SPECIAL REPORT: HOME THEATER FURNITURE

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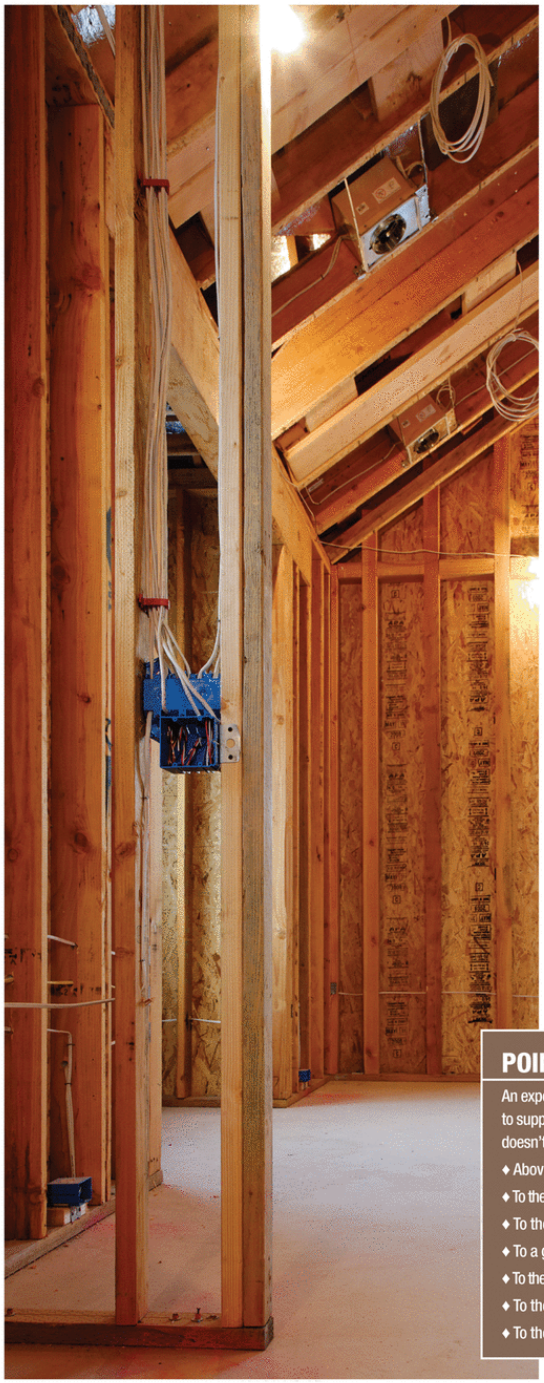
Check out the outrageous theme theater in this house *page 64*



Futureproofing Your House

All the right cabling to all the right places will ensure your home is prepared for any technology that comes its way.
by Lisa Montgomery

WIRELESS IS GAINING STEAM as a convenient, efficient means of streaming audio and video signals from a central rack of components to TVs and speakers positioned throughout the house; for transmitting commands from a control device to lights, thermostats and other devices; and for creating a network over which devices can communicate. Still, if given a choice, home systems contractors would pick hard, physical wiring over wireless any day. It's more reliable, it has the bandwidth to handle huge chunks of data, and in many cases, it's more affordable.

"Wiring is the most important part of getting a home ready for technology," says Frank DeFilippis of custom electronics design and installation firm Link Your House, Norcross, Ga. "You'll want to plan for it right away, as the floor plans of your home are being drawn up. And, you'll want to prewire for everything imaginable." Good advice, because after those walls are sealed up, it'll be tough—and expensive—to add wiring later.

So exactly what is "prewire" and what kinds of products and systems should it support? A common prewire package will consist of speaker wiring, Category 5 (or higher) Ethernet-type

POINTS TO PONDER

An experienced home systems contractor knows where he should pull wire to support technologies now and in the future. However, be sure that he doesn't miss these spots when you're putting your prewire plan together:

- Above the fireplace for a flat-panel TV.
- To the patio, deck and other outdoor areas to support an entertainment system.
- To the unfinished basement to support a home theater.
- To a guest bedroom to support a home office or media room.
- To the kids' bedrooms—who knows what you'll want there after they move out.
- To the front porch, back door and other entrances.
- To the laundry room and kitchen to support Internet-enabled appliances.

cabling and some form of coaxial cabling. A home systems contractor will typically bundle many of these wires together and run them all from a single "headend." A headend refers to the location occupied by all the various electronic components that manage and operate the systems of your house. For example, your headend might include cable and satellite receivers, media servers, a lighting control panel, a security panel, and a main home control processor that delivers commands to the lights, thermostats and other devices.

From this hub the cabling will be routed within the framework of the house, terminating at points where you plan to have wall jacks, speakers, keypads, home control touchpanels, surveillance cameras, security sensors, and other equipment. Don't worry if you're unsure of what to put in and where. The beauty of prewiring is that you can prepare for anything, anywhere, at minimal extra cost. You'll pay pennies to run extra cabling to the front porch for the eventual addition of a security camera, for example. In fact, it's so easy and inexpensive to wire for eventual upgrades that many home systems installers do it as standard procedure. "[Even if homeowners don't ask for it] we always run cabling to the wall opposite the bed and above the fireplace just in case they ever decide to put in a flat-panel TV," says DeFilippis. "We also run wiring to laundry rooms and behind the refrigerator to support Internet-enabled appliances, if and when they become available."

Another futureproofing technique many home systems contractors employ is installing plastic conduit behind the walls, from the headend to tech-heavy areas like a media room and home office. This conduit will provide them with an open chase through which to add new cabling should it ever become necessary.

Currently, the best thing you could give your media room is HDMI 1.4a cabling, says DeFilippis. Does this mean that people who had their homes prewired with HDMI 1.3 are out of luck? Not if you're one of DeFilippis' clients. He installed conduit so the 1.3 can be replaced with 1.4 without having to cut into the walls.

So how much does prewiring cost? Link Your House charges $2 per square foot, so if it's a 4,000-square foot house, you'll pay around $8,000. Of course, prices will vary depending on the extent of the prewire, the labor involved—wiring an existing house will cost at least twice as much as one that's under construction—and accessory items (Link Your House includes detailed video documentation of the installation in the cost of its prewire) "We produce a DVD that shows where every wire is," says DeFilippis. "It's been a real lifesaver for people who want to do things down the road." EH