

[OUTSIDE IN]

Things Are Looking Up

How ceilings shape behavior **By Lauren F. Friedman**

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NLESS we're visiting a cathedral or a cave, we rarely have occasion to notice the space overhead. But the height of a ceiling can affect the way we think, feel, and interact with those around us.

A study from the University of Minnesota reported that people in 8-foot-high rooms feel more confined, while those in 10-foot rooms feel freer. "Even though you're not using the vertical height, it activates a sense of freedom," says study author Joan Meyers-Levy.

Low ceilings can trigger feelings of confinement, making places like basement apartments seem all the more crowded and unbearable. In fact, the lower the height of a ceiling, the more personal space we need from others, notes a study in *The Journal of Psychology*.

But while a packed party in a soaring ballroom might help guests feel more comfortable, lofty spaces can also feel overly formal. Low ceilings create intimacy, especially in spots (say, a canopied bed) where letting someone into your personal bubble is exactly the point.

"This is one reason living rooms in McMansions—which typically feature soaring ceilings—are not much of a



Ceiling height affects more than feelings—it can shift our thought processes as well, Meyers-Levy found. Subjects in lower rooms tended toward more detail-oriented processing: They noticed a table's rough-hewn underside, for example, even though the top surface was smooth and polished. Their counterparts in the rooms with 10-foot ceilings more frequently overlooked such details.

The ideal height for a space depends on what needs to happen beneath the ceiling. Operating rooms, for instance, might benefit from lower cover, so that doctors are primed to focus on the task at hand, Meyers-Levy suggests. "But if it's to your

benefit to think more broadly, more creatively, then a high ceiling is best." In other words, if the goal is a cure for cancer, not a neat row of stitches, then by all means, raise the roof.

social hot spot," says Sally Augustin, an environmental psychologist and a *PT* blogger. "The scale of the room is very different from what we associate with family interaction."

Head space

Scoping out a new home? Here are some factors to keep in mind.

VARIETY: Multiroom homes with a consistent ceiling height throughout never feel comfy—people want to wander under different heights for different social situations. If your home is flat, adding hanging storage and lofted areas will help.

NOOKS: Why do window seats and alcoves feel so cozy? Geographer Jay Appleton theorizes that people love protected spaces with sweeping views because they mimic ideal lookout spots for our prehistoric ancestors on the savanna. "It's like being in a tree or a cave," Augustin says.

COLOR: Before you knock out a ceiling to adjust its height, consider a paint job: We perceive light-colored ceilings as higher, studies show.