



Sometimes, trim above a cabinet can accentuate an out-of-level ceiling, as with the ceiling in this kitchen (1). The solution was removing the trim, leaving open space between the top of the cabinets and the ceiling. Uplighting was added above the cabinets to further disguise the discrepancy (2). When cabinets end short of the ceiling, another strategy for hiding an out-of-level ceiling is varying the topography of the cabinets—using some cabinets that are deeper and some that are shorter than others (3).

Photos by Doug Horgan

## Dealing With Out-of-Level Kitchen Ceilings

BY DOUG HORGAN

**When you're remodeling a kitchen,** it's rare to find a floor that's actually level—stranger still if the walls are plumb and the ceiling is level as well. While it's normal for carpenters and cabinet installers to adjust for some variations in a room, we sometimes need to work with rooms that aren't even close to level. I recently presented a conference on this topic at JLC Live. In that session, I covered floors, ceilings, and walls that were out of level and plumb, but here I'll focus on ceilings.

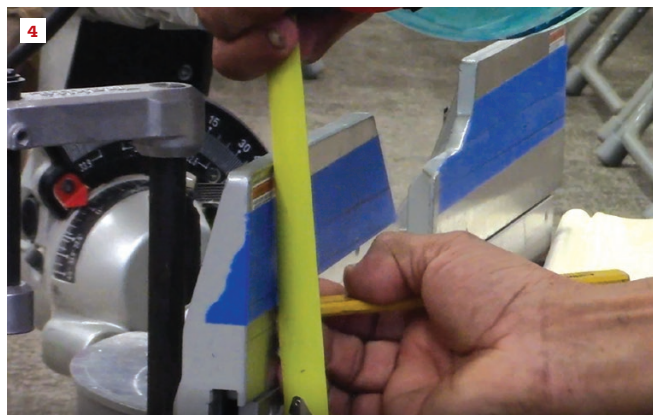
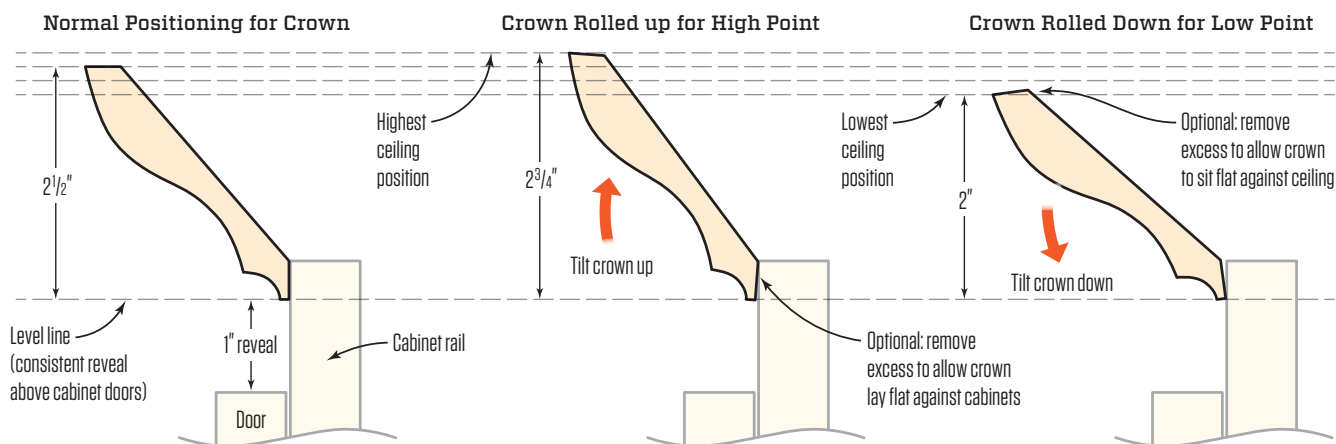
**Leave the cabinets short.** One line of attack with an out-of-level ceiling is to keep the cabinets well below the ceiling plane. An open space of 6 or more inches can hide a lot of variation. We recently went this route in a kitchen where the plans called for a vertical fascia above the cabinets. We initially installed the fascia but discovered a 1½-inch drop in one corner of the ceiling (1). Completing the fascia would have accentuated the drop. After consulting with the architect and the client, we removed the fascia and installed uplighting above the cabinets (2). This hid the out-of-level problem, and the clients liked the uplighting.

In this first example, the variation was a wavy 1½ inches in 6 feet, which is too much to handle visually in a soffit. But in situations with a gradual, even slope, a wide vertical soffit or trim can actually be used to hide an out-of-level ceiling. An even change of as much as an inch over 10 feet can be hidden in an 8-inch-tall soffit face without it being too obvious.

