

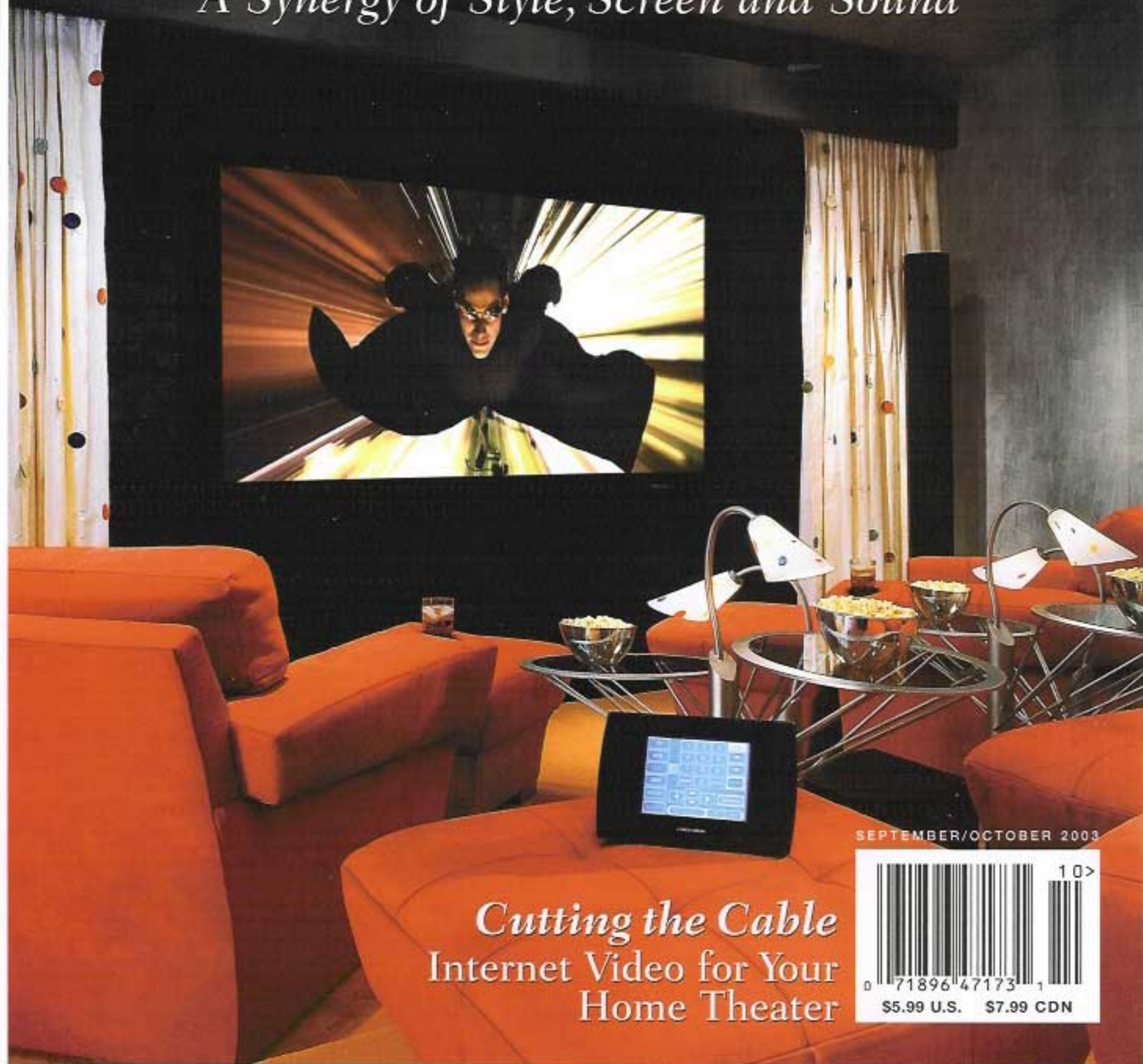
Robb Report

Home Entertainment & Design

CUSTOM AUDIO/VIDEO, AUTOMATION
TECHNOLOGY, LIFESTYLE & INTERIORS

FILM TAKES FLIGHT

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SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2003

Cutting the Cable
Internet Video for Your
Home Theater





INTO THE WOODS

A SPEC HOME IN A WOODED NEW JERSEY DEVELOPMENT IS TRANSFORMED INTO A CUSTOMIZED HIGH-TECH WONDER WORLD FOR A CEO WHO WORKS HARD AND PLAYS EVEN HARDER.

