We don't even notice the absence of trim, especially in small rooms.

To my eye, however, the duct at the corner shatters the simple shell-like image, leaving us with unconnected planes that don't seem as though they can hold themselves up. But why does the band of trim shown in Figure B help resolve the problem?

My feeling is that the band defines the top of a wall. Because it is strong, horizontal and continuous, it makes the wall underneath seem strong enough to hold up the ceiling. Because the trim is dropped down to door-head height, the ceiling isn't just a plane, it becomes a sort of vault. Craftsman and Prairie School houses often have this lowered trim band, with or without an additional band at the ceiling. The ceiling paint runs down the upper wall to the trim band, so that the ceiling feels and looks a little like the sky.

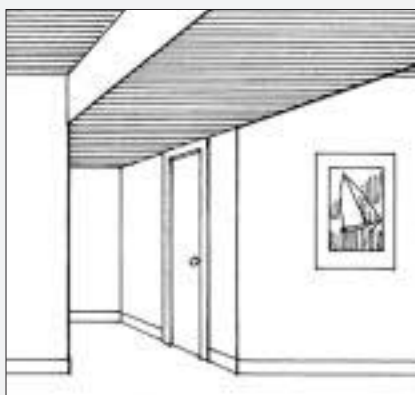
The duct boxout seems to float up in this "sky," and no longer interrupts the sense of support. We seem to be able to tolerate a lot of sculpted shapes up there in the sky vault. Even the skylight well in Figure A might look okay above this lowered trim band.

## Dropped Ceilings

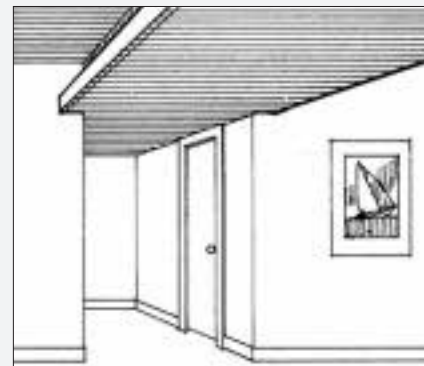
Figure C shows what I call a "sliding volume." Forms like this are all around us, especially in office buildings, hospitals, and the like. We take them for granted, but as in the other cases, I think this is a mistake.

Architecture elements have apparent weight. When we try to make building elements look weightless, we defy something very fundamental about how we see and experience buildings. Some architects have successfully made elements appear to float, especially the domes in Baroque churches. But it

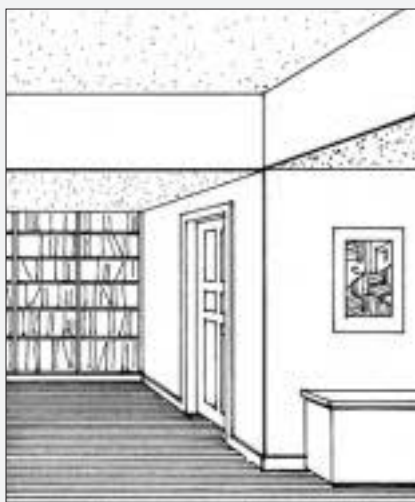
## C. Floating Ceiling



*The dropped ceiling at left seems to have slipped down, and might continue to slip for all we know. Turning it into a floating ceiling plane, below, creates both security — the ceiling is securely locked into the walls — and the excitement of a floating element.*



## D. Four-Corner Detail



*The four-corner joint at left was not well thought out. Dropping one ceiling and adding trim, below, demonstrates what supports what, and defines the higher dropped ceiling as more important than the lower one.*



takes a lot of effort to fool the eye.

In this ordinary case, nothing was done to make the trick convincing. Instead, the volume simply slips in between the walls of the corridor, as if the ceiling box (probably concealing ductwork) were a drawer in a piece of furniture. There is nothing under it: It seems to be glued in place, or jammed in like a Lego block.

The lower drawing in Figure C shows one way to fix the problem. Again, as in the first example, the ceiling is

defined as a plane of known thickness.

It projects out from the duct-concealing box and genuinely appears to float. Furthermore, because it "locks into" the walls at the side, it is supported visually. So we get the excitement of a floating element, hovering overhead as if by magic, but at the same time securely anchored so it doesn't seem ready to drop on our heads.

A final example is another version of the sliding volume. Because the two lower ceilings in Figure D don't con-

nect, the image is of two separate dropped ceilings at the sides, and not of a raised ceiling in the center. But nothing seems to be holding up either of the dropped ceilings.

The solution shown provides a very easy and effective fix for this common problem. Simply raise one of the lowered ceilings enough to let a band of trim slide through. Now the image is clarified and simplified: One of the lowered ceilings is made subsidiary to the other, and both lowered ceilings are securely supported by the wall below. Notice an important side benefit: We have automatically clarified which “ell” of the space is the more important, and have given an ambiguous space some definition.

### **Can't Defy Gravity**

Most of us — whether due to tight budgets or personal tastes — use this sort of trimless detailing with painted gypsum board. We're also used to seeing these continuous, unadorned surfaces in our offices, shops, schools, and public buildings.

The architects and interior designers who popularized this clean, stripped-down look felt they were liberating us from older styles and details, which to them seemed heavy-handed and covered with unnecessary ornament. Why not celebrate our new structural materials — steel, concrete, and glass — by breaking with forms based on traditional structures?

The problem with this idealistic notion is that nothing can “liberate” us from our inborn feelings and visual sense. We still have to solve the same design problems our ancestors struggled with. The old trim systems were there not merely to cover joints, but to give our buildings visual anchors, and to visually explain how the parts go together.

Trimless detailing with continuous gypsum board surfaces often gets us into trouble because it defies gravity without explaining how the trick works. Gravity seems to play a key role in design, and when we recognize this, and respond to it with our detailing, our buildings come out right. ■

*Gordon Tully is an architect in Arlington, Mass. He also teaches at the Harvard Graduate School of Design.*