



Recent Trends in Home Theater Design

Advances in Technology Are Allowing Homeowners to Create a True Theater Experience for Less Money Than Before.

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Inventors are rarely prepared for the cultural changes their inventions spark. Alexander Graham Bell, for example, could never have envisioned cell phones, ringtones, or “E.T. phone home.” Nor could Henry Ford have imagined the Model T giving rise to drive-ins, drive-throughs, or drive-by shootings.

Similarly, when the DVD format appeared in 1994, many people thought digital discs would be better than VHS tapes simply because they didn’t require rewinding. But the digital format had extra capabilities that were far more valuable—and we don’t mean those bonus discs full of theatrical trailers, audio commentaries, and deleted scenes. Instead, the high-capacity discs promised superior video quality and the capacity for true surround sound. Home theater was the inevitable result.

Home theater, of course, lets you simulate the theater experience in your family room or in a dedicated media room. While home theaters were once found only in million-dollar homes, such rooms are much more common today. In fact, Tony Rossini, president of Digital Lifestyles in Louisville, estimated that 75 percent of homes worth \$500,000 or more now have dedicated media rooms.

Although standards vary widely, the basic ingredients of home theater are a large-screen television or video projector, a set of surround-sound speakers, and a control system that handles everything from dimming the lights to lowering the screen to playing a DVD. In addition, the seating and décor in home theaters is typically designed to enhance the theater experience. Some home theaters look just like the real

thing—complete with sconce lighting, popcorn machines, and movie posters. Others double as great rooms or family rooms when the lights go up.

Video

Much of the recent buzz in the consumer electronics industry has centered on plasma TVs—and with good reason. Unlike old-style rear-projection units, plasma TVs offer consistently bright, clear, and perfectly focused images that look great from almost any viewing angle. Best of all, these TVs are thin enough to hang on a wall, yet they boast screen sizes of up to 63".

But plasma TVs' size, while impressive, is not quite impressive enough, according to Dan Moore, president of Blue Grass Home Entertainment in Lexington. "A rule of thumb is that the width of the screen should be one-and-a-half times the distance to the front row of chairs," Moore said. That means all but the smallest home theaters demand a screen size of 100" or more, something that's only possible with video projection.

The most popular projectors today are ceiling-mounted front-projection units. They're much easier to maintain than rear projectors and allow the screen to be mounted flush against a wall without forcing the homeowner to carve out a projection room in back. The downside is that front-projection units don't work as well in rooms with a lot of ambient light.

Gene Crawford, president of Crawford Entertainment Systems in Louisville said the projector is the first place to spend money and the last place to cut corners. Although you can spend thousands of dollars on a screen, he said homeowners can do just as well with a \$799 screen, putting the extra money into the projector or audio system.

Audio

Unless you watch only silent movies, audio is nearly as important as video in creating a great home theater. According to Moore, five-channel audio is where home theater starts.

Five-channel audio—usually referred to as 5.1 audio—simply means that there are three speakers across the front of the room and two in back, along with a subwoofer (the .1 part of the name) to enhance the bass. Just like in a large theater, sounds come at you from all directions—but also from the right directions. On-screen voices come from the center front speaker, other important sounds come from the left and right front speakers, and background noises emanate from the back.

While 5.1 audio is light-years ahead of standard stereo, many manufacturers have already moved on to 7.1 or 7.2 audio. "Even Best Buy is doing 7.1," Moore said.

For true audiophiles, more is always better, but some homeowners don't like to look at ugly black speaker cases, especially in non-dedicated rooms. According to Byron Sims, system design specialist for Trend Technologies, many of his customers are opting for in-wall speakers. "Painted speakers disappear into the wall," he said, "and there are even speakers with a panel in front that can be taped and mudded into drywall."

Similarly, some screens are porous enough to allow a speaker to be mounted behind them. In-wall speakers are especially popular in multipurpose rooms that double as home theaters.

Speaker quality and placement are important, but so is the room itself. “A third of the sound quality is the room,” Crawford said. “We spend a lot of time with room acoustics.”

Control Systems

Of course, the greatest home theater setup is worthless if you can't figure out how which of your half-dozen remote controls will let you adjust the volume or close the blinds. That's where the control system—either a single remote or a wall-mounted touch screen—comes in.

“Every system we put in has some sort of a control system,” Digital Lifestyles' Rossini said. “If people are going to spend money on a theater setup, they have to have a control system.” He said roughly 60 percent of his customers choose a touch screen.

Both touch screens and remotes let users do just about everything but switch DVDs all at the touch of a button. The best of them are simple enough to use that anyone can use them without reading a manual. (To illustrate how easy they can be to use, Crawford calls them grandma remotes or babysitter remotes.)

Trends in Home Theater

So how has home theater changed in the last few years? According to everyone we spoke with, the biggest change has been dropping prices. Systems that once cost \$50,000 today fall in the \$12,000 to \$15,000 range. “We can do one for \$12,000 that we're proud of—\$10,000 with rear projection,” Crawford said.

Sims agreed. Most of Trend Technologies' systems cost between \$13,000 and \$35,000, although customers could easily spend up to \$150,000.

Another trend is in furniture. Not content to watch movies from the same old recliner or sofa, more and more homeowners are opting for dedicated theater seating. “It's the biggest thing going now,” Moore said.

La-Z-Boy's Matinee line of recliners can be combined into curved or straight rows with built-in cup holders, trays, and drawers. Irwin Seating's Victorian-style Springfield seats would look right at home in a 1920s-era movie palace. And then there's designer Karim Rashid's ultramodern Orgy sofa—yes, you read the name right—which retails for just under \$12,000. The matching ottoman costs just \$2,257.

Regardless of the seating you choose, one small home-theater company hopes you won't be sitting still for long. Quebec-based D-Box Technology has developed the Odyssee Motion Simulator, a patented system that animates your seat in perfect synchronization with onscreen actions. Much like virtual-reality rides at theme parks, the system is designed to really put you in the center of the action.

The Odyssee system includes a controller on which you load motion codes for specific movies and a set of actuators. These can either be placed under a platform

holding ordinary furniture or installed into compatible home theater seats. According to Rob Robinson, D-Box's director of sales for the United States, the company expects up to be working with 80-90 percent of companies that manufacturer home theater seating by the end of the year.

Adding the Odyssee Motion Simulator to your home theater is not for the faint of heart or the light of wallet. The controller itself retails for \$5,000, while the actuator sets cost from \$5,000 to \$27,000. You'll also need to buy a \$550 annual subscription to receive updated motion codes each month.

Still, if money were the issue, you wouldn't invest in a home theater at all. Instead, you'd just keep plopping down \$8 or \$9 each time you wanted to see a movie. But to enjoy the theater experience without crying babies, overpriced popcorn, and chewing gum on the floor, home is where the art is.