

Chapter 1

The Zen of Home Theater

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When you hear the term *home theater*, you probably think of big screens, cool sound, DVDs, CDs, and lots of remote controls sitting around your living room. We're sure that football games, beer, and other fun images sneak into that image as well.

Home theater is truly for everyone — regardless of the size of your house or apartment, your economic wealth, or your taste in movies. And home theater is bound to mean something different to everyone. It's not just about the gear — boxes, cables, remotes, DVDs, CDs, iPods, whatever. It's really about embarking on what can be a great adventure.

Appreciating the Art of the Home Theater

Before you start on your home theater adventure, it's critical to understand what the makers of the equipment, movies, standards, audio CDs, and so on mean when they say that they support home theater.

To the companies that produce the equipment and media, home theater is all about trying to recreate — in your home — the experience of watching a film in a movie theater, hearing the cheers of the crowd in a football stadium, or feeling the reverberations of music at an open-air concert. Many of the people who devote themselves to creating atmosphere and mood using this medium consider what they do to be an art form. These are usually the people who are listed in the credits at the end of a movie.

When you take all the sensations of a movie theater and insert them in your living room, you're on your way to successfully recreating that immersive feeling you get at the movies. All the improvements in sound compression, surround sound, digital screen imaging, and more have been done not to sell more equipment at Circuit City or Wal-Mart but to try to perfect the ability to draw you into another world where you can experience a truly creative piece of work.

So a lot of this book is about explaining the technologies and ideas behind the home theater that you are going to put together, because it's not just about seven speakers hooked into your stereo or a big honking TV screen. It's about how to make sure everything is put in its proper place to maximize your home theater out-of-body experience — the way the media creators intended.

Fitting Home Theater's Many Faces into All Kinds of Spaces

You've probably watched enough TV shows and movies about Hollywood and the rich and famous to know that, for some people, home theaters are as common as a kitchen or a bedroom. Indeed, home theaters were spawned from the necessity of filmmakers to preview footage, screen tests, and full movies. They gradually grew to be a status symbol among actors, too, and spread out from there.

In those early days, a home theater was pretty much literally that: a small theater with Peerless Magnarc carbon-arc lamphouses and theater seating. They were often extensive and elaborate affairs — to match the surrounding house.

Today, you too can get into the act, and you're lucky enough to have a broad range of projectors, screens, displays, seating, and equipment — heck, even popcorn machines — available to create your own home theater.

Probably the first big decision you have to make is where you want to put your home theater. It's one thing to figure out where to put your 19-inch TV set; it's another thing to think about where to put a big-screen TV with six (or more) speakers and associated A/V gear. Few people are prepared for how overpowering a full home theater setup can be in a small home, so it's especially important to plan if you have limited space.



Defining your home theater space is a necessary first step. If the only place to put a TV is on the mantle above the fireplace, you're looking at a flat-panel (plasma or LCD) TV and not much else. If you have to fit the whole system into the corner of the living room, that narrows the search as well. Remember, you don't want to buy a home theater that just won't fit into your home and

your lifestyle. A home theater is all about creating a theatrical atmosphere, so choose your spaces and work from there.

You can most certainly put a home theater in your present living room, your bedroom, or a room devoted to your theater. In the end, what matters is not so much the size but the way you establish the room's ability to coax you into its sound field and video experience.

Budgeting for Home Theater

We believe in setting expectations. We don't want to get you salivating over a 52-inch LCD and a nice Harman Kardon system and then smack you over the head with an unrealistic price. Unfortunately, a quick stroll through any consumer electronics store could lead you to believe that you can get all you need in an entry-level home-theater-in-a-box (without the video display) for just \$199. However, that \$199 system will be right for some people and not for others.

Exploring equipment and prices

So what does it cost to get into a home theater system? Table 1-1 gives you an idea of what you can spend. We've broken this table down by the roles that each group of audio/video (A/V) components plays in your home theater. (*Audio* sources are devices that provide audio-only playback in your system, whereas *video* sources provide movies or TV content.) The A/V system provides the control for your home theater (meaning it lets you select what you want to watch or listen to) and does all the heavy lifting in terms of sending surround-sound signals to your speaker system. The video display, of course, is what you watch (think TV). We've also included some optional components — gaming systems and home theater PCs (which let you use a PC as a high-quality audio source device, or video source device, or both).

