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## Hollywood at home

Author: Judy Adamson

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Take your seats. Small cinemas are the main attraction for renovators.

TONY White doesn't own a boat. He doesn't have horses or a holiday house, either, but he likes to entertain. "We like people to come and enjoy our house, and we like movies," he says. So when he and his wife Liz decided to renovate their home in the Hills district, they added a bar area - and state-of-the-art home cinema. It would be their one great luxury, "so we thought, well, let's throw the money into this".

Their dedicated room has all the gear: a Runco DLP (digital light projection) projector, a Stewart "Grayhawk" fixed screen, Meridian digital active speakers, digital sound processor, DVD recorder and DVD player. PlayStation2 is accessible at the touch of a screen, as is the internet and pay TV. And it can create those spooky ground-shaking effects you get at the movies.

A home cinema can cost more than \$250,000. White works in the film industry, and has seen plenty of ritzy home theatres in his travels, but he was keen to avoid anything grandiose at his place. He avoided flashy extras that some go for, such as automated theatre curtains, jukebox, popcorn machine and drink machine. When deciding on furniture, White had seen single chairs with a \$15,000 price tag and says flatly that he "just couldn't see the value". Instead, the family spent \$13,500 all up on reclining armchairs and sofas from Freedom - to seat 10 people on three levels - and kept the big bucks for the technology.

He may be the envy of his neighbours - for privacy reasons, he has asked for his name to be changed - but White is not the first or the last person in Sydney to embrace the home-cinema revolution.

The managing director of AVD Home Technologies, Sandy Howard, says the market in Australia has grown at an extraordinary pace, partly due to cheaper technology. "In two to three years, costs have probably halved," he says. "The first plasma released three to four years ago cost more than \$20,000 just for the plasma screen. Now you can buy a high-definition plasma screen for \$8000 to \$9000. There's a technological change every 90 days."

James Billington, a director of Smart Home Solutions, says that not long ago installing a home theatre was pretty much DIY. Now "there's a lot of companies devoted to designing and installing home theatres". He adds that developers are offering clients "the option of one of the rooms in their new homes as the media room or home theatre room, whereas once upon a time it was the formal living room".

Sales tracked by GfK Marketing Services make it clear how big the revolution has become. From 2002 to 2003, purchases of simple home theatre systems - five speakers and a DVD player - jumped by more than 100 per cent in Australia, while DVD recorder sales rose a staggering 550 per cent and flat-panel plasma TV sales jumped almost 125 per cent. In January last year, only five front projectors, which can be used with fixed or portable screens, were sold in Australia at an average cost of just over \$4500. By October, the average price had dropped to \$2750 and sales soared close to the thousand mark.

The manager of home automation systems for Harvey Norman Commercial, Sam Bouzounis, says that his arm of the business was launched three years ago with one staff member. Now it has 24 workers in Sydney alone. Demand is so high that Bouzounis and his team have moved beyond wiring new apartments for home theatres and are installing the complete package as part of a deal offered by developers.

But Australians are keen on home cinemas for reasons other than price. Professor Jordan Louviere, from the school of marketing at the University of Technology, Sydney, says government incentives to the broadcasting industry to take up digital technology have helped. Also, consumers are "spending a lot more time at home".

"And why is that?," he asks. "People don't want to drink and drive any more. I've read about this phenomenon of people over the age of 35 basically squatting in the comfort zones of their homes - that's part of this phenomenon."

"You've got a significant proportion of people with kids and there's also a fairly wide perception ... that things aren't as safe as they used to be. There's a bunch of forces combining to put incentives in place for people to spend more time at home with their families, and when they're doing that they're wanting better quality entertainment. And that's what it's all about."

John Francis (not his real name) and his family don't watch a huge amount of television, but that didn't stop him from getting a high-tech theatre installed in an underground room at his new northern beaches home. "It's a bit 'in' at the moment," he says. "But also we had a space that we had nothing else we could do with, so we decided to put one in. A friend of mine had one up at his house, so that's what gave me the idea."

