# Rooms Without Walls

## Ceiling heights define spaces in an open floor plan

BY SARAH SUSANKA



Almost a decade ago, I met Ed and Maureen Labenski. They were proud owners of a beautiful prairie-school home designed by William Purcell in 1910. I enjoyed meeting them immensely and was delighted a few years later when they asked me to design their retirement home in Vermont.

They'd learned a lot about architecture from their Minneapolis dwelling and had come to appreciate the difference that good design can make to the comfort of a home. They knew that they needed a very different floor plan than the more formal one that they were used to. The Labenskis wanted an open layout with plenty of natural light and views of the surrounding landscape and the mountains beyond.

Like many empty nesters, the Labenskis loved the idea of building only the spaces they would use every day. The only formal space they needed was for a small collection of antiques; they didn't even need a formal dining room. When they entertained, they wanted to be able to do so informally, using the same table they use for everyday meals.

In designing a house with this level of openness, it is important to give each activity area some spatial definition because there are no walls to accomplish that task. My favorite technique for doing this is to use differing ceiling planes. Because it's relatively simple for a builder to lower sections of ceiling from the joist plane above, I start with an 8-ft. or 9-ft. ceiling, then drop soffits and ceiling areas to define the spaces.

In this house, I employ many strategies to modulate ceiling height (top photo, facing page). Although you aren't consciously aware of those visual cues—you don't stop and say, "Aha! I'm moving into a new area now!"—they have significant impact at a subliminal



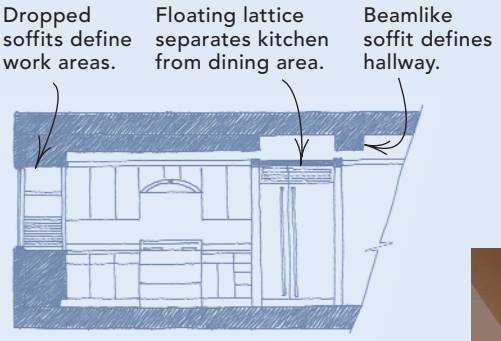
Photo above: Ellen Labenski



## IN THIS OPEN FLOOR PLAN, ADJOINING AREAS BORROW SPACE FROM EACH OTHER

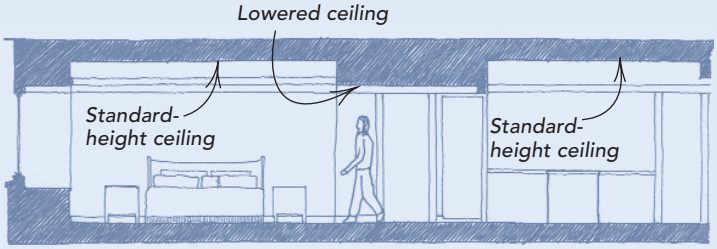
The dining area can overflow into the hall for large dinner parties, and the living space can flow into the dining area. Likewise, guests gathering in the kitchen can move into the dining area.






### Ceiling treatments define spaces in kitchen

Two ceiling planes drop from the main one. A wooden lattice separates the kitchen from the dining area, while soffits over the countertops provide a place for task lighting.




### Ceilings make the hall; halls make the room beyond

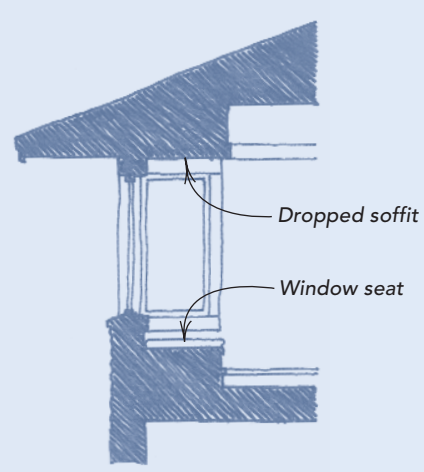
A lowered ceiling in a hall between rooms makes the standard-height ceiling in the room beyond feel higher (as in the drawing above and the background of the photo at right). Lowered ceilings in the form of beamlike soffits (photo right foreground) define a hall without walls.



Drawings: Sarah Susanka

## SOFFITS CREATE COZY ALCOVES

Dropping the ceiling at a window seat or a task-specific area, such as above a dresser or a soaking tub, can create a comfortable nook. Soffit depth should mirror the depth of what's below it to accentuate separation.






**Double duty**
The soffit sheltering this window seat also defines the desk area to the right.

level. The eye notices this change in height and subtly recognizes the distinction between one space and another. This kind of awareness is similar to that of stepping through a gateway or arched opening.

In the short hallway connecting the living/dining area with the master bedroom, this definition is quite distinct. Here, I lowered the entire ceiling to the height of the trim band. Because the transition hall is a relatively narrow space, it creates the sense of moving through a compressed zone, like a tunnel, before the release of moving into another major space (drawing p. 67). If you stop to think about it, we experience most things through contrast. We know the weather is hot or cold by comparing it with what we've felt previously; so it is with space. Compressing the ceiling plane in the hall creates a strong contrast between the lowered hallway ceiling and those of the adjacent rooms, making the rooms feel taller. If every space in the house has the same ceiling height, there is nothing to compare it to, so it feels monotonous.

