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home theaters the smart home
subterranean splendor

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The Smart House

BY NENA DONOVAN LEVINE, ALLIED MEMBER ASID

There's still no device to make your bed each morning, but can one be far away?

WHEN MY SON WAS SIX YEARS OLD he performed some feat that astonished me. (Lo, these many years later, I don't remember what.) I later recounted it to my mother, sighing, "I always knew he'd be smarter than me ... I just thought I had more time."

While there *is* more time before your house becomes smarter than you, consider this moment your technological reveille. The brains behind the custom electronics industry are shrinking your "time remaining" portion as they raise the I.Q. of domiciles everywhere.

A stunning home theater, the more so because it is a retrofit. A motorized screen attaches to the ceiling, concealed in the soffit and crown molding; it descends for movie viewing (the projector is hidden at the back of the room). Plasma art over the mantel conceals a 42-inch plasma TV, and the fireplace remains a focal point.

PHOTO BY WILLIAM J. PSOLKA



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BEFORE

The before photo shows a projector mounted at the ceiling and conventionally mounted draperies. In the transformed room (left), the projector is concealed in the crown molding. The room also features paneling beneath a chair rail and upholstered walls above for better sound control.

PHOTO BY WILLIAM J. PSOLKA



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Photos above show the aftermath — meaning “after a lot of math.” All calculations for millwork and electrical connections must be exact to achieve an installation this complicated. The shades and screen are motorized, and the technology is hidden: sound processor, video processor, power amplifier, and HD receiver are all located in a rack on a lower level. The DVD and VHS are in an adjacent room.



Above: The projector is hidden in a new soffit with dentil molding. When “projector” is selected on the control unit, the screen descends, lights dim, shades close, and the projector door opens. The molding just under the soffit conceals a motorized drapery rail. **Below:** The plasma TV “displays” horses as art. Different options from Media Décor allow you to conceal the television with art or with a mirror at the touch of a button.



Technology: A Double-Edged Remote

Remember how the _____ would definitely free up time? Fill in the blank with your own electronic wonder or choose from this list: typewriter, fax machine, minicomputer, laptop, Blackberry, iPhone. As technology proliferates, simplifying our lives becomes an increasingly seductive goal, one we chase using a still newer, time-saving, electronic device. What is wrong with this (HDTV) picture?

In fact, the more powerful and sophisticated the technology, the easier we want the learning to be. Make that “operating,” since we mostly don’t want to learn it — we just want to use it. We shave a razor-thin sliver off our time block, maybe less time than it takes to unpack the product, and scan the quick-start guide. Some of that impatience is born of the deep-seated suspicion we’ll never master it anyway. “It” is too complicated, unnecessarily so.

It’s Getting Better

Recent signs point to improvement. “Ultimately, the technology is about the solution and not about the technology itself,” Tim Woods, vice president of ecosystem development for the Internet Home Alliance Research Council in Canada, said recently. As the industry gives more thought to the end user, smart companies now employ systems integrators and custom electronics designers, those who define, then design. They identify the technology that does what you want and build the user-friendly system to provide it. Then they ensure it is optimally installed.

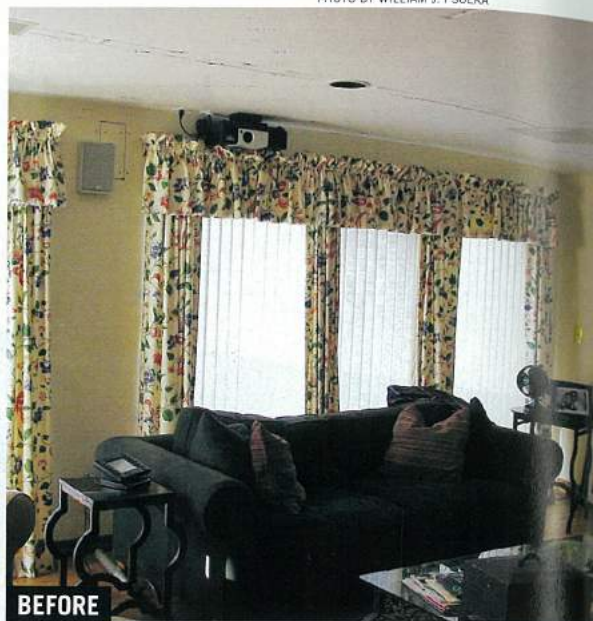
Nick Lehotzky, marketing manager at Electronics Design Group Inc. (EDG) in Piscataway, wants homebuilders to meet “as early as possible” with a systems integrator. He says wireless technology has “extremely robust” applications today, such as Lutron’s lighting systems, but there are still compelling reasons to run structured wiring, and those wiring decisions come early in the home design process.

