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Sound Investment

Getting a home audio system right first time can save some serious headaches down the line so it's crucial to listen carefully to your clients and audio experts when creating a future-proof design

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**LISTEN UP**

CCM616 speakers by Bowers & Wilkins built into the ceiling offer a subtle source of sound in this kitchen by Staffan Tollgård Design Group

Today's home-audio systems rely on an increasingly complex combination of servers, routers, cabling and speakers to deliver music from an invisible source through intuitive interfaces to all areas of the house. If your clients fancy listening to some Bach in the bathroom, Kaiser Chiefs in the kitchen and Lulu in the lounge then audio experts recommend plenty of planning and consultation to ensure all the necessary hardware is in place to manage a multiplicity of current and future requirements.

Rufus Greenway, director of Sound Environment, explains that it is never too early to bring in a specialist audio installer. 'As soon as there is a floor plan and an idea of where the rooms are going to be, we can get involved in helping to plan the infrastructure,' he says. Interior designer Staffan Tollgård of Staffan Tollgård Design Group agrees and adds that good communication between the client, designer and an audiovisual specialist is essential when planning a system that will stand the test of time. 'It is important that designers and AV specialists have a meeting early on to determine what equipment is necessary to do what the client needs,' he says. 'Our design practice is quite young and technology driven so we are happy working with audio and have learned to ask the right questions early on.'

The key consideration during the design and planning phase is to ensure that the necessary cabling is provided to every room where audio will be used. 'At the early stages we don't need to specify what all the equipment might be — we can decide on the models and the pricing later — but it's important to know where things will go so the wiring can be installed,' explains David Graham of Grahams Hi-Fi.

A forward-thinking approach will pay dividends because most clients want their audio systems and speakers to be completely integrated into the structure of the building. 'We spend most of our lives hiding stuff,' says Greenway. Slick interiors with built-in speakers operated by remote controls or wall-mounted panels are now standard in premium interiors. However, experts warn that the sound quality from built-in systems is not as good as from traditional speakers and that problems arising from 'sound bleed' between rooms needs to be taken into account. Greenway still encounters music lovers willing to specify quality speakers that they are proud to display. For such clients he recommends speakers by Bowers & Wilkins or Linn, which produce bold designs.

In most newbuilds or contemporary conversions, audio is just one part of a whole-home system incorporating entertainment, lighting, heating and security, all controlled by a central server. Sean Cochrane of Cochrane

**MUSIC TO YOUR EARS**

Top to bottom: Lutron lighting control panels can be upgraded with simple audio functions; Graham's Hi-Fi used an iPad loaded with control software to supplement in-wall touchscreens and wireless touch panels in this home; the stunning Nautilus speakers from Bowers & Wilkins are designed to be on display



UNWIRED FOR SOUND
Left: wireless ZonePlayers from Sonos can bring audio to any room in the home

PAD FOR IT
Below left: the interface of the Sonos system is designed to be simple to use on any device, such as an iPad



Design says clients are now demanding increasingly complex functions as the technology has become far more accessible. 'A few years ago we were doing fully integrated systems that cost £200,000 but recently we did one that only cost £60,000 and included absolutely everything,' he says. 'Our clients expect more now because they can get a better package at a better price and, when it comes to selling the house, you actually make money by putting in an integrated system whereas before you might just get your money back.'

The other key advantage of integrated systems is that they can help to remove clutter in large homes, offering the opportunity to operate multiple functions from a single control panel. Graham says: 'It makes perfect sense to integrate audio and other systems but to back it up we can use whatever hardware we want. It's

completely flexible — there's just a difference in performance.' He regularly installs Lutron lighting control panels in rooms where only simple functions such as track selection and volume control are required.

Multi-room systems that enable different music to be played in individual rooms or throughout the house are popular and there are a range of options available. The award-winning Sonos system offers adaptability and affordability thanks to its wireless ZonePlayers. Cochrane says it works well because it is simple to use, easy to explain and any problems can be resolved with minimal interference to the structure of the rooms. Fiede Schillmoeller from Sonos believes the internet will be at the heart of home audio in the future and the Sonos system, in combination with platforms such as Spotify, is opening up a whole world of music to users.

Audio specialists recommend an initial consultation with the client to determine how they will use audio in each room because this will determine the quality of equipment needed to meet their requirements. 'There's no point specifying £60,000 speakers for use in the bedroom or bathroom,' says Tollgård. 'Here the clients usually want everything to be hidden in the walls or the ceiling.' Greenway adds that every component used in a home-audio system will affect the quality of the sound but most users are unlikely to notice the difference between a good and a really great set up, particularly as most people are now listening to music files streamed from a central server or the

web. 'Music has become something that exists in the background so the sound quality isn't as important as it used to be,' says Tollgård.

Cost and quality still play a significant role in the interface that controls the central server. With so much of the hardware hidden, the controller remains the last tangible feature. The current trend is for application-based interfaces that can be downloaded on to an iPad or smartphone, enabling complete control as users move around the home. 'Things like the iPad have already brought the cost of control systems down dramatically,' explains Graham. 'You can buy a £400 iPad and use that to control your music instead of spending four thousand pounds on a proprietary panel like a Crestron controller.' However, Greenway recommends using a dedicated input device by a company such as RTI or URC that deals solely with the audio system because it offers optimum functionality and can't be used by a child for playing games.

Graham believes that however the client ends up controlling or listening to audio in their home, planning for the future and spending wisely enables you to create an infrastructure that will offer enjoyment and adaptability for years to come. 'We're going back to jobs we did five or 10 years ago and just updating them,' he says. 'We're not changing the speakers, the amplifiers or the control systems, we're just providing access to content that is streamed from the internet. If we put in good hardware, it's really just the source that changes, which is great because it means the kit is not obsolete.' *idf*