

Home Theatres



MICHAEL STUPARYK/TORONTO STAR

Greg Seligman and his son, Billy, enjoy the entertainment experience that can only be had from a 123-inch plasma screen, part of a custom-designed, total-home, audio-video system that cost \$150,000.

Bringing home a lot of magic

The buttered popcorn is warm on your lap. The big white screen begins its slow descent. The house lights dim and surround-sound music swirls as the credits begin to roll. Suddenly, you're transported by old-fashioned movie magic.

But this trip to fantasyland isn't happening at your local megaplex. Instead, it's in the comfort of your own home theatre.

And these days, home theatres are much more than a big TV and a sound system with good speakers. Viewers want movie-quality pictures and concert-hall-quality sound, all in a nice tidy package.

Enter Sound Designs, a high-end audio-video store and showroom in Toronto's Distillery District. For a price, they'll custom-design, wire, install and equip an entire house for music and video, lighting, heating vents, blinds and home security, says co-owner Andrew Ellbogen.

All the electronic hardware — stereos, CD players, DVD players, etc. — can be tucked away in a single room, with their tentacles shooting out into each room through wired circuitry.

Sound Designs recently completed a custom system for Greg Seligman's new house in Forest Hill — for a cool \$150,000. Included in the price were two plasma screens: a 42-inch model in the family room and a 123-inch monster in the basement home theatre.

Despite the eye-popping prices, Ellbogen says his company can hardly keep up with demand, even with seven full-time installers and a programmer.

Sound Designs installs more than 40 custom entertainment systems a year. The wiring in Seligman's house was done while the house was still under construction, but the company also does custom work for existing homes — which takes three to four weeks.

Seligman, head of G.E.S. Construction, builds high-end cus-

tom homes for a living. He uses Sound Designs' services for his clients, since custom entertainment systems "are standard in houses of that calibre."

So, naturally, he thought of Ellbogen when he built his own house.

The pièce de résistance in Seligman's house is the \$50,000, 18- by 23-foot theatre in the basement, with its huge drop-down screen operated by a stand-alone remote control.

A 42-inch plasma screen, complete with a wireless master control tablet that doubles as a computer, hangs as demurely as a framed painting above the main-floor family room fireplace. Smaller flat-screen TVs pepper the rest of the house, including one in the gym.

The simple touch of a wall panel, or the click of a mouse on one of the home computers, brings radio or CD sounds to any room, as well as controlling lights and security features.

Top-end system? Get technician for set-up

PAUL IRISH
STAFF REPORTER

If you're going to lay down big bucks for a home theatre system, it should be operating on all cylinders.

That might even mean installing comfy movie seats with drink holders so your favourite flicks can be enjoyed in total comfort.

"If you're going to do it, do it right," says Paul Bernard, retail manager at Sound Designs. "You're investing a lot, so you should make sure you're getting everything out of the system you can."

But, to the dismay of installation technicians, there are still myriad audio-visual sins being

"There's a learning curve, but the system is very user-friendly," Seligman says.

An early evening tour of the house finds Max Seligman, 14, and his friend, Jared Beber, ensconced in the cozy home theatre. It has two long couches and a pair of dark leather recliners. The walls are finished in a special acoustical material to enhance sound quality.

Ironically, the boys aren't glued to the big movie screen. They're sitting at a table and playing Texas hold 'em poker with an ordinary deck of cards.

Meanwhile, in the main-floor study, Billy Seligman, 11, works at his computer. In the background, The Band plays "Up on Cripple Creek," selected from the family's CD collection using the computer.

The study, like the rest of the house, is uncluttered.

The back of the desk doesn't drip with the usual tangle of cables. No power cords slink across

bare floors or hide under rugs.

The wiring is buried neatly behind the drywall, and speakers are embedded in the ceilings. The electronic components, including CD player, amplifiers, processors, music server, cable box, radio and power protectors, are stacked neatly in a tall, narrow rack in a basement utility room.

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Luke Vostermans, consultant

Ellbogen realizes most people can't afford this degree of home entertainment sophistication, Sound Designs offers "one-room solution" set-ups, which take only a couple of days to install.

These systems fit into spaces as small as 14 by 10 feet and cost \$15,000 to \$20,000, depending on the quality of the compo-

nents. That gets you a 50-inch plasma screen TV, speakers, amplifier, DVD player and high-definition cable box, plus an armoire to hold the hardware and organize cables. Add another couple of thousand and they'll wire them into the Internet.

Sound Designs' store has fully furnished home theatres and media rooms on display, as does Mississauga-based Trutone, which also installs a range of home entertainment networks.

Trutone project manager Paul Cosentino says his company started selling TVs in 1968 and moved into lifestyle products in a big way eight years ago.

"We made the transition because clients were demanding it," he says.

A system can cost less than \$50,000, Cosentino says, although it could shoot up to as

much as \$1 million.

He says Internet Protocol (IP) wiring is the way of the future, and predicts we'll be using computers more and more to run our homes.

"You could be in the kitchen and use a touch screen in the wall to bring up family photos. You could plug in your iPod and have it instantly display on the monitor," he says.

So what's driving this trend? Cocooning, says Luke Vostermans, a Nova Scotia-based small business consultant who specializes in trends marketing.

People are looking for comfort and security in the face of a scary world, so they're staying home more, he says.

Vostermans also notes that children today expect their homes to be equipped with a high level of technology and stressed-out parents are happy to provide it.

"Years ago, you spent money on a video — if you had any. Now, getting entertainment at home is a must-have situation and no longer tied to disposable income," he says. "These things are just part of the appliances you need to live in this day and age."

This trend can only intensify, Vostermans believes. He says people who lived through the Depression and World War II made do with as little as possible, believing the future belonged to those who saved. But younger generations are more optimistic and spend freely.

That's what Seligman did, even though he says TV isn't important in their household. His sons play serious hockey, basketball and soccer.

"We're never home," he says. "But when we are, it's entertainment. (The technology) changes the quality of the TV experience."

Billy Seligman sums it up simply: "It's cool."

committed in dens and recreation rooms across the GTA.

Bernard says many viewers sit just a few feet from massive screens — their heads bobbing up and down and side to side to catch all the action.

"These people aren't getting the full potential of their system," he says. "They aren't enjoying it as much as they should be."

He admits that setting up a system can be intimidating. He says even the most adept buyer would have difficulty getting the optimum audio and visual effects by simply reading the instruction manuals. "And it would take a lot more than giving out a few tips to do it right."

Every room is different, Bernard says, so ideally you should have a trained technician come to your home to set it up right.

But there are a few basic facts you should know before buying a system.

One of the most important is size. Bigger isn't always better if you don't have the space.

For optimum viewing, Bernard suggests the audience sit back 1.5 to two times times the diagonal size of the screen.

For instance, if you are watching a 42-inch screen, you should be five to seven feet away.

The set-up should also be located in an area where direct light won't hit the screen or in-

terfere with a projected image. Bernard says movies or TV can be watched in total darkness, but if light is desired for safety or convenience, it should be subdued and ambient, emanating from wall sconces.

He says courtesy is always an issue with the rumbling subwoofers — especially if the system is installed in a condo or apartment.

Bernard strongly suggests replacing all the cables that come with your theatre system with upgraded ones, because they offer superior quality in both sound and picture.

He also suggests the viewing room be partially carpeted, to avoid echoes.