

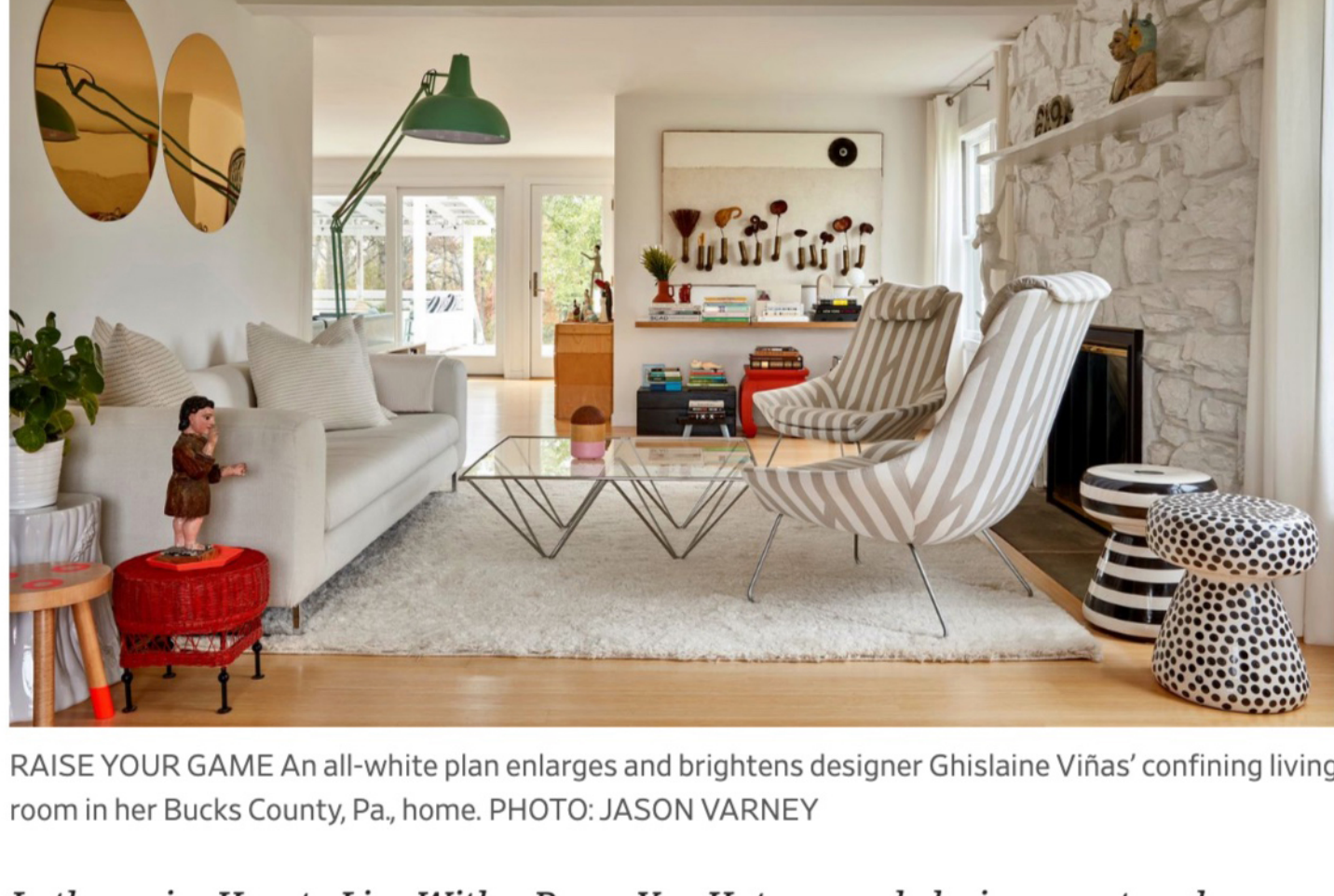
STYLE | DESIGN

Low Ceilings Got You Down? Steal These Height-Boosting Tricks From Design Pros

A room that’s oppressive overhead can sink even the most stylish design schemes—which is why pros rely on eye-tricking workarounds. Here, five to try.

By *Antonia van der Meer*
Nov. 1, 2023 6:00 pm ET

Gift unlocked article Listen (5 min)



RAISE YOUR GAME An all-white plan enlarges and brightens designer Ghislaine Viñas’ confining living room in her Bucks County, Pa., home. PHOTO: JASON VARNEY

In the series How to Live With a Room You Hate, we ask design pros to solve everyday interior problems.

