

## QR OUTDOORS

# Outdoor Living: Audio and Video

*Today, it's all about more Wi-Fi, more televisions and more music. And as projects grow in size and sophistication, specialists are required right from the very beginning.*

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*Photo: Cantara*

Allen Construction, the Santa Barbara, California-based full-service remodeling icon, is thriving. Last year the company completed approximately 150 jobs on \$24.6 million in revenue and was ranked No. 61 on the *QR* Top 500 list. Year-in and year-out, it is seeing a steady flow of big-ticket, whole-house projects. And nearly all of them have large outdoor-living programs, says Eric Johnson, vice president of construction for the company.

“Most of our projects have at least some sort of outdoor living incorporated into it,” Johnson notes, commenting that every part of an outdoor space has gone up a level in recent years. “They start with a great big, multi-slide door that opens to the outdoors.

They, at the very least, have a deck with a large fireplace. We’re doing tiled floors instead of decking. There are multiple refrigerators, stainless steel cabinetry, and barbecues of course. They are almost as expensive as the house. All they are missing is a couple of doors and windows, quite frankly.”

Audio and video elements have also kept pace. Newer and better products come onto the market all of the time. Until a decade ago, televisions remained indoors for the most part, and speakers were hidden in rock-shaped enclosures, says Jason Voorhees, founder and CEO of Los Angeles-based [Cantara](#).

“Today, there are three main technologies that are part of every project we do these days. It’s all about outdoor Wi-Fi. It’s about outdoor televisions. And it’s about outdoor music,” Voorhees explains. Echoing Johnson, Voorhees emphasizes the importance of an early brainstorming and planning meeting with clients, before overall designs for the space are finalized. “Clients really need to be educated so they can figure out what they really want and know what everything costs and what their options are.”

## Outdoor Wi-Fi

Strong Wi-Fi signals turn out to be one of the things that clients want most in their outdoor spaces. Very few people are satisfied with the signal they get on their iPad or laptop from even the best-positioned indoor routers.



Today, specially made outdoor routers are mounted under eaves with antennas pointed out toward the outdoor living spaces. Because they are typically unobstructed, one router will work in most cases; but Voorhees says that he goes with two or three routers, perhaps mounting one in a tree out past a pool. People don’t want any dead zones.

In addition to providing strong signals for any number of devices a client might bring into an outdoor living space, Wi-Fi can also be an important link to a home’s automation system which, in turn, controls outdoor lighting, outdoor music and outdoor TVs. “People really can’t live without it,” Voorhees adds.

## Outdoor TVs

Indoor flat-screen televisions can work well for a short period of time when mounted in a shaded area of an outdoor living space. But increasingly, TVs are ruggedized and specialized for a variety of outdoor viewing conditions. The priciest TVs are those designed to show clear pictures, even in open, bright sunshine conditions. One popular manufacturer of outdoor TVs is SunBrite.



They advertise a “direct-sun tolerant outdoor HDTV for home.” And the company has a range of products for the outdoors, depending on light levels. Their 55-inch Pro Series Best Outdoor Ultra-Bright TV runs a knee-weakening \$5,745. But they work well for a long time.

Voorhees says the quality of outdoor TVs get better all the time, and the prices are gradually coming down, but he’s had ultra-rich clients who opt for much cheaper 70-inch flat screens from Costco or Amazon, knowing full well that they will need to be replaced quickly.

Voorhees does not counsel against the use of cheaper indoor TVs, but he does offer the caveat that they can break at unpredictable times, potentially when the client has guests over to watch the big game. So there are risks involved.



Another very important consideration for mounting outdoor televisions is to design recessed spaces in which to mount those TVs. This helps control airflow, which can bring unwanted moisture, dirt and even excessive heat from nearby fireplaces and firepits. Depending on the size of the outdoor living space, there can be several TVs throughout a single project, Voorhees notes.

From Eric Johnson's perspective, his key consideration is noise attenuation. Many spaces are located near lot lines, and pains must be taken to allow the TV to be heard in adjacent seating areas but not in the neighbors' yards. On some "estate" size jobs that [Allen Construction](#) has managed, highly specialized acousticians have been brought in to devise plans for creating sound barriers that fit well in the outdoor space.

## **Outdoor Music**

Outdoor speakers and music offerings have also come a long way in a short time. There was a time when tinny sounding rock-shaped speakers placed in gardens were considered state-of-the-art. Today companies like Sonnance have radically transformed sound capabilities with "soft-ground embedded speakers and subwoofers," Voorhees says.

There have been two main advancements in the speakers that have enabled improvements in the quality and the scale of outdoor music systems. First, speaker companies began upgrading the housings of their speakers. Today, they look like smaller outdoor spotlights with hooded, directional enclosures. They also have long spikes at the bottom for placement in underbrush areas.

The second major advancement is on the technical side. To fight the problem of “signal loss” via long cable runs from speaker amplifiers located in the main residence, sometimes 300 feet or more, today’s outdoor speakers are 70 volts each.



*Photo: Jim Bartsch*

In short, they pull in a lot more power than 8 ohm speakers that migrated from indoor settings to outdoors. Now powered by 70 volts, dozens of speakers can be daisy-chained together across very long distances without any reduction in sound quality.

This is true of subwoofers too. They have been upgraded to 70 volts and are now designed to be embedded in softscapes. The ability to daisy-chain speakers has enabled audio professionals to “design” sound zones similar to those found in a networked house.

For example, if you want music to play in just the outdoor dining room and not near the fireplace, only the required zone can be controlled and activated. Zones also allow for different volume levels in different parts of an outdoor space. Voorhees recalls a very large hillside project with 18 different zones of audio for different locations around the estate. There was a zone for the beach area, a zone for a sitting area halfway up the hill, and so forth.

Linking all of this sophisticated equipment is not the job of your average cables and connectors. First, one of the main benefits of advanced planning is the ability to properly place and bury all of the necessary PVC conduit. Direct-burial cable is sold by many vendors and should be utilized throughout all parts of an outdoor audio and visual system. The connectors must be filled with epoxy once everything is up and working properly.

Clearly, these are not tasks that a typical remodeling general contractor will want to keep in-house. In fact, Eric Johnson of Allen Construction says he typically brings in the audio-video consultant early and will then let the client and consultant work together in an almost independent way from the rest of the build-out. “Audio-visual outdoors can have a high cost. We like our clients to know the budget early and help them control it. The technical side is complicated and so is the budget. So we work together but also separately with the client.” **QR**