



ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF  
AN ENGLISH HOME

# ELEVATING FEATURES

In an ongoing series exploring the idea that a finely tuned symphony of form and function provides a truly inviting place to live, we explore how to make the most of a home's unique characteristics

FEATURE EMMA J PAGE

**THIS PAGE** To emphasise ceiling height and architectural features, interior designer Laura Stephens has used a darker paint tone above the picture rail, drawing the eye upwards. An oversized circular mirror lends the fireplace a contemporary twist.

**OPPOSITE** In this Arts and Crafts house, Charlton Brown Architecture & Interiors has concealed an unsightly RSJ by way of a soft arch that gently frames the view of the entrance hall and the room beyond.



New or old, our homes tend to be marked out by some distinguishing features, whether period detailing, from cornicing to eye-catching entrance hall, or contemporary shaping, such as the form of a graphic glass extension or the outline of a simple archway. As Sir Terence Conran suggested in his invaluable *The Essential House Book*, first published in the mid-1990s, “Intrinsic, evocative features such as mouldings, cornices, dados, picture rails, fireplaces and architraves define, embellish and articulate the plain surfaces of the interior.” A feature is what lends a home character, and a feature elevated or thoughtfully integrated can allow a scheme to sing.

### TIME TO SHINE

Sometimes it can be difficult to take a step back and view a room objectively, but every house is unique in some way. “Even a ubiquitous terraced row will contain homes with individual histories,” says Violet & George’s Nicky Mudie. “Try to bring that uniqueness to life by accentuating features

such as stained glass, cornicing, beading, panelling, materials and hardware, whether you paint them in a contrasting colour or restore them to their original glory. These small upgrades make a huge impact.”

At the turn of the 21st century, original features were frequently stripped out in period homes in favour of a minimalist look. These days, there is a welcome return to ornamentation. “If you are starting afresh, be careful to select mouldings and architectural details that are appropriate to the age and style of the house,” counsels Own London’s Sabah Ashiq. “These fine points should enhance rather than detract from the home’s original charm and character. In rooms with tall ceilings, we always incorporate architectural detailing to balance out the proportions. We also like reinstating decorative ceiling roses paired with minimal lighting, as well as dado rails and cornices. They bring out a sense of grandeur which can either be carried through in furniture, or contrasted with radical modernism. Either works beautifully.”

Coving is typically used to soften the junction between walls and ceilings, which can make a space feel more refined and intimate. Cornicing, ▶

ABOVE LEFT An elegant trailing leaf border, Mariana in Blue/Green by Birdie Fortescue for Dado Atelier, creates an uplifting frame around a generous doorway. Its tones are picked up in the scheme beyond.

ABOVE RIGHT Cornicing in Paint & Paper Library’s Very Well Red adds an elevating pop of colour in this sitting room designed by Studio Vero. It also complements the tones of the armchair and the vibrant Alejandro Ospina painting below.

In the bedroom of interior designer Tiffany Duggan, the lines of the unadorned four-poster bed echo those of the ceiling coving in a contemporary take on classic British style.

*'Intrinsic, evocative features, such as mouldings, cornices, dados, picture rails, fireplaces and architraves, define, embellish and articulate the plain surfaces of the interior'*

Sir Terence Conran, *The Essential House Book*



In this period renovation by Studio Raymond, alcoves backed in antiqued bronze mirrors lend a sense of symmetry either side of the fireplace while adding understated grandeur. Joinery in soft, earthy pink with grasscloth cabinet inserts adds texture.

on the other hand, can add opulence to a room by accentuating the top edges of walls or windows. Enhance them by using an unexpected approach. "In a recent project which had particularly lovely original cornicing, we painted a contrast stripe just below it, rather than picking out its detail in a different colour," says interior designer Kate Guinness. "This drew the eye upwards. I also find that taking the wall colour up on to the cornice enhances the feeling of height."

Existing panelling, sloping door architraves, and original joinery all tell a story. "Perfection is in the imperfections, and these sorts of quirky features make me think about the home's first architect and why they designed in that way," reflects interior designer Octavia Dickinson. "I particularly enjoy a sloping ceiling and feel it ought to be embraced."

Of course, there are some features that are tougher to celebrate – and often they involve poorly designed replacement window frames or low ceilings, frequently found in post-war or modern builds. "Carefully positioned window treatments can disguise less appealing structural elements above or around windows," suggests interior designer Louise Robinson. "Where less favourable elements can't be hidden, I try to work with them – such as building a bespoke bench into a recess to create a cosy nook, or by using the natural break in the wall to frame either a single piece of artwork or a larger, salon-style wall hang, so that the result is integrated and intentional."

### ASSIMILATE & ELEVATE

Making a feature of quotidian elements can help to create an impactful look. Painting the underside of an archway in an unexpected colour is instantly elevating; likewise creating a border around a doorway – either painted, or in a modern, graphic repeat paper. Where the underside of a solid staircase is visible, papering it in a bold pattern that pulls through a scheme's existing colourways, results in a cohesive look with creative appeal. Alternatively, consider incorporating stair glazing, which is also an excellent way of introducing natural daylight into an area which would otherwise be left in the dark. "It's often only thought of in contemporary homes, but it's also a good option for Victorian terraces, where one needs to be quite inventive when it comes to channelling light," says interior designer Alice Leigh. "We recently glazed a staircase leading to the basement, adding panelling on the opposite wall – it created a nice tension between classic and modern."

