

● Looks good

● sounds great

● feels real

With today's amazing home media systems, the only place you'll want to be on Saturday night is close to your remote control.

By Lisa Arcella

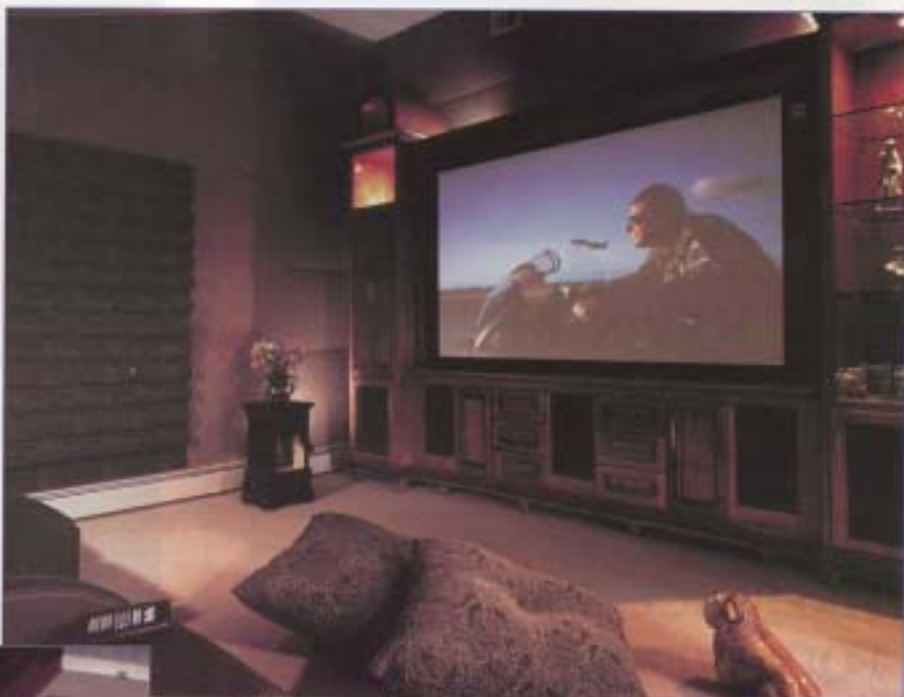
With today's technology, it's possible to create an audio-visual setup in any room of the house that rivals the best movie theater in sound and picture quality. The technology is so good that some people are installing their own red velvet seats and a popcorn machine.

"People want to entertain themselves at the touch of a button," says Kamel Yassin, president of Sound City in Denville. "A great sound system, something with Dolby Digital Surround, for instance, sounds better than what you find in many theaters. Besides, it's something the whole family can participate in. If you have three kids and it costs \$8 apiece each time they go to the movies, maybe you'd rather enjoy the movie with them at home."

People can do so much with a home system today, echoes Tony Titone, owner of Legacy Audio Showroom in Boonton. "The clarity and sound can be so good that when you're watching a movie like *Armageddon*, you feel the asteroids shaking the floor."

Feels like you're part of the picture

The chief benefit of most home systems is a big picture with realistic sound that lets you feel as if you're part of the action on the screen. The system can't be too complicated to operate, either. "Our motto is: if you



Today's home media systems offer a big picture and audio system that sounds better than what you find in many theaters, says Sound City's Kamel Yassin.



Use of automated screens, video projector lifts and TV lifts can solve home media room design problems, say Electronics Design Group's technicians.

can read, you can operate the system," says Mike Gulow of Acoustech in East Hanover.

"If a system is properly designed, the operation should be simpler than turning on your home computer," says Franklin Karp, president of Harvey Electronics in Lyndhurst. "We can design a system that everyone can use without having to manage six remote controls. It's possible to have one-button operation in your home."

Karp suggests homeowners consult with electronics experts early in the process of planning a home theater or media room. "They will work with an architect or designer and help organize the necessary wiring diagrams and blueprints," he says.

Today, the buzz in home electronics equipment is over HDTV (high-definition television), DVDs (digital versatile discs) and digital VCRs (video-cassette recorders). HDTV is said to be the future of TV because its images are up to eight times sharper than standard pictures. The only hitch so far is that a consumer must have a TV set capable of receiving the high-definition images sent by the broadcaster. Today, there is limited HDTV broadcasting, notably by Direct TV, HBO and Discovery Channel, but experts expect HDTV accessibility will expand.

