

There's No Going Back



All the people interviewed for this article defined home theater to include audio, video, and wiring the whole house for a variety of entertainment purposes. So, it seems, home theater is bigger than movies and video equipment. And no one I spoke with had any regrets.

I LOVE THE NEON! -Theresa Maestas

Theresa Maestas integrated her home theater into her whole house, from the beginning. How did it start?

"I was building this house. I wanted a TV for the basement... A TV and a bike for working out."

"And then?" I questioned.

"At night, I started thinking about what else to put in there."

She and her designer had been considering neon, in the bedroom, but that didn't work. The designer suggested using the neon in the basement.

"I kept asking my son—'What should I do? What should I do?' He suggested doing something like 'American Graffiti'—something about the '50s."

"So the room is evocative of the '50s—the white couch," Maestas said, "the pictures, the posters of Marilyn Monroe and James Dean—That was the first step. The posters. "

"What else?" I asked my son again.

"He said 'What about a pool table?'"

"Then... I need a jukebox. And we found one... It works. You can use quarters or I can push a button... The records on it are the '50s—like Elvis.

"Then I thought, I need a bar. But, I don't drink... so I can't have a bar. Then it came to me—a soda fountain."

Her son then said she needed a big screen TV. "I was going to have a little TV and a bike."



Maestas then got an estimate for her new room, with all the home theater equipment. "Wow! So many choices It took me days to decide—it was a lot of money... I didn't leave anything behind. And now there's no going back."

Maestas' system has a 50-inch TV downstairs, two more TVs upstairs, two VCRs, a CD player, a double tape deck, a laser disc player, and all the other components. There are 10 speakers in the basement room alone. This system, installed, cost approximately \$21,000.

Are you glad you did this?

She grinned and nodded.

"Oh, yes They've been so sweet helping me learn how to operate this system. I never owned a VCR before."

What do you like most?

"It's such a fantasy. Let me see... My workout. I don't have to go to the health spa. I use workout tapes... I love the laser disc player—the movies. I love the VCR in my bedroom. I love to watch TV. I *love* this (the big screen TV in the basement)."

"Do you use this room?"

"YES. Every day. More than I thought I would... I use it a lot. Not just entertaining... I love the neon. It inspires me, motivates me I love to dance—did you see the dance floor? I put on a CD and dance."

IT'S GOT TO BE INCONSPICUOUS

-Ron and Becky Francis

"It started when my old system started going on the fritz," said Ron Francis.



"And it happened in phases." So, he went looking for a sound system. He shopped around. Had a demonstration.

"My house, which I designed, has small rooms, not great rooms. It's hard to put a big screen in a cozy room and have it be hidden and I hate the electronics sticking out in the room," Ron said. "They wanted a big screen, but the room is 14 feet by 16 feet, so a 32-inch set is fine... the sound effects are great I didn't want to see these big black speakers... You're right this is usually what women say... I don't want to see the cords. I want them inconspicuous."

The sound itself, audio, was important, and Francis would not compromise sound quality. "The stereo is wired everywhere but the kids' rooms. From the central control cabinet, the system goes into five rooms, plus the outside patio." At this stage, only the audio system goes outside and into all the other rooms. They can control volume in various sections of the house and can switch them off completely if desired.

They have five VCRs, a mixer, all new speakers, a new TV, surround sound, and speakers on the patio. They didn't get a laser disc player—they just put cable in a year ago.

The bedroom has a whole separate system. They can use all the system components at the same time, and they all work independently. The cost for the whole thing, done in phases, was about \$30,000. Now, their plans for expanding their system include the garage, the barn, a guest house, and eventually a theater room.



"It did get out of hand [expense]," said Ron. "But, I'm real happy with it. It's been two years. I like to brag about my system... our neighbor now has one... One of the best things about it is the quality of the sound. We don't see the repairs. *It's inconspicuous!*"

Ron admitted he hadn't really believed it could all be hidden.

He would do two things differently now—he would have done it all at once and he would have made a bigger room.

"I would have designed the house to accommodate a big screen TV—make this room bigger If I'd realized how much I'd like it.

"The biggest surprise is the quality of the sound." When the system is put on *normal* TV, Ron thinks the equipment has failed. "I notice immediately. There are no sound effects... I can't go back."

AUDIOPHILES TAKE ADVANTAGE OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES

-Maureen and Steve Baca

Maureen grew up in a house of audiophiles, and always had a great stereo system. She teases that Steve married her for her stereo equipment.

When they decided to build their own home, they wanted *good* sound. They say their home is an extension of themselves and their decisions were not based on resale value, but what *they* wanted.

Steve is an electrical engineer, and he laid the initial wiring in 1978 when they built their home. All of this was completely redone in 1992-93 when they installed their home theater system. He said they wanted three things:

- Make sure we took advantage of the technology of building speakers into the walls-to recover space.
- Improve control of the system-make it more integrated. So we can turn things off and on in other rooms.
- Do something with video-we have a little TV in our bedroom and another on the kitchen island. We wanted to take advantage of surround sound and watch movies.

The Bacas wanted to move their speakers into the walls. They had moderate to large speakers that often used up floor space. "We had magna-plane speakers, maybe four feet tall, flat, but, in our bedroom We wanted something not quite so obvious," Maureen said. "It's great not having speakers on the floor."

Steve added, "It's one less thing to dust."

