

Chapter 1

Zen and the Art of Home Theatering

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- * Honey, I shrunk the home theater
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When you hear the term “home theater,” you probably don’t really think much about the actual terms. Someone says, “home theater” to you, and you think big screens, cool sound, expensive boxes, DVDs, CDs, and remote controls @md lots of remote controls @md sitting around your living room. We’re sure that football games, beer, and other fun images sneak into that as well.

It does not matter your type of abode, your economic wealth, or which movies you like, home theater is truly for everyone, and is bound to mean something different to everyone. It’s not just about boxes, cables and remotes, or about disks, records, and cassettes, it’s about all of that, and a bunch more.

As corny as it sounds, home theater is not just a lifestyle, but it’s an adventure.

The Zen of “Home Theater”

We can say all we want about what we think “home theater” means to us, but before we start on our adventure, it’s critical to understand what the makers of the equipment, movies, standards, audio CDs, etc., mean when they say that they are supporting home theater. After all, they invented it and should know.

See, to them, home theater is all about trying to recreate @md at home @md the surreal experience you have when you watch a film in a movie theater, or the cheers of the crowd in a football stadium, or the reverberations of music in an open air concert, or even the coziness of a smoky piano bar. (Yes, indeed, if you are familiar with the woes of “Smell-o-rama” you know they’ve even tried to replicate smells too.)

For all that we consider Hollywood to be the source of gossip and this weekend’s entertainment, there are scores of people who consider what they do to be an art form @md these are usually all the people who are listed in the credits at the end of the movies. These people devote themselves to trying to create an atmosphere and mood in a visual and audio stored medium.

When you hear the music start to get louder as the stupid couple goes into the dark house on Halloween to look for a friend we all know is already dead, or that deep bass bum-bum, bum-bum sound of the shark approaching the swimmers in *Jaws*, they are trying to elicit an emotional response from you.

They want you scared, shocked, teary-eyed, surprised, happy, etc.

So when you hear about a singer spending weeks in a studio recording one song, or about a director issuing the Director’s Cut of a movie, you know that these are the signs that artists are at work.

Take all of this and insert it in your living room, and nothing changes. All the improvements in sound compression, surround sound, digital screen imaging, etc., have been done not to sell more equipment in Circuit City or Wal-Mart, but to try to perfect the ability to suck you into another world where you can experience their piece of work.

Believe it or not, a lot of the more recent improvements in sound quality in theaters today is owed to *Star Wars* @md when that movie first came out in 1977, less than 50 theaters were equipped to play back Dolby Stereo decoding. But the feel of a star cruiser humming over your head and fading into the distance behind you is unmistakable. You feel its mass. You feel the reverberations of its engines. You feel like it just passed over your head and want to duck. Everyone noticed the difference, including movie theater owners. By the time *Star Wars* ended its theater run a year later, more than 2000 movie theaters supported Dolby Stereo.

Star Wars Director George Lucas had accomplished what he set out to do @md make a film that took the art to a new level.

So a lot of this book is about explaining to you the technologies and ideas behind that home theater that you are going to put together

@md because it's not just about seven speakers hooked into your stereo or a big honking TV screen. It's about how to make sure everything is put in its proper place to maximize your home theater out-of-body experience @md the way the media creators intended.

We can't tell you how many people buy equipment and put it together, and find that they don't feel emotionally charged. It's usually because they don't understand what they are trying to accomplish. You're a step ahead of the action because you're reading this book. So prepare to get thrilled! (And teary eyed, and scared, and shocked...)

Home Theater's Many Faces Fit All Kinds of Spaces

You've probably watched enough old TV shows and movies about Hollywood and the rich and famous, to know that, for some people, home theaters are as common as a kitchen or a bedroom. Indeed, home theaters were spawned out of the necessity of those working on the films to preview footage, screen tests, and full movies. They gradually grew to be a status symbol among actors and actresses too, and spread out from there. Anybody that's anybody has a home theater, right?

In those early days, a home theater was pretty much literally that, with Peerless Magnarc carbon-arc lamphouses and theater seating. They were often extensive and elaborate affairs @md to match the surrounding house.

Today, you too can get into the act, and you're lucky enough to have a broad range of projectors, screens, displays, seating, equipment @md heck, even popcorn machines @md to create your own home theater.

Probably the first big decision you'll have to make is where you want to put your home theater environment. It was one thing to figure out where to put your 19-inch TV set, it's another thing to think about where to put a big-screen TV with six speakers and associated A/V gear. No matter how well you plan and think about it in advance, few people are prepared for how overpowering a full home theater setup can be in a small home.

So defining our space for home theater is a necessary first step. If the only place to put a TV is on the mantle above the fireplace, then you're looking at a plasma screen TV option and not much else. If you have to fit this into the corner of the living room, then that narrows the search as well.