Table 1-1 Home Theater Budget Guide		
<i>Role</i>	<i>Device</i>	<i>Price Expectations</i>
Audio sources	Audio cassette player*	\$50 to \$250
	CD player/recorder*	\$50 to \$600+
	Turntable*	\$100 to \$5,000+ (really!)
	AM/FM tuner*	\$200 to \$1,000
	Satellite radio tuner	\$75 to \$300

(continued)

Table 1-1 (continued)

Role	Device	Price Expectations
Video sources	DVD player	\$50 to \$1,200+
	Blu-ray disc player	\$300+
	VCR*	\$50 to \$300
	Personal video recorder*	\$0 to \$700 (\$0 “payment” when leased as part of a service)
	Satellite TV receiver*	\$0 to \$500
Computer/gaming	Gaming console*	\$100 to \$400
	Home theater PC*	\$800+
A/V system**	All-in-one systems	\$200 to \$3,000+
	A/V receiver	\$200 to \$4,000
	Controller/decoder	\$800 to \$5,000+
	Power amplifier	\$500+
Speakers	Center, left, right, and surround speakers	\$150 to \$10,000+
	Additional surround-sound speakers*	\$100 to \$5,000+
	Subwoofer speakers	\$150 to \$5,000+
Video display***	Up to 73-inch rear-projection TV	\$1,000 to \$4,000
	Up to 120-inch front-projection TV	\$1,000 to \$15,000+
	32- to 60-inch plasma or LCD flat-panel TV	\$500 to \$10,000+
Portables	Portable MP3 player*	\$50 to \$350
	Portable video player*	\$100 to \$500
Car system	Car PC*	\$800 to \$2,000
Accessories	Speaker and A/V interconnection cables	\$50 to \$1,000+
	Surge suppressor/power conditioner	\$20 to \$1,500
	Home media server*	\$1,000+
	Internet media access devices*	\$100+

* *Optional.*

** *You don't need all of these parts, just an all-in-one system, an A/V receiver, or a controller/decoder and power amplifier combo.*

*** *You only need one of these displays.*



Over time, components have been doing the integrating thing better and better. You can find really good DVD/VCR combos, for instance. Receivers can now control your video signals as well as audio ones. Personal video recorders are now a part of many digital cable and satellite set-top boxes. We talk about the advantages of individual components versus more integrated units in Chapter 11.

Also note that these prices are a snapshot in time — they are continually dropping, so don't be surprised to find everything on this list available for even less money when you go shopping.

Certainly, you don't need all the gear in Table 1-1. You can buy a nice all-in-one home theater system and a smaller (but high-quality) flat-panel TV for not much more than \$700. Of course, you can spend a lot more money, too. One thing is for sure: Pricing is competitive and is changing all the time. Two years ago, a lot of the gear listed in Table 1-1 cost twice as much as it does now. As we go to print, the first 50-inch plasma screen TVs for under \$1,000 are hitting the market.



To get a quick grasp on pricing, go to a few Web sites, such as www.circuitcity.com, www.plasmatvbuyingguide.com, and Pricegrabber.com to get a sense of the going rate for different items. Compare that with Table 1-1 to get a sense of how much pricing has dropped just in the time it took for this book to hit the shelves.

Buying on a budget

Given that you are probably working within a budget, here are some ideas about what you can expect to buy and install for different total budget ranges:

- ✓ **\$0 to \$500:** Definitely the entry-level package for home theater, a system in the under-\$500 range basically uses your existing TV (or includes an inexpensive flat-panel TV in the 27-inch range) and an entry-level all-in-one home theater system package (which comes with all the speakers you need for surround sound and a receiver/DVD player combo). You can probably throw in a \$50 VCR if you don't already have one, but even the lowest level all-in-one home theater sets include DVD players. (Gotta have DVD!)
- ✓ **\$500 to \$2,000:** By spending a little more, you can go up a range in a number of the components and get HDTV into your home theater, which we highly recommend — especially because all TVs convert to digital in 2009! You can spend some of this money on a midsized flat-panel TV (perhaps in the 37- to 42-inch range), though with the way flat-panel prices are dropping, you may be able to get a 50-inch or larger flat-panel TV, while leaving money in your budget for audio equipment. Or if you need a bigger screen, consider a rear-projection TV; the 50-inch screens

start at around \$1,000. This price range has a range of options for better surround-sound systems, with packaged options available for your five surround-sound speakers plus your subwoofer. And you can buy a fairly good A/V receiver to drive the system. Top this all off with a portable MP3 player and a DVD player for the car, and your kids will love you (more).

