

Beyond the Flat Ceiling

by Gordon F. Tully

One reason small houses look small is that the standard, eight-foot flat ceiling creates spatial monotony in small rooms. But there are various design strategies that can help you avoid monotony.

Many of the examples in this article make use of light from above. In fact, bringing light in from overhead, or bouncing light from a valance up onto a ceiling, is perhaps the most important reason for breaking up and out of the flat ceiling. Keeping this in mind, the emphasis will be on configurations that break open the flat ceiling.

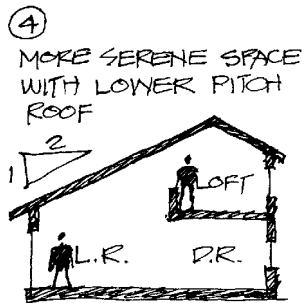
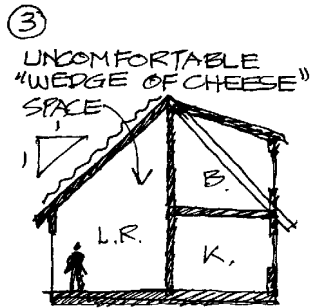
One simple device is a hole in the floor above, which lets the space below flow up and connect with another level of the house. Two other approaches are the cathedral ceiling, where the interior space follows the roofline, and the dropped ceiling, which makes the normal ceiling seem higher by contrast. Then there is the dropped floor—but that's another story.

The purpose of all of these shenanigans is to create spatial drama at minimal cost. A big house can have lots of drama without ceilings that pop up and down. But in the typical small house every foot counts, views are often uninteresting, materials are simple, and architectural decoration is minimal or absent.

Extending a room vertically is a simple way to add drama, especially in condo and townhouse developments, where the need for a small

the usual design, the cathedral ceiling is confined to the living room. One side is the real roof, and the other is a sloped false ceiling (1). An "honest" cathedral ceiling continues through from room to room (2), and gives the sense that you are living under the roof, as in a barn or a tent. I like that much better.

But this "honest" approach can



have its problems, too. In solar houses with active collectors, where the roof has a 12-in-12 slope, we often end up with "wedge of cheese" spaces, where the ceiling is merely one side of a large solar roof (3). None of these has ever worked out well. With a lower roof slope—5 or 6 in 12—the result is more pleasant, and yet the space seldom is memorable (4).

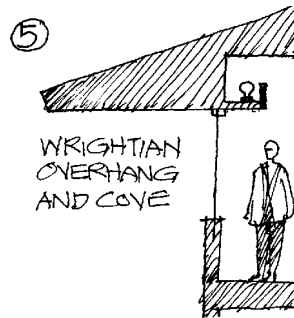
We need contrast, but it has to be anchored to something familiar and close at hand. The wedge-of-cheese space (with a low wall at one end and a high one at the other, like a lean-to) has the problem of ambiguity: should our eye use the high or the low wall as a measure? We resolve this problem by using first one, then the other. The space seems uncertain, and that makes it feel jumpy and uncomfortable.

The key is to have the roof go up and come back down within the room. Our most-published house had a cathedral ceiling under a hip roof with a 12-in-12 pitch. This created excellent spaces, because there was a low wall around two or three sides of each room instead of just one side.

We need to anchor a space to something familiar, and then create drama by contrast. Frank Lloyd Wright did this frequently by designing a low, extended roof overhang that sailed in over continuous win-

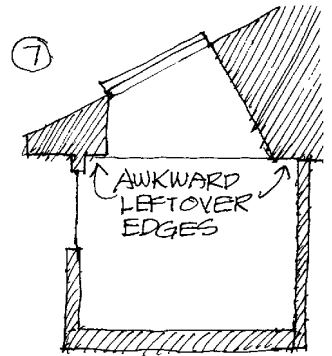
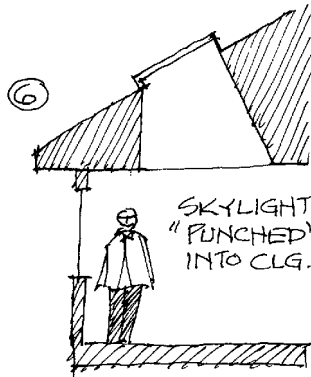
dows to form a low interior valance that hid cove lighting (5). Above this low reference plane, a relatively modest ceiling height seemed monumental and dramatic. (We are trying out this effect in a house now under construction.)