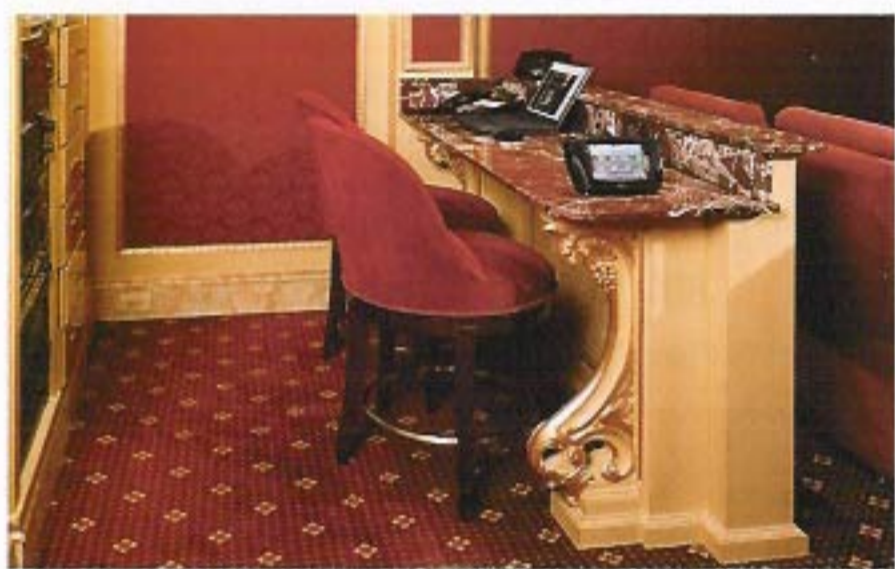
BY JEAN PENN PHOTOGRAPHY BY WILLIAM PSOLKA

Only a tiny portion of the 17,000-square-foot Sampson home is visible from the rustic country road in Franklin Lakes, N.J. Anyone taking a leisurely Sunday afternoon stroll through the woody area has barely a hint of the high-tech, integrated pleasure dome nestled just beyond a thick blanket of oak, elm and pine trees.

Down in the basement, it's a balmy 73 degrees and the setting is tropical. Today, the thermometer hit 25 degrees and the great outdoors is frosted with snow. Graham Sampson—a frustrated 48-year-old architect who owns ECI, a communications company that provides audio conferencing and web collaboration services—is floating on a raft in his indoor swimming pool, heated to a cozy 87 degrees, and is enjoying a Sunday football game on his 90-inch motorized video projection screen.

Upstairs, in the gleaming gourmet kitchen, Linda, 43, is feeding their three dogs and cat, and is planning dinner. She clicks on the all-in-one remote (just like the one Ozzy Osbourne can't operate on MTV's *The Osbournes*), sees her husband in the pool and giggles. Every Sunday afternoon, like clockwork, he jumps in for a swim and to watch a little football. Tonight, the two of them will take a dip and take in another episode of one of their favorite shows, *The Sopranos*.

Linda checks in on some of the other newly added rooms in the lower level of their resort-like home, again, with a click of the remote. Their three daughters are playing in the plush eight-seat theater, the scene of a recent sleepover party. In the back is a bar designed by Graham that allows him to watch an NBA bas-



"People are amazed at the technology and integration in our home. Nothing was designed with a lot of flash. It's designed so the technology can be enjoyed, but you can't see it."

