

**Life / Homes****Creative ways to quiet down your condo**

Make your home say 'shh!' to the noise of daily life

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Sound-absorbing Softwall, by Molo in Vancouver, is a partition with pleats that sop up noise.

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**By: Vicky Sanderson** Homes, Published on Fri Nov 07 2014

Noise is one the biggest complaints from people who live in condos and apartment buildings.

Whether the result of construction, poor design or merely the laws of physics, it's more than just annoying, warns Toronto audiologist Beverley Wolfe.

Excessive noise can lead to hearing loss, which according to the [Canadian Hearing Society](#), affects one in four Canadians. And it's not just hearing that can be hurt — the World Health Organization suggests over-exposure to loud sounds can even have a negative effect on cardiovascular health.

In cities, noise is all around us, says Wolfe, pointing to subways, construction and stadium noise as common public-space culprits. But our homes, she says, can also have dangerously high levels.

That's partly because so many urban spaces feature multiple hard surfaces and large expanses of windows that can amplify noise.

Appliances are also to blame. Stand mixers, hairdryers, lawnmowers — all typically register above 85 decibels, the level at which factory workers are required to wear protection, says Wolfe. If you're concerned, she suggests a good place to start is to test household noise with one of several readily-available apps that gauge sound levels.

Wolfe says that people need to “get over the idea that loud means strong” when it comes to home appliances, adding that she wishes more consumers would ask about decibel levels when shopping for appliances.

Earlier this year, Wolfe offered expert advice as [Rowenta](#) launched a line of vacuums that measure in at between 65 and 69 decibels.

The largest, the Silent Force Extreme, runs at about 68 decibels. Compared to an industry average of about 82 decibels, the company says it's "one of the world's most silent vacuum cleaners and the quietest vacuum available in Canada."

They also claim it has better pick-up than comparable models from its high-end competitors. Having tested the unit, I can say that it does perform extremely well and is, indeed, noticeably quieter.

A good in-home sound-check, offers Wolfe, is to turn the volume of a radio or TV to a level that allows you to hear someone's regular voice when they're a metre away.

Adding thick carpeting, heavy drapes and soft surfaces is another age-old trick used by designers to muffle sound. That's because they diminish the reverberation time, or the time it takes for sound to dissipate after the source stops, says Janine Gliener of [Acoustics With Design](#), a company that sells decorative sound absorption panels made by the Swedish company Wobedo.

Gliener explains that room measurements are used to calculate the number and type of panels needed. Clients then choose from a range of curvy bubble, circles, squares and rectangles shapes. Figurative shapes, such as a barn or church steeple, work well for playrooms and day-care settings. There's also a range of choice for colours and fabrics.

The process isn't cheap, admits Gliener, but compares with "buying some decent art."

It's an easy self-install, she says, using Velcro discs mounted with screws and anchors.

Vancouver-based design studio Molo makes Softwall, a flexible, free-standing partition system made of a non-woven polyethylene material. Designed by Molo founders and lead designers Stephanie Forsythe and Todd MacAllen, the honeycomb structures have "pleats" that increase the wall's surface area and improve sound absorption.

Moveable softwall components are resistant to tearing, UV ray damage and water.

Both opaque and translucent white models also sculpt the light of a space, adding depth and subtly patterned shadows. The system also comes in black — dyed with a UV-resistant bamboo charcoal ink, which gives them the soft, rich sheen of charred wood.

The design is sufficiently practical and beautiful to have been included in the permanent collection of the [Museum of Modern Art](#), in New York.

Can light affect sound? Yes, if they're Molo's lighting fixtures. Inspired by Alexander Calder's famous mobiles, the Cloud Softlight can be hung as a single pendant or in groups of various sizes to resemble chubby, fluffy clouds. Lit internally with LED lights, it's made from the same the textile as the Softwall. Floor lamp styles are also available.

As awareness about the effects of excessive noise is raised, Gliener hopes that sound will become an increasingly important element in home design.

"It's not something people typically think of," she says. "But it can really affect the way you live. Too

much noise can seriously affect your health, and your happiness.”

*More from Vicky Sanderson at [thestar.com/life/vicky\\_sandersons\\_on\\_the\\_house](http://thestar.com/life/vicky_sandersons_on_the_house) . Also the DIY editor for Reno and Decor magazine, Vicky is on Twitter: @vickysanderson or email [vswriter@sympatico.ca](mailto:vswriter@sympatico.ca) .*