

REAL ESTATE

Ceilings Come Down to Earth

**Drafty, Noisy, Hard to Clean,
Two-Story Rooms Are Waning;
How to Fill In the Air Space**

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It's said that hemlines fall with the economy. Ceilings may be following suit.

The cathedral-ceilinged "great room" -- a defining feature of big suburban houses for the past 15 years -- is losing favor. Owners say these double-height rooms are expensive to heat and cool. They can be drafty and reverberate noise. Cobwebs are hard to reach; painting requires long ladders and washing the second-story windows can be a nightmare. Moreover, growing numbers of home buyers think these soaring rooms waste space.



Alamy

More home buyers are opting to add second-floor rooms in place of a double-height ceiling, builders say.

across the country, says she's getting more requests for renovations that put rooms where high ceilings used to be.

Major home builders including Pulte Homes, Toll Brothers and K. Hovnanian say more buyers are looking for the maximum number of rooms and square footage for their money, so they're opting to have a loft, bedroom or playroom built in the air space where the plans call for a double-height ceiling. "People don't want it anymore," says Ken Gancarczyk, head of builder services for KB Home. The big Los Angeles-based builder has stopped offering double-height great rooms in response to falling demand.

Meantime, some people who already own such a room are seeking new uses for the air space. "The tide has turned," says Lisa Stacholy, an architect in Dunwoody, Ga., who, like other architects

The housing crunch and mortgage mess mean more people can't afford to trade up to a bigger house. Filling in the space below the ceiling costs about half of what it would to add an addition because the walls and roof are already there, says **Michael Mills, of Michael Mills Construction Inc.**, which builds homes in the Santa Cruz, Calif., area. All a contractor typically needs to add are joists, flooring and doors, he says.

U.S. Census data seem to affirm the trend. Expenditures on interior restructuring of homes rose about 40% to \$13 billion from 2005 to 2007, according to the census. But spending on new-room additions fell 57% to \$4.8 billion over the same period. Andy Hait, a survey statistician with the Census Bureau, says these figures indicate that homeowners are spending more to reconfigure existing space, such as by building a loft, and much less to expand a house's footprint.



Pulte Homes

For decades, cathedral ceilings have been an attempt at grandeur. They started gaining momentum among suburban homes in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a way to show off wealth in a growing economy, builders say. The most common variety involved ranch houses with a vaulted room near the entryway (à la the house on "The Brady Bunch"). When the housing market soured in the early 1990s there was a brief blip toward smaller homes. But as the economy recovered and building once again boomed, tract homes moved toward more traditional, two-story models including faux Tudors and chateaux, and double-height ceilings became common in great rooms -- the new term for family rooms. As housing lots shrunk, having a taller (or "Big Hair") home with an airy, light interior helped give the impression of more space.

Then came high-ceiling fatigue. Toll Brothers started to see interest wane in the Carolinas, where people tend not to have basements and wanted an extra room, says the company's director of design, Lee Golanoski. The trend to fill in the ceiling area spread to the Northeast, where heating and cooling such high spaces cost more and rising land prices made additions prohibitive.

A PASSING ERA?

Major home builders say fewer buyers are opting for rooms with two-story ceilings. A look at their downsides -- and substitutes.



Echo Chamber

Double-ceiling rooms can be drafty and hard to heat. Others say they reverberate noise, a problem when kids are sleeping.

Gaining Space

Replacing a double-height ceiling with rooms can add about 300 to 400 square feet, says Pulte Homes.

Clever Uses

Many people put a bedroom where the high ceiling was. But Atlanta-area architect Lisa Stacholy says a laundry room, exercise room or homework room can be better uses for some families.

In Washington, D.C., Maryland and Virginia, K. Hovnanian still uses two-story ceilings in model homes because they're great to lure prospective buyers. "People come in and say, 'Wow, look at this,'" says Dee Minich, senior vice president for sales and marketing. But when it comes time to buy, the proportion of people choosing to put a room above the great room in place of the cathedral ceiling is now around 20%, compared with fewer than 5% two years ago. Ms. Minich says the shift is primarily due to a growing awareness about the need to save energy.

The most dramatic shift toward filling in the space is happening with families with young children, says Sean Degen, national vice president for architectural services at Pulte. The builder has seen a 70% jump in demand for such options among that demographic group over the past two years.

When Mindy Wieggers was looking at 5,600-square-foot houses in Ashburn, Va., to move into

	Additions		Alterations		Maintenance/Repairs			
	2005	2007	2005	2007	2005	2007		
Decks and Porches	\$2.9	\$4.3	Kitchen remodeling	\$12	\$15	Painting and papering	\$11	\$13
Attached garages	1.6	.86	Bathroom remodeling	5.6	9.0	Roofing	2.5	1.7
Rooms	11.0	4.8	Interior restructuring	9.3	13.2	Flooring	.84	1.2

next month, she was all set to choose a model with a cathedral ceiling. But one night the 38-year-old defense analyst and her husband went to a party where the other couples were talking about how noisy and difficult to clean such high ceilings could be. "They were all saying, 'If only we'd known,'" says Mrs. Wieggers.

When a friend told her she could go on the Toll Brothers Web site and design her own house, she noticed the company offered models that filled in the space with a bedroom. With such a large home, having five bedrooms makes more sense instead of four, she says, and everyone in the family, including her 3- and 7-year-old kids, can have their own space. (They plan to use the extra bedroom as a playroom.)

It was the noise that also turned off Gina Schodrowski to the cathedral ceiling in her old home in Haymarket, Va. When their kids went to bed, she and her husband would have to tiptoe around the great room and whisper because the high ceiling magnified sounds. "We couldn't entertain at night," says Mrs. Schodrowski, 44, a stay-at-home mom. It was also hard to watch TV without waking the children. So when the Schodrowskis moved to Dulles, Va., earlier this year, they opted for a playroom in lieu of the high ceiling. Because the cathedral ceiling in their new house would have been 21 feet high, they still were able to get 11- and 10-foot ceilings in the two rooms.

John Fahey steered clear of repeating the high-ceiling mistake when he moved to Charlotte, N.C., from Nashua, N.H., in March. In his old house, the 39-year-old engineer thought the double-story room felt too open to hang out in; he wanted a more intimate space to "veg and kick back." He adds, "I didn't want to be in bed but I also didn't want to be in a ballroom." While Mr. Fahey was house-hunting in Charlotte, the majority of the new homes he saw had cathedral ceilings, but "it just seemed like a lot of wasted space." So when Pulte offered the option of

filling the ceiling with a room, he jumped at it. Now he has what he calls his "man room" -- a space with leather sofas and a flat-screen TV where he goes when his mother-in-law and wife are watching "Dancing With the Stars" downstairs.

But for some people, the tight economy means just having to live with ceilings they hate. Elizabeth Lauzon, a 41-year-old free-lance writer in Syracuse, N.Y., says if she could have designed her house she would never have installed cathedral ceilings. "All that wasted space to heat wrecks havoc on the heating bill and I don't care how well insulated the house is," she says. In winter, Ms. Lauzon says she rarely walks into her great room because it is so cold. She has to get on a tall ladder to clean the skylights. And the last time she painted the room? "It was a miserable experience," she says.