

DESIGN FEATURE

BY JANINE GLIENER



WHAT GOOD ACOUSTICS LOOK LIKE

It used to be that interior designers faced the dilemma of choosing between delivering beautiful space or meeting noise reduction goals, but that's changing. A distributor of decorative acoustics details how new products are making it possible to do both



Many exciting lines are coming out of Europe, such as Ginkgo Acoustic Panels by Stone Designs from Blå Station

Acoustic panels and interior design are finally making friends of each other. For too long, project design decisions, whether in new builds or renos, neglected to consider the impact on the ear. Acousticians and product providers report the vast majority of their work is retrofits, with frequent calls from occupants to “Fix our acoustics!” Yet this is the worst time to try to meet noise

reduction goals. Options will be more limited and solutions likely more costly than if acoustics are considered during the design and build.

The good news is that the building community is becoming more aware of the importance of acoustics at the same time that the industry is giving designers more options to address them.

Acoustic panels used to be thought of primarily for large commercial spaces such as auditoriums and theatres, swimming

pools and sports complexes, airports and schools. And given these applications, the large square or rectangular shapes that were mostly available were fine — not gorgeous, but fine.

But now, much is changing in the realm of interior acoustics, including three key trends:

1. INTERIORS ARE NOISIER

Design trends over the past few years have caused noise levels to increase in the everyday places where people work, socialize and live. Open offices have removed wall barriers that formerly served to contain noise. Restaurants have largely replaced soft, noise-absorbent materials such as carpet and cloth with reflective hardwood, concrete, glass and metal. Even in modern home design, there is more noise-reflective surface, with expanses of drywall and glass.

2. AWARENESS OF THE HARMFUL IMPACTS OF UNWANTED SOUND IS GROWING

Understanding of the impacts of the acoustic environment is growing. The International Well Building Standard introduced in September 2015 notes that bad acoustics negatively affect not only human comfort but also people's bodies, across cardiovascular, endocrine, immune and nervous systems! At work, organizations are recognizing the costs of lowered productivity and well-being that result from noise. In social situations, noise hampers conversation and comfort.

3. ACOUSTICS PRODUCT OPTIONS ARE MORE PLENTIFUL AND ATTRACTIVE

Designers have historically been frustrated by the trade-offs they had to make between good-sounding and beautiful-looking interiors. In all the smaller spaces where acoustic treatments are now needed, the visual impact of panels becomes even more important. This need for compromise is changing

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➤ *Christel Månsson, the creator of the decorative acoustic panels by Wobedo Design of Sweden, was originally an interior designer herself.*

too, with the introduction of new products and the creativity of designers themselves in developing acoustic installations.

Acoustic panels mounted on walls and/or ceilings can make the difference between an unbearable room and a functional, beautiful space.

There are several ways to make an acoustic panels treatment look great and stay consistent with the design vision. Product options, placement considerations and designers' own creative approaches can all enhance design while meeting noise reduction goals.

PRODUCT OPTIONS

Conventional, two-inch-thick, fabric-wrapped acoustic panels are still widely recommended and used in most interiors. However, the market is exploding with alternatives and now designers' options for acoustic treatments have expanded well beyond the conventional flat surfaces and right angles of those rigid panels.

As is so often the case in design, Scandinavia seems to be ahead of the curve. Many exciting lines are now coming out of Sweden and Finland and innovation has spread to other countries including Belgium, Italy and more.



➤ *Toronto designer Peter Brooks combined panels with paint to create full wall grid patterns in an Internet marketing company's meeting/teleconference rooms.*

Acoustic panels are available in more materials, such as felt, foam and melamine, and in a variety of shapes, from flat to curved, cylindrical and even nature-inspired outlines. Every big interior design show seems to introduce more beautiful alternative acoustic products, for wall, ceiling and free-standing applications.

There are even acoustically absorbent lighting fixtures! A quick online search for “decorative acoustic panels” — via Google, Pinterest or Instagram — shows how much the sector is evolving.

PLACEMENT CONSIDERATIONS

An acoustician or product supplier can advise on the most effective areas of the room to treat for acoustical impact. Ceiling treatments can be suspended and colourful for visual interest or inconspicuously flush-mounted and colour-neutral. Wall-mounting position is usually similar to art, with lower edge just about eye level, about five feet above the floor.

Then, design considerations can take over. Conventional panels can be cut to almost any size and many shapes within a four-by-eight-foot grid, then arranged or grouped to create a configuration.

Some of the decorative panels now on offer have unique mounting configurations that allow for easy rearranging on a wall, to refresh an installation by changing up the colour combinations or even the overall shape and placement.

DESIGN POSSIBILITIES

Within the conventional panel offerings, a vast number of fabric choices support any colour scheme. Fabric textures range from fine weaves to burlap. Literally! One coffee shop wrapped panels with the bags used to ship their beans!

Today’s high quality digital fabric-printing processes mean acoustic panel surfaces can become a “canvas” on the wall for a stunning photograph, an art reproduction or a meaningful message. A restaurant can display some mouth-watering photos of the attractive menu items in a restaurant, to whet their diners’ appetites.

One of the newest products uses the basic rectangular acoustic panel shape and sculpts a three-dimensional image onto the surface — numbers and letters for a playschool, a corporate logo for an office or an abstract flourish for a home entertainment room.

Increasing awareness of the need for a good acoustic environment, along with a wider range of solutions, plus design creativity, are leading to more spaces that are wonderful both visually and acoustically. Consult with acoustics professionals during the design stage to help ensure projects are delightful in every way. | **CFM&D**

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