Another trick that can work for either an unlevel or a wavy ceiling is varying the topography of the wall cabinets (3). Using some deeper cabinets and some shorter ones and then wrapping the tops with crown can hide variations in the ceiling.

**Crown-base trickery.** Leaving the cabinets 6 inches short of the ceiling is a great solution if the kitchen has a high ceiling. But with lower ceilings, we need other solutions. In these cases, designers frequently extend the crown molding and trim all the way to the ceiling. I often ask designers to include a wide vertical surface for the crown base, which can help with problem ceilings.

Depending on how sharp an observer's eye is, a flat trim (or crown base) that is 4 inches wide can hide



When the crown molding lands within an inch of the tops of the cabinet doors, an out-of-level condition can often be dealt with by rolling the crown. For this 2 1/2-inch crown, draw lines on the miter saw fence at 2, 2 1/4, 2 1/2, and 2 3/4 inches (see illustration and photo 4). For crown that is only 2 inches high, set the edge at the 2-inch mark and cut the miters at 45 degrees (5).

about 1/4 inch in 4 feet. The bottom of the base follows the cabinets, and the crown follows the slope of the ceiling, often without the variation being noticed.

**Rolling the crown.** One of the most skilled carpenters I've ever worked with, Abidan Muñoz, taught me how to "roll" crown molding to make up for an out-of-level ceiling. This technique is fairly simple and can hide a surprising amount of unevenness—up to 1/4 inch in 2 feet (see illustration, above).

This approach is most useful when there is no crown base to come to your rescue, such as where the crown attaches directly to the cabinet face frames. If there's only an inch of frame above the cabinet door openings, you won't be able to hide a half inch of ceiling slope by just sliding the crown up and down on the face frames—almost any variation will show in a one-inch space.

So let's say the natural height (the vertical distance down from the ceiling) of the crown molding is 2 3/8 inches, and the distance between the ceiling and the 1-inch line on the cabinets above the

doors varies from 2 1/4 inches at one end of a run to 2 3/4 inches at the other end. Start by marking the fence on the miter saw at 2 1/4 inches and 2 3/4 inches. Draw the line all the way across the fence (4). (Muñoz applies tape on the fence to make the lines more visible.)

Now place the crown nested upside down against the miter saw fence (as normal). When you make the two cuts for the joint at the 2 1/4-inch end, slide the crown down the fence until the crown's bottom edge (against the saw fence) touches the 2 1/4-inch line on the fence (5). The miter angles are cut normally, so for a 90-degree corner, set the blade at 45 degrees. Cut both intersecting pieces, and when they join, they will sit against the cabinet face frame exactly 2 1/4 inches down from the ceiling with a perfect miter.

For the other end, cut the joints at the standard angle, but this time, slide the bottom edge of the crown up the fence, so that the edge touches the 2 3/4-inch line as you miter the pieces for both sides of the joint. Install the crown with the bottom edge on the 1-inch line on the cabinets and the crown will be snug to the ceiling at both



The difference in crown angle can be seen between the wall cabinet in the foreground and the one in the background (6). But when viewed from across the room, the difference is hardly noticeable (7). Slight variations in the ceiling can often be remedied by floating drywall compound down to the level of the crown molding (8).

ends (6). Continue with this technique around the rest of the kitchen, cutting inside and outside miters at the normal miter angle, and “rolling” the crown up or down so that it meets the vertical height needed to maintain the proper reveal (7).

If the crown is difficult to twist to fit tightly against the ceiling (as can happen with beefier hardwood profiles), try kerfing the back of the crown to make it more flexible (a tip I picked up from attendees at JLC Live 2018 in Providence, R.I.).

This rolling technique works like magic and is easy to do, and the result looks great. Because you are looking at the face of the crown, the subtle change in angle is hard to pick up visually, and the installer can make up for a lot of discrepancy in a relatively short distance. Depending on how much you tilt the crown, you may need to remove a bit of material from the back of the profile to allow the crown to sit tight against the surface of the cabinet.

Rolling the crown can be combined with changing the reveal on the crown backer, if the slope is extreme and you have the luxury of

a wide backer. As you try to cheat some of the ceiling slope by attaching the crown higher and higher on the backer, you may run out of vertical space. Before that happens, mark the bottom edge of the crown on the backer. Measure to this mark, then keep the bottom edge of the crown at this measurement and roll the crown to handle the rest of the slope.

**Floating drywall.** Occasionally, a small gap remains between the ceiling and the trim, no matter what you do with trim, cabinets, or caulk. In these rare cases, a skilled drywall finisher can “float” the surface of the ceiling down, to fill the gap and to meet the trim (8). In our area, we resort to this method only within reason—maybe  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch to  $\frac{3}{8}$  inch before it becomes prohibitively expensive. I’ve heard that in some parts of the country, there are good plasterers who can float larger gaps than that.

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