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How Far Should You Go?
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by A. Grimani

Everyone knows that proper design and engineering of a home theater is essential, and there's no doubt that proper documentation of the design is equally crucial. But just exactly what level of detail should you go into on the plans for a project? Should they be basic sketches (one step up from Napkin CAD), construction grade plans, pretty pictures, or some combination thereof? Whom should the plans target? The builder might want architectural plans that he or she could use to physically construct the room. On the other hand, you might like a pretty visual representation of what your substantial investment is going to look like when it's finished. Are those two mutually exclusive, or is there a model for plan sets that make everyone happy?

After designing over 150 rooms, I can safely say that I have experienced the process of translating plans into actual, finished home theaters. Sometimes the end result depends on the quality of the design, sometimes the detail in the drawings, and sometimes the thoroughness of the builder. In most cases, these three factors combine to affect the final outcome of the project, but they can work entirely independent of each other! I have seen roughly-documented designs get executed to perfection, and meticulously-drafted plans turn into complete chaos. Here are some reflections and observations from the field:

1) Understand that builders are accustomed to certain types of construction. They go through the same motions and processes day in and day out. Construction of a home theater can be radically different from regular residential construction – even if the building materials themselves are similar. You need to work with the builder to explain the intent and help him or her see how construction phases can be different from the norm.

2) Document phases of construction. There are typical phases in a residential construction project: Foundation, framing, electrical & plumbing, sheetrocking, and finishing. Often, home theater projects don't fit that formula. You may need to do a phase of sheetrock between framing stages, requiring the builder to rotate one of his sheetrock crews in early. For example, the riser in a home theater needs to go in after

walls are sheetrocked to ensure proper sound isolation. Someone needs to predict when the sheetrocking will be needed and outline it for builder.

3) Be prepared to use colors and multiple views in your documentation. You need every tool at your disposal to communicate your design intent. Use as many actual photographs of real projects as you can.

4) Use your intuition in determining if something is sufficiently described. Not every person is endowed by the creator (or has evolved, if you prefer) with a certain inalienable sense of intuition. That being said, if anything in a design seems vague to you, it will most likely be dense fog to the builder. Remember: you know what you mean; the builder doesn't. He or she probably has no past experience on which to base an interpretation of the plans.

5) Document chronologically. Start with a full plan view and one elevation of the room. Then go on to drawings that build chronologically per the phases of construction.

6) Describe precisely every device, fastener, and bracket. If a part or piece influences the final result of the project, make sure a monkey couldn't mistake it for something else. Use as many pictures, model number references, cut sheets, and sketches as you need. Paper is less expensive than re-dos.

7) Be prepared to do a briefing meeting with the builder and architect. Spend a few hours presenting the plans and construction process as you see it. Be prepared to take feedback from the builder, and be prepared to modify your ideas accordingly.

8) Plan as much as you can, but realize that the best laid plans have to be altered. Once construction starts and errors and omissions are discovered, you will have the opportunity to demonstrate the character quality of flexibility. There's no way that anyone can fully predict all the factors involved in one of these projects.

9) Plan on frequent site visits. I'm always amazed by the number of things that are uncovered during site visits that weren't communicated by phone, email, smoke signal, or owl post.

Here's the catch: If you *over* document the project, you run the risk that the builder won't read through the whole design. I've seen it many times: a crucial piece of info is outlined in a note at the bottom of a page but goes unread. The project may end up with a major flaw. Whose fault is it? The builder's, the project manager's, or yours? Realize that you *all* probably share some of the blame! Ripping into someone rarely helps because everyone is already defensive, feeling some amount of guilt over the mistake.

Experience will teach you how much info you can dish out before you start loosing your audience. The key is to highlight the really import stuff and not sweat the small stuff!

This article is based on a column published by A. Grimani in Residential Systems magazine November 2005. Chase Walton contributed to this article.