Thinking Inside the House

What can these smart systems now rule? Entertainment in its myriad, burgeoning forms; work-at-home career options; household systems (lights, heat, security, window coverings); and communication/convenience (family calendars, messages). A single system to control entertainment and information seems as obvious as it is use-



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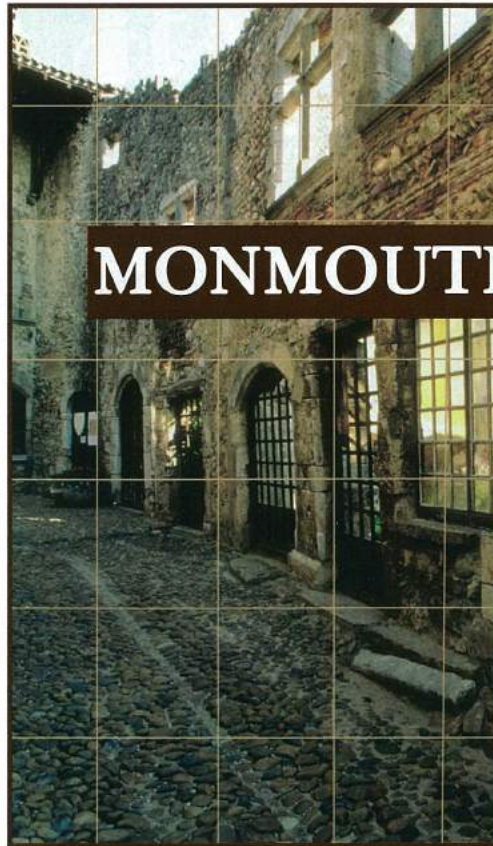
PHOTO BY WILLIAM J. PSOLKA

ful, yet it is a recent marriage.

Today's best systems are scalable, meaning able to handle add-ons down the road. Pre-scalable systems (much of what is out there now) are known as "legacy" systems, says Craig Spinner, director of marketing at Savant in Osterville, Massachusetts. Adding new hardware to such a system can be a frustrating adventure, often one that gobbles up hours of expensive programming. The purposeful integration of hardware, software, and installation are crucial to scalability. Savant Systems, with its own hardware and its Linux-based software, often teams up with Avix Systems, for example, which customizes and installs the systems.

EDG has engineers on staff and does its own installs, but only after building the racks (controllers for various subsystems) in-house, then testing them on-site, ideally before the client moves in. Lehotzky says the company has honed its "define-design-test-install" process over twenty years, which may explain why EDG is a 15-time winner of the Electronic Lifestyles Award presented by CEDIA (the Custom Electronic Design & Installation Association, a professional group established nearly twenty years ago to provide certification, continuing education, and resources to electronics professionals). In 2007 the Consumer Electronics Association gave EDG its "Luxury House of the Year" award.

Another option is the Life|ware 2.0 software from Exceptional Innovation. This software partners with Microsoft Windows Vista Media Center; in concert the two run systems and entertainment in a Smart House. Remotes, in-wall touch screens, and ultra-mobile PC screens are some control devices homeowners can use to browse on-screen Life|scenes. These "scenes" are simply owner-selected, diverse commands that can be grouped and activated using a single *uber*-command. For example, "Goodbye" would turn off lights, audio, and TVs; lower the



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thermostat; activate the security system; close the blinds; and so on. A strength of this system is its simple remote control: six buttons total.

