

Raise the roof: Make ceilings look higher with no expense

Written by Jeb Breithaupt

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If the ceiling in your post-World War II house is so low you're afraid you'll bump your head on it if you wear high-heeled shoes, it's tempting to think about raising the roof.

Chances are, you'll get over it once you see the contractor's estimate and learn all that's involved with making your eight-foot ceilings a more comfortable nine or 10 feet tall.

The cost of having a remodeler cut your ceiling joists, remove the sheetrock and insulation, relocate electrical wires, air conditioning ducts and cast-iron gas pipes, and possibly remove and replace the roof is awfully high just to add an extra couple of feet to the home's walls.

If the room where you want the higher ceiling has an exterior wall, it could cost even more. A room with four interior walls is a little bit more affordable, but still presents most of the same construction issues.

An alternative to raising the roof to get higher ceilings: Make your rooms feel taller. Here's how:

1. Add a window. It's far less expensive to add windows to a room with limited light than it is to heighten the walls. So if your room has any exterior walls, add an oversized window or two. A room with windows on two sides gives the illusion of extra space because you can see outdoors no matter where in the space you are standing. A light-flooded room can induce "lighter" feelings in people, allow you to see others in a better light and get the sense that the ceiling is higher.

2. Install electrical lighting. If there's no exterior wall where you can add a window, electrical lighting is a great alternative. Recessed ceiling lights can help make a room feel larger—but only if they are evenly distributed. Uneven light distribution can actually make the ceiling feel closer. A tip: Light the room with wall sconces, which "point" the light upward and give the illusion of height. Or add accent lighting that shines upward onto a vertical piece of artwork that you hang fairly high on the wall.

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3. Replace interior doors. Upgrade the standard sized interior doors with taller models that nearly touch the ceiling. It will take a bit of construction to make space for larger doors that give the illusion of a taller ceiling. And hang draperies from ceiling to floor, even if your windows are much lower than the top of the drapes.

4. Paint the ceiling a lighter color. White or off-white ceilings—or a hint of pastel—can visually elongate your room if the walls are slightly darker.

5. Avoid (or remove) wood paneling or “popcorn” texture. Having these textures on the ceiling give too much definition to the room’s overhead “finish line.” Even wood-paneled walls can make a ceiling look lower because they create too stark of a stopping point for the walls. If your heart is set on paneled walls, cover just the lower two-thirds of walls with beadboard, which is etched with vertical lines. Then, paint the wall on top of the paneling the same light color as the ceiling to give the ceiling the appearance of more height.

6. Open up a wall—or part of one—between two rooms that don’t require privacy. Creating a window pass or a doorway between the kitchen and the family room, for instance, can make a room feel more airy and taller.

7. Choose furniture that’s low to the ground. This will create extra space between the ceiling and the sofa, chairs and tables. And keep your room as clutter-free as possible; everything that you place in a room makes it look a little bit less open, airy and spacious.

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