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Render Your Home Theater in 3-D

Visualizing how your home theater will look is easy if your installer draws it up in 3-D.

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June 22, 2009 by Lisa Montgomery

How will a video projector and a 100-inch screen fit into my family room? Is there a way to incorporate a suite of seven speakers into a space without interfering with my artwork? What colors will look best in the basement when I decided to put in a home theater?

Custom electronics professionals are asked these questions daily by homeowners interested in outfitting their abodes with technology. Many people, no matter how tech-savvy they are, simply can't envision how a room will look after it's been tricked out with electronics.
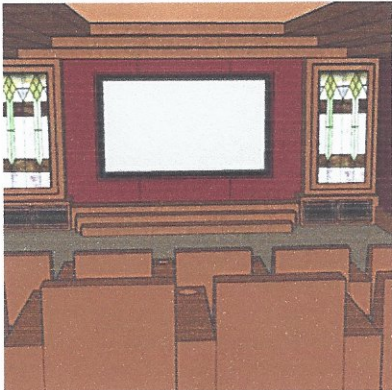
That's why many CE pros have gone 3-D. Instead of presenting their clients with "old-fashioned" pen-and-paper architectural drawings, they're guiding them through a virtual walk-through of the space. With the help of a computer screen, homeowners are able to see how the room will look from different angles, experiment with furniture layouts and equipment placement and test out a few favorite paint colors for the walls. Say they'd like to add another seat or upgrade to a slightly bigger screen: A couple of mouse clicks and those changes are incorporated.

You might pay more to have your room computer generated in 3-D than you would to have it sketched out, but it's a much more efficient, accurate and engaging design tool.

"It's like watching a short movie of what your room will look like," says Rob Dzedzy of Media Rooms Inc., West Chester, Pa. "And the rooms that we build come out almost identical to the renderings." (So much so that we had readers believing that a popular Star Trek theater highlighted on ElectronicHouse.com was a fake—we added the 3-D renderings to show the design, then the outcome.)

How you're charged for the service depends on your installer. Derek Cowburn of DistinctAV in McCordsville, Ind., for example, charges a flat fee of $200 to design two rooms in 3-D. The client gets a detailed printout which includes precise measurements and dimensions of everything in the space. It's a handy document to have, he explains, whenever you want to modify or update anything. Rob Roessler of Audio Video Concepts in Columbia, Ill., employs a slightly different pricing model. "If it's a new customer we'll charge them between $400 and $900 up front and if they decide to actually do the room, we'll subtract the fee."

Even if your installer's 3-D fee seems somewhat steep, think of it as protection against the unknown. Design changes can be costly is during the construction and installation phases of a project, so being able to nail down exactly what you want through trial and
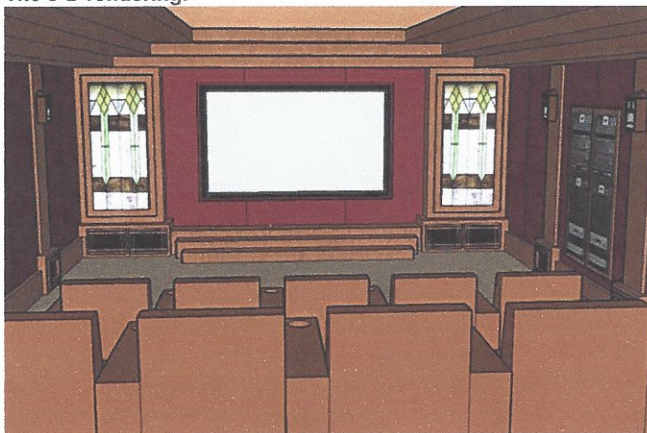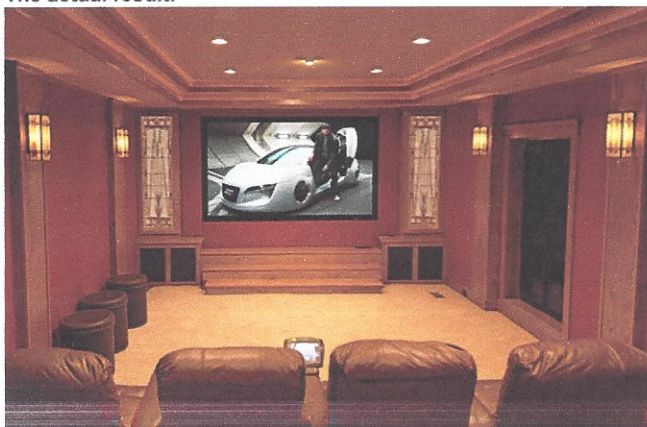
error beforehand can save a huge chunk of change. Proof in point: "After seeing our 3-D rendering of a home theater, the carpenter requested that we shift the location of a planned ticket booth and concession stand," Cowburn says. "Had we not been able to accurately visualize how much better that $6,000 piece of carpentry looked in that new spot, we might not have done it."

No 3-D yet? Three-dimensional computer-based tours may be wave of the design future, but don't worry if your installer isn't doing it yet. Story boards and two-dimensional line drawings are good tools—you'll just need to stretch your imagination a bit more. Commonly used by interior designer, a story board is just that—a good size piece of board—that illustrates how your room will come together. Onto the board an installer might tack a computer-assisted drawing of the room, including elevations, measurements and other critical information, and be complemented by fabric swatches, carpet samples and photos of the equipment planned for the space.

The 3-D rendering:

The actual result:

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Lisa Montgomery has been writing about home technology for 15 years, with a focus on the impact of electronics on a modern lifestyle.

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