

Bringing Cathedral Ceilings Down to Size

How to add interest and intimacy to your home's vaulted spaces

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As you design your dream log home, you will likely plan for the perfect master suite, the gourmet kitchen and the ideal great room with a soaring stone fireplace and a cathedral ceiling. But how much thought have you really put into that ceiling? Have you carefully considered how it will affect the way your home looks and feels?

When it comes to ceiling design, two basic concepts often are misunderstood. The first is the relationship between ceiling height and spaciousness. Many people believe that vaulted ceilings will make a room appear more spacious. This isn't necessarily true. Actually, the eye tends to be drawn to the longest dimension, whether vertical or horizontal. Other dimensions appear relative to the longest dimension. Therefore, in a room with a cathedral ceiling, we are drawn to its height, making the horizontal dimensions of the room seem narrower. The same size room with a lower ceiling height will appear wider.

The second misconception concerns the relationship between what is interesting architecture and what is livable. Cathedral ceilings are dramatic; however, impressive spaces aren't necessarily the most comfortable. We find comfort in rooms that are in proportion to our own sense of scale and offer a perceived sense of protection. A soaring ceiling may be visually inspiring, but it may not provide a comfortable place to read or have a conversation. For the same reasons, dining under an 8-foot ceiling seems more intimate than one that's 25 feet high.

Conversely, a large great room with an 8-foot-high ceiling would seem out of proportion. When deciding whether your home should have cathedral ceilings, many factors—from visual appeal to heating bills—must be weighed.

Pros and Cons

Rooms with cathedral ceilings can cost almost twice as much to build as the same size rooms with low ceilings. And heating and cooling rooms with high vaulted ceilings can be considerably more expensive. Plus there are the added difficulties in cleaning, changing light bulbs and so on.

By pointing out the potential drawbacks of cathedral ceilings, I am certainly not advocating a return to standard ceiling heights. Cathedral ceilings do add interest and character to a house. They also create a range of related design opportunities for lighting and connecting upper and lower floors, such as lofts and catwalks, that will make your home both visually exciting and enjoyable.

Fortunately, there are many ways you can give a room with a high ceiling more warmth. For instance, a large bay window, uniquely shaped rooms or unexpected room placement can balance the effect of a high ceiling. Another solution is to construct additional architectural elements, such as log trusses or ceiling beams—either structural or merely decorative—that are equal to the level of the first-floor wall height. The size and spacing of the beams should be relative to the size of the vaulted space and the desired effect.

Here are some other options.

Lofty Ideas

Lofts are quite common in log homes, and there's a good reason for that. An upper floor that's open to the main level below breaks up the height of a vaulted cathedral ceiling and adds architectural charm. In one house I worked on, we suspended a catwalk over the living area that not only provided an effective link from the second-story rooms to the exterior, but also bridged a gap between a large expanse of open space and a more visually appealing lower level.

When a second-story space, such as a bedroom, requires more privacy than an open loft can provide, consider other options that yield openness in smaller doses. For example, interior windows with shutters in an upper-level wall can create an element of surprise and can be opened or closed as appropriate.

If these options don't appeal to you, there are other ways to bring a cathedral ceiling down to size without losing its dramatic appeal. Try building a ledge or soffit at the dividing point between the upper and lower floors. It also creates accent lighting opportunities below as well as a shelf to display artwork and plants above.

If incorporating a ledge or soffit into your home's design isn't feasible, a simple plate rail or a long shelf can accomplish a similar effect for less money. However, a shelf fastened to the wall won't be as strong as a structural soffit, so pay attention to the weight of the objects you place up there. It also won't provide opportunities for additional accent lighting.

Right Angles

Where a high wall intersects the slope of a cathedral ceiling, a sharp, unsettling angle can result. A false ceiling sloping up from the wall can decrease the height of the vault and create a

lower and more pleasing peak where it intersects with the actual roof. This technique is especially effective in a bedroom or other small room.

Lighting and Highlighting

Lighting a cathedral ceiling can be a tricky matter. Generally, log home owners want to accent the exposed log roof beams because they are prominent features. But spotlighting the beams can emphasize the vault's height and reduce intimacy in the room. Creative accent lighting can play up your home's architectural uniqueness without detracting from the coziness of the living space below.

Warm colors, especially wood and earth tones, tend to reduce the perceived height of a ceiling. But too much wood can detract from the log beam work, whereas a painted drywall ceiling can complement it. Yellow and peach tones work well. Darker hues may be too oppressive for some, however others delight in the drama of a forest green or crimson ceiling. The objective is to highlight the log beams while lowering the perceived ceiling height. Cathedral ceilings can be one of the most challenging design elements in a log home. With creativity and forethought, you can create a wonderful balance of exciting spaces with intimate charm.

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