

Lamorinda OUR HOMES

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The Home Designer

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Home Theater: Sound and Pictures All Around You

By Cathy Dausman

Seventy years ago, a voice from the Technicolor screen proclaimed “there’s no place like home!” If Dorothy was discussing home theater today, then the technical innovations would be the Wizard of “aahs!” Home theater has travelled light years since mid-century families first gathered around a flickering, black and white cathode ray tube image pulled in by rabbit ear antennas.

Today’s home theater experience is a full-immersion of sight, sound and sub-woofers. But home theater is a broad term, and its installation is often as much art as it is science, says Sound Works owner Andrew Norleen of Moraga. He says a home theater system can be as simple as five speakers, an amplifier and a TV screen. He also says that receiver/amplifiers have undergone such an evolution recently that he considers them the heart of the system.

Just what defines home theater? Paradigm Integration Vice President Kerry Blessing says the current customer trend “is toward large flat panel TV 60 inches or more, with surround sound. The larger image gives you a more compelling and immersive ‘head turning’ experience, meaning your whole body tracks the action, not just your eyes.”

Digital sound comes encoded in Dolby, THX or EFX. Your sound system must be set to decode one of those systems. Blessing says “you can get amazing sound” from a 5.1 speaker sound system. In the 5.1 system, three speakers are placed left, center and right on a plane even with the viewing screen. The fourth and fifth speakers reside behind the viewing area. A subwoofer addition (the “.1” in the system) reinforces bass sounds. Additional side speakers along the length of the room would create a 7.1 or 9.1 system, and put everyone in the middle of the sound action.

There are two options for the visual portion of the home theater experience. While most families build a “family room” theater with a giant flat panel screen in a multi-use room,



One click on the remote switches the TV to a projector and rolls down a large screen.

Photos Andy Scheck

a truly cinematic experience – and one Blessing cautions comes with a much higher price tag – involves creating a dedicated theater room with full light control and two-piece viewing system of ceiling projector and wall screen.

Those very different technologies really come down to a lifestyle choice, she says. Is a home theater high on the “need or want” list for home buyers? Not really, says Alain Pinel realtor Diane Reilly, even in the higher price range homes. It is more important, she says, that the great room, family room or living room have a wall large enough to accommodate a big screen TV (50 inches or more) positioned for good viewing.

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