- ✓ **\$2,000 to \$5,000:** At this level, you start to create serious options for a very decent home theater system. You should be able to get a high-quality 50-inch or bigger 1080p (this term refers to the resolution of the screen — 1080p displays are the highest available) flat-panel TV or an even larger LCD or DLP (digital light processor — a special micro-mirror-based chip system) rear-projection unit with a great high-def picture (starting at around \$1,500). You might make the move from DVD to Blu-ray at this budget level. (Entry-level Blu-ray disc players are hitting around \$300 as we write.) On the audio side, you can spend \$1,000 or so on a relatively fancy all-in-one system, but at this price level you can also start to get serious with separate components, getting a very good A/V receiver, DVD/CD player/recorder, personal video recorder, gaming system, surround-sound speakers, and potentially even more. At this price range, the average person can get a mighty fine system.
- ✓ **\$5,000 to \$10,000:** When you top \$5,000 as your budget, you can start expanding in some wonderful ways by adding more throughout the house through multizone capabilities, whole-home audio, and universal remote-control capability, or you can continue to go up the ladder in terms of higher-quality separates. We swear by audio servers that store all your music in one box. Get one for the car, too, and have them sync up when you drive in the driveway. Front-projection TVs become a viable option in this price range; good projectors start around \$2,000. No matter what you choose — flat-panel, rear-projection, or front-projection — in this price range, you should expect a big (50-inch or more) high-definition display. Or you can get fancy with furniture. Good home theater seats start around \$350 each. A high-quality universal remote control costs about \$500.
- ✓ **\$10,000+:** Above \$10,000, the sky is truly the limit. For \$10,000 to \$20,000, you get to enjoy a lot of the next generation of home theater. At this point you'll be buying the top-of-the-line 56-inch or larger plasma or LCD flat-panel TVs, or a very high-end projection system. Your DVD player should be the best available and should play not only DVD but also Blu-ray discs. You probably want some extra amplifier equipment in the system, and you may also want to boost your controls, perhaps with a nice Control4 wireless touch-screen control. If you get above \$20,000, you are into high-end audiophile-type stuff all the way. Whole-home audio and video, integration with home automation systems, consultants — the works. Believe it or not, it's not unusual for people to spend \$1 million or more on a home theater. At that point, we think a lot of money is being paid for custom interior design, high-end projectors, and so on. Nothing is held back. To us, given more modest expectations, a \$25,000 system is stunning in almost all senses of the word.

Getting Your Money's Worth

In deciding how much to spend overall, we can give you only this advice: Your home entertainment system is probably one of the most-used parts of your home. It helps define your family, social life, business relationships, and so on. It's important, but spend within your means. You also want to save something for the future. Building and later adding onto a home theater is fun, too.

One of the great things about home theater is that it's modular, so you don't have to buy the whole thing all at once. If you really want a great TV display, get it, and go cheaper on the other components. And when you're ready to trade up, figure out what you want next. The better stereo stores have a trade-up policy that gives you credit toward getting something better. And then there's always eBay (www.ebay.com) or similar auction sites, where you can get all sorts of gear in great condition — everyone is always trading in stuff to move to higher levels, so don't feel pressured to do it all at once.



Realize that, even if you are installing home theater wiring and speakers into the walls and such, you're not likely to 'get that money back' when you sell the house. People are leery of other people's homegrown solutions — even the professional ones — and equipment becomes outdated quickly in this industry. So if you're going to do some remodeling and spend some money, recognize that you are doing it for yourself first, everyone else second, and by all means not for the money.

Indeed, a lot of this book is about getting your money's worth out of whatever you buy. If you get an all-in-one home theater system for \$199 from Radio Shack or a high-end system with, say, a \$37,000 Faroudja projector, \$18,000 worth of MartinLogan Prodigy speakers, a \$4,000 B&K receiver, and other similarly priced components, you're still going to need to figure out how to get the most out of the system. So stay tuned to find out how to get more per kHz, or disc, or channel, or whatever you track your home theater fun by.