Francis contacted Howard with no real brief other than wanting "a whizz-bang, hot home theatre ... He said 'no worries'. I gave him a budget, he doubled it and we did it."

Today, he is the proud owner of a Barco Performer DLP projector and three-metre-wide fixed screen, which is perforated with tiny holes so the sound from the Meridian speakers behind the screen comes through as if it was emanating from the screen. The room is lit with a Clipsal intelligent lighting system, and contains seating for eight. The purpose-built arm-chairs are upholstered in chocolate-coloured microsuede - as are the walls.

Everything in the room is controllable by a colour touchscreen, and the family can sit down to watch DVDs, Foxtel and free-to-air TV, play computer games or look at digital camera images. The room is also soundproofed. "It's acoustically perfect," Francis enthuses.

Yet before the decision to include the home theatre, the family wasn't going to have a television in their new house. Francis reasons, however, that having a designated place to go for TV and movie viewing is a good alternative. "We all go and watch in a room rather than having it on in the background all the time, so it stops you watching as much TV - which is good," he says.

White, too, is delighted with his home cinema. "When kids come in here they say, 'This is much better than a boat'," he says. His family still go out: the plan was to have the cinema installed before the Rugby League grand final last year, but the Whites decided it would be more fun to see the match live. So they did.

AVD Home Technologies, 9906 2424;

Harvey Norman Commercial, 9710 4155; Smart Home Solutions, 8399 8399; to find a home theatre expert in your area, log on to [www.cedia.com.au](http://www.cedia.com.au)

(the Custom Electronic Design & Installation Association).

Little extras

Mechanised theatre curtains

Silent Gliss, Lilyfield, can build a motorised track system with polyester curtains. The cost for a screen 2m wide is about \$2500. Phone 9810 4300.

Popcorn makers

Old-style popcorn cart, 1.3m high, \$6000, Audio Connection, 9518 3000.

Sunbeam Cornelius, \$40, from electric, discount and department stores.

Jukebox

The most popular Wurlitzer is the "One More Time", a 1950s reproduction, \$9845, Nelson Group, 9791 0922.

Confectionary bars

Available from March at Audio Connection, 9518,3000.

Reclining chairs

Freedom has leather armchairs, \$1359, two-seater sofas, \$1859, and three-seaters \$3159. Phone 1300 135 588.

Harvey Norman has a package of reclining two-seater sofa with two reclining armchairs, \$2499-\$10,000; Savoy reclining chair with one or two cupholders, \$799-\$899. Phone 9710 4155.

Below: Top Form Nouveau four-seater, \$5250, from Len Wallis Audio, 9427 6755.

So, you want a cinema, too

The budget-end of the scale - buying speakers and a DVD player to hook up to your existing TV - is an easy DIY job. If you decide to shell out on a flat-panel plasma TV, which needs to be hung on the wall, you'll probably need help. As you continue to move up in price, input from the technology experts, designers and installers becomes more important. Do you choose a front or rear projector? How big should the screen be? What kind of soundproofing works and where can you put the speakers?

Howard and Billington work across the market but concentrate on the upper end on jobs. They design the rooms, with the help of architects and interior designers, taking in soundproofing, seating styles and layout, screen size, appropriate levels and types of surround sound and lighting. The whole lot is then integrated with the visual technology so it can all be operated with a single, hand-held touch screen.

It's not important, says Howard, to bother about acoustically treated seating. He adds, however, that how the room is built, furnished and shaped plays an important part in creating the right sound. Trying to do it yourself with high-class technology can lead to expensive mistakes, warns Billington. "Your speakers must be compatible with the amplifier."

Bouzounis's core business at Harvey Norman is in prewiring for home theatres. "[The owners] have never had it before and we show them the systems, they buy it and put it on their mortgage."