

Loose Wires

One of the big selling points of a custom installation is the multi-room feature which always has great customer appeal. And installation is straightforward; provided that the residence is a new build which can be cabled at the first fix stage. But retro fit is another game of soldiers as our Technical Editor Stan Curtis discovered when he began to survey his home.

One of the downsides of being involved with a custom installation magazine is that people expect you to know something about the subject and be able to share their pain when they describe some arcane problem involving RS-232 connections. Now I've always found that the best way to gain the right experience is the get a shovel and to start digging in the hope of getting my hands dirty. So from time to time there are long lengths of Cat5e cable meandering down the corridors of my home whilst I test various new products. Yet so far we've resisted the appeals of multi-room sound and vision because of the potential and very real cabling problems. Our home is a 1900 Victorian pile and the only way cables are going to look in place is if they are buried in the walls and that means chasing the walls out with a hammer and chisel. Yes I do know I can use a drill with a cutter but old concrete is harder than tool steel and the cutter makes no impact. After chasing out a few feet with the said chisel and a club hammer I'm knackered and thoroughly disenchanted by the vision of chasing the over 1200 metres of channel needed. So this is one retro fit which certainly isn't going to happen. I've put in the network cables for half a dozen computer points and that's as far as I go.

So what about wireless networks; surely they are designed for this very application? Well maybe they are and maybe they work well in a one bedroom cottage but I'm afraid that the pathetic 66 milliwatts or whatever just hasn't got the grunt needed to get through more than a couple of 14 inch thick brick walls before the signal gives up and drops from the ether. No, this is one of those cases where multiple wireless access points are needed and fortunately there are a number of alternative RF channels available. Except they can, and in my case, do interact; so before going further I'd need to do a full field strength survey to map out exactly what is going on. Oh, deep joy.

Many decades ago I was project manager for a radio paging system installed in the Stock Exchange and we

used a derivative of Telefunken technology. My blonde, blue-eyed boss could have passed muster as a Panzer-SS officer and insisted on doing everything "the German way". Which meant doing it properly. So I had to lug a Tektronic scope and a search coil round every one of the twenty plus floors whilst plotting the field strength and bandwidth at every location much to the confusion of the occupants of the Ladies toilets. Of course there were dead spots aplenty and supplementary transmitters were fitted yet at first they seemed to just move the dead spots to different places. The whole project began to degenerate into farce for this was the company's biggest ever contract and I found myself trapped between the UberFurher who responded to stress by screaming at me in German and the Chairman who thought that any problem could be solved by gin and tonics all round. By some miracle we got it all sorted and I learned enough about antenna polarisations and adjacent channel interference to last me a lifetime.



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The whole sorry episode has been buried as deep in my subconscious as it is possible to go and my fear is that once I start trying to balance up the coverage of maybe five or six wireless access points I will surely release those demons to do who-knows-what damage to my mental well-being. So there we have it. Either I spend eternity suffering the physical torture of chasing endless channels into walls or I go wireless and start down a road which ends with me pushing a rubbish filled shopping trolley down the high street whilst babbling at frightened shoppers.

Given the options perhaps I should forget the whole thing and go back to a Dansette record player. Seems to me that this custom install business is proving to be a case of decisions, decisions.