



How to create the perfect home theatre

# The great escape

BY: ZAHRA SETHNA

Claude and Lana Hamilton entertain a lot. When the time came to build a new, 13,000-square foot home in Fall River, N.S., they knew a dedicated home theatre for playing Nintendo, taking in the big game, or watching a blockbuster movie was just the ticket.

“When you’re watching football or hockey, a lot of times you’re talking, you might be eating, you want to get up and move around. For movies it’s a different experience,” says Claude, a 38-year-old father of one. “Having a home theatre where you could do all of that was something we always talked about.”

Their 750-square-foot dream room, completed in 2010, features 13 reclining chairs, a bar with high-backed stools for additional seating, built-in cabinetry stocked with candy and treats, and surround sound speakers hidden in the walls and behind the projection screen to mimic a movie theatre experience.

Technology is changing the way we live, work and play at home. Recent advances include 3-D viewing, automated controls for security, lighting and heating, energy-saving lampless LED projectors and Internet-enabled gaming consoles. These technology developments allow for design ideas that save space, hide unsightly cables, and maximize the audio-visual impact of a home entertainment centre in a way that was unimaginable even five years ago.

As the owner of a successful leadership development business, Hamilton was committed to seeing his entertainment vision fulfilled. “When I was building the house, people said you won’t be able to get that kind of quality in Atlantic Canada, you’ll have to go somewhere else.” Sticking to his guns, however, he found what he was looking for in UberHome, a Dartmouth, N.S.-based design and installation company co-owned by Shane and Suzanne Wamboldt.



Home theatres and media rooms have become more accessible and therefore more ubiquitous



Photos: UberHome

“Pre-planning was a big part of it,” Hamilton says. Construction on his house began in 2008, and preparations for the home theatre began immediately. “We knew we had to plan for it in the construction. We met with Shane before the hole was even in the ground.”

Although budget was not his biggest priority, Hamilton said working with a company like UberHome did allow him to get the most “bang for his buck,” as he had expert advice to guide him on how to spend money where it would have the most impact. “If you get somebody who knows what they’re doing, you can save a tonne of money.”

In fact, when it comes to prices, “there’s something out there for every budget,” says UberHome’s Shane Wamboldt. The cost of home electronics has fallen dramatically in recent years; home theatres and media rooms have become more accessible and therefore more ubiquitous, he says. “High-definition TVs are getting bigger and less expensive or you can get a good performing projector and screen for \$2,500 or less, so it is very approachable now.”

**TOP:** Multiple display screens can be distributed throughout the home, including in the bar/lounge, theatre and master bedroom. But all equipment is centrally located and out of sight.

**ABOVE LEFT:** A 138-inch acoustically transparent screen conceals speakers and subwoofers behind it. A specialized projector lens and motorized masking system eliminates black bars when watching movies. All equipment can be easily controlled with a portable touch panel.

**LEFT:** Fortress theatre seating offers seats for several viewers. Each chair has a cup holder and motorized recline for optimal comfort.

While many people are still opting for dedicated home theatres like the Hamiltons did, Wamboldt says he is seeing a rise in open-concept media rooms featuring sectional sofas, bean bag chairs and big pillows—rooms that can serve a number of purposes, easily transforming from a screening room to a place to play games.

An UberHome consultation starts with a series of questions so the team can get to know the client's needs and learn about the family and their lifestyle; for example, how many kids are there, what are their ages, what kinds of movies do they like to watch?

"We talk about keeping sounds in and out," he says, suggesting that soundproofing needs to be more substantial if the media room is directly below children's bedrooms. "You don't want to put in a whole home theatre and then realize you can't turn up the volume when the kids are in bed."

Storage is another consideration, and one that led Pamela Thoms to construct a built-in entertainment unit for her home in St. Philips, N.L. Thoms and her husband moved to Newfoundland from Toronto in the spring of 2012 and were attracted by an entertainment unit in the open-plan home they intended to buy. When they learned the sellers were taking the wall unit with them, the couple began to shop around in local stores for something similar.

"We have speakers built into the wall so we really needed something that could fit within specific dimensions. Also, we have a three-year old and a big thing was having a place to store all her toys," says the 34-year-old dietitian. After several unsuccessful shopping trips, Thoms called in a custom woodworker, Kevin Dunphy, whom she found on the Internet.

"I had the basic concept from what the old owners took with them," Thoms said. "Kevin was really open to talk about my ideas." In addition to storage, Thoms wanted a clean, contemporary space to showcase her collection of art as well as allow room for the family's 40-inch television, stereo equipment and Playstation.

Dunphy created a built-in console of white, engineered wood that consists of open shelving in the upper portion and three lower cupboards with frosted glass doors. The entertainment equipment sits behind the glass so that remote controls can still function when the doors are not open.

The television is mounted in the centre of the unit and surrounded by a removable frame that sits flush with the screen, giving the impression that the TV floats within the unit. The frame is removable for maintenance and cleaning and can scale to allow for a larger television if the family wants to upgrade later.

This kind of convenience and expandability is a hallmark of Dunphy's work. "If clients are

constrained by my design, I haven't done my job," he says.

A 20-year veteran cabinetmaker, Dunphy takes many design cues from his former career working on aircraft interiors. While some people want straight lines and others want flair, Dunphy says almost every client has the same request: keep everything, especially all the wires and boxes, hidden.

"No one wants a smaller TV, but it can overpower a room if it is just hovering over a mantle. Also, we've got all these little boxes—your iPad, laptop, game consoles, DVDs—and people just have to have them, so you're getting more and more stuff to hook up to this TV," he says. Dunphy loves the creative challenge of incorporating all these elements into a room without overwhelming it.

"The bottom line is it has to be well thought-out," he says. "Proper planning is everything." ❄

FEEDBACK

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Top tips for a high-performance home theatre

1. Think about what you watch and how you will use the room.

Why is this important? One major reason is to help decide what aspect ratio (or shape) your screen should be. Movie viewers would benefit from a wider aspect ratio screen, while the standard 16:9 shape gives the largest image for sports nuts and gamers.

2. Don't assume high-performance components translate into a great home theatre experience.

Careful forethought and expertise are required to execute a top-notch home theatre design. An expert will use their specialized knowledge of home theatre acoustics, sound containment, equipment calibration, lighting, screen material selection, installation logistics and control systems to ensure you get the maximum performance out of your components.

3. Don't get hung up on projector specifications.

Projectors are tricky to judge by specifications alone. Pixel resolution and brightness are important, but one of the most important factors is the projector's optic system. The other important ingredient is proper video processing. Sometimes a lower cost projector with an outboard high-quality video processor will look excellent, and may offer performance similar to a higher-end projector that could blow your budget.

4. Don't skimp on the audio system.

Great movie sound is designed to be an immersive movie-watching experience. If your budget doesn't allow for the audio system of your dreams, spend on high-quality subwoofers first. Upgrading this one aspect of the system goes a long way toward an immersive experience.

5. Go bigger than you think you want.

The best advice is to get in front of a screen and go as close as you can without feeling uncomfortable. Measure how far away you are and how wide the screen is. Otherwise, use painter's tape to mockup the screen size on your wall and then sit where your planned seating area will be to see how it feels.

6. The room is everything.

Do not underestimate the importance of your room's shape, dimensions and construction. If you design and build a room that's mathematically "correct" (architecturally speaking), use a high-performance surround sound system with properly located speakers, and use appropriate acoustic treatments and noise isolation techniques. The sound will be amazing.

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