—Graham Sampson, homeowner

NO PH.D. REQUIRED: All of the home's high-end gadgetry is easier to use than the typical office copy machine.

ketball game, enjoy a sandwich and read his e-mail or surf the Internet at the same time (Graham oftentimes hosts his executive team meetings in this flexible meeting center, where he can conduct Web tours and make PowerPoint presentations from his laptop). Early on, the karaoke system was christened by the kids and some neighborhood moms.

Their son, 25, who has brought home some of his buds on this visit, hangs out in the billiard room. Here, Graham also designed the cabinetry and hardware reminiscent of Scotland's St. Andrew's Golf Club. The furniture consists of expert reproductions of that in the St. Andrew's clubhouse.

Linda clicks the remote of the intercom system, which is woven throughout every room in the house, and asks: "How does Chinese sound for tonight?" Everyone confers and agrees, so she quickly orders takeout.

Like many who have the wherewithal to do so, Linda and Graham enjoy altering reality. While their outside world may be at the mercy of Old Man Winter at times, indoors they check into an entertainment-filled resort world of swimming pools and palm trees, theaters, billiard rooms and workout rooms—all dependent on technology that is cleverly concealed, but works like magic.

To achieve that world they called on John Bleeker, a well-known local architect, and Joe McNeill and his team of high-end residential system integrators from Electronics Design Group Inc. (EDG), based in Piscataway. Interior designer Sydney Roberts, of Covington Designs in Franklin Lakes, was also called upon, as well as a small battalion of craftsmen and building trade workers, led by a general contractor. Graham, not surprisingly, orchestrated the entire show, down to selecting the fabric for the sofa, the decorative items in the house, as well as the finish on the floors.

Graham Sampson wanted top-of-the-line equipment everywhere, but he didn't want to see anything tecky "hang out like a wart." The Genelec speakers are concealed within the theater's grand columns; the Sony CRT projector hides in the gold-finished crown molding. But what makes the theater a winner, says Joe McNeill of Electronics Design Group Inc., is the bar in the back of the room, designed by the owner. "And you don't have to be a rocket scientist to use the wireless control panels," McNeill says. An integrated AMX system controls every function with the simple touch of a menu icon on the wireless color touchscreen.



It took several years to achieve Graham's vision, a \$2-million basement renovation that included the indoor pool, theater, billiard room, gym and a 6-by-8-foot steam room. He also planned two downstairs bathrooms, one for each sex, so visitors, who often arrive in parkas and snowshoes, can quickly change into swimsuits. During the renovation, he refurbished the master bedroom on the main floor, added a library and a separate carriage house (his "cave," he says) that stores his motorcycle collection and a guest apartment—all which boast the same technologies. In a project of this size, frustrations and unanticipated costs are routine. However, Graham relished every minute of the journey and today the Sampson family knows that their renovated "playground" is worth more to them than any amusement park.

It all began in February 1997 when the Sampsons, both longtime New Jersey residents, bought a Sholz Homes spec house in Franklin Lakes, an affluent residential community 22 miles west of Manhattan that ranks high on annual per-capita income lists. Each capacious home centers around its own private, substantially wooded lot of at least one acre. Their property, says Graham, covers three acres and is backed by another 1,000 acres of government-protected woods. Before sketching any blueprint redesigns, they lived in the house for a year and took lots of notes.

Prior to venturing into his current profession of high-tech communications, Graham did interior commercial design installations and construction for retail stores, thanks to four years of architectural drafting he has beneath his belt.



In their 23 years together, Linda has seen her husband through many home projects, including their summer home in Mantoloking Shores. "This house is large," she said of her Franklin Lakes home when they first moved in, "but there is not much real living space."

Graham, not surprisingly, was eager at the time to jump-start the renovation, and those words were all he needed to get going. "I'm fanatical about designing houses for the way people live," he says. "Everything here is done 100 percent, and it's based upon how my life functions in business as well as in our personal lives. My whole thing about technology and living space is that it has to be user-friendly." He spent the next year working on architectural plans with Blecker and obtaining building approval.