### Defining the rooms with the ceiling treatments

The Labenskis' house is organized around a main walkway that extends from the front entryway to the master bedroom at the other end of the floor plan. A beamlike soffit runs the length of the walkway on each side (bottom photo, p. 67). This soffit suggests definition without restricting the shared floor space of the adjacent rooms. For example, the dining table can be extended into this area, and the living-room furniture can be spread out to allow seating for additional guests. But most of the time, this walkway remains open, offering a long, unobstructed view through the house.

Although the kitchen, dining area and living area are combined, the kitchen is separated in an alcove and is hidden from view when people are entering the house (photos pp. 66-67). Each room is differentiated further with a floating lattice of cherry 1x3s. The wood's darkness lends visual weight, which further accentuates the spatial division. The lattice is at the same height as and flows into a continuous trim band running throughout the house at door and window heads. If I had used a soffit instead, there would have been much more separation between activity areas. Because I wanted the kitchen, dining and living areas to feel more connected, the lattice was the best choice.

### Defining the alcoves and the work areas

Small alcoves or window seats are other places where I lower the ceiling or drop a soffit (photo above). A lower ceiling defines the area, marking it as distinct yet still integrated into the whole composition. Just like the hallway between rooms, it brings a sense of com-

### Accentuating a special spot

Continued across the adjacent stair, a soffit houses a light and helps to delineate a display space for art.



### Using the soffits

Task lighting in the soffits (photo above) bounces off adjacent walls to brighten the space efficiently. Above a shower and tub (photo below), a soffit adds intimacy.





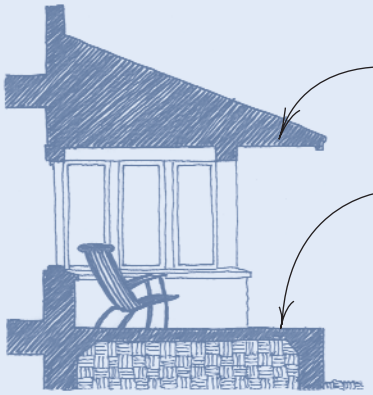


pression. But in the case of a window seat, it's a space you can nestle into. If the ceiling were not lowered, there would be much less of a sense that the window seat is its own place, and as a result, it would be less inviting.

I often use the same technique over countertops, vanities, dressers and art niches. Here, I make the soffit depth equal to that of the cabinetry below (photos right, p. 69). Each of these areas has its own distinct function and character, which the lowered ceilings help to accentuate. A dropped soffit is also a great place to locate lighting; when combined with flanking sidewalls, the whole alcove lights up and lends personality to adjacent spaces (photos right, p. 69).

## PROJECTING PLANES BRING IN THE OUTDOORS

Outdoor rooms are almost as important as indoor rooms, as reflected in the rooflines. They're simple to create by extending the ceiling and floor outside the walls.



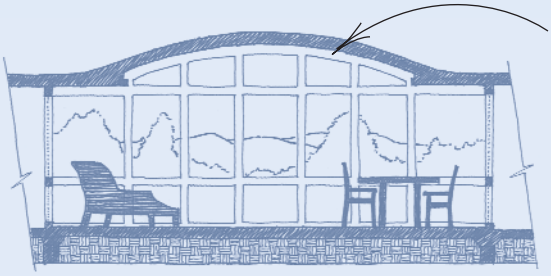

**Two levels of protection in an outdoor room**

A deep, open seating area (top photo, facing page) provides a dry place to enjoy a rainstorm. The screened porch in the background (bottom photo) offers a higher level of protection.



**Multiple ceiling planes bring order to outdoor rooms**

The flat planes create cozy, sheltered alcoves for dining and sitting.




In kitchens, I frequently drop a soffit along the perimeter where most of the work area is located (photo top right, p. 67). The soffit gives the workspace a sense of shelter, rather the way the brim of a hat protects its wearer. Task lighting in the soffit creates a pleasant place to work. Although it sounds strange to mention shelter and protection when speaking of functional areas like a kitchen, working in a space that is tailored this way is vastly superior to one with no ceiling-height distinction. The lowered soffit gives visual cues that this room is designed to make work go smoothly, not just a bunch of cabinets lining the walls.

### Ceilings don't stop at outside walls

The Labenskis requested wide eaves, not only to protect windows and siding from the elements but also to allow them to sit outside. So I developed a series of outdoor spaces that are as defined by their ceilings as the inner alcoves are. The screened porch is the most heavily used of these spaces: an outdoor room, open on three sides, with a barrel-vaulted ceiling directing the eye to the mountain view beyond (bottom photo, facing page). Flanking the barrel vault on each side is a section of flat ceiling. These flat planes give a sense of shelter for the dining area and the sitting area, again delineating separate identities within a larger space.

From a distance, the main level appears to sit atop a stone platform or plinth (photo left). Extending this plinth beyond the home's exterior walls creates a series of wide terraces along the downhill side, all sheltered by the eaves above (top photo, facing page). The eaves give a strong sense of shelter to these terraces. You feel as if you are still inside the boundaries of the house, even though you're sitting outside. The Labenskis have told me that these terraces are wonderful places to sit during a rainstorm. They don't get wet, but they can see the rain approach and participate in Mother Nature's show once it arrives.

In an open floor plan like this, ceiling-height variations are critical. Without them, the space would be amorphous and the activity areas undifferentiated. An open plan sounds good in concept, but it can be disappointing to live in if activity areas have no sense of boundary and definition. □

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Sarah Susanka, author of *Not So Big Solutions for Your Home* (The Taunton Press, 2002), is a contributing editor to *Fine Homebuilding*. Photos by Charles Bickford, except where noted.