



PERFORMANCE MEDIA INDUSTRIES, LTD.

Any Spare Room?
1/2005

by A. Grimani

So you've decided to install a home theater in your open floor plan, light-colored, reverberant, and window-filled great room. Of course you want nice gear, because you deserve it and everything you have is top-of-the-line. So, you can labor to hide speakers inside custom cabinetry, place a large plasma set over the fireplace, flush-mount the side and rear speakers into the high ceiling, and hope for the best. But...is it really worth it? Will you get your money's worth of movie entertainment? Of course not! Your large volume of sonic space will reverberate for three seconds, mashing dialog and effects into an unintelligible cacophony. The background noise from the refrigerators, telephones, dishwashers, and HVAC systems will trample all the fine sonic detail of film soundtracks and music, making those high-end amps and speakers sound no better than ones you can buy at the local electronics supermarket. The high ambient light will force you to turn up the contrast on the plasma set, reducing its lifespan and saturating all the whites into a flat and un-involving picture. When all's said and done, you will have wasted money on a room that sounds bad, looks bad, and is certainly not the way to really experience a film.

So what is a real film experience? It's one where you go to a special room with seats all facing the large screen, and where, after the lights dim, nothing is allowed to distract you from being transported to medieval England or space in 2001. (Wait, that year already passed...didn't it?) The sound is intelligible, clear, and powerful. The picture is big, bright, and crisp. Everything is set up to trick your conscious mind into suspending its disbelief that this is a real experience. That's what allows a film director to transport the audience wherever the script intends. Ever found yourself shushing up a talkative neighbor at the local cinema? Why? Because they're messing with your virtual reality film experience, darn it! So why would you allow a fridge, a telephone, or an air handler to do the same?

The fact is that a reasonable home theater experience really needs a dedicated room or at least a multi-use room with doors, light-occluding drapes, acoustical treatments, and adequately dark surroundings. Without this you have nothing but a large TV with loud sound. That's just not right...

Here's what I suggest doing. Rather than going with the Great Room Home Theater concept, ask yourself if there is a spare room in your house that gets relatively little use and could be turned into a dedicated theater space. Of course you will meet with some resistance, but fight yourself a little harder. There is usually an office, a den, a guest bedroom, a bedroom from a college-bound kid, or even space in the garage you could use. You can also suggest finishing out a basement, or even digging one if necessary. You can even add a theater/pool house if that works. You really don't need very much room; I have experienced very nice theaters in 15' by 12' rooms that can comfortably seat five people. You can still put a basic flat screen TV plus a multi-channel sound system in the great room, but go low-cost and simple.

The dedicated room offers so many advantages that it's really hard to argue against it. Here's a basic list:

Sound Isolation: You can build out a space that is isolated from the rest of the residence. When you enter and close the doors behind you, no one hears you, and you don't hear the outside world. Gone are the telephones, the washers, the traffic noise, and the loud teenagers - ahhh, so nice!

Light Control: You can fully control the light levels and thus go from those over-hyped plasma sets with inferior picture quality to a real projection system with resolution and contrast that will knock your socks off.

Esthetics: You can decorate the room to make it into a real entertainment event. The cinematic transport process starts even before the lights dim! Also you can use the darker and neutral tones required for adequate projection systems. You can integrate the acoustical control treatments into the décor to disguise them. You can even hide away all the gear that may distract your conscious mind from its virtual reality trip. You can live out your fantasy, whatever it may be...

Seating: You can use purpose-made theater seating. Ever tried to sit up on a living room couch for two hours while watching a movie? Not possible. Your body will ache; that's a given. Theater chairs are ergonomically designed for proper support so that your 120 minutes are as comfy and wiggle-free as possible. That helps the virtual reality thing, you know!?

Background Noise Control: A dedicated space can be made into a quiet area with no background noise. That allows the system to shine through and resolve the 120dB of dynamic range available in Dolby Digital and DTS soundtracks. You can even turn the

volume down a bit without losing any lines of dialog or critical sound effects in case your ears are a tad sensitive.

High-end Gear: A properly designed and engineered dedicated room can fully showcase the performance values of high-quality equipment. The picture is at its full contrast ratios. The audio system can exhibit its full dynamic range. The fine subtlety of carefully crafted cinematography and sound design come through just as the director intended, allowing you to really believe in the storyline.

Enhanced Property Value: A dedicated theater space is often a key selling feature in an upscale residence. Everyone has a swimming pool. Everyone has a game room. Few home sellers have a dedicated, themed theater space. Prospective home buyers (AND their kids) are sure to remember the house with a theater. That puts the seller at a negotiating advantage compared to other properties in the neighborhood, and I am seeing more and more real estate agents cite theaters as a feature in their listings.

Boy, with arguments like these who would ever want to outfit a great room with a home theater system? A dedicated space is the obvious path to movie nirvana. Of course, this all assumes that you have a passion for the movies!

This article is based on a column published by A. Grimani in Residential Systems magazine January 2005.