"I wanted the indoor pool room to look like it was outside the house," says the homeowner. To that end, "the pillars look as if they are holding the roof of an arbor, but are actually supporting two stories of home," architect John Blecker says. EDG, the systems integrator, added a 90-inch motorized screen and a Sony LCD video projector so the family can enjoy TV, watch DVDs and listen to music while splashing in the pool.

"The planning board had field trips to the property," recalls Graham, who bought a quarter-acre from his neighbor in order to gain final planning commission approval. Construction finally began in July 1999. The family lived in the house through winter and retreated to their summerhouse, as always. The renovation took more than two years.

A big challenge was the indoor pool, says Bleeker, who has been involved in many municipal pool projects. In a private home, however, preventing the chemical smell and humidity from sneaking into the rest of the house is tricky, he explains. With the help of consultants, they designed an addition of doors to seal off the pool area. So that the pool chemicals and humidity don't infringe on the home's interiors, the addition was added to the outer structure, even though the pool and surrounding area look as if they are part of the inside of the home. They also added independent heating and air-conditioning to the space.

The home theater, which centers around a Sony video projector and Stewart 110-inch diagonal screen, reclining theater seats, and lighting and curtain controls, won a 2002



Although the kitchen was not part of the \$2-million renovation, the Sampsons asked Joe McNeill and his EDG team to add an AMX control system with an ELO panel, which allows Linda to monitor all the rooms in the house by remote, and use the screen as a TV. "It's so easy to use—Joe just had to walk me through it on the phone," she says. Enlarging the kitchen is the next project on Graham's list.

"best home theater" award at last year's Custom Electronic Design & Installation Association (CEDIA) annual industry conference. The 8-foot ceilings were raised to nine-and-a-half feet to enlarge the space. To do so, they blasted out the entire floor below; the bottom of the proscenium now sits 24 inches below the main floor.

Graham says he spent upwards of \$225,000 for the theater, once all the technicalities were ironed out. Acoustic panels from Acoustic Smart of Merrick, N.Y., were installed

TECH TALK: THE SAMPSON HOME

As beautiful as the home of Graham and Linda Sampson may be, preserving the look presented the most minor challenges of this installation, according to Joe McNeill, sales manager for custom installation company Electronics Design Group (EDG), located in Piscataway, N.J.

"The unusual thing about this home is the pool," McNeill explains. "You don't often see a large indoor pool like that. Graham wanted to put a TV in that space, but none of the conventional TVs we considered would give every guest in the room a good view." EDG opted for a Sony LCD video projector with a motorized screen so the picture can be seen clearly from the pool, the bar and everywhere else.

"We chose LCD for the high light output," he continues. "It's bright enough to produce a watchable picture during the day, but at night it looks really good, and they mostly use the pool at night. Since the projector is mounted under the overhang, we can use the Lutron lighting system to light up most of the room while keeping the screen area dark."

Despite the room's size and reverberance, the system sounds pretty good, thanks to the use of high-quality Bowers & Wilkins

outdoor and in-wall speakers. The system is versatile, too. "Graham wanted to listen to whatever is playing on the Sony LCD projector through the speakers in the pool room, and watch a basketball game or something while listening to music," McNeill says. "He can do all this, and control the lighting, through the AMX touchscreen panel."

EDG added AMX touchscreens in the home theater and the kitchen. The kitchen screen—AMX's 20-inch ELO panel—also accesses all of the home's security cameras, and allows the Sampsons to watch video from satellite or DVD on the touchscreen itself.

It's difficult not to be impressed with the performance of the Sampsons' home theater system, which results both from EDG's expert installation and the choice of gear: a Sony CRT video projector, Genelec loudspeakers and a Lexicon surround-sound processor. But for the client, the best part of the theater is the bar and desk that are in the room's rear.

"Graham really likes sitting at the bar when he gets home and watching TV while he checks his e-mail," McNeill reports. *For an in-depth equipment list, please visit www.hedmag.com.* —Brent Butterworth

to ensure that the Genelec active speakers, which have built-in amplifiers, would deliver stellar sound.

