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## The ultimate in home theatre

Prices of high-end systems start at \$250,000 and the sound, not the big picture, makes the largest impact

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When Kelowna entrepreneur and movie buff Rick Jenson wants to show his friends what owning a real home theatre is all about, he fires up the DVD of *Blackhawk Down*.

The spacious theatre's six rear seats have transducers placed under them, so that the chairs actually vibrate with the lower sound frequencies. "It feels like you're in the helicopter itself," said Jenson.

On the 110-inch screen -- perforated to allow speakers to be placed directly behind it -- the colour from the ceiling-mounted projector is clear, clean and sharp. And the surround sound, no matter what the scene, is impeccable.

"Some of our friends say this has better colour separation and better sound than any of the theatres in town," said Jenson. "Before this, we had large TVs, but nothing comes close to this experience."

Agreeing with this assessment are Jenson's wife Sharon, who also likes to watch movies, and their 19-year-old son Brian and 15-year-old daughter Michele.

The front seats of the theatre -- designed by Kelowna's Beyond Audio -- are equipped with controls for Xbox and PlayStation video consoles. This means that Brian can have friends over to play games or even compete with others over the Web.

As for the price, Rick Jenson said he wasn't thinking about that when he started out. But he admits he always likes to buy the best.



"The project simply took on a life of its own," he said.

What we're describing here is not your next door neighbor's theatre-in-a-box --toted home from the local electronics outlet. Nor is it something set up by your aunt's boyfriend's cousin who used to be a cable installer and once took a correspondence course in audio.

This is true upper-level home theatre, where prices of \$250,000 are common and climbing -- although they make up only five to eight per cent of the work done for clients by people like Beyond Audio, and their Vancouver rivals Sound Plus and La Scala.

While you can get a something more than a basic home theatre for as little (relatively speaking) as \$15,000 to \$20,000 -- and on up -- it's these showcase jobs that really show what today's technology can do. And each step up the quality ladder means a sizeable jump in cost, said Mark Blackwood custom sales manager at Sound Plus, who has a lengthy track record of award-winning theatre design on the West Coast, including working on a \$600,000 US demo project for Magnolia HiFi (now Magnolia Audio Video) in Seattle.

"To go from the \$20,000 to get a better theatre it would cost you \$40,000," said Blackwood. "And at about the \$250,000 level its a diminishing return -- where you're getting about five per cent more performance and spending over double what you would have for a \$100,000 theatre, to obtain the best."

Surprisingly, while it's initially the size of the screen and the potential for eye-grabbing spectacle that seizes the imaginations of deep-pockets clients, the sound is usually the element that ends up making the biggest impression.

"You go and hear theatre-in-a-box and you think, man, that's great," said Marilyn Sanford, president of La Scala. "But in a dedicated theatre it's an entirely different film. You hear things you never heard before, nuances and footsteps and whispers."

And, said Beyond Audio owner Mike Ohman -- whose company recently was awarded the audio visual contract for the British Columbia Welcome Centre at the Turin Winter Olympics -- it's the audio that clients comment on a year or two down the road.

Recently, he went to visit half a dozen clients whose home theatres he had installed.

"Every single customer, all they could talk about was how good the sound was," Ohman said. "Originally, all they wanted to talk about was how big the picture was going to be."

Ohman tells the story of an experiment by a manufacturer. Two rooms were set up with exactly the same video equipment --including screens of the same size. One room was equipped with a \$1,500 sound system and the other had audio equivalent to the quality of the video.

"Eighty-five per cent of the people said they liked the system with the larger picture -- even though the pictures were identical," Ohman said.

Blackwood, who designs theatres for Intrawest's resort properties, said that surround sound should be diffuse and enveloping so that those in the theatre don't localize where the sound originates. Otherwise, it detracts from the experience.

"Your ears are such finely tuned instruments that you're distracted from what the main purpose of the film is and that's the voice or the dialogue of the movie," he said.

Although not all sound equipment is THX certified -- the standard developed originally by LucasFilms -- the designers use THX as a reference.

"It's sort of the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval," said Blackwood. "If you do the room to the THX specification, you usually have a pretty good sounding room."

When it comes to screens, the industry standard is the Stewart, from the Los Angeles-based company that

provides the screens for the Academy Awards and has been making screens since shortly after movies began to talk.

"Back then they recognized that they were battling poor lighting sources and unevenness of surface and so forth," Owen said. "When they spotted the home theatre thing starting to come on, the needs were the same."

While the Jenson family has a cathode ray tube projector -- necessary when using a perforated screen and still regarded as offering the best picture -- the latest technology for projectors is Digital Light Projection (DLP), developed by Texas Instruments.