"Broadcasters will go through a transition until at least 2006," says Craig Eggers, Toshiba's director of product planning for DVDs and home audio. "The key element is a wide-screen TV with an unbelievable picture. You'll see the hairs on a football player's arm as he throws a pass. The goal is a picture that looks as much like film as possible."

Harvey Electronics' Karp says you can still buy a great analog TV in the style that most people presently prefer. But if you have your eye on a long-term investment, HDTV is the purchase to make. "High-definition-ready TV is where everyone is going," he says. "It's the wave of the future."



Many people use custom cabinetry to enclose their big-picture, big-sound media systems, says Hammer & Nail's Barton Lidsky.

Lifelike pictures on HDTV

Once you've made up your mind up to buy a high-definition television, you will need to choose the style of operation—projector or plasma screen.

"People should decide whether they want a system that has the look of an overhead projector or one with a plasma screen, which is a flat, space-saving unit," says Legacy's Titone. "Some people want to create the atmosphere of a movie theater with a projector-type screen, while others want the sleek style of a plasma screen. It's all a matter of taste."

In either case, clarity is amazing. "The only problem is that the picture is so good that programmers will someday have to change the way they film shows. I recently watched an episode of *Chicago Hope* on an HDTV set and the picture was so good that, unfortunately, the props looked like props, the blood looked fake, and you could even see the makeup on the actors' faces."

Not everyone in the home electronics business is singing the praises of HDTV. Acoustech's Gulow says the technology is too new, and he tends to steer his customers away from it. "HDTV will start to emerge in the next three years and won't be common for at least 10 years," he says. "It's a gorgeous picture, but right now it costs a fortune and programs are limited."

Quick access to favorite scenes

DVDs store high-quality digital pictures and sound on an easy-to-store CD-sized disc that has quickly become state-of-the-art for any home theater system. Individual DVDs cost about \$20 each and don't have to be rewound. You can quickly find a scene you like in a movie just as you can instantly find your favorite song on a CD. "A DVD player is the best way to enjoy home theater," Karp says. "The quality is far superior to that of videotape."

DVD players are now available in a broad spectrum of prices, says Gulow, who recommends Toshiba models on the lower scale and CAL on the higher price scale. "We mix up our components by merit, instead of by price," he says. "We sit down with our clients and see what really works with their lifestyles and interests."

The third element that's integral to any home theater setup is the digital VCR. It is sometimes known as a TiVo, or a replay TV, and you will be hearing more about it, Titone says. "It's a VCR without tape," he explains. "A phone line is attached to the machine so it can connect to a service. It can access a TV guide directly and record up to 20 hours of programming. The amazing thing is that you program it only once and it can record an entire season of a show automatically."

Acoustech officials recommend something called Request TV, which is similar to a TiVo unit and offered without a monthly service fee.

Selecting a home media system

How do you plan a home media system for the great room or den you're now building onto your house? There are many issues to consider when deciding which setup is right for your family.

What are your specific needs? Are the the audio elements more important than the visual aspects? Will you be using the room to watch TV and films, or will playing music be the main activity? How will the room be designed and who will install the media system?

Prices fluctuate wildly. Simple systems may cost only a few thousand dollars. Fully equipped fantasy rooms cost as much as \$200,000. Harvey Electronics estimates that the average cost of a home theater is \$10,000. Sound City says its typical customer spends \$30,000 to \$50,000.

"The goal of home theater is to reproduce the ambiance of a theater in the home," Eggers says. "Display, source (or content) and audio are the three elements that make up home theater."

Industry experts say a contemporary home theater system should include the following components: 27-inch TV; Dolby Pro-Logic receiver; hi-fi VCR; left-, right- and center-front speakers, two surround-sound speakers and independent sub-woofer; and DVD player.

"The rear speakers are there to provide ambiance and special effects such as when you hear a helicopter landing in an action film," Eggers explains. "The left- and right-front speakers enable you to sense motion on a screen. The center-front speaker is crucial because it creates 60 percent of what you hear—dialogue, for example—while the woofer adds oomph."

