



First-time townhome buyers to luxury high-rise condo dwellers want high-tech spaces. High-speed Internet access, cable, satellite and more converge in the media room.

media rooms

Plugged in for New Technology

by marcia jedd

Imagine having complete access to your iPod tunes and favorite satellite radio shows at the touch of a button on panels located throughout your condo. Or, selecting a DVD movie from your media hub to play in the great room or catch that recorded TV show on DVR in the bedroom. These amenities are a reality today in many homes, and townhomes, condos, and other association-maintained homes are no exception.

"Most of the clients that we work with in conjunction with builders of condos and villas really enjoy the technology and want to incorporate it into their home. Their main concern is making it easy," says Pete Baker, president of Custom Home Integration a low-voltage systems integrator in Eden Prairie. And what's easier than controlling audio, video and lighting with a high-end universal remote, or HVAC, audio, lighting and security from a touch-pad screen on the wall?

Home buyers want some form of media room, whether a top-notch dedicated home theater or a multi-purpose room. Think great rooms, family rooms and living rooms outfitted with flat-panel TV and surround sound. Don't forget the home office, cleverly tucked away in the media room or in the den, with PCs networked to a central printer with wireless access.

Builders and home integration experts say most townhome and condo buyers



APOLLO SYSTEMS PHOTO. HOME BY ANTHONY THOMAS HOMES.



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don't tend to opt for dedicated home theaters but instead leverage multi-purpose spaces to create media havens. Rec rooms, hearth rooms, lofts and even sun rooms are used as home entertainment areas.

Design elements

Whatever space is used for media, multi-unit dwellings do have special design considerations. Baker says: "It's important to treat the home so that sound doesn't transfer over to the space next door or above." To combat sound loss, inexpensive treatments during construction can be specified by builders such as soundproof drywall. One product is QuietRock drywall by Quiet Solution that is used in place of standard drywall. Plus, special rubber matting can be placed between two layers of drywall as a sound absorber.

Baker adds avoiding placement of speakers on common walls is key, given today's built-in speakers which are often flush-mounted in walls. Another option? Well-placed ceiling speakers, such as oval-shaped Ellipse speakers by Sonance that are mounted in the ceiling at an angle. "Ceiