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Comfortable chairs and sight lines are some of the things that matter in a home theater.

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HOME THEATER

CATCH THE ACTION

For Optimal Sports Viewing,
You Need A Winning Plan

By **DEBORAH HORNBLow**

Creating a home theater or media viewing room should be easy, right? Big screen, comfy chairs, and you're done? Depending on the scale of your ambitions (and your TV or movie screen), creating a relaxing space that's designed to accommodate a multitude of viewers may require a bit more than that.

If you want the room done right, "it requires a lot of planning," says interior designer Sharon McCormick, owner of Sharon McCormick Design in Durham.

Whether the space is large or small, or whether the job is contracted out to professionals or done as a DIY weekend project, the elements to be considered are essentially the same. We asked two interior designers and one fairly handy homeowner to give us a play-by-play.



LORI HAMEL

Sharon McCormick designed a media area of a great room with flexible seating, ottomans and swivel chairs, for homeowners Kay Mooney and Mark Agnoli.

Sight Lines

The most important considerations in the design of any viewing room are the sight lines. “You want everybody to look straight ahead and not at an angle,” says McCormick, who recently designed a jewel-box art house theater in the Glastonbury home of longstanding clients David Saling and Lindsey Rutka, owners of Van Horst General Contractors of East Hartford. In a dedicated home theater space, you ideally want seating that’s no wider than the screen so that no one has to turn to watch the action, McCormick says. If the screen is too high or situated to the side of a seat, your viewer could be in a neck brace by the end of March Madness. There is a formula for the optimal distance that should be allowed between the screen and the viewer: “Generally, it’s two to three times the width of the screen,” McCormick says. “A deep but narrow room is ideal.”

Kristen McCory, founder of Connecticut-based McCory Interiors

and a former professional basketball player whose client list includes a former NBA player-turned-coach, has designed a number of spaces that were created specifically to accommodate “the whole team.”

“Ninety-five percent of the time, I find that male clients want to sit as many people as possible,” she says. For one client, this involved creating an upholstered sofa bed, roughly 20 feet by 18 feet, with dual tiering. The idea was to create a space where teammates could sprawl out to watch games, and even sleep over if the partying got a little too enthusiastic.

If the screen is in a family room, the space needs to be more flexible to accommodate social interaction and movement. “We try to figure out paths in and out of the room so it’s more conducive to watching without people walking back and forth in front of the screen,” McCormick says.

Mike Soucy, a Newington homeowner, is remodeling an outdated, circa 1970s man cave that

came with the purchase of his house. While the basement room houses a big screen, it also features a bar (complete with Keg-o-rator!) and a poker table. Soucy has one large TV positioned in clear view of couch seating, and he’ll be installing a smaller screen in the bar so no one getting up to get a beer has to miss a touchdown.

Sound

Digital surround sound most closely mimics the cinema experience, and it’s what most viewers want, whether they’re watching sports or movies. Interior designers largely rely on audiovisual experts for advice on what type of equipment to buy and how and where to install it. “If you want to feel like there’s a herd of cattle coming up behind you, they’ll tell me what I need to make that happen,” McCory says.

While a great deal of attention is generally accorded high definition sound, soundproofing is too often

overlooked but should be considered essential if a viewing room is near other spaces. To contain sound in the Glastonbury home theater she designed, McCormick installed what's called "zero-sound" or acoustical dry wall, then covered it in fabric to maximize sound absorption. She installed upholstered panels, carpeting, long draperies on either side of the screen, and panels clothed in leather. All of these finishes help absorb sound in ways that don't inhibit a viewer's enjoyment but do prevent too much sound from escaping the room.

Screens and Projectors

If a projector is part of the plan, siting it presents its own challenges. "The projector lets off a lot of heat and sound, so you want it as high as you can," McCormick says. Because projectors aren't the most attractive items, designers generally devise ways to conceal them. In the

Glastonbury home theater project, McCormick positioned the projector behind a wooden beam so viewers entering the space don't see it at all.

Lighting

Media viewing rooms and home theaters are best built in basements or windowless rooms where there is no possibility of glare on screens. If viewing rooms have windows, curtain treatments can prevent glare in the daytime.

Ambient lighting is also key. Designers recommend various settings to suit the mood and the function of the space. In Glastonbury, McCormick incorporated a lighting plan from Lutron System, which offers several settings. "Entry & Exit" means all lights are up so people can safely move in and out of the theater. "The Movie" means lights are all down except for an area surrounding the steps in case people need to see their way out during the course of the film. A third setting

allows viewers to read a book or knit while watching something on television. Whatever the degree of sophistication involved, it's the range of options and ease of changing settings that are important.

Electronics

One prevailing question affects the design of every media viewing room: Where do you hide the wires? In Soucy's basement, he bundles wires in a media center. The basement's drop ceiling also allows him to conceal wires behind the panels. When possible, McCorry favors running wires behind walls. "It can be done anywhere if you have outlets below," she says. In McCormick's home theater, she created overhead beams to hide wires and basement ductwork.

In new construction houses or homes that are being retrofitted for today's wired lifestyles, wires and electronics are increasingly being centralized in a single closet that

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One thing to be mindful of in any redesign is that technology is constantly changing. "Internet TV was not a big thing five years ago," McCormick says, but now streaming has become the norm. "You need everything to be wired and easily accessible in case of change," she says. "It needs to be accessible for future technology."

Adding Character

The character of any room is defined to some large degree by its decorative elements. McCormick's clients Saling and Rutka asked for a theater with a sense of "fun." McCormick installed movie posters

lit by marquee lights, wall sconces familiar from art house theaters, a lighted sign that says "Cinema," a carpet patterned in popcorn boxes and film reels, and, in a nod to the home's spectacular view of downtown Hartford, a large photo that shows the view and a sign that welcomes viewers to "City View Cinemas."

The sports stars on McCory's client list typically fill their spaces with sports memorabilia, "jerseys from different teams, action shots, and quotes," she says, including motivational or inspirational phrases.

Soucy, a serious movie buff and sports fan who roots for the Patriots, the UConn Huskies and the Atlanta Braves, has decorated the walls of his viewing room with prints of Sports Illustrated magazine covers that show team wins, and with movie posters. Team colors can also be picked up and repeated in choices for wall paint and upholstery or pillow

fabrics.

The Cost

The cost of a dedicated media viewing room generally starts with the sum of a sectional couch and a wide-screen TV and goes up from there. McCormick estimates that a home theater space on the scale of what she designed for her clients "begins around \$50,000 and can go anywhere upwards of that." The cost also will depend on the quality and complexity of the electronics required.

Any No-No's?

Apart from protecting sight lines in a viewing room, there are no no-no's when it comes to designing a space for viewing. Soucy, whose stressful job often involves working on weekends, says his basement hide-away is "a great place to unwind and hang out with family and friends." Are girls allowed? "As long as they're rooting for my teams." ♦

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