

A home-cinema installation by London-based consultancy United Media UK, with loudspeakers concealed behind picture frames



## Design and build

**Making AV technology blend with customers' interior design concepts is one of the biggest challenges facing custom installers. Llanor Alleyne looks at a range of possible approaches**

It's happened to so many of us before. Somehow, some way, we get ourselves invited to a house or flat so stylish, so perfectly fitted out with expensively and discreetly hidden gadgets, that the force of holding the word "Wow!" firmly between our teeth makes our eyes bulge. As more and more homeowners deck their multi-room halls with the latest in audio and AV products, the demand to secret away all this new-fangled home entertainment

However, just because European homes tend to be shorter on space, doesn't mean that design comes lower down the list of priorities. The desire to hide modern technology away from view is no lower a priority on this side of the pond, and as a result, US companies like Stewart, the plasma- and projector-mount specialist Chief Manufacturing and furniture designer Middle Atlantic Systems are enjoying strong sales growth in Europe.

who previously bought bespoke products from other manufacturers transfer to us, as we supply high quality at a lower price," says Martin Bennett, B-Tech's managing director.

"We have a very popular articulated plasma mount [the BT8003] which was designed for hotels and airports, but now custom installers want to install it in upmarket homes. They have asked for provisional cover plates to make it more acceptable to the home environment." To accommodate this demand, B-Tech will issue a revised version of the BT8003 featuring more attractive cover plates in two months' time.

Regardless of how much equipment can be kept out of sight, increasing numbers of custom installers are having to consult with interior designers as to where and how speakers, projectors, screens and cables will be integrated into overall home aesthetics. It is a forced, evolving partnership that can become territorial, as each camp tries to fulfil not only the client's brief, but maintain their own professional identities within the project.

"The conflict comes between AV installers and designers because the client is often used to a designer that they have used for years," observes Hossam Abdallah of London-based custom-design outfit United Media UK. "In terms of technology, AV installers are always up-to-date, but often times, designers do not have any idea about technology."

It is a problem that CEDIA has tapped into and plans to address at its UK Expo 2005, to be held in Birmingham later this month [see Preview starting p54]. There, under the umbrella heading of the Design Professionals Conference, a series of seminars have been scheduled to school architects, interior designers and specifiers on the ins and outs of integrating their skills with those of the AV technician.

Abdallah, an AV specialist by trade, has forged a unique partnership with Michael Collins, an interior designer whose former

**'In terms of technology, AV installers are always be up-to-date, while often, interior designers will have no idea'**

technology for the sake of preserving home aesthetics has become an art within itself.

For years, AV furniture manufacturers have been developing racks, mounts and motorised products to help custom installers and homeowners better present – and hide – their home entertainment equipment. Motorised screen manufacturers, ceiling-mount designers and rack furniture makers have long been catering to the demands of this market with creative solutions for the affluent and finicky homeowner.

That many of these firms are US-based should not come as a surprise. North America is the current leader in home automation and entertainment, as indicated by the 2004 CEDIA US Member Survey, which reports that 74% of respondents said they will hire new employees in 2005 and a further 58% indicated that their business figures have grown greatly from 2003.

"In the US there is a dedicated home cinema market that is very developed," says Manfred Freiburger of Stewart Filmscreen, the California-based projection screen designer and manufacturer. "Here you have all kinds of home theatres in terms of look and design, because there is room to play with. That is not necessarily true in Europe, where you are dealing with brick walls and limited [living] space."

Among Stewart's cache of innovations is the ElectriScreen series, a motorised and retractable projection screen that can be ceiling or wall recessed, or simply flown using the company's cable climber when high ceilings are present.

Middle Atlantic has had particular success with its ASR-HD Series slide-out and routable shelving system for home entertainment centres. A straightforward unit, it fits into custom-built cabinets and is designed to be ideal for storing audio and video source products, such as VCRs and DVD players, as well as signal processors and distribution systems. Also used extensively, is the company's SRSR Series 19in Rotating Sliding Rail System, which extends and rotates 90° in either direction, making it suited to ideal in-wall installations where it facilitates easy rear access to equipment connections.

Elsewhere in the 'concealment' sector of the market, UK-based B-Tech international, a manufacturer of universal mounting solutions for the commercial AV space, has been getting requests from custom installers wanting to fit its products into residential environments.

"In the commercial sector, because the price of flat screens is decreasing rapidly, installers are very price-conscious and we have been seeing a lot of new customers

In-ceiling speakers are the perfect solution for bathroom audio (Photo: CEDIA)



clients include Paramount Studios. The duo, having met while working on a project three years ago, realised that dialogue between the AV installer and interior designer could make for a harmonious environment and decided to work together under the aegis of Abdallah's relatively young company.

"I see the partnership as a blueprint for the future, because the client doesn't have to worry about anything," says Abdallah. "We can take the project from A to Z, so that all they have to do is say what they want. We give them ideas. We give them samples. We

## 'Custom furniture is popular, but it's expensive and it's something people often forget to budget for'

show them how things will work. We will deal with the workers, the contractors, the painters. We will run the cables and commission the work. And we will definitely make sure everything is working."