They converted the "dog room" into their home theater (when they built their house, they had been into showing poodles). They went through several design phases before deciding on exactly what they wanted.

"Did they get exactly what they wanted?"

"Exactly," Steve said.

Maureen said, "I would do nothing different."

"Not under the constraints of current technology," added Steve. "We really like the speakers everywhere. It's saved enormous space."

Their system is a simple one—with control units in three other rooms, and volume controls in four rooms plus the greenhouse (all for the audio portion of the system.) They do have a second TV and VCR in their bedroom that is hooked up to





the main center and is independent. They can listen to only one piece of music at a time in all the rooms. But, as Maureen said, "It's only the two of us, and we do things together."

They didn't get a large screen TV (a flat screen), nor a laser disc player. They are waiting for the technology to improve. The estimated cost of this system, if all their equipment had been bought new, was \$15,000.

"The sound is much much better. It's designed and *balanced* for *this* space," said Maureen. "It's hard to tell where the sound is coming from."

And now the furniture ties it all together—storage, components, TV—and displays their pot collection as well.

WE LIVE IN THIS ROOM

-Peggie Findlay and Steven Bush

Peggie Findlay and Steven Bush bought land and helped design their house, which was finished in 1992. Their home theater was planned from the beginning.

All they had at this time, was what they called their "college" equipment. But, this was their dream house, and they made no compromises. As Peggie said, "I'll be taken out of here feet first."

Their first priority was music. "We listen to music," said Peggie. "Classical music. And we play, our kids play." They wanted to have access to music wherever they were in their home.

Bush added, "We do like the movies. We saw it as opportunity—for our kids, our friends—to have movies and some TV, too."

They watched a home theater demonstration and even though they don't watch much TV, they were impressed. "It was fabulous," said Findlay.

Bush said, "We decide to not spend a lot of time looking for 'almost the best'... We really got the best components."

They wanted a house that would meet their needs now *and* as their kids grow up—a place they want to be and bring their friends.

"This room is used for other things," Findlay said. "So the equipment had to be hidden... We *live* here... It had to be comfortable, tough—not a room where we would always be saying 'Don't touch', or 'Don't jump on this.' We can be fancy in the other room, with its white couches. In here you can put your feet on



anything.”

The room, the center of their home theater system, is large—it’s 20 feet by 36 feet. The size of the room dictated a front projection system. The screen is about six feet by eight feet and people can sit all around the room. There is a clear picture even if sitting off to the side. The front projection system answered another requirement, also. They didn’t want a big piece of furniture nor did they want the TV or screen visible when not in use.

Bush said, “We wanted to maintain the view of the tree and the fields through the big window. And still have the system in this room.”

“We do these semi-potlucks,” Steve said. “With friends, with kids. Everyone comes. We watch an opera or a play. They sit everywhere, pull the pillows onto the floor. Food on tables. We sit and watch. The kids are between four and eleven. We watch ‘The Barber of Seville’ and ‘The Magic Flute.’”

“‘The Magic Flute’ is the number one hit, said Findlay. “The kids are engaged by it.”

“Do you think it’s in part because of the system?”

“Yes,” said Findlay. “Part is ‘how they see it’—with family and friends.”

“We bring down the screen, put on the sound. It’s like being in the theater,” Bush added.

The cost of their system, all together, was about \$32,000. And it included the satellite system, wiring the whole house, and all new equipment—a 35-inch TV, the front projection system, a 10-disc CD player, a VCR, a double tape deck, a turntable, and all the amps, receivers, and tuners. They have only the one TV in the whole house, even though all the bedrooms are wired for TVs and VCRs.

“We’re waiting on a laser disc player for a few years,” Findlay said. “That technology will be pretty slick. But, we’re not interested in spending a lot of money early on, before the bugs are worked out.”

They have a master remote, from Bang & Olufson, that lights up.

Bush said, “We changed the whole level of performance of the system... By a lot.”

There are speakers everywhere. Audio and video sound goes everywhere.

“Can they watch TV and listen to music at the same time?” I inquired.

“I think so,” Findlay laughed, “I don’t know how. I haven’t been good.”

“Yes, it does,” Bush confirmed.



The system has zones and sub-zones. Each zone has its own amplifier and each room (sub-zone) has a volume control. For example, the kitchen, the nook, the dining room, and the patio make up one zone, but each room has its own volume control.

The amp for the whole zone is controlled by the remote. The volume is controlled by a dimmer-like switch on the wall. In spite of how complicated this sounds, they said the basic system—playing music, and watching movies and operas—is relatively simple. Findlay said, “The only drawback to the system is... we’re very busy people and it’s complicated. It does a lot of things we haven’t used yet.”

Bush said, “I’ve just learned about hooking in the camcorder, so we can make, and edit, our own home movies.”

Findlay admitted, “I haven’t taken the time to learn... to use all the options.”

“What would you do differently?” I questioned.

Findlay answered first. “I’m not sure there’s much we’d do differently. But part of the expense of the system was the satellite and we don’t use it much.”



“We went from seven channels. We don’t want 500 channels; we don’t watch much,” Bush added.

“It may have been better to have cable.” Findlay said. “The satellite is most troublesome—the dish gets stuck... There’s real maintenance... Also, I might have put speakers out on the front patio.”

“Do you love it?”

An emphatic “Yes” from both of them.

The net impression I get from all these people is that they use their home theaters, all in different ways, but these customers have systems that are tailored to their needs and lifestyles and they all couldn’t be happier.

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