McNeill oversaw the audio and video installation, lighting and home automation on the lower and main floors. Graham's corporate computer consultant set up the local network, complete with user terminals in every bedroom, the home office and the kitchen—all of which are networked to a single server.

Not surprisingly, the Sampson family made a big splash to show off their long-awaited home renovations with a pool party, says Linda, for their middle daughter's birthday and about a dozen of her friends, plus all of their parents. A few months later when Super Bowl Sunday arrived on the calendar, they hosted a get-together for about 80 people—a festive event that spilled over into the home theater and outdoors to the climate-controlled pool area.

These days, Graham is taking it easy, but his work on the family "resort" isn't finished. "It's definitely on our mind to redo the kitchen ... make it 5 feet wider and 7 feet longer. And the master bedroom still needs finishing details." For a preferred list of architects and interior designers, please visit our website at www.hedmag.com. [H&D]



To accommodate the pool's steel structure correctly, it was necessary to redo the oddly shaped master bedroom. "It was reconfigured so it was in a more comfortable traffic pattern," Graham says, "and it increased 30 percent in size." Windows open on the eastern side, offering the best natural light possible. The bathrooms, complete with 14-foot ceilings, were renovated at the same time.

RESOURCES

ARCHITECT

Bleeker Architectural Group of Haledon, N.J. (973-942-2100)

CUSTOM INSTALLER

Electronics Design Group of Piscataway, N.J. (732-650-9800)

INTERIOR DESIGNER

Covington Designs of Franklin Lakes, N.J. (201-848-0507)

Theater

Acoustic panels: Acoustic Smart (516-623-5711)

Carpeting: Axminster Carpets (www.axminster-carpets.co.uk)

Custom woodworking: White Eagle Architectural Woodworking (201-785-0892)

Draperies: Acoustic Smart (516-623-5711)

Theater chairs: Acoustic Smart (516-623-5711)

Wood finishing: Martin & Fowler Studio (201-444-8600)

EQUIPMENT RESOURCES

200-disc DVD player: Sony (201-930-1000, www.sony.com)



This \$130,000 bike, one of many in Graham's collection, won "bike of the year" in 2002 from *Vintage Quality* magazine. It took two-and-a-half years to build. He also owns a hand-built custom reproduction of Dennis Hopper's bike from *Easy Rider*.

AM/FM tuner: Rotel (800-370-3741, www.rotel.com)

Amplifiers (for multiroom audio): Sonance (949-492-7777, www.sonance.com)

Audio cables: JSC Wire & Cable (800-572-9473, www.jscwire.com)

CD players: Sony (201-930-1000, www.sony.com)

Ceiling and in-wall speakers:

Bowers & Wilkins (800-370-3740, www.bwspeakers.com)

Lighting control: Lutron (610-282-3800, www.lutron.com)

Multiroom audio switcher: Vaux Electronics (480-354-5556, www.vauxelectronics.com)

Multiroom audio volume controls: Elan Home Systems (www.elanhomesystems.com, 859-269-7760)

Phone system: Panasonic (800-211-PANA, www.panasonic.com)

Racks: Middle Atlantic (www.middleatlantic.com, 973-839-1011)

Satellite receiver: Sony (201-930-1000, www.sony.com)

Screens: Stewart FilmScreen (www.stewartfilm.com, 310-784-5300)

Security cameras: Silent Witness (www.silentwitness.com, 888-289-2288)

Speakers (home theater): Genelec (508-652-0900, www.genelec.com)

Subwoofer (family room): M&K Sound (818-701-7010, www.mkssound.com)

Surround processor: Lexicon (www.lexicon.com, 781-280-0300)

Theater satellite receiver: RCA (317-632-8000, www.rca.com)

Touchscreen control panels: AMX (800-222-0193, www.amx.com)

VCR: JVC (973-317-5000, www.jvc.com)

Video projectors: Sony (201-930-1000, www.sony.com)