

David Murphy meets a man whose basement went from nightmare to AV nirvana

When Alan, an insurance executive, went shopping for a laptop one day, he got more than he bargained for. That trip to the shops resulted in the creation of an amazing home cinema system in the basement of his beautiful Hertfordshire home.

Alan's home cinema adventure began when a large-screen TV in a Sony centre distracted him from his laptop-buying. Liking the look of the TV, he went into the shop and asked to hear it in full swing, and from that moment on, he never looked back. 'I had never even heard of home cinema before then' says Alan. 'But I liked the look and the sound of the Sony TV enough to investigate the idea of surround sound further.'

Alan's investigations led him, of course, to the pages of Home Cinema Choice, and



Chic fabric-covered walls conceal the necessary metres of cabling and pipework

when he had read one of our install features and saw what could be achieved, there was no turning back. His next move was to call Martin Redwood, the managing director of specialist installer Pounds, whose Enfield shop Alan passed on his way in to work each day. One demo later and Alan was sold on the idea of converting his basement into a state-of-the-art media room.

WOBBLY WALLS

When Martin visited Alan's home and saw the basement where the media room would be located, he knew that he and his team had something of a challenge on their hands. Although the room was of a decent size, and in good condition, the basement, like the rest of the house, had walls made of flint. Nice to look at, but rough, uneven and not conducive to cinema quality audio, nor in fact, to channelling in cabling and then covering over to conceal it from view.

'Acoustically, the room was a nightmare,' admits Martin, 'and it took a lot of headscratching to come up with a solution which would get round the problem of those walls.'

The solution Martin hit upon was to build a room within a room. A timber frame was erected all around the room, standing a few inches proud of the wall in order to let it breathe, and then secured to it with industrial strength glue to avoid defacing the walls with drilled holes. To this frame were added a series of MDF panels, dressed with a fake suede material called Alcantara. The panels served both to provide an attractive finish to the room, and to help kill sonic reflections. To make up for the thick concrete floor, meanwhile, the installers specified extra thick underlay for the carpet.

While the installers were keen to minimise reflections in order to improve the room's acoustics for home cinema use, they were wary of making the room too 'dead' as Alan had advised them that he wanted to put a pool table at the back of the room. So, to cater for the room's dual role as both games and media room, Martin and Alan between them cooked up the idea of the concave ceiling. Not only does this combat unwanted sonic reflections, it also makes a home for the beautiful fibre optic lighting rigs.

WIRELESS HOME CINEMA

The timber-frame 'room within a room' had been designed with cable management in mind. All of the cabling, together with a maze of 'legacy' pipework, is neatly concealed behind the panels. The cabling includes mains and speaker cables, as well as category (Cat 5) cabling for the lighting control and curtains and blinds. Pounds made a point of installing even more Cat 5 cabling than they needed in order to futureproof the room and allow a greater degree of home automation should the client want it in the future.

One potential idea which had been discussed for the surplus Cat 5 cabling was to put a security camera by the front door. When the doorbell rang, the film would automatically pause and the image from the camera, showing who was at the door, would be displayed on the 7ft Stewartscreen perforated filmscreen. In the event, Alan decided not to take up that option for the moment. Instead, the installers come up with

a cute solution to the problem of having a media room buried deep in the house. When the doorbell rings, a series of LEDs set into the front right speaker grille flashes to alert anyone in the room that there's someone at the door. Neat.

The only bit of cabling that's not hidden behind the panels along the side walls or behind the ceiling is that which runs to the floor-mounted projector sitting in the middle of the room. To connect all this up, the installers had to set about the concrete floor with a pneumatic drill, digging out a channel in which all the cables could be laid before making good and carpeting over.

The projector is a Sony D50 CRT model, and it has been cunningly concealed inside a beautiful mahogany box, which matches the mahogany cabinets at the front and back of the room. The installers also took the opportunity to create additional temporary connections on the exterior of the box housing the projector, turning it into a sort of ad-hoc patch panel. There are sockets to connect a PlayStation, a PC and a modem, as well as a mains socket for vacuum cleaning. With a system that's as powerful as this, you could vacuum the room without ruining the movie soundtrack!

The front left and right Miller & Kreisel speakers are mounted on extended M&K stands and concealed behind the concave-shaped mahogany cabinetry to either side of the screen, with grilles built in to the panels at the appropriate height. The centre speaker and the two subwoofers, also from M&K, are mounted behind the screen. The three front speakers are wrapped in Rockwool to prevent any sound leakage from one to the other, and the subs both fire in the direction of the solid flintstone wall at the edge of the room. 'We tested the subs firing at the wall and into the room and got a 6dB uplift by firing at the wall' says Martin.

