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REAL ESTATE

Quieting the High-Tech Luxury Home

The sounds from gadgets inside modern smart homes—from Amazon’s Echo to internet-enabled refrigerators—create a state-of-the-art racket. Homeowners are hiring acoustical consultants to damp the din.



Terry Kearney installed sliding glass doors between the kitchen and a living area to reduce noise in his Los Altos Hills, Calif., home. PHOTO: COLIN PRICE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Alina Dizik

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Forget drowning out the neighbors. Homeowners today are battling a different kind of noise: the cacophony of pings and dings coming from all the gadgets inside their homes.

Internet-enabled, voice-activated “smart” devices have infiltrated homes, making it possible for people to adjust their bedroom temperature, turn on their oven or order a pizza merely by speaking the command. But talking and beeping devices, combined with other noise-emitting items like TVs, phones and iPads, have created a high-tech racket.

It’s the opposite of the peaceful retreat many homeowners strive to create. “Homes have suddenly become more ‘live,’” says Steve Haas, an acoustical consultant who works in luxury residences. “It emphasizes the need for better control.”

Homeowners can try a number of ways to reduce noise. Among the less expensive, simpler options: buying sound-absorbing panels for walls or ceilings, or sound-absorbing curtains or rug pads, and installing them yourself. These panels can be found online for as little as \$50. Many window-treatment manufacturers sell noise-reducing shades or curtains for \$50 to \$300.

At the higher end, homeowners can hire an “acoustical consultant,” who will come to your house, evaluate your needs, recommend solutions and help with installation. Such work can cost up to \$20,000 per room and include tactics such as special sound-absorbing ceiling plaster, vinyl noise barriers built into walls or ceilings, or noise-reducing ceiling tiles. Other options include adding extra insulation around mechanicals or purchasing furniture with plusher upholstery.

One of the biggest problem areas: the kitchen. Not only do kitchens have a lot of noisy gadgets, including newfangled sound-emitting ones like wi-fi-enabled refrigerators and ovens, the sleek surfaces on appliances, countertops and tile floors reflect rather than absorb sound. People also often place their virtual assistants, like Amazon’s Alexa or Google Home, in kitchens.



Custom acoustical wall tiles inside a home in Montauk, N.Y. Better acoustics “gives the sense of a cozier environment,” says architect Paul Masi. PHOTO: BATES MASI + ARCHITECTS

“People want voice activation for what they would normally press buttons for,” says Mr. Haas. “It really does add to the noise level throughout the home.”

For clients’ kitchens, he recommends using perforated wood panels to create a decorative ceiling, or acoustical plaster that blends in to ceilings and absorbs sound, costing about \$35 to \$45 a square foot at the higher end. Sound-absorbing panels on walls also help.

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Open-plan living areas can also cause noise problems. The open design plus minimalist-style furniture can increase reverberations, which can muddle sounds and make it more difficult to pick out the noises you want to hear, like speech, says Bonnie Schnitta, founder of SoundSense, an acoustical-

consulting company based in New York. Adding in devices like Amazon Echo and Google Home, plus televisions, iPads and phones, makes the acoustics in those spaces even more challenging. Some living room fixes Ms. Schnitta recommends include using sound-absorbing fabric in curtains, behind wall-hangings, or under rugs.



Mr. Kearney and his wife, Mauri Okamoto-Kearney, wanted to bring sounds from outside in and reduce the noise from appliances inside. PHOTO: COLIN PRICE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Another noise-reducing solution: the good old-fashioned door. Mauri Okamoto-Kearney and Terry Kearney sought to block off noise from television, laptops and iPads in the living room of

their 2,200-square-foot home in Los Altos Hills, Calif. They had sliding doors installed to block off a portion of the living area behind the kitchen.

The all-glass doors have double panes to reduce noise, but can slide all the way open to create a larger cohesive space, depending on what the owners want. “We are specifically trying to avoid the noise and complexity of modern appliances,” says Mr. Kearney. “I don’t want it to be like a car or like my office.”

Stephen Atkinson, the architect who worked on the Kearney home, says when he builds homes from scratch, he generally avoids ceilings higher than 16 feet and rooms that span an entire floor in order to reduce acoustical complaints. Homes that don’t follow those guidelines, he notes, often need acoustical fixes and can be a turnoff to home buyers. “When you walk in, you know right away that you don’t want to live there,” he adds.

Paul Masi, an architect based in East Hampton, N.Y., who works with acoustics consultants, says he groups noisier appliances like mixers, dishwashers and even some refrigeration in the butler’s pantry. In living rooms or great rooms, he places custom wall tiles layered with sound-absorbing fabric near the ceiling.

Reducing the noise from devices is key to a home’s sense of serenity, Mr. Masi says. “When the sound isn’t reverberating or echoing, it gives the sense of a cozier environment.”

Write to Alina Dizik at alina.dizik@wsj.com

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