By Design

Vaulted Ceilings: Think Before You Leap

by Jamie Fisher

In the never-ending quest to make houses feel more spacious, the vaulted or cathedral ceiling is a natural temptation. After all, the space is already there, so you might as well put it in a room instead of in the attic, right?

There are certainly times when a vaulted ceiling enhances a space. But even when the considerable technical difficulties can be overcome (see "Venting Details for Cathedral Ceilings," 12/96), the vaulted ceiling, though a natural first impulse, is not always the best solution. Sometimes the floor plan is better served by a flat ceiling. At other times, the space is best enhanced by a sculpted ceiling plane that is not a direct reflection of the roof above. An unexamined decision to "go with a cathedral ceiling" can pass up these and other options that actually make for a better room.

The one-story addition in Figure 1, for instance, is the sort of space that tempts one to use a vaulted ceiling. But despite adding volume, a vaulted ceiling over the new family room would actually diminish the wide-open feel of the whole space by giving the addition a distinct spatial character that effectively separates it from the existing (flat-ceiling) areas. It would cut the family room in two, breaking an expansive L-shaped space into a long, skinny, flat-ceiling room alongside a little boxy vaulted room. Better to go with a single flat ceiling throughout.

Figure 2 (page 16) shows a more complicated problem. This rectangular bedroom lay beneath a complex roof consisting of two differently sized offset gables. The owner wanted a cathedral ceiling. However, following the roof's lines would have created a wild ceiling, with a flying beam and two offset ridges hanging over irregular walls of differing heights.

At first, we considered carrying the lower roof vault through the room so that the ceiling would follow the con-

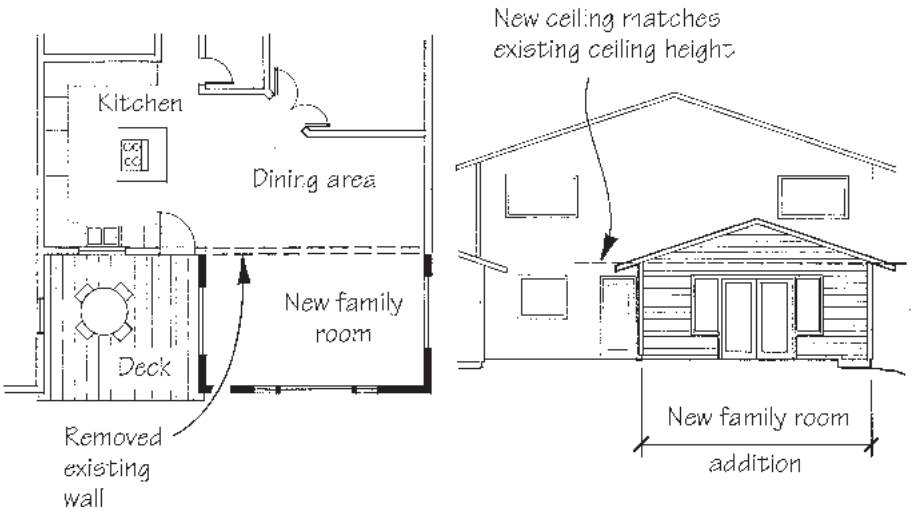

Figure 1. Though at first glance a vaulted ceiling seemed a logical way to open up the family room addition, using a flat ceiling there actually made the space seem more spacious by connecting it to the existing flat-ceilinged rooms.

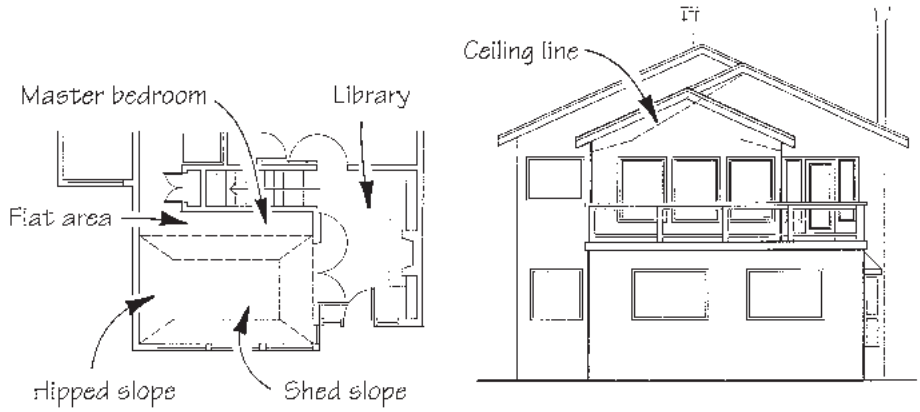

Figure 2. Enlarging this bedroom with a true vaulted ceiling — one that followed the complex intersecting roof planes — would have created a chaotic, unrestful space. The author designed instead a simpler, more orderly reflected ceiling bay that reinforces the room's main axis.

tours of a single simple gable. This would not have been a true cathedral ceiling, in that it would not have really reflected the roof above, but it would have had the virtue of simplicity and produced the familiar vaulted form.

Unfortunately, the ridge ran perpendicular to the axis of the bed and to the direction of movement in the room below — an unsettling effect. And the gable's traditional proportions and strong symmetry clashed with the modern, dynamic feel of the windows, which wrapped one corner of the room but not the other.

I went back to work and came up with the reflected ceiling in Figure 3. A high bay zone that is the width of the bed follows the room's main axis and is surrounded by a lower hipped zone, also centered on the bed. A flat section along the inboard side defines the circulation path back to the dressing room. The result is dramatic while being very specific to the room and its organization and function.

These two examples suggest the sorts of issues you should consider when tinkering with ceilings: connections to other rooms and the organization of the room where the vault is being added. Other rules of thumb include:

- A vaulted ceiling should reinforce order, and that order should originate with the room itself: its plan, its function, and its relationship to surrounding spaces inside and outside the house.
- A vaulted ceiling generally creates a strong "grain" to a room, making two walls feel like sides and the other two feel like front and back. With a full vault, the sides will parallel the ridge; in a shed, the sides will be the trapezoidal walls. If these implied orientations won't work with the rest of the room, find another ceiling design.
- Avoid vaulted ceilings that result in walls of uneven plate heights or ceiling planes of several pitches, except in secondary spaces like baths. If you don't, the resulting space may seem too chaotic. ■

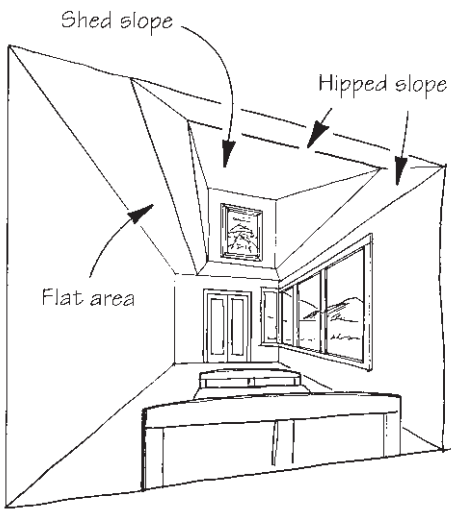

Figure 3. The vault not only reflects the room's orientation but also provides a visual focal point.

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