Remember, home theater is what you make of it, and what you want it to be for your lifestyle. Just as your mom probably told you when you were a kid, “Don’t try to be something you’re not,” you don’t want to try to buy a home theater that is just not going to fit into your home and your lifestyle. A home theater is all about creating a surround atmosphere, and so pick your spaces, and let’s work from there.

You can most certainly put a home theater in your present living room, or in your bedroom, or in a room devoted just to this application. In the end, what matters is not so much the size, but the way you establish its ability to coax you to into is sound field and video experience @md that’s what matters, and it can be done (if done right) anywhere in your house.

One theme of this book, which draws from our experiences in real life, is that you want to make full use of your home theater investment, so you might find that you have a couple of mini home theaters in addition to your big bang in the living room, for instance. We’ll talk about a smart home @md one that enables you to make efficient and smart use of your assets all over the home. (For more on this, check out our book, *Smart Homes for Dummies* . It’s very applicable to Home Theater enthusiasts.)

Honey, what about in the den?

Home theater gear comes in all shapes and sizes, so there’s almost no place in your home where a home theater won’t make sense (and yes, even in the bathroom, as we point out in Chapter 24!)

If you are cramped for space, consider smaller more integrated units that combine several pieces of A/V gear into one box. Many companies offer all-in-one devices that integrate a receiver and DVD player in a single component. Companies like Bose (www.bose.com) specialize in great sound in small packages. You can think about storing your music on your PC and wirelessly linking it to your receiver, for instance.

Have a little more space than that? Consider getting some home entertainment furniture @md we discuss this in detail in Chapter 23 @md and load into it your receiver, VCR, DVD player, and your cable or satellite set top box, if you have one. If there’s room, throw in a game console.

As you get into more space @md even up to the ultimate, a home theater with its own room @md you can do more in terms of size, accessibility, and spatial coverage. Now, that 42-inch plasma starts to look good with all the specialized audio and video gear, plus a place to store all of your CDs, DVDs, VHS and

cassette tapes, and laserdiscs, if you've got them. You can consider larger floor standing speakers, and deeper TV sets.

Think about the places you feel most comfortable in. There's NOTHING wrong with having a TV monitor in the kitchen with its own set of speakers, or having sound piped into the bathroom for nice soothing baths. A home theater is supposed to match your lifestyle, not change it.

Above all, consider housing a lot of the less frequently accessed gear in another place, like a well-ventilated closet or less used area. It does not all have to fit right on top of the TV set! We talk in Chapter 2 about the concept of a wiring closet to centrally house a lot of your 'stuff.' So read on!

Budgeting for Home Theater

We believe in setting expectations. We don't want to get you salivating over a 42 inch plasma and a nice harmon/kardon system, and then smack you over the head with an unrealistic price. Unfortunately, a quick stroll through any consumer electronics store will set your expectations that you can get a whole home theater in a box for just \$299! And that \$299 system will be right for some people and not for others.

So what does it cost to get into a home theater system?

Table 1: Budgeting: Getting into Home Theater

<i>Role</i>	<i>Device</i>	<i>Price Expectations</i>
Audio Sources	Tape Cassette Player*	\$100-\$800
	CD Player/Recorder*	\$60-\$600+
	Turntable*	\$100-\$5,000+
(really!)	AM/FM Tuner*	\$200-\$1,000
Video Sources	DVD Player	\$50-\$1,200+
	VCR*	\$50-\$1,000
	Personal Video Recorder*	\$200-\$1,000
	Satellite System*	\$100-\$800
Computer/Gaming	Gaming Console*	\$150-\$200
	Media Center PC*	\$1800+
A/V System**	All-in-one systems	\$200-\$3,000+

	A/V Receiver	\$100-\$4,000
	Controller/Decoder	\$800 - \$5,000+
	Power Amplifier	\$500+
Speakers	Surround sound speakers	\$150+
	Rear surround sound speakers*	\$100+
	Subwoofer speakers*	\$150+
Video Display***	27 to 38+” direct-view tube TV	\$200-\$3,000
	Up to 65+” rear projection TV	\$1,200-5,000
	Up to 120+” front projection TV	\$3500+
	32 to 60+” plasma screen TV	\$3000 - \$15,000+

* Optional

** You don’t need all of these parts, just an all-in-one system, an A/V receiver, or a controller/decoder and power amplifier combo

*** Only need one of these displays

Certainly you don’t need all the gear in Table 1. You can buy a nice all-in-one Home Theater system and a relatively big-screen direct view (picture tube) TV for not much more than \$500. Of course, you buy a lot more for more money too. One thing is for sure @md pricing is competitive and changing all the time. Two years ago, a lot of the gear listed above cost twice as much as it does as we write. As we go to print, the first plasma screen TVs for under \$3,000 were hitting the market.

<Tip>

To get a quick grasp on pricing, go to a few Web sites, like www.circuitecity.com and www.plasmatvbuyingguide.com to just get a sense of the going rate for different items. Scroll up and down and check out different sizes and prices, to get a feel for what costs what today. Compare that with the above chart, and get a sense of how much pricing has dropped @md 10%? 20% 30%? In any case, use that percentage discount as a rule of thumb as regards pricing in this book, because pricing always is going down.

