



## High ceilings spur creative thinking, study finds

Lower rooms encourage people to process in a much more concrete and detailed fashion, a UBC marketing professor says

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Designers and real estate agents have long sung the praises of dramatic cathedral ceilings, but a new study reveals the height of a room can actually change the way people's minds work.

"The general wisdom is that these environmental factors -- whether the room has a window, the ceiling height, the brightness -- should affect the way we think and behave," says Rui (Juliet) Zhu, an assistant marketing professor at the University of British Columbia's Sauder School of Business, who co-authored the paper.

But until now, no one had actually tested how and why such features affect people, she says.

For the study, which will be published in the August issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research*, the researchers used two test rooms, one with an eight-foot ceiling and the other 10 feet high, and suspended colourful Chinese lanterns to emphasize the height. In one experiment, they showed 100 volunteers pictures of a wine rack and a coffee table that were smooth and sleek except for a few awkward features. When they asked the volunteers to describe the "products," those in the low-ceilinged room zeroed in on the imperfections, while the ones in the taller room took a more generalized view and ignored the glitches.

"When a person is in a high-ceiling environment, they are going to process information in a more abstract, creative fashion," Zhu says. "Those inside a room with relatively lower ceilings will process in a much more concrete, detail-oriented fashion."

That's because people in a high-ceilinged room are "primed" to think broadly because of the sense of freedom associated with the space, she says, while the containment of a lower room encourages people to think small and focused.

She and co-author Joan Meyers-Levy at the University of Minnesota proved their hypothesis in a retail context, but the findings could easily be applied to all sorts of spaces in which people live and work, Zhu says.

She suggests hospitals could design post-surgery recovery rooms with tall ceilings so patients will "focus on the bigger picture," rather than momentary pain or anxiety. But bigger isn't always an advantage, she points out, and a surgeon may be better off in a low-ceilinged operating room that encourages focused attention to detail.

The field of "atmospherics" examines the ways in which people's environment affects their thinking and well-being, Zhu says, but until now most research had focused on sensory factors such as smell or background music, not structural aspects.

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