Life|ware is "hardware agnostic," marketing coordinator Andrea Ison says. It will shake hands nicely with hardware from a long list of vendors that are Life|ware-certified. It does

this via its WSD feature (web services for devices), software bridges that make it open-ended and scalable.

A home system's racks may be out of sight because sightlines from remote to device are often no longer needed. Visible or not, hardware is getting more elegant. One example is Savant's single-hand remote, with iPod-like

scrolling ability. The user navigates through on-screen choices, allowing for a "heads-up" technology. This replaces the "head-bobbing" technology: peer down at tiny buttons and teensy writing; then up at the on-screen result; repeat as many times as necessary.

Origin of the Species

Why did the Smart House idea start to seem, well, smart? Plenty of reasons. Personal computers and miniaturization demolished traditional office walls, allowing us to work from anywhere. Companies recognized the benefits of employee telecommuting. Homes grew, or redeployed space, to contain offices. "Office" technology, such as image projection, was repurposed into home theaters. (After all, it wasn't the technology that had put limits on where it could be used.)

Larger homes cry out for centralized, efficient, integrated management of entertainment and operating systems. Then, too, there can be some of the "wag the dog" mentality among so-called early adopters: If there are more, newer electronics out there, these people want to find a place for them. Nick Lehotzky says home theaters are currently the most requested systems at EDG.

Who Is the Market and Where?

If you answered high-net-worth homeowners, those with upscale homes, and those excited by the technology, you are correct.

If you surmise it's preferable to design the Smart House when it's constructed rather than retrofitting it, you have nailed it, though retrofits are absolutely doable.

If you anticipate there is no way to talk cost because systems vary so much, you win the Triple Crown.

Wrap-Up

Even electronics experts work in teams because no one person today knows it

PHOTO COURTESY OF ELECTRONICS DESIGN GROUP



Smart House technology has aesthetic benefits too. One small control center (above) now handles what used to require three devices (top).

all. Lehotzky suggests letting CEDIA (www.cedia.org) vet the choices out there. Other suggestions for getting smart include:

- Ask your friends/neighbors about their systems (maybe you can finagle an invitation to see a movie in their home theater.)
- Be upfront about your budget, schedule, any other parameters. Then let the professional get you the best system possible. **ENR**

Nena Donovan Levine is an allied member of the American Society of Interior Designers, a writer, and owner of N Design in West Hartford, Connecticut. She wrote about universal design in the June/July and August/September issues and about green design, also in the August/September issue. © 2007 Nena Donovan Levine.



