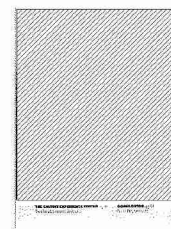
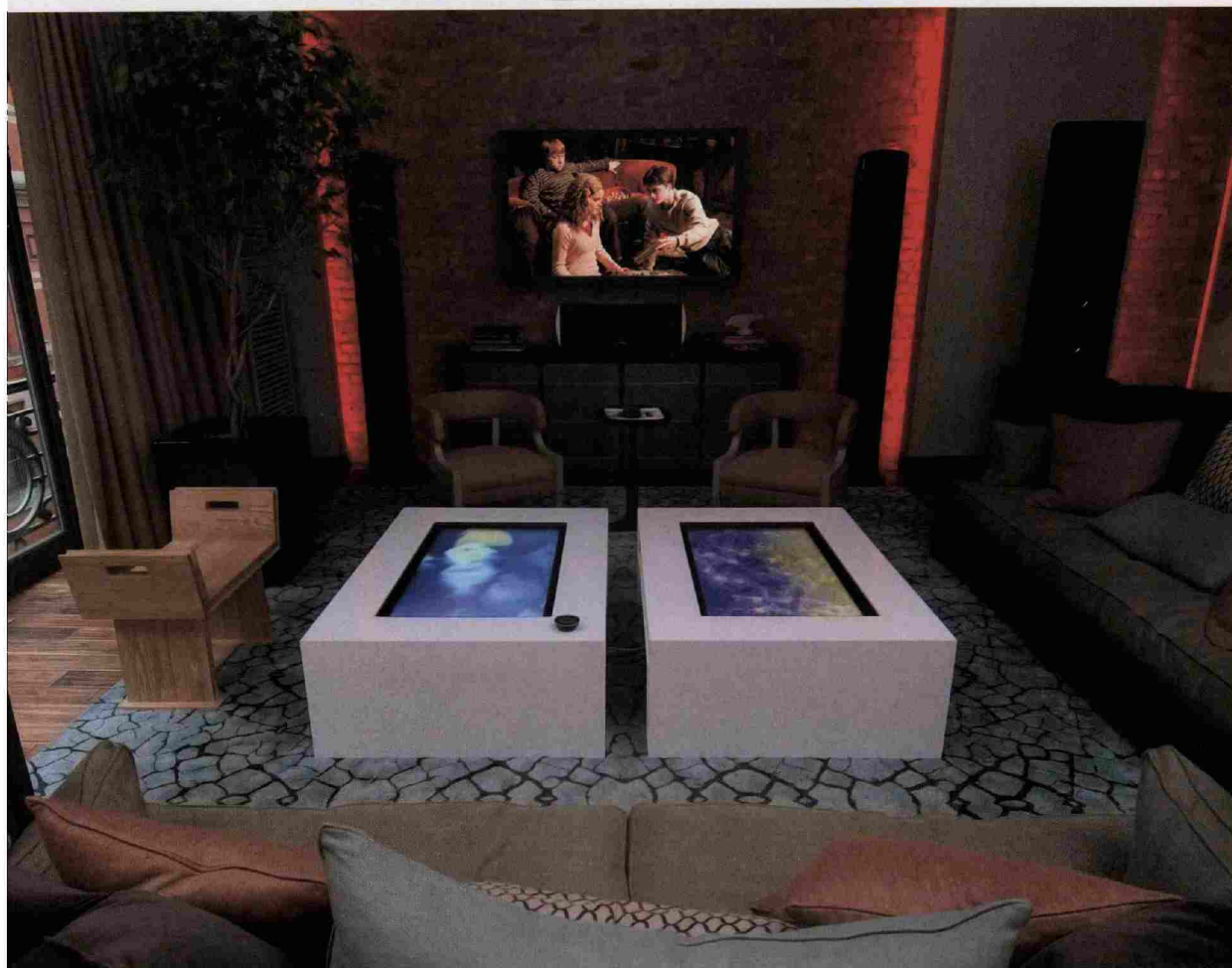


BRINGING THEATER INSPIRATION INTO YOUR HOME

HOME THEATER

DESIGN





Flatwire Speaker Wire

Going Retro

PART II: RUN, WIRES, RUN

BY Darryl Wilkinson

In Part I (*Home Theater* January 2010), Darryl reviewed some of the best current options in wireless audio systems. This month, he shows you how to pull off a seamless install—yourself!