"The average projector for us is probably around the \$15,000 to \$20,000 range to really do it well," Sanford said. "A lot of people say, gee, I can go out and spend \$2,000 for a projector or \$100,000. Why would I ever do that if I can get it for \$2,000?"

The answer, she said, is that you need a projector that suits the size of the screen.

"It's horsepower for clarity of the picture and the detail that you're going to get," she said.

Sometimes clients think they know what's best for them in terms of equipment because they've been reading reviews in home theatre magazines, Ohman said.

"Those magazines exist mainly to advertise equipment, so they're not really a great resource. We assess hundreds of products a year, so we're really the first line of defence. We filter out the equipment that doesn't perform as advertised or doesn't have a good track record of reliability"

As well, new clients often have to be discouraged from their obsession with mammoth screen size, said Mark Owen, a Vancouver based manufacturer's representative for home theatre equipment, who also consults with the designers on projects,

"The most common error people make is they say 'I want the 120-inch screen' and the next thing we have to ask is, 'How big is your room?' "Owen said. "And we point out to them that when you go to the movies, you don't choose to sit in the front row.

"There's this tendency to want to go really large, but, you know, that's why you engage a professional designer to assist you."

When it comes to the larger theatres, designers from the likes of La Scala, Sound Plus and Beyond Audio most often work with new houses under construction, where they have a chance to have input from the beginning of the project, some of which have been known to last as long as five years.

This means they can provide the homeowner and the contractor with complete room designs, wiring diagrams, placement of speakers, materials to be used and the like and there are far fewer problems with having to improvise solutions later on.

"Anything to be successful needs to be planned properly in advance," said La Scala designer Patrick Tasci. "You do need to adapt as things change, because they always do, but by having a plan that everyone can follow we can just draw it up on paper and give it to the builder.

"We're not just meeting on site and saying, I need something over here and it needs to be about five feet high." said Tasci. "Honestly, that used to happen."

These days, Tasci said, there's accountability for everyone involved.

"And things tend to be built to a higher standard when there's accountability."

While dedicated theatres -- those self-enclosed spaces devoted entirely to the movie watching and other audio video experiences -- have been the norm for the past few years, fashions are always changing.

Originally, customers went for designs that almost replicated the theatres of the commercial cinema chains,

"Initially, what we were promoting was a miniature professional theatre in a person's home, including theatre seating and even a popcorn machine because it was kind of fun," said Owen. "Some people were doing fake ticket kiosks in their lobby and so forth. They had movie posters up and marquees and so forth." That quickly changed, said Owen,

For one thing customers soon realized that movie theatre seating isn't really all that comfortable. And that mean they started to go for electronically controlled lounge-type seating, where the adjustable chairs can cost from \$2,500 to as much as \$4,000 and designs that can emphasize things like classic wood paneling.

"Now we're into what do I really want and how do I want to watch in my theatre," said Owen" So now we have two, possibly three, incarnations."

The first of these is the dedicated home theatre with adjustable chairs. The second one would be a media room," said Owen. "And the media room we differentiate only slightly because, typically, it's going to be used for more than just watching movies. "You might use it for surfing the Web. You might use it for video games for the teens and pre-teens and you might use it just for regular sports watching and so on." The third category is the multi-use room, where there might be a bar at the rear or a pool table.

"I know some folks who are really heavily into poker and they've put a poker table at the back," Owen said. "Maybe they're watching the Eric Clapton concert, which doesn't require your complete attention. You can look over and say, 'Isn't that a great song or isn't that a great guitar solo and then you can go back to your game."

One of the most important elements of any home theatre these days, say the designers, is the ability of the family -- especially the less technically adept --to actually use it, something that could cause problems in the past.

"The whole process of using the home theatre should be fun, effortless and intuitive" says Ohman.

These days this problem is solved by providing clients with simple-to-use controls that are self-explanatory when it comes to operating the theatre.



The designers, all members of CEDIA -- which certifies those who take its educational courses --emphasize the need to hire someone who knows what they're doing when they put together a home theatre.

"Certification and educational programs can really elevate the market," Sanford said. "We're concerned that there are untrained and inexperienced people out there, and it tarnishes everybody in our industry."

Sanford adds that top-level designers also offer after-market service.

Another necessary element, adds Ohman, is a showroom and full-size demonstration theatres.

"Can you actually demonstrate your work?," said Ohman. "There's a lot of people who can't. It speaks volumes to the dedication people have in the industry if they can recreate the experience for the client before they actually sign a cheque."

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