Given you are probably working within a budget, here are some ideas about what you can expect to buy and install for different total budget ranges:

* **\$0-500:** Definitely the entry level package for home theater, the \$0-\$500 range will basically use your existing TV (or include an inexpensive TV in the 27inch range), and an entry level all-in-one home theater system package (which comes with speakers and receiver/DVD player combo). You can probably

throw in a \$50 VCR if you don't already have one, but even the lowest level all-in-one home theater sets have DVD players included. (Gotta have DVD!)

- * **\$500-\$2,000:** By spending a little more, you can go up range in a number of the components. You can get up to 36-inch model TVs for \$400 or so more than the average price 27-inch versions. You could even start into a rear projection TV, as they start around \$1,200 for a 40-52-inch TV. There are a range of options for better surround sound systems in this price range, with packaged options available for your five surround sound speakers plus your subwoofer. And you can buy a fairly good A/V receiver to drive the system.
- * **\$2000-\$5,000:** At this level, you start to create serious options for a very decent home theater system. The lowest cost plasma screens are under \$3,000, and accompanying mid-range all-in-one systems can be in the \$2,000 area. High definition-ready rear projection TVs can be had for a bit more than \$1500. At this price level, you can also start to get serious with separate components, getting a very good A/V receiver, DVD/CD player/recorder, personal video recorder, gaming system, surround sound speakers, and potentially even more. At this price range, the average person can get a mighty fine system.
- * **\$5,000-\$10,000:** Once you top \$5,000 as your budget, you now can start expanding in some wonderful ways, either adding more throughout the house through multi-zone capabilities, whole home audio, and universal remote control capability. Or, you can continue to go up the ladder in terms of higher quality separates. We swear by audio servers that store all your CDs in one box. Front projection becomes a viable option here, as good projectors start around \$4,000. High definition TV (HDTV) units would fall in this budget range too. Or, you can start to get fancy with furniture and chairs. Home theater seats, good ones, start around \$350 each. A high quality universal remote control will run \$500.
- * **\$10,000+:** Above \$10,000, the sky is truly the limit. For \$10,000-\$20,000, you get to enjoy a lot of the next generation of home theater. Your TV and VCR should be HDTV-capable. Your DVD player should be top of the line. You will probably have some extra amplifier equipment in the system. And, you'll want to boost your controls, like a nice Crestron wireless touch screen control. If you get above \$20,000, you are into high-end, audiophile type stuff, all the way. Whole home audio and video, integration with home automation systems, consultants, the works. Believe it or not, it is not unusual for people to spend \$1 million or more on a home theater. At that point, we think a lot of money is being paid for custom interior design, top-of-the-line projectors, etc. Nothing is held back. To us, given more

modest expectations, a \$25,000 system is stunning in almost all senses of the word.

Getting your money's worth

In deciding how much to spend overall, we can only give you this advice: your home entertainment system is probably one of the most used parts of your home. It helps define your family, social life, business relationships, and so on. It's important.

But spend within your means, and as we said before, save something to do for the future. Building and growing a home theater is fun too.

One of the great things about home theater is that it is very modular @md meaning you can approach it in parts. You don't have to buy the whole thing all at once. If you really want a great TV display, get it, and go cheaper on the other components. And when you are ready to trade up, figure out what you want next. The better stereo stores will have a trade up policy that gives you credit towards getting something better. And then there's always eBay (www.ebay.com) or similar auction sites where you can get all sorts of gear in great condition @md everyone is always trading in stuff to move to higher levels, so don't feel total pressure to do it all at once. Pat's been waiting for HDTV pricing to get to just the right sweat spot before plunking down his salary.

Realize that even if you are installing home theater wiring and speakers into the walls and such, you're not likely to 'get that money back' when you sell the house. People are leery of other people's home-grown solutions, and even the professional ones. Things date quickly in this industry.

So if you are going to do some remodeling and spend some money, recognize you are doing it for yourself first, everyone else second, and by all means not for the money.

Finally, remember it's not what you buy, it's how you use it. We're both of modest means, although Pat is a little more modest around the waist than Danny, and neither of us is looking to spend our next year's salary on the next larger plasma screen TV set that hits the market. But we do like to have extensive and well-used home theater gear in our houses. And by well-used, we mean getting our money's worth out of the system.

Indeed, a lot of this book is about getting your money's worth out of whatever you buy. If you get an all-in-one home theater system for \$299 from Radio Shack, or a high end system with, say, a \$60,000 Madrigal projector, \$18,000 worth of MartinLogan Prodigy speakers, a \$4,000 B&K Receiver, and other similar pricey (but well

worth it) components, you're still going to need to figure out how to get the most out of the system. So stay tuned to find out how to get more per kHz, or disc, or channel, or whatever you track your home theater fun by.