Evaluate your home's interior architecture, looking for ways to enhance. "Look at sight lines through doors and windows," counsel's Oakley Moore's Kate Aslangul. "For a room to have depth and personality, it needs layers so that the eye is drawn from one thoughtful detail to another. A glass-roofed ▶

### DESIGN INSIGHT



ABOVE Designed by Sibyl Colefax & John Fowler's Lucy Hammond Giles, this sitting room has fabric-wrapped double doors in the brand's Seaweed linen, topped with an expressive squiggle pattern using upholstery nails, elevate an otherwise pared-back space. LEFT In this simple scheme, interior designer Kate Guinness has painted a contrasting stripe detail – Chocolate by Edward Bulmer Natural Paint – just below the cornicing to subtly draw the eye upwards.



side extension is an oft-overlooked opportunity to do something enhancing. Recently, inspired by the abstract compositions of visual artist Etel Adnan, we designed a mural on an extension wall depicting an imaginary landscape painted in a colourful Provençal palette. It links the sitting room to the kitchen-dining area and amplifies flow, too.”

Strategic use of colour or materiality plays a vital role in directing the eye, either drawing attention to key features or softening the impact of less desirable ones. “We recently used rough, curved plaster to cover an unsightly brick fireplace, lending a Moorish feel to the scheme,” says Nicky Mudie. “It completely transformed the space from drab to elegant.”

Handling RSJs and pillars is an age-old problem, but these elements can become a welcome part of the home. “We recently worked with a wall artist to transform an awkward steel joist into a design statement by painting it with a one-off pattern,” says Hutley & Humm’s Melissa Hutley. “Bespoke joinery also allows us to disguise functional elements, like boxed-in pipework, while adding a polished, harmonious feel to a room.”

For the steel beam so often found in kitchen extensions, another option is to assimilate it into functional design. “For example, you could build shelving around the beam or incorporate it into a kitchen island design,” says Studio Raff’s Sophia Ayrton-Grime. “Painting or wrapping pillars in a bold or tactile fabric can also transform them into intentional focal points, adding individuality.”

For renovations that are still at the build stage, RSJs can be cleverly integrated. “These can be easily concealed without ending up in an ugly box,” advises Charlton Brown Architecture’s Siwan Ifan. “Our approach is usually to create a small downstand and nibs on the side. The large, framed opening created can then be lined with an architrave or could even be arched. Features like this can form a small separation between spaces, often offering more opportunity for interest, furniture placement and efficient zoning.”

**CLEVER WAYS**

While unsightly features can either be painted into the background or contemporised (designer Portia Fox recommends painting unappealing window frames in a dark, rich tone such as charcoal, deep blue or even matt black to add sophistication and contrast), there is also plenty of opportunity to playfully embellish, creating features where once there were none. ▶

ABOVE LEFT Architectural details have been elevated in art director Laura Sawyer’s cloakroom, with a basin topped with deeply veined marble and walls in Mylands’ Rose Theatre.

LEFT Originally decorated by the late Robert Kime, and revisited by Orlando Atty, this country house features soft greens and russets to complement the original beams.



In order to draw the eye through to the garden beyond, interior designer Louise Robinson has chosen Little Greene’s Invisible Green for the internal details of the window frames.



*'Accentuate features such as cornicing, beading and panelling. Paint them in a contrasting colour or restore them to their original glory. These small upgrades make a huge impact'* Nicky Mudie, founder and director, Violet & George

Sometimes, the most naïve of touches are the most effective. "In Italy, you will often see farmhouses and villas with a painted cornice rather than a plaster one," says designer Emma Sims-Hilditch. "It's a great way to create the definition of a moulding but with a simpler feel. Pick out a few colours that are complementary to your scheme or employ a specialist decorator to create a *trompe l'œil* effect for something more dramatic."

Of course, the most often overlooked potential feature is the ceiling. "Yet it can be a game-changer when treated as the 'fifth wall'," says Studio Raymond's Carina Raymond. "I like to introduce ceiling panelling to create rhythm in long corridors or to define zones in large open-plan spaces, breaking up monotonous expanses. For a playful twist, I use contemporary mouldings, such as strip ropes or bobbins, which I paint in contrasting colours to add a pop of visual interest. These details work beautifully in bedrooms, studies or loft spaces."

Other approaches are to fabric wrap double entry doors for statement-making appeal, create a fabric

tented ceiling in featureless rooms – a trick that works especially well in dining rooms and children's bedrooms – or introduce joinery that echoes the shape of a sloping eaves space, which can be especially impactful if it incorporates glass-fronted, fabric-lined doors for depth and texture.

Of course, sometimes the key is to embrace an awkward feature instead of working against it. "At the moment, we are working on a 16th-century manor house which has a lot of original dark beams on both the walls and ceilings," says interior designer Kate Guinness. "They have a lovely patina, so we have selected colourways throughout to work with them. We're also reusing old panelling, choosing fabrics and finishes to enhance it in all its worn glory."

Perhaps the oldest and most well-loved feature of all, the fireplace, remains the perfect fallback. "For me, nothing works as well as a hearth to serve as an enhancing feature," says VSP Interiors' Henriette von Stockhausen. "It instantly adds character and warmth." Which goes to show that our homes offer a wealth of existing potential – just waiting to be unlocked. ■

**ABOVE** Studio Duggan has used a moody colour wash on walls and ceiling, tying in window treatments too for a cocooning, contemporary approach, throwing architectural details into a new light. For an elevating touch, the reveal of the opening is clad in mirror panels.

**OPPOSITE** In this country house, walls have been painted in Fired Earth's A Dip In The Lake while architectural details have been picked out in crisp white. An oversized lampshade adds a playful touch.

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