DESIGN FOCUS

getting the right sound

This issue, designer Shannon Vos shares his sound advice for controlling the volume levels at home

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Hands up those of you who have to turn the TV up when the kettle boils, or have to shout over any little curtain rustle? Just like a lighting plan, being aware of the way sound moves around a home is often left as an afterthought – and yet it can really make or break how much you enjoy living in a space. So, how do we remove the sound we don't want without it seeming like we live in a muffled recording studio? Here are some tips for creating that alluring, restful home without having to banish the kids to the neighbours' place.

What exactly are acoustics? Essentially, they are the movement of airborne sound around your space. Anything and everything can react with sound, so it's important to consider when you're designing a space, as you want your room to sounds as good as it looks! Have you noticed how, sometimes, when you walk into a room and it feels not-quite-right, or jars in some way? It can often be put down to acoustics.

Are they good or bad? They're neither. We need noise to travel in order to communicate, however, the magic spot is being in control of where that sound ends up. For example, music that gently wafts through the home as opposed to whispers that sound like shouts echoing through the whole place.

Sound can either be reflected, absorbed or scattered and we need to consider this when choosing finishes, furniture and the way our spaces are designed. Knowing what the rooms will be used for is important, too. An expansive open-plan living/dining/kitchen space, for instance, will need to have a well-thought-out plan to prevent too much noise bouncing between the different spaces. A bedroom, however, won't need as much treatment, but think about measures you can put in place to ensure sound doesn't travel between adjoining rooms.

So, how do you get it right when you're designing a floorplan or space? The truth is, the trend towards open-plan living makes things pretty damn hard. The key is considering the path between the zones: avoiding a direct route for the sound to travel is a good start. Keep in mind that distance between doors and windows will also greatly affect the amount of sound transferred into a space. (The bigger the distance, the louder it gets.)

If you want to slow the noise down, use panelled or glass sliders to 'get in the way'. They will absorb sound if made from a soft material, or can reflect sound away from a intimate zone.

And of course, think about external sound. Keep your bedrooms away from noisy roads and common walls, and try to keep your noisy spaces separate to your quiet spaces.

What should we consider when it comes to building materials? There are loads of building techniques and materials on the market. Noise transfers through floors, walls and ceilings, so choosing specialist finishes is imperative. When it comes to walls, remember that sound is best absorbed by multiple substances – whether it be brick, concrete or timber – so go for double cavities. Both CSR (csr.com.au) and Boral (boral.com.au) make sound-rated plasterboard, and if you're after a really quiet room, try double sheeting. Dulux (dulux.com.au) is also working on a special coating called AcoustiCoat that will have sound insulation properties.

Make sure your windows are double or even triple glazed, and that they're sealed from the outside. Your doors may also need seals on the edges to make them more efficient, as doors are a bit of a failure when it comes to these matters. And don't forget your more traditional options such as ceiling insulation and wall batts.

PHOTOGRAPHY: (OPPOSITE) LINCOLN BARBOUR

CEILING These timber battens help cut down on the echo effect of a high ceiling.

LAYOUT Jessica Helgerson Interior Design (jhinteriordesign.com) has created this built-in shelving divider that blocks out ambient noise from the next zone with its generous proportions. The additional accessories lining the shelves also play a part in sound-proofing.

SITTING ZONE The large modular sofa, rug and ottomans will absorb sound, to counter the concrete floor.

And what about flooring? Concrete floors may be sexy as hell but, the truth is, they reflect sound like glass. Timber floors are problematic, too, but slightly better than concrete. Carpet is best, but, if you're sold on concrete or timber, you can try to incorporate different floor levels – it'll make a massive difference in slowing down the sound travel.

Ceilings are often overlooked because they can feel a little intangible, but I think they can have the greatest potential for getting rid of unwanted noise. A simple high ceiling will work well and even a slightly angled, raked ceiling will help suck a bit of noise from the room. Worst case, if you're in real trouble, you can mount acoustic panels either from the ceiling or on the walls. They're specifically designed to absorb unwanted noise and are a great solution to an echo-y space.

Also, consider a timber-battened ceiling. Coupling that with some exposed black sound-proof insulation batts wrapped in black cloth, and you have a magnetic sponge for sound that can be the most effective and the best looking treatment for noise.

What are the best post-build solutions? When it might seem easier just to throw the kettle out and install a Zip instant boiling water tap, it's not the smartest solution. There are loads of other ways to fix the problem. And while a clean minimalist look might be on trend at the moment, it's not great in this instance. Soft furnishings absorb sound, while furniture (hard or soft) will either absorb or deflect, so the more the better. Go nuts on some rugs – layer them. Then think about sofas, pendant lights, lamps, even wall-hangings, wallpaper and artwork – it'll all help. Again, with an open-plan space, you might have to work double time when the kitchen – often the main noise offender – is located next to the living space.

If you need to make changes that are more than just decorative, you can consider retrofitting sound-rated plasterboard on your walls or introducing timber panelling details. They're not hugely expensive options and will really help things. With a few simple ideas and some creative thinking, that tranquil retreat you're after won't be too far out of reach. Shhh, peace out…

WINDOWS Give your double-glazed windows an added level of sound insulation with a curtain, as seen in this space by interior designer Jessica Helgerson (jhinteriordesign.com).

checklist

1. **Choose sound-rated** building materials such as plasterboard, sliding doors and specialist finishes.
2. **Make a good plan** as part of your design process – think about creating zones.
3. **Minimise external noise** with proper building measurements and seals for windows and doors.
4. **Layer furnishings** and tactile materials to absorb sound – look to big-ticket items and wall finishes.
5. **Consider timber batten features and acoustic panels** if you've exhausted all other options.

PHOTOGRAPHY: (OPPOSITE) ANDREW CAMMARANO

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