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Saturday Night at the Movies

Taking the silver screen home

By Stephanie Cavanaugh

Picture this. Clutching your tickets and a barrel of popcorn, you shuffle among the jostling hoards into theater number 26 at the local megaplex and settle into a seat behind the inevitable basketball player wearing a Stetson. The lights dim, the music soars...and a baby starts howling as your neighbor begins a play-by-play commentary to her spouse.

"People are getting a lousy experience at the movies," says Rob Shapiro of **All Around Technology**. "Twenty years ago we had great movie theaters. Today you can do better at home. The sound can be light years better, the comfort of the chairs, and the screens..." Oh my, those screens.

Shapiro's company is one of an elite group of home entertainment system designers that are bringing the magic of Hollywood to a rumpus room near you. A very fancy rumpus room.

This is not, "Howie Long and his wife sitting in front of a rear projection TV with five little speakers," says Tom Wells of **Integrated Media Systems**. "That's okay for a family room. But if you really want a cinema, you need a screen and a projector."

And not just any screen. Rule of



Integrated Media Systems designed their showroom theater with Theo Kalomirakis, using two separate audio systems (above). They worked along with a client's architect to achieve a more personal home theater (below).

thumb: "If you're still measuring your TV in inches, you don't have a theater," says **Gramophone's** Jeffrey Hudkins. "When you start talking feet, and when people become larger than life on the screen, then you have theater."

John Burden of **Theatron Home Theater**, agrees, "Home theater is the screen."

As fabulous as the new ultra-thin plasma TVs are (all agree that the picture is "Jaw-droppingly good," as Shapiro puts it), at a maximum size of 61 inches they're too small for great home theater.

"You're still watching TV," says Hudkins of the large TV monitors. "Big TV. But TV." Pick up a guide to DVD releases and

you'll notice that films are rated for how well they translate to television. "There are lots that don't. The classic being *Star Wars*."

Not that you can't watch TV in a home theater. "You're going to watch the Super Bowl on it," he laughs. "There's *nothing* better than watching the Super Bowl on a big screen!"

Home theater may be all about the screen, but that screen frequently gets a Hope diamond setting. While you can put together a decent basic projector, screen and sound system for around \$15,000, once you start adding sophisticated acoustics, custom controls for the lights, dedicated air conditioning and Corinthian leather seating, the price tag begins to soar. A half-million dollars is no longer unusual, says Hudkins, who says, "we haven't reached the upper limit."

"More and more, people are trying to recreate the look and feel of a theater," says Burden. "Tiered seating, fabric



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and acoustic panels on the walls...they want to actually feel like they're going into a theater."

Hudkins just finished a stunner for a client who insisted on including a little



This gorgeous theater started life as a cold, dark basement space. Gramophone turned it into a warm, inviting room for their client.

gift for her husband in the package: "A fiber-optic map on the ceiling of the sky on the night her husband was born—all of the planets, the constellations. It's like being in a drive-in," he glows, "sitting under the stars."

The space needn't be enormous. "Fourteen by 20 feet is average," says Burden. "It all depends on the viewing distance from the screen. You don't want to be too close—but that doesn't directly relate to the size of the room. You might not have a deep room and you can do it with one row of seating."

Except for task lighting to help you find your drink, a true home theater has to be dark since with front projection, light washes out the picture. This usually requires a dedicated space rather than an open portion of a larger room, says Wells. "You don't play pool in it or Ping Pong." If the space combines a variety of functions it's called a media room, not a theater.

Bona fide home theaters are expertly engineered to deliver an extraordinary cinematic experience: "Home theater that rivals—and outperforms—the com-

mercial cinemas you go to on a Saturday night," describes Wells.

People are beginning to appreciate the nuances that make such an experience possible. Like proper acoustics, which can add from \$15,000 to \$100,000 to the budget. "Go live with a nicely configured and designed system for six months—then try living without it," Shapiro challenges.

"Clients are realizing that it makes a big difference in the theater."

They're also enjoying small luxuries, like controls that handle everything from recording a program to adjusting the air conditioning without making you budge from your seat. (If

control of the cool doesn't seem like a big deal, "Put six to eight people in the room with the electronics," says Burden. "You generate a lot of heat.")

Wells also recommends remotes that reduce the usual mysterious jumble of buttons to a handful that you can actually use—and see without groping for your glasses. "If you can't figure out how to use the equipment you're going to feel like you made a poor investment decision," he says. "We make technology simple to use."

At this rarified level, many clients are not concerned with debating the relative merits of, say, Mitsubishi or Sony. They trust these electronics consultants to create the "experience," as Burden calls it. "A lot of our customers don't get involved in the technical side. They're not concerned about brands. Quite a few don't even know what they have."

Using a professional electronics company gives consumers access to products that are not even available in typical super stores or online shops. "Better products and services are reserved for

the better dealers," says Wells. "There are levels out there—more expensive but higher performance."

Professional dealers also provide services to help their customers properly set up their equipment, from setting up video calibration to making sure the sound is optimal. By using a professional, "you're getting studio-quality level...the most out of the equipment," says Wells.

Extending way beyond just home theater, many homeowners have begun to weave audio and video technology throughout their houses. Take, for example, the room-to-room video display system Burden engineered for the mother of a teenage son who invites friends to their theater. Not only can she see what the kids are watching while she's cooking dinner, she can monitor what the kids are doing. And if she doesn't like what she sees, she can shut down the action and turn up the lights without curdling the hollandaise. ♦

Stephanie Cavanaugh is a freelance writer based in Washington, DC.

RESOURCES

The companies mentioned in this article are award-winning members of the Custom Electronics Design and Installation Association (CEDIA), the trade group that sets the gold standard for the home electronics industry.

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