

These days it's hard to say which is more crowded on a weekend evening: the local cineplex or your neighborhood video store.

Movies are always a popular entertainment choice, whether viewed in the comfort of your own home or in a state-of-the-art theater. But now you can have the best of both worlds by transforming any room into your very own home theater.

One way to lessen the out-of-pocket impact of a good home theater system is to tie your investment in with your mortgage. If you plan ahead, you can finance a better, professionally installed cinema room and avoid settling for an entry-level system that may be limiting or quickly obsolete.

The room

A true home theater is a bit different than your typical television-viewing area. To approximate the movie theater experience, you need to maximize control of lighting, acoustics and viewing positions — constraints that are difficult to impose on a high-use living area. A basement is often the perfect choice since ambient light is usually not a problem, but any room which you can sufficiently darken will work.

The room dimensions will depend on your maximum intended audience and the screen size. In general, the optimum viewing distance is about twice the diagonal screen measurement (for example: a 92-inch screen is best viewed at a minimum of 10 feet).

Lighting

Always make sure your light sources are indirect and controllable. Automation is quite popular. Technology is available to automate the theater lights, close and open window treatments, drop the projector from the ceiling and lower the theater screen. All of this can happen with a touch of a button on a sophisticated remote.

Furnishings

Comfortable cinema seats are a must. Small reclining chairs work well, but avoid high backs that will obscure views. Sectional sofas are not always a good choice; half the viewers will have sore necks turning to watch the movie.

Video Essentials

The best home-cinema room experience begins with a digital front projection video system. Affordable yet powerful, front projection systems start at about \$3,000 installed. Plus, they have a size advantage that TVs lack. Starting at 70 inches, they go up to 12 feet in screen size. Upgrade your cable or satellite box to high definition, and the images become lifelike.

New media control devices combine movies, music, games, TV, Internet access, and digital photos into one, easy on-screen menu. With one touch, you can control everything.

Audio

Start with a surround-sound receiver. Then, carefully select a surround-sound speaker package. This will give you a minimum of 6 speakers that wrap around you, resulting in a dynamic, 3-D listening experience. High performance audio packages start for as little as \$1,300.

A real movie theater for your home should range between \$3,000 and \$10,000 including audio, video, and installation. You can have the home theater of your dreams today and enjoy it for years to come.

One trend in media rooms is to design the space to feel more like a family room