Designer and installer issues aside, the fun part of fitting out a home entertainment space is creating those fine touches that not only define it, but induce wild bouts of envy and soft murmurs of

admiration in those who come across it for the first time. "Most clients like to impress people," says Abdallah. "Having a projector screen come out of the ceiling by the press of a button – that makes them happy."

In Europe, current trends in home design – pick up any glossy tome dedicated to architectural interiors for proof – are leaning toward a sleek, near-futuristic relationship between furniture, spatial design and electronic integration. This doesn't necessarily mean lots of metal and shiny surfaces (though these are indeed popular), but rather the use of traditional materials such as wood and brick, being innovatively re-interpreted to a uniquely 21st-century functionality. Again, this puts a huge onus on installers to ensure that any technology is either tucked away or is sympathetically designed.

"We can blend the AV into the design," says Abdallah. "If a client doesn't like the look of big speakers sitting in front of them, we can have them match the wallpaper. To cover speakers up, clients can choose from images from the Getty gallery, with whom we have an agreement, or they can use our prints or provide us with one of their own."

With equipment suitably disguised, mounted or tucked away in walls, ceilings and behind false bookshelves, gaining access becomes the next big challenge. "We've just



Not every client wants a plasma screen at the end of their bed but, if the designer specifies it, AV hardware suppliers undoubtedly have the technology... (Photo: CEDIA/SG Systems)



This month, [HiddenWires.co.uk](http://HiddenWires.co.uk) looks at AV furniture and brack-etry. Sara Jones, head of marketing for Kell Systems, discusses what to look for in specialist AV furniture, while Peter Nas, area sales manager for Vogel's, discusses brackets and mounting for flat screens and projectors. On the design side, Helen Wrede, MD of More Than Plasma TV, gives an overview of bespoke AV furniture for the bedroom.

<http://hiddenwires.co.uk/resources/articles.html>

## Case study: screens set the scene in a Vienna apartment

Austria-based HomeCinemas recently fitted out the living room of a 500sq m downtown Viennese apartment with a virtually invisible high-end home theatre system. "The client approached us together with his architect

and interior designer during the design phase," says home theatre designer Roland Koller of HomeCinemas.

"This was most fortunate for us because we could influence all the important design aspects for our work, such as wiring, ventilation and false ceilings."

Armed with the simple client brief to integrate a big picture screen (96in wide) of superb quality that disappears along with the projector when not in use, the HomeCinemas team installed a Stewart ElectriScreen. The screen – made of Stewart's unique Firehawk material, which raises black levels, colour saturation and shadow detailing when used in ambient light and

The Stewart ElectriScreen is paired with a Runco DLP projector

in conjunction with DLP, LCD and D-ILA projectors – has a wide 1.78:1 aspect ratio and vertical masking, all of which is controlled via a Stewart Bric system.

"As the industry leader in projection screen technologies, Stewart is the only choice for professionals, unmatched service and unmatched quality," says Koller. "In this particular project it was important that the screen and masking system are electrically retractable, so both could easily disappear in the false ceiling."

Along with the Stewart screen, HomeCinemas also installed a Runco Reflection VX4000ci DLP projector, and a Bang & Olufsen plasma TV and Bang & Olufsen sound system. ■

[www.homecinema.at](http://www.homecinema.at)

done some research into AV furniture, and metal and glass are certainly very popular at present," says Jonathan Pengilly, commercial director for Steljes, a UK-based AV distributor with its roots in the commercial sector but a growing interest in the residential field. "It doesn't have cable management though, and therefore can look very untidy.

"Bespoke furniture is also still popular, but as with any good-quality furniture it is expensive. It is something that people don't budget for, and then it throws the budget

out as a good system always needs to be housed properly."

Economics do indeed have a way of throwing a spanner in the works – not least in the design and specification of the control systems that allow motorised screens, projectors, blinds and so on to be activated at the touch of a button. Control processors from companies such as Crestron and AMX contain a plethora of 'hidden' equipment which can be just as costly as the kit that impresses the neighbours. And then there's the subject of

the user interface itself – since, by definition, wall-plate and touchscreen controllers have to be visible, their own visual aesthetics need to be scrutinised carefully to ensure that they match customer ideas and expectations.

Czech-based touchscreen manufacturer Cue is renowned for its slick, sexy-controllers, while Vantage, despite being a North American company, offers a range of surprisingly European-looking wall plates through its EMEA operation.

One home remote controller causing a stir at the moment is a touchscreen model geared toward ease of use for both installers and end-users. "The Universal Remote Controls (URC) MX3000 has won a number of awards for its design," points out Jonathan Pengilly. "It is proving very popular and we're seeing 100% growth month to month. Now Crestron have OEM'd the MX3000 and have added the Cresnet protocol and an RF gateway."

In the march toward a more multimedia daily world, the more people want it and buy it, the faster the zeros behind costly home-automation and entertainment installations will begin to fall off. Just look at what happened to the price of plasma and LCD screens when the public caught on to their superior aesthetics.

The current blossoming of home entertainment as a way of separating this century from the last shows no sign of wilting. The challenge is to keep everyone in the garden happy. ■■

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