OPTICAL ILLUSIONS: MAXIMISING SPACE AND LIGHT

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Sometimes the rooms in our homes aren't quite everything we want them to be, and very often it's about light and space. Most of us would love some of our rooms to be a little bigger and a little brighter. Well, you could push the walls out, and you could replace the windows with larger ones – but it would be jolly messy and would lighten your wallet quite considerably, so let's assume you have to work with what you've got! The good news is: the mind can be tricked! It's a funny creature, so armed with only paint, wallpaper, accessories and a rug or two (or not), a lot can be done to make the most of the space you have. First: walls.

The human eye naturally scans vertically before horizontally, so the height of a room can be a major influence on our perception of its size. Anything that interrupts the flow of form or colour, will 'trip' our eye and temporarily halt its smooth progression – so dado and picture rails, borders and horizontal lines will always make the ceiling appear lower. When ceilings are at the 3? -metre mark or above, horizontal lines can help create super features. But when you have a ceiling that's below 3 metres, as is standard in most post-war homes, horizontal lines won't do you many favours.

So how can you make the most of the height of your room? Well, you could rip off the dado or the picture rail but a less drastic solution, which works very effectively, is simply to paint the rail in the same colour as the wall so that it melts into the background. And, if you do have a dado, then vertically striped wallpaper below will make the area seem 'taller' than it is. You can then paint the dado itself and the rest of the wall above in a soft, pale shade. You don't have to stick with neutrals, but just go for a slight hint of your chosen colour. The eye will now happily travel upward, with a kick-start at the bottom and an unbroken sweep to the ceiling. And if you hang mirrors and pictures vertically, they will add to the impression of height.

While on the subject of mirrors: I'm always amazed at the number of homes that don't have them! As far as I'm concerned, you can't have too many mirrors: they reflect light and give the illusion of depth. Walk around your home and really try to notice which areas feel dark or closed-in. Now hold up a mirror there and see the difference. It's so simple and yet so many people shy away from mirrors, when really, they are the saviours of the pokey corner, the dark hallway and the narrow room. They are the crown prince of optical illusions.

Now: colour. The darker you go, the less white content there is in the paint, and the less light is reflected, which tends to make the room appear smaller. So in sitting rooms, kitchens and bedrooms, where we generally want a spacious feel, a pale colour is best. In rooms where we often look for a more intimate atmosphere – such as dining rooms, snugs and studies – people often use deeper colours, like reds and greens. Do remember that there may need to be a trade-off between atmosphere and space, and in smaller dining rooms I would always recommend sticking with a light colour on the walls.

The skirting and coving define the boundaries of the room, where the walls, floor and ceiling finish, and you want them to be as unobtrusive as possible so that the old eyes' travels don't come to an abrupt halt. One of the most 'interesting' flats I have seen, colour-wise, had a sitting room with cornflower blue walls and navy paintwork, and a bedroom that was lime green with raspberry skirting, doorframe and coving. I felt as though I was inside a kaleidoscope that had been chucked down a well. In my book, your internal paintwork should always be painted in either white or off-white; and eggshell blends much better with the rest of your paintwork than gloss, as well as being very much the current finish of choice.

As a general rule, ceilings should always be white and smooth. Again, you want to feel that there is as much space above your head as possible, so try to make your ceiling invisible. Texture will cast shadows and create a pattern, which will jar the eye and make the ceiling a 'feature' – and at under 3 metres, trust me, you don't want a feature.

The floor works in a similar way to the walls: you want to make it feel as big an area as possible, so eliminate barriers to the eye, such as rugs and runners. Now, I should point out that a hero of mine, Laurence Llewellyn-Bowen, has been known to take a contrary standpoint. He makes the case that if you have a rug in the middle of a smaller room, you concentrate on the rug and then your peripheral vision is free to travel beyond it, into the neutral territory of the plain carpet and skirting, giving the illusion that the room is larger than it is. I'm daring to rebel! I absolutely believe that one continuous finish / colour / texture allows the eye to travel quickly over the entire floor area, whereas a rug will make you focus on just that area immediately, and give the initial impression that the floor space is smaller than it is. If you want to make your room feel as big as possible, stick to one type of floor-covering, wall to wall.

If you have a bay window, make the most of the size of the room by incorporating the bay into the living area. Often, people see a bay as a feature to be looked at and they waste the space, so make sure you are using all of the room. A window seat, or popping a chair and table in the bay will ensure that you take full advantage of the usable area.

That being said, making the most of the space doesn't mean you have to push all the furniture to the furthest extremities of a room. Leaving a small gap between a chair or table and the wall will allow the eye to travel beyond the piece itself and give the illusion of there being extra space. And always position a lamp, plant or some focal feature at the furthest point from the door, in order to immediately draw the eye to the depth of the room.

And lastly: make sure you don't overcrowd a room. A large sofa in a small room will immediately suggest that it's not big enough, and too many pieces of furniture will do the same. If you do have a very small room, perhaps in a Victorian cottage, then ensure surfaces are clear and go for simple accessories: not too many cushions on the sofa, the minimum amount of stuff on table tops, and window sills empty and clean.

So there you have it: vertical lines, soft colours, eggshell, mirrors and lose the rugs. It's not tricky – you just have to try to look at your home from an objective point of view, and don't be afraid to try different things. Take a day and devote it to your home's image. Move the furniture around; experiment with mirrors; really look at whether you're maximising light and space. You'll be amazed at what a difference you can make for very little (if any) outlay.

And really, lose those rugs.