Good effects occur when the ceiling simply pops up—in a skylight well, for example. It is always a good idea for the pop-up to break into a well-established plane as a contrasting element (6). But as soon as the pop-up becomes too large, it eats up the reference plane and the room



becomes uncomfortable.

It is better to double the height of an entire small space than to cut a double-height hole out of it and leave a little bit of undefined ceiling in the room (7). Another strategy is to make small pop-ups and skylight



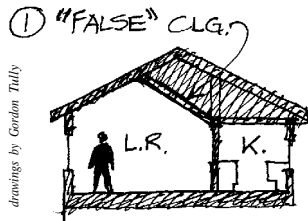
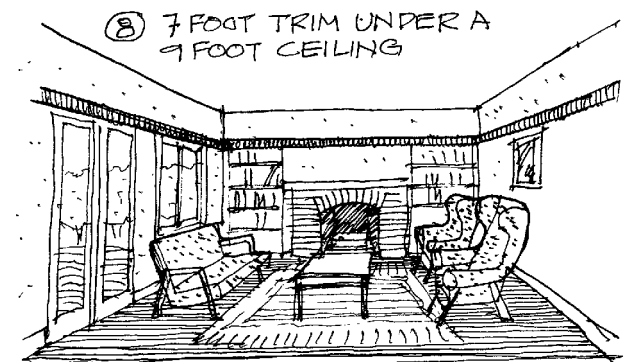
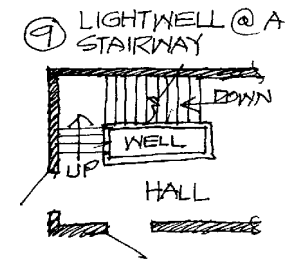
wells line up with a key element, such as the centerline of an intersecting corridor or a doorway in the opposite wall.

Today, as architects reexplore 19th-century Victorian designs, we see how important decoration and trim can be in setting up references against which we can play our variations and thereby organize small, complex spaces.

Unfortunately, trim costs money. It is fun to see \$200-per-square-foot Victorian replicas designed by a style leader, but most of us have to work under normal cost constraints. Trim is easy to omit when the going gets tough.

Yet, in many cases a simple line of molding can do the same thing as a complex break in the ceiling, and at half the cost. For example, a nine-foot ceiling will seem higher if a band of trim is run around the room at about seven feet, creating a reference line for visually measuring the height of the wall (8). The effect is even better if the paint color changes above the trim.

What is the cheapest way to create double-height drama? Start with the staircase because, whether you like it or not, a stairway is a double-height space. You may get a kick out of squeezing stairs into small spaces, but it is better to take advantage of a staircase's built-in drama.



building footprint makes it easier to extend the building upward than outward.

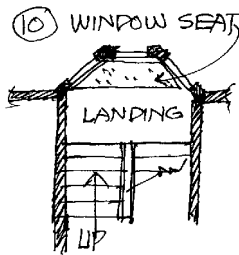
One might think that simply raising the ceiling would help, and indeed it often does. But the problem is not that simple, and in some cases a uniform nine-foot ceiling actually makes small rooms seem smaller. This is especially true with high windowsills; you may feel you are living at the bottom of a well.

Cathedral ceilings often are used in ranches and raised ranches, where the living spaces are under the roof. In

drawings by Gordon Tully

The simplest approach is to open up the stair to create a lightwell (9), with a skylight or window at the top to cast light into the lower levels. Even better is to give the stair more room, and perhaps widen the landing to provide a place to sit (10).

Or you can put the stair in a double-height hall, dining room or other space where its use will not detract from the room's function. The stair is an ideal element to help anchor and define a high space and, in a case such as this, there usually is a bridge or balcony running across the space at the top of the stair.



There are lots of ways to break away from the monotony of flat ceilings, provided you are sure they *are* monotonous. (Lots of little Capes are nice and cozy precisely because of this "monotony.") As with every other architectural device, double-height spaces, pop-ups, skylight wells, cathedral ceilings and stairwells can be helpful or annoying, depending on how you use them. Some of the above principles may help you avoid the worst errors. ■

Copyright © 1986 by Gordon F. Tully
Gordon F. Tully is president of Tully & Ingersoll/Massdesign Architects in Cambridge, Mass.