

Give your home a lift with a decorative ceiling

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Wherever you happen to be sitting right now, tilt your head back and look up. What do you see?

If you are in a typical [house](#) or apartment, the answer probably is "ceiling white," a bright shade that graces many of the ceilings over our heads. But if that's the view from your seat, you might be missing out, say some Chicago-area [home](#) designers.

"The ceiling is the fifth [plane](#), and it often doesn't get the attention it deserves," said Michael Abrams, owner of Chicago interior [design](#) firm Michael Abrams Limited. "It can have a huge impact on the feel of a room."

Abrams' office, for instance, is an old loft space with exposed ductwork and rafters overhead. The plain plaster walls take a back seat to the drama on high.

"Ceilings can make a room seem larger, smaller, warmer or colder," he added. "They have great potential to add a sense of excitement and drama." Abrams prefers to save the drama for first-floor spaces such as dining or [family](#) rooms, where guests are sure to take notice.

Some of the options for interesting ceiling design are not always obvious to the layperson: Beams, mirrors, architectural details, colored paint, windows and even wallpaper have the potential to enliven an otherwise boring plane. The possibilities are downright heavenly, said Kristin Petro, principal of Elmhurst-based Kristin Petro Interiors.

For clients who wanted a new house with an old-house vibe, she designed a kitchen with a soaring dormer window incorporated into the ceiling. Dark-stained planks add texture and provide contrast in the light and airy space. Those building a house have the chance to incorporate interesting architectural ceiling details from the get-go, Petro said.

"We designed the space from the ceiling down," she said. "In fact, much of the rest of the house was designed around that window."

"Considering ceiling design before you build is wise. Many people just paint it white and forget about it." Not so for Petro, who always factors in the ceiling in design projects.

Although high ceilings have become popular in new construction, bigger isn't always better, Petro said. She likes to create contrast with ceilings of different heights, a technique Frank Lloyd Wright employed in his designs, she said.

Builders have their eyes to the sky these days, too. Many include out-of-the-ordinary ceiling details in their standard building packages.

At Epcon Communities' Maples at the Sonatas development in Woodstock, two-bedroom, two-bath town houses come standard with soaring cathedral ceilings, which make the 1,700-square-foot homes seem airy and more spacious, said Carol Lyons, a sales [consultant](#) for the development. Detached single-family courtyard homes include tray ceilings in the living room, dining room and master bedroom.

Customers of Downers Grove-based Oakley Home Builders often choose beadboard or coffered ceilings to go along with the builder's signature Nantucket style, which spokeswoman Amy Krieger describes as "Pottery Barn meets Restoration Hardware." Wooden beams painted white or stained dark are also popular, she said, and can add depth to a room. The beams are sometimes made of realistic-looking faux wood to keep costs in check.

Ceilings needn't be the same throughout a house, added Krieger, who said beadboard ceilings are popular for porches, while coffered ones reign in family rooms.

Architect Kevin Toukoumidis of Chicago's dSpace Studio got creative with the ceiling of a salon in a vintage Chicago building undergoing a total rehab and conversion into a single-family home from apartments. His inspiration was the plaster ceilings in spectacular European villas. Toukoumidis' firm designed an elaborate scrolling design, which was translated into foot-long plaster segments. An artisan spent a week installing the design and coating it with another layer of plaster.

The elaborate ceiling was labor intensive to produce and "not inexpensive," Toukoumidis said, but the awe-inspiring result was worth it. The effect works especially well in a smaller room, he said, like the 12-by-12 salon.

"Ceiling design can be a game-changer," he said. "It can transform a house."

Fortunately, for those [on a budget](#), there are "a million simple applications," from paint to moldings, Abrams said. An easy trick: Instead of "ceiling white," paint the ceiling the same color as the trim, which is often a softer shade of white or cream.

Petro likes to paint ceilings a gray-blue: "It's the color of the sky, and it's very subtle. It provides another level of serenity," she said.

"Ceiling design is a pretty inexpensive way to dress up your house," said Jane Kelly, kitchen and bath designer with Lincolnwood-based Airroom Architects, Builders & Remodelers, who takes her cue from other elements of a room when selecting ceiling design. A beefy molding might suggest a coffered ceiling of recessed panels with decorative trim. A vintage kitchen cries out for tin ceiling tiles.

Kelly notes that ceiling materials — tiles and moldings, for example — tend to be affordable, but installation can be expensive. In some cases, homeowners can do the work themselves, using flexible molding to create a circle on the ceiling or anchor a kitchen island in its space.

Nora Schneider of Chicago-based Nora Schneider Interior Design has several cost-effective tricks for enlivening boring ceilings. She likes to paint them in metallic colors, something that is more subtle than it sounds, she said, or add wallpaper, such as a demure gray-and-white check.

Ceiling wallpaper? "Your wallpaper guy will hate you, but it can look spectacular," she said.

Clients sometimes fear an eye-catching ceiling will make their rooms appear smaller, but Schneider reassures them. "I say, 'Trust me, it doesn't make them look smaller, only more interesting,'" she said.