In years past, putting together and installing a multizone audio system meant running lots of wires for the speakers, keypads, and IR repeater system. Things are different today. On the most basic level, a surprising number of relatively affordable AVRs, such as Onkyo's TX-SR507, include powered Zone 2 outputs. All you need to turn that \$399 AVR into a multiroom control center is speaker wire, speakers, and some gumption. A simple speaker selector will expand the system to even more rooms.

Many wired multiroom audio systems are extremely retro-friendly. Aton's four-source/four-zone DH44 digital audio router with DIGI-5 technology (\$799, plus \$199 for the keypad) only requires a single Cat-5 cable run to each amplified keypad plus speaker wire to run directly from the keypad to that zone's speakers. The system is so simple to set up that the quick guide

instructions fit on a 17-by-30-inch poster (with nice large illustrations). Other systems, such as Russound's CA4 four-source/four-zone system (\$1,999), require a Cat-5 cable to each keypad and a separate wire from the CA4's amplifiers to each of the speakers. Video products that can distribute HD using single or dual Cat-5 runs are available from Gefen, Xantech, Aton, and others.

I've tried to convince my wife that Cat-5 and speaker wires draped across the room from nails in the wood trim and running down the hallway are an up-and-coming décor trend, but she doesn't buy it. Here are some ways you can hide your wires until it does become chic to leave them out in the open.

1. Stop, Hammer Time

If all you need to do is get a speaker wire out of the way, perhaps to keep from tripping over it or getting it caught in the vacuum cleaner, one of the most cost-effective ways to do this is to tack the wire to the wall along the baseboards or around the door trim with wire clips—little plastic hooks that hold the wire snug when nailed down. RadioShack and virtually every hardware store in the northern hemisphere carry wire clips of one sort or another. Most clips are designed to hold one or two wires in place. They're often available in white or black and cost pennies per clip. When all else failed and time was short, I used wire clips (a lot of them) to secure a Cat-5 cable that needed to run up a flight of stairs. It was functional, but like other long runs and/or large bundles of wires secured with wire clips, it was unsightly.

As my wife continually reminds me, "Beauty isn't cheap." So instead of run-of-the-mill, low-cost round wire, you can use Acoustic Research's PR360 flat speaker wire or Monster Cable's Superflat Mini speaker wire to pretty

things up. Expect to pay at least 60 cents per foot. However, it's not the easiest stuff to work with when it comes to making right-angle turns at the corners of doors and windows. Acoustic Research calls its PR390 (\$79 for 50 feet) speaker wire "MicroFlat," and at 0.5 mm thick, it is pretty darn flat. It also includes an adhesive backing, so no wire clips are necessary.

2. Hide It in Plain Sight

Baseboards, crown molding, as well as door and window trim were invented to cover gaps and other imperfections in a building's structure. There's no reason why you can't use them to hide a few wires, too. In the older sections of my home, there's plenty of space behind most of the baseboards. It's simply a matter of gently prying the baseboard away from the wall, tucking in the wire, and hammering the baseboard back in place.

In newer homes, you'll need to do a little drywall modification. Carefully pry the baseboards away from the walls. If there's caulk, paint, or wallpaper, you may need to use a utility knife to separate the top of the baseboard from the wall. Once you've removed the baseboards, cut through the drywall and remove a strip along the bottom that's wide enough to contain the number of wires you need to conceal. (Make sure, of course, that the width of the drywall you remove is less than that of the baseboard you'll be covering it with.) A drywall saw works well, but a Dremel tool with a drywall bit is much faster.

At this point, since you already have the bottom of the wall open, you can take the opportunity to run wires through the wall up to an in-wall or on-wall speaker. Consider buying fish tape or a push rod from the hardware store first. If there isn't any attic space—when there's a second floor above the room, for example—this may be the best way to invisibly get wires to an in-wall speaker.

3. Cut a Rug

You can also use carpet to conceal wires. It's helpful to use a special install tool called under-carpet tape—essentially a long strip of stainless steel—to snake the flattest wire you can afford between the carpet and the pad. It can be easy to get the tape caught on the pad and twist the wire as it goes through, so you'll need to take your time. Try to avoid running the wire under high-traffic areas for the obvious reason of excessive wear and tear.

