



Photo by Janet McCann

the fifth wall

DRESS UP YOUR CEILING **BY MARTHA RUSSIS**

SOMETIMES A ROOM JUST isn't complete if the ceiling has been forgotten. Besides, there are so many possibilities other than simply covering it with a can of white ceiling paint.

Also known as the "fifth wall," ceilings are a more difficult surface to work on than the wall or floor. They are often an afterthought once the rest of the room has been decorated, but the payoff for paying attention to it is a room where it appears every detail has been carefully planned.

Whatever is done to the ceiling, it's important that homeowners don't get carried away and overpower the rest of the room. Make sure that the ceiling blends in with furnishings, the walls and floor.

There is one general principle to consider when deciding just how much to alter a ceiling: the higher the ceiling, the more it gets noticed.

"The higher the ceiling, the more the ceiling becomes an element in the room and the bigger the room is, you tend to see that whole ceiling when you enter that room," says Janet McCann, president of McCann Associates Inc., a River North interior design firm.

There is no official benchmark, but designers tend to pick ceilings nine feet tall, or higher as makeover candidates. Eight-foot ceilings usually are not dramatic enough to entice people beyond eye level.

Before embarking on any ceiling work, stop and think about what's above it and solve those problems first. Water damage problems can be big culprits—either from a pipe above or from winter seepage when water creeps under roof tiles and into woodwork.

Once used strictly for weight-bearing purposes, beams have come in vogue as decoration.

However, beams don't work in every room. They must create a symmetrical division of ceiling space.

"People tend to look up way more than they look down and if the beams are done right and they are the right size and blend in it just makes you go, 'Wow.' It's like looking at art," says George Havlicek, president of Havlicek Builders Inc. in Geneva, a custom builder and remodeler.

Many species of wood and finishes are available to blend with the rest of the room—from a rustic cedar beam

to a very polished cherry wood. They can be stained or painted white to soften their appearance. Metal beams are also an option.

Depending on the type of wood and the size, Mr. Havlicek says installing beams in a kitchen can start between

\$3,000 to \$5,000.

Building trends are leaning away from two-story family rooms and beams help create a cozy, warm feeling, says Peter Stefani, president of Naperville-based King's Court Builders Inc.

With nine-foot ceilings the standard in new construction homes, he says there's ample space to drop the ceiling another four to six inches with beams.

Beams are an old staple, but unconventional materials can have just as dramatic an effect on ceilings.

Julie and Louis Bucksbaum of Northbrook saw a picture of an upholstered wall and translated it into their dining room ceiling.

Their colorful home, which has a mountain lodge feel to it, includes a 14-foot dining room ceiling padded with rust-colored ultra suede fabric. The ceiling resembles a quilt with big padded squares. It has nine hanging light fixtures and it's quickly noticed by visitors.

"I love it. I absolutely positively love it," Julie says. "The reason I paid attention to the ceilings was because my husband wanted really tall ceilings

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Photo by Crystal Yonan

SCALLOPED-EDGE CEILING

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and I wanted an intimate cozy feel so the idea of doing something on the ceiling would bring it down and make it feel (like) less of a blank slate.”

For those on a modest budget, there are plenty of sprucing-up options for do-it-yourself ceiling treatments.

An array of crown moulding patterns are available to fit the corner between the ceiling and walls all around a room. Mr. Havlicek notes that a popular job nowadays is ripping out kitchen soffits and replacing them with heavy crown moulding.

Beadboard tiles, which are tongue and grooved, can be an easy installation that doesn't give up a lot of ceiling height—often it's somewhere around five-eighths of an inch thick. It has a textured, patterned look in contrast to a flat painting job.

Drywall can be applied to a ceiling's outer edge and then scalloped. Then, either the inside or outside of the ceiling can be painted or textured to set it off.

Several years ago, homeowners had little painting choices other than ceiling white or a lighter shade of the walls. However, advancements in paint technology with water-based products made an array of ceiling finishes possible, says Edward Mattingly, CEO of Mattingly Home Decorating Inc., a decorative painting company in LaGrange.

Mr. Mattingly says metallic finishes, particularly pearlescence, are a popular choice now for consumers.

“We do a ton of metallic underlayers on ceilings now and a lot of soft colorwashing on the ceiling,” he says. A pearlescence with soft colorwash over it gives the finished ceiling a soft, beautiful sheen without screaming glitzy.

Murals, geometric designs, and lighter art are also possible on ceilings but deciding whether to go so elaborate depends on the décor of the rest of the room, Mr. Mattingly says.

He adds that high ceilings in master bedrooms are a great place for cloud painting. Powder rooms and dining rooms are also better suited for ceiling scenes, and art on a child's bedroom ceiling is almost always a guaranteed hit.

But putting art on the ceiling can be a waste of time and money if it's not lit correctly.

Mitchell Kohn of Mitchell B. Kohn Lighting Design in Highland Park advises using uplighting such as wall sconces, floor torchieres, or lights suspended on a cable below ceiling level.

For downlighting installed into a ceiling, Mr. Kohn remains a big fan of lighting that is as inconspicuous and unobtrusive as possible and has small aperture openings.

“I like to put recessed lighting into almost any kind of environment and the mistakes that I see people making are they use fixtures that are too big and too bright. Lighting can make a big difference in how a room looks and feels,” Mr. Kohn says.

He adds that there's no excuse for the bulky track lighting of the past—newer, modern track lighting is smaller, lower wattage and just as effective.

Ms. McCann notes that there are many more limits to retrofitting a ceiling versus creating a ceiling from scratch. In new construction, it's an excellent idea to install different-

shaped ceilings such as barrel, tray, vaulted or coffered. Installing a specialty ceiling to an existing home can be impossible or impractical because living space in the room above can be lost.

Ms. McCann sometimes sees homeowners copy a ceiling they saw somewhere else when it really does not fit in well with their home. Rooms can easily get a little out of proportion because homeowners go overboard.

“I do see a lot of top heavy rooms,” she says. “Let's deal with the ceiling but let's not 'overdeal' with it. After all, it is just a ceiling.” ■