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Ask the Contractor

I Would Like to Soundproof a Room. How Hard Will It Be?

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The Panel

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Westlake Village, Calif.

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THE CONSTRUCTION QUEEN
Weston, Conn.

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SILVERLINING INTERIORS INC.
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Wahab: It's easy to soundproof during construction — you put sound insulation between the walls. The cheapest (but a still quite effective) material is something called insulation mat, which you unroll. There's sprayed insulation, which is better but is messy to install and more expensive. At the high end is a heavy, lead-based material that works really well. The first two of these products will also offer you thermal insulation. **Wiener:** If you don't want to open the walls up to soundproof, the simplest thing to do is put a recycled-paper product called Homasote or cork, like the stuff people use for pinup boards, right on the existing wall. Then you cover that with some kind of wallpaper or fabric. Or there is a rubber-based product you can put on the walls and Sheetrock over. But in both cases, the walls will now stand out from the baseboard molding. **Disalvo:** Many people want sound muffled through floors. We use a layered system of plywood and three-quarters-inch-thick soundproofing material and then another plywood layer over that, on top of which you place wood flooring. That will eliminate about 90 percent of sound through the floor.

What are the best, most efficient water-heating systems for my house?

Grosswendt: There are three ways you can go. The traditional and most standard method is a tank of 50 to 150 gallons that's heated continuously by a gas, electric or oil heater. There are some systems in which the tank is heated right off the boiler. Then there are the modern, tankless on-demand systems, which are gaining in acceptance because

they're small and fuel-efficient. **Polumbo:** I recommend the on-demand systems. They don't store hot water, so you aren't paying for a giant tank with a flame burning under it day and night. That wastes a lot of energy. The on-demand heater can make hot water continuously for several showers and loads of laundry, and the energy use is considerably smaller. **Martinez:** Of the three fuel sources, gas is the most efficient, then oil and finally electric. The electric systems are the most expensive to run.

I'm going to supervise my own renovation. How do I find competent craftsmen and manage them properly?

Hanley: The person who runs a construction job is called a general contractor, and you aren't ready to be a G. C. unless you can write contracts for your subcontractors (the carpenters, plumbers, electricians, etc.), coordinate and schedule their work and ensure that the job meets the specs or drawings you have. My advice is, Don't do this. It isn't a job for amateurs. **DiSalvo:** Make sure you are getting your subcontractors (subs) from reliable sources. You want recommendations from architects, friends, building-materials suppliers. Don't work with someone out of the phone book. Check references. All the subs should be licensed and have insurance. Schedule a coordination meeting and make sure the subs are doing what needs to be done at the right time. Lastly, I would advise controlling payments. You need to monitor their work and pay only for what has been done. **Grosswendt:** The best thing you can do is invest in plans from an architect. Once you have clear plans, you can take multiple bids from subcontractors. If the plans are clear, you'll make your mistakes on paper rather than in the field, when it counts, and you can have clarity with your subs.

I want to move a wall. What issues are involved?

Slovak: If the wall is load-bearing, meaning it is supporting the floor above, you need to replace that weight-bearing support. You'll need to install a header — a wood or steel beam that runs across the ceiling — supported by posts at either end, which can be hidden or can stand out like columns. Also, those headers need to be supported adequately on the floor beneath and down to the foundation. **Polumbo:** You need to make sure there are no water and gas pipes or electrical wires in the wall. In a house, you can often reroute these back down to the basement and up intothe living areas through other walls. If you are in an apartment building, you may find risers, the lines that take gas, electric and plumbing up through all the floors. Theoretically, you can move risers, but they never work as well then, and many buildings have rules against that. **DiSalvo:** You may also have flooring repairs to deal with. If you have old materials or patterns on your floor, it may be impossible to make the whole thing look right again without ripping everything up and starting over.

The light bulb in my hall light keeps burning out. Why?

Martinez: It could be any number of things. If you're using a low-voltage bulb, you may have a faulty transformer (the machine that converts the voltage from standard to low). Regular incandescent bulbs burn out if there is vibration from cars or construction. Power surges will also blow out bulbs. **Slovak:** In my experience, the socket is usually the problem. If you screw a bulb in too tight, you pull out the rivets in the socket, so you

get a poor connection between socket and bulb. That heats up and causes the bulb to burn out. I have a trick for this. Put a light coating of petroleum jelly on the aluminum part of the bulb. Screw it back in, and you'll be fine.

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