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# design details

## Exposed beams

Could unconventional structural components create a striking focal feature in your home?

**Emily Smith** looks at how to add this detail



CHRIS HUMPHREYS

Exposed beams have the potential to become an attractive design feature and work to draw the eye to a building's heritage or construction method. But don't assume they only work in traditional-looking houses or industrial conversions – bare timbers and steels can look striking in contemporary settings.

If you're renovating a heritage property, you may be lucky enough to already have exposed beams that boast rustic character. In medieval times, timbers supporting the upper storeys were often left bare, aligned along low hanging ceilings. As the centuries went on, this look fell out of fashion and original beams were often concealed behind ornamental plaster ceilings. Once you start ripping back the layers of a period house, you may unearth some lovely timber detailing, but make sure it fits with the style of the rest of the property. Some older beams may have fallen victim to decay or distortion, so consult an expert to see what repair is needed and if they need to be replaced.

Conversion projects often lend themselves to this design detail. Highlighting the structural timber

in barns can look great and work to retain the agricultural character of the building. Industrial spaces, such as workshops, could feature metal beams that boast an en vogue, raw appeal. Loft conversions are another type of project where exposed beams can make a real statement.

The technique also works in new timber frame homes, where unveiling the structural skeleton makes for a dramatic and attractive feature – especially in tall, vaulted ceilings. On standard storeys, especially in oak buildings, beams add character – and could be painted a neutral hue for a modern twist. Single, metal examples can also work wonderfully as an eye-catching focus and look great in extensions to identify the junction between old and new.

Faux beams could offer you the look you want, without needing to work out how to turn structural elements into design features – ask your designer whether this is a suitable option for your scheme.

**Top:** This conversion by Evolution Design retains much of the 19th century chapel's original detailing and character. **Wiring** connected to exposed roof trusses enables a suspended storage area for pots, pans and kitchen utensils



This oak skeleton, supplied by Carpenter Oak, makes an eye-catching centrepiece on the top floor of this new house. The warm, honeyed hue of the wood looks striking within the bright, airy room, which boasts a neutral colour palette.

The soaring, vaulted ceiling of this property is supported by steels, which have been left exposed to create a visual contrast to the white-washed walls and ceiling. Expansive glazing by Velfac pours natural light into the room and highlights the glossy texture of the beams.



The ceiling and adjacent beams have been painted the same grey hue in this new house by Emmett Russell Architects. The scheme brings a design flourish to an open-plan room that features a neutral colour palette.

The team at Tigg + Coll Architects wanted to highlight the separation between old and new in the extension of this Victorian terrace. A steel beam has been placed below the ceiling, exposed and painted luminous red to turn the structural element into an attractive focal feature.



ANDY MATTHEWS PHOTOGRAPHY



JAMES FRENCH

Originally a bungalow, the renovation works on this property saw another floor added. These exposed beams will allow for the first floor to be extended to the edge of the ground floor at a later date, but meanwhile are used to hang copper lights closer to the dining area.

Glulam beams have been installed in this new extension by Duncan Foster Architects as a contemporary reference to the exposed timbers in the original house. They sit above sliding doors, which glide back to reveal a stunning cornerless edge, and below a glazed gable, to give the illusion of a gravity-defying floating span of timber.



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### THE EXPERT VIEW



ARCHITECT DAVID TIGG, ONE OF TIGG + COLL ARCHITECTS' DIRECTORS, SHARES HIS INSIGHT INTO HOW TO ACHIEVE THIS LOOK

#### Q What are the options for turning a beam into a focal feature?

There are multiple ways to create a unique and striking centrepiece out of an exposed beam, and these can create a strong aesthetic in any property if designed well and integrated into the overall scheme. You could over-size a structural element to create a very deep and dominant feature, or semi-conceal it to reveal a refined component, for instance. Steel beams work particularly well in contemporary or industrial-style spaces and alongside other raw materials, such as concrete. The red painted steel example featured at Brackenbury Gardens (left) creates a contrast to the period features of the property and distinguishes the extension as a modern addition to the house.

#### Q What are the key practical considerations?

Always consult with a structural engineer, who will be able to advise if an exposed beam is appropriate or possible for a project. Building Regulations compliance is also key, as there are fire protection measures that need to be undertaken in certain circumstances. Service runs should be properly considered and fully coordinated, and it's also important to be aware of any statutory restrictions on the property – for example if the dwelling is listed or locally protected.

#### Q Where might faux beams be the best option for achieving this look?

These could offer a solution for projects where revealing the actual building fabric is going to be too expensive or complex. However, an exposed structure generally works best where there is an honesty to it as you can get a real understanding of the work it's doing – whether holding up the roof or the building above you.

#### Q Will exposing beams affect any of the internal workings of a property?

While insulation in cold roof makeups would be packed in between the ceiling joists, a warm roof construction would typically be employed if the exposed beam is in a single storey space. The latter is where the thermal insulation layer is located above the structural decking and support structure. The roof build up will always vary from project to project, so it's important to work with specialists – including architects – to get the detail right. You'll need to include a vapour control layer and waterproofing membrane, as well as ensure the relevant Building Regulations (eg for U-values) are met.

#### Q How can I enhance the character and drama of this feature?

Architectural lighting design can always work to boost atmosphere and is a useful tool to use in bringing out the key features of a room – including beamwork. The design, construction and desired effects of the overall space are the most important elements to consider, along with the finish and texture of the structure and the colour of the fitting or light itself.