You also need an AV receiver, or switcher, to decode information from the speakers. You can buy it as an all-in-one system or devise separate amps for each speaker. And speaking of speakers, size counts. "You'll always get a deeper sound with a larger speaker," Titone says.

Installing a home media system

Finding and choosing the right projection television, DVD, speakers and other components may seem overwhelming. Many people turn to experts for help. In some cases, finding the right person for an installation is more important than choosing top-of-the-line equipment.

Even when you invest in expensive equipment, if it doesn't maximize sight and sound, your money will not be well spent. Get a home electronics designer involved in your home theater project, especially if you're installing a system into a newly built home. The choice, location and installation of wiring is vital.

Costs to design a room can vary. Harvey Electronics doesn't charge design fees, while others charge as much as \$5,000 for complicated wiring and consulting fees.

"It's important to find a THX Level 2-certified deal-

Dream home-theater system

What components make up the ultimate home-theater system? We asked media-system installer Lee Richman of Nu Sound Concepts, who estimated a total budget of just under \$100,000 for the equipment and labor to install a state-of-the-art theater in a typical 10-by-12-foot den.

"Costs will add up, but a trained professional can find a great system within your budget," he says. Here's his wish list.

| Media Equipment | Estimated Cost |
|--|------------------|
| Zenith 1200 HD-ready projector TV | \$ 24,000 |
| Faroudja line quadrupler or scaler | 24,000 |
| Stewart Ultimate 4-way Screenwall | |
| Electra 100-inch mask | 5,400 |
| Lexicon sound processor MC-1 | 6,000 |
| Toshiba DVD player and progressive scan 9100 system | 1,200 |
| Triad gold series THX speakers with fine wood veneer | 6,000 |
| Philips TiVo digital recording device | 1,000 |
| RCA high-definition satellite receiver | 1,000 |
| Creston remote control system | 5,000 |
| Denon DCM 5000 CD player with 100-CD cartridge | 1,800 |
| Panasonic PV-HD 1000 VCR | 1,000 |
| Sunfire amplifiers | 5,000 |
| Cabling | 3,000 |
| Labor | 12,000 |
| Total Cost: | \$ 96,400 |

er to plan your room and install the media equipment," says Lee Richman of Nu Sound Concepts. "A trained person can design the room to enhance its acoustical qualities," he explains. "It's one of the wisest investments you can make, because THX technicians are trained by Lucas Films to deliver maximum clarity and reproduction of the audio and video material. If you have a room that's not designed correctly, it's not going to reach its full potential."

Sound City's Yassin is one of the few installation experts in the New York area who is certified to work with specialized sound-insulation systems. "It's important that there is no sound resonance in a room," he points out.

A trained professional can help you add extras to a room. "We can install seating, automatic screens, lighting controls, even a fiber-optic ceiling to create the effect of stars—to give the ambiance of a real movie theater," Yassin enthuses. ●

SAVVY RESOURCES

If installing a home theater, visit these web sites: www.stiving.upenn.edu/~bjorn/ht.shtml and www.gaddehomeheater.com. Both offer advice on home theaters and a glossary. Here are some experts who can guide you further.

Acoustech

34C Ridgedale Avenue, East Hanover
(973) 887-4003 • www.acoustechinc.com

Electronics Design Group

60 Ethel Road West - Unit #4, Piscataway
(732) 650-9800 • www.edgonline.com

Harvey Electronics

556 Route 17 North, Paramus
(201) 652-2882 • www.harveyonline.com

Hammer & Nail

232 Madison Avenue, Wyckoff
(201) 891-5252

Legacy Audio Showroom

421 Main Street, Boonton
(973) 541-0100 • www.legacy-audio.com

Nu Sound Concepts

4-74 48th Avenue #35E,
Long Island City, NY
(718) 340-8344

Sound City

89 Route 46 East, Derwille
(973) 627-0083 • www.soundcity.com

Sounding Board

75 Franklin Avenue, Ridgewood
(201) 445-5006

Toshiba America

82 Totowa Road, Wayne
(973) 628-8000 • www.toshiba.com/tacp