THOUGH THEY CAN MAKE a nap-inducing [bunk room](#) or cottagecore Hobbit house feel more snug, low ceilings tend to be a real design downer otherwise. “They feel quite oppressive and limiting,” bemoaned Nicole Salvesen of the London firm Salvesen Graham. Not to mention a surefire way to thwart that coveted “light and airy look,” added New York City designer Ghislaine Viñas.

To simulate height and combat gloom, interior pros like these rely on a host of tricks. Here, five directions for the stature-challenged to go in—all of which point up.

1. Write a Never-Ending Color Story

In most rooms, the line between walls and ceiling is stark. But swath those planes in the same hue and the differentiation becomes less apparent, a sleight of hand that designers say helps fool the eye into following the lines of such surfaces up, up, up. Indeed, it’s a strategy Viñas exploited in the living room of her own Bucks County, Pa., farmhouse, where low-slung 7-foot 5-inch ceilings threatened to cramp the space. Drenching the walls, ceilings, shag rug, sofa, drapes—even a massive stone fireplace—in an all-white palette causes edges to disappear, masking the room’s modest height, she explained. “Now I can breathe in here.”

2. Aim for the Top

A classic trick to fake loftiness: Hang window draperies from the ceiling rather than the top of windows. But lifting other details can also give you a leg up on a low ceiling. Try placing accents like framed artwork a bit higher, says Salvesen; the extra wall below them creates an illusion. When designing a Mayfair, London, bedroom with little headroom, she used a high eye-catching headboard and hung the canopy of a half tester bed directly from the ceiling—which tricks the eye into thinking the wall continues past where it actually does. “Going as high as possible really lengthens the space,” she explained. Trailing fabric side panels also accentuate the canopy’s height, while a trim valence around the top helps keep everything in proportion.



In a London bedroom designed by Salvesen Graham, a ceiling-mounted half-tester canopy visually extends a low-slung space. PHOTO: CHRISTOPHER HORWOOD/SALVESEN GRAHAM

3. Get the Low Down

On the flip side, other designers argue that you can offset claustrophobic ceilings with furniture that hugs the floor. “Arranging things so that there’s more weight at the bottom is a really good trick,” said Viñas. Her basic rule of thumb: Divide the height of a room into thirds in your mind, then place furnishings in the lower section, leaving the upper two-thirds free and clear. Designer Gemma McCloskey of Cúpla Studio followed that playbook when outfitting her own diminutive London sitting room with a long, low-backed sofa topped by a cadre of loose cushions. “I wanted something that felt more horizontal than high,” she explained. Opting for a tailored couch without a skirt and floating side table also exposes more of the floor—another canny move that “gives you a greater feeling of space,” McCloskey said. Tucked alongside, a tall prickly pear plant stretches skyward, breaking the negative space and eliminating the potential monotony of having everything on one plane.

4. Take a Grand Stand

Design elements that add a bit of grandeur—from architectural details like crown molding to large-scale light fixtures—can instantly lend a short room a sense of greater scale and stature, says Salvesen. In her farmhouse living room, for instance, Viñas creates contrast against the all-white backdrop by juxtaposing bold accessories like an oversize green anglepoise-style floor lamp and a poppy red wicker side table.

Interest can also come from above. Just because a low ceiling cannot handle a heavy-hanging chandelier, your lighting choices needn’t be modest. Instead, try statement ceiling-mounted pieces like a six-armed bronze fixture that McCloskey uses to anchor her cozy living room. It stretches sculpturally across the ceiling rather than dangling down, and “diverts attention from the height of the room because you’re looking at the width instead,” she said. “Distraction is key.”



A dramatic light fixture in designer Gemma McCloskey’s London living room stretches sculpturally across the ceiling instead of down. PHOTO: MEGAN TAYLOR

5. Earn Your Stripes

Cavelike dwelling still got you down? Finding playful ways to incorporate repeating vertical lines throughout your space can strategically amplify height, Salvesen said, whether that means simple ribbed headboard wainscoting, graphic striped wallpaper or dramatically pleated draperies. Bold stripes reliably elongate; see how the cream-and-beige fabric upholstered across the curves of the lounge chairs fronting Viñas’s farmhouse fireplace seems to stretch the space vertically. But you don’t need to rely on such aggressive stripes. To emphasize verticality, and “raise” the ceiling of a dinky London bedroom, McCloskey made a feature of the delicate linear cords of pendant lights that hang extra-low, poised over a pair of squat night tables. Like many of her compatriots’ methods, the logic here is wonderfully simple: It’s all part of “drawing the eye,” she explained.