4. Your Insurance Doesn't Cover Molding?

So you're not handy with a drywall saw, and you removed all the carpets in your house after the cats kept peeing on them. Surface raceways or

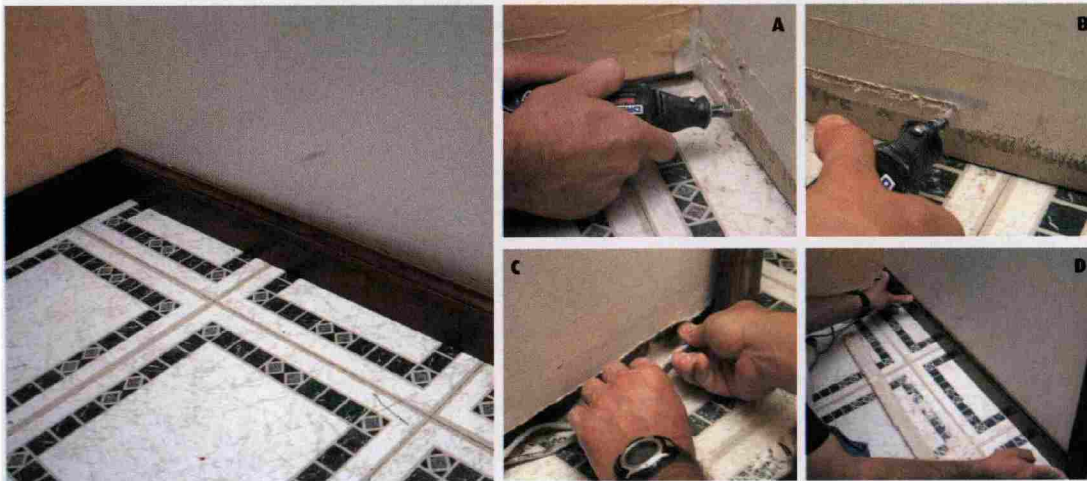
wire molding might be your answer. These are essentially paintable channels with removable covers that mount on the surface of the wall. They come in sizes for single or multiple wires. Some are designed to be used vertically in corners; others are horizontal, so you can use them along the ceiling like crown molding or along the floor like a baseboard. There's even a chair rail version. It's more aesthetically appealing than using wire clips and often easier to install, especially if you use the kind with an adhesive strip on the back. Since the channel covers are removable, you can add additional wires in the future if your system changes—something that's much more painful to do with other methods. Raceways are an especially helpful and painless way of hiding the wires for wall-mounted flat-panel TVs and on-wall speakers. Wiremold, CableOrganizer, and Panduit offer a variety of raceways and accessories, such as corners, T-junctions, and even matching surface-mount outlet boxes that you can use to mount wall plates and keypads. Unfortunately, the channels themselves typically start at more than \$1 per foot—and that's not counting the additional parts and pieces you may need—so wiring a large room (or house) can be pricey.

5. Does My Wire Look Flat to You?

If you want a truly invisible install and can't or don't want to put wires in your walls, Flatwire makes incredibly flat speaker wire (0.1 mm thick) that can be glued to any wall, plastered, and then painted or wallpapered over. When done properly, the stuff is virtually invisible. Flatwire also makes flat component video cables and Ethernet cables, and ultra-flat HDMI cables are in the works. Spools of 18-gauge speaker wire sell for around \$2 per foot. Flatwire also makes 14- and 12-gauge wire at \$2.50 per foot and \$3 per foot, respectively.

Seeing Is Unbelieving

Hopefully the information in this two-part story has helped you come to the conclusion that it's possible to retrofit your old home with plenty of A/V technology without totally destroying its original looks or spending big bucks on remodeling or installation. Sure, it's something you'd wish the previous owners would have done, but then if they had, they might not have wanted to move out of the house. After it's all done, even though you've increased the value of your home, you probably won't ever want to leave, either. 🐾



OUT OF SIGHT To conceal wires in a baseboard, Darryl used a Dremel tool to remove a strip of drywall (A and B). He then inserted the wires (C) and replaced the baseboard (D). The finished job is shown in the image on the left.