Transoms for Interior Doors

BY GARY STRIEGLER

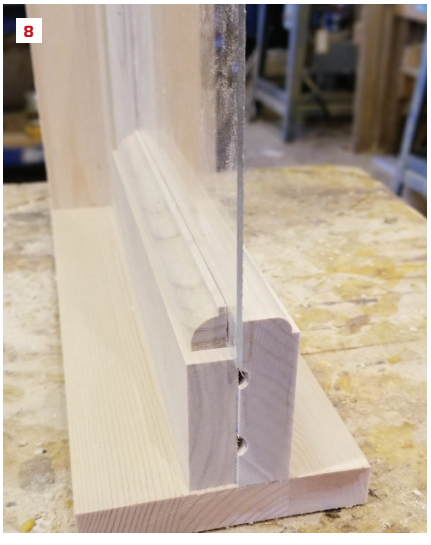
Nine-foot ceilings are a common upgrade in the new custom homes we build; in fact, they are rapidly overtaking 8-foot ceilings as the standard. But while ceiling heights are growing, the standard height for doors hasn't changed—6'-8" doors have been the standard for ages. I have tried using 8-foot doors with 9-foot ceilings a few times, but I've found that when an 8-foot door is trimmed with a nice 3 1/2- to 4-inch-wide casing and there's a decent-size crown molding above on the ceiling, the visual proportions don't work very well. Seven-foot doors look great with 9-foot ceilings, but they are never a stock item and usually cost more than an 8-foot door.

Transom frame and jamb. There are usually only a few highly visible doors in the public spaces of a house, and transoms are a great way to make those 6'-8" doors look better with tall ceilings. To make room for transoms in new construction, I make sure that we frame the headers directly below the top wall plates. On remodeling jobs, the header can be removed if the wall isn't load bearing. For load-bearing walls, we simply remove the drywall from one side of the wall and move the header up under the top plate. The goal is to have 10 to 12 inches of space above the door.

To make the transom jamb, I build a box out of door-jamb material to the exact width of the door below. I make the box 1/2 inch

Photos by Gary Striegler

Nail together pieces of jamb material for the transom jamb **(1)**. Install the transom jamb about 1/4 inch above the door jamb **(2)**. After shimming the jamb square **(3)**, secure the sides **(4)** and case the entire door and transom **(5)**.



For a traditional-looking glass transom **(6)**, the author mocked up several options. The simplest glass option captures a glass panel between two strips of panel molding **(7)**. The second option looks more like a window sash in the transom **(8)**. The solid panel option can be built and installed before the box goes in **(9)**.

shorter than the opening to ease installation. I make the top and bottom full width and nail them to the vertical legs **(1)**.

To install the transom jamb, I align it with the door jamb below. After spacing the box about 1/4 inch above the header of the door jamb, I nail it in place **(2)**. I set a square in the corner of the transom jamb **(3)** and shim the jamb square in the opening **(4)**. Then I just let the door casing extend up to include the transom **(5)**.

Glass transom options. Glass transoms let light pass between rooms even with the door closed **(6)**. A simple way to make a glass transom is with panel molding laid flat on the jamb as a glass stop **(7)**. To save time, I cut four pieces of molding to the height and four more to the width measurements.

With a gauge block, I locate the first set of panel molding 1/8 inch back from the jamb centerline (to accommodate 1/4-inch-thick glass). I attach the molding to the jamb with brads. I leave the second set of molding loose for the painters to prefinish, making sure that they finish the back edges that can be seen after the glass is installed. After the painters finish, the glass company sets the glass on rubber setting blocks with a dab of silicone to keep the glass from rattling. We then nail in the second set of stops.

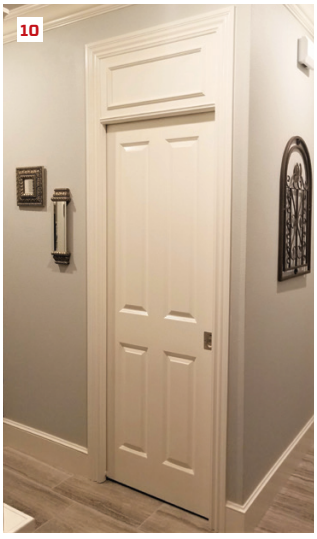
Another glass transom option has the more traditional look of a window sash above the door **(8)**. Instead of using panel molding, I make a frame out of 2-inch-wide 1-by material. I rout a profile around the inside edge of the frame with a 3/8-inch radius bit set deep enough to leave a shoulder. The rounded corners can be cleaned up with a sharp chisel and sandpaper. If possible, we nail this frame in place before installing the transom box.

Next, I build a second frame out of 1 5/8-inch-wide 1-by material and nail it back-to-back to the first frame. The glass then sits inside this frame, held in place by a 3/8-inch quarter-round stop that I make using the same router bit. I precut the trim and make sure everything is prepainted. Because I am working with much smaller trim, I install the stop with headless pins. The side of the transom with the stop looks a little better, so I face it toward the most visible side.

For a solid panel instead of glass, I sandwich a 1/4-inch plywood or MDF panel between two 2-inch frames back-to-back **(9)**. Again, I assemble and install the frames in the box before the box is installed. I finish the detail with panel molding installed inside the frame on both sides.

Transom without the jamb. To dress up a door, such as an entry closet door, that doesn't call for the full transom treatment **(10)**, I use a detail that doesn't need a separate jamb so there is no need to raise the header. My strategy varies depending on the size of the door trim I'm using. If the inside edge of the trim is 5/16 inch or wider, I run the casing trim as if I had an 8-foot door, installing the casing directly over the drywall.

If I'm lucky enough to have smooth drywall, I only have to add a thin piece of trim at



Doors that are less visible don't need the full transom treatment **(10)**. After extending the door trim to include the transom area, the crew member removes the drywall and installs a plywood panel **(11)**. A molding strip goes between the door and the transom area **(12)**.

To finish off the panel, the crew member pre-assembles a decorative frame of panel molding, gluing and pinning the corners **(13)**. Using a gauge block to space the panel molding frame away from the door trim, the crew member attaches the frame to the transom panel **(14)**. The entire door assembly is then ready for paint.

the door jamb header between the casing legs. If the drywall has a texture to it, I fit a piece of 1/4-inch plywood inside the casing that extends down to the door jamb header **(11)**. The thin piece of trim then covers the bottom edge of the plywood **(12)**.

If the door casing trim has a very thin inside edge, I use a multi-tool to cut out a section of drywall above the door. I make the edges of the cut fall beyond the inside edges of the extra tall casing trim. I then replace the drywall with 1/2-inch MDF or plywood. When I install the casing, the inside edge lands on the plywood.

With either strategy, I add a picture frame of panel molding to finish the detail. I size the picture frame to leave a 2-inch reveal to the inside edge of the casing trim. I assemble each frame on the workbench **(13)** and install it with a headless pinner **(14)**. If I am using this treatment on multiple doors, I make a 2-inch gauge block to speed up the installation.

The extra work and marginal cost of these treatments on high-visibility doors is well worth the result. My clients are always happy to have invested a little bit to dress up their doors.

Gary Striegler owns Craftsman Builders (craftsmanbuildersnwa.com), in Fayetteville, Ark., and teaches workshops at the Marc Adams School of Woodworking. Follow him on Instagram @craftsmanbuilders.