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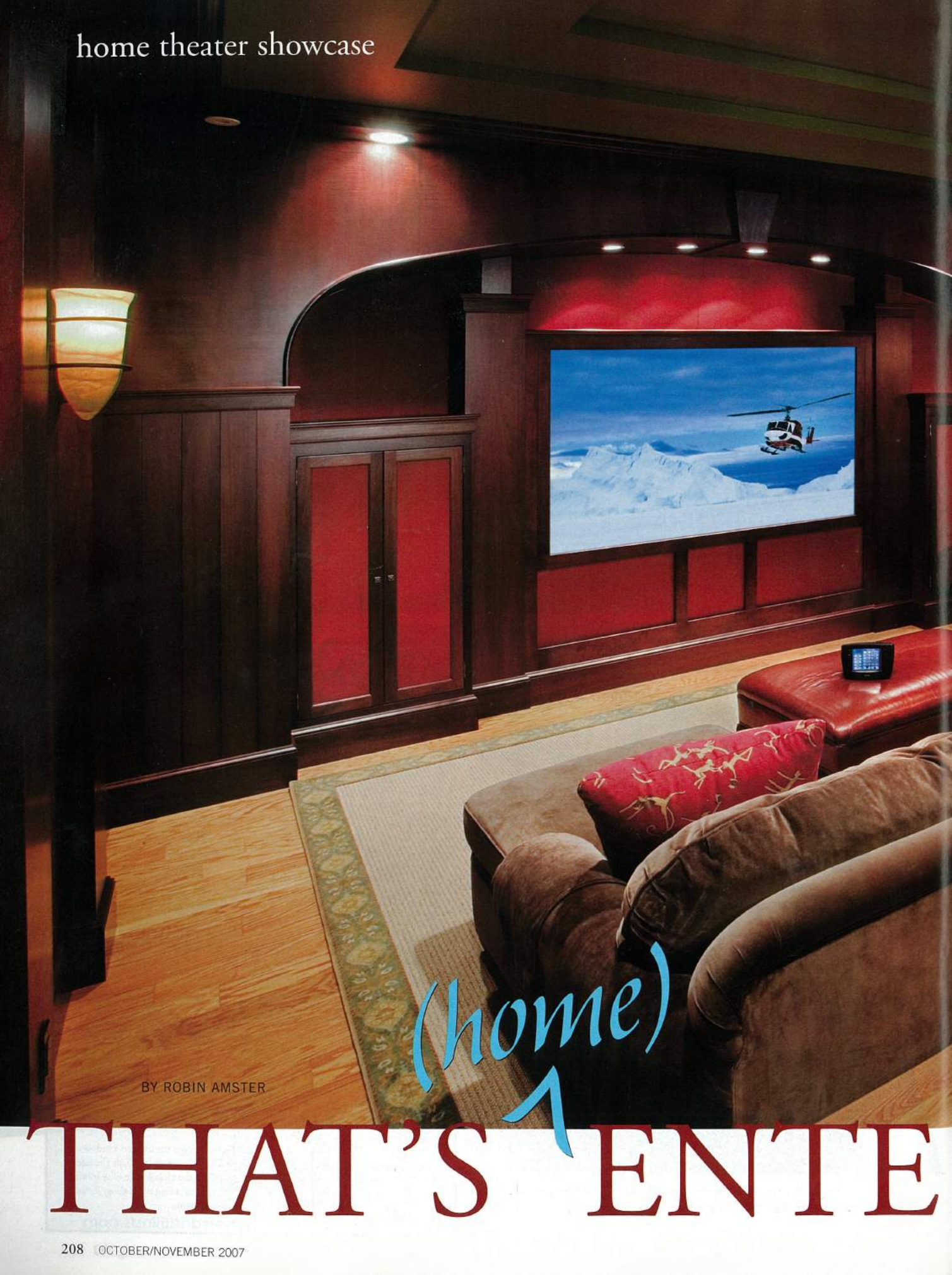
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BY ROBIN AMSTER

(home)

THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT

There's no place like home.

When it comes to entertainment, that familiar slogan is proving true for a growing number of New Jersey homeowners. For them watching a movie or sporting event at home on a big screen — with theater-quality audio and video — is just the ticket. And there's no shortage of electronics companies and interior designers who combine technology and fantasy to make it all possible.

PROBLEM SOLVER

Rumson homeowners couldn't enjoy their home theater because the sound could be heard elsewhere in the house. To solve the problem, they built an addition and moved the theater to a room built within another room in that addition. Materials that isolate sound vibrations were applied to the walls, and a dedicated heating and cooling zone was created for the theater. "We wanted to design it so the theater could be used at any time of the day or night," says Joe McNeill, senior systems consultant with Electronics Design Group. The client wanted "ultra-high performance," he adds, so EDG installed a loud-speaker system with an amplifier built right into the speaker and a dual-mirror rear-projection system that provides clear images even with all the lights on. The look of the theater, especially in the woodwork and lighting, echoes the Arts and Crafts style of the home, interior designer Elaine Spero says. The fabric on the acoustical panels is dark red, while the ceiling is apple green. A velvet sectional, which provides seating for eight, sits on a khaki wool sisal rug with a red and green border. The alabaster sconces have wrought iron accents.

SOURCES: design and installation, Electronics Design Group in Piscataway; interior design, Elaine Spero Custom Decorating in Atlantic Highlands; architecture, Jay D. Measley Architects in Red Bank; builder, Faust Contracting in Long Branch; sectional, Kravet in Bethpage, New York; rug, Parigian Group in Marlboro; lighting, MSK Illuminations in New York City.

RTAINMENT!