There are three sets of rear speakers, again from M&K. One pair is mounted on either side of a supporting beam left and right, with a slight delay between the furthest-forward and furthest-back speakers to improve the accuracy of the surround sound imagery for viewers sitting in the two rows of chairs. The client originally specified cinema-style seats but he changed his mind in favour of the standalone armchairs, which are much easier to move. The third set of surround speakers are mounted to the rear of the listening area, about two thirds of the way back, where the home cinema area ends and the games area begins.

RACK AND ROLL

The rest of the gear has been housed in an alcove to the back right hand side of the room, in a mid-Atlantic equipment rack. This rack, says Martin, serves three purposes. It means that the kit is always easy for the client to get at, and it also means that the equipment runs more efficiently because of its ventilation panels. And the third purpose is that it looks great.

The power to drive the system is provided by one 5-channel and two 2-channel Parasound power amps, whereas the finesse comes courtesy of Lexicon's popular MC1 processor. The sources include a multi-region Pioneer DVD player and a Panasonic S-VHS VCR, and the M&K speaker system comprises two MX-350 subwoofers, with MK150s for the left centre and right and MKSW85s and SW95s on the surround channels. Also in the alcove, constructed as part of the install, is a bar

and kitchen area, which boasts a fridge and microwave oven. What could be more convenient for that all-important mid-movie snack break during Hannibal?

There is also some storage space in the alcove for Alan's small but rapidly growing and eclectic DVD collection, which already includes Saving Private Ryan, Gladiator and Billy Elliott, as well as classics like Ben Hur and Spartacus. When we visited him, Alan was kind enough to demonstrate the system with the opening of Toy Story 2, scenes which can be relied upon to provide a fabulous audio-visual workout for any home cinema system.

JUST SAY 'WOW'

Sitting on top of the equipment rack is a Crestron controller which manages day-to-day control of the system. The user interface is an STI1550C touch-screen panel, customised to make it easy for Alan or his wife Linda to drive the kit. The 'Home' screen shows a picture of the house with one soft button labelled 'Wow'. Once you press this, first the curtains draw back from in front of the screen, and then the blackout blind drops down in front of the window at the back of the room. Then the lighting dims and whichever DVD was waiting in the Pioneer multi-region DVD player begins to play. There are also three macro commands brought up by pressing on the picture of the house, which offer three different options: Watch a DVD; Watch a video/TV and Play a CD.

There are six lighting channels controlled by a Lutron 3106 lighting controller. By combining some of these channels, the installers were able to create eight custom lighting themes including Welcome, Film, Music, Pool and Reading. In fact, the room features so much lighting that Pounds had a set of transformers custom made to handle the large lighting loads. There are 10W mini low voltage downlighters creating a wash effect on the Alcantara panels, as well as some 35W downlighter sets a little further in to give a bit more illumination. Yet more light is provided by the uplighters along the false ceiling beams, while the part of the ceiling above the pool table has its own set of 35W downlighters. The lighting system is finally completed by those two stunning fibre-optic starlight rigs.

BUT SERIOUSLY, FOLKS

Alan freely admits that when he first raised the idea of converting his basement into a home cinema, his friends, and even some of his own family, were sceptical, and thought the idea would pass. But Alan is not a man to let the grass grow under his feet, and counting from the initial meeting with Pounds in December 2000, the whole room was transformed in less than four months. The installers started work onsite on 1 February and finished at the end of April. The sceptics have now been long converted. 'Their jaws are down here somewhere when they see the room now' Alan says. 'And when we fire up the system...you can imagine.'

Both Alan and his wife Linda admit that they are not, as they put it, 'TV people' but they say they are thrilled with the room. 'I'm tempted to come down here most nights, even if it's just to watch the news' says Alan, while Linda was just as sold on the idea as Alan once she experienced the initial demo at Pounds' store.

For Alan on the other hand, the defining moment on his home cinema journey arrived when Martin began a phone conversation by telling him that he had been lying in bed the previous night trying to figure out where the speakers could go. 'From that moment on,' Alan told me, 'knowing that the poor guy was worrying about my home cinema system in his sleep, I had every confidence in Martin and his team. I knew they would get it right.'

Anyone who compares the finished room with how it was when the Pounds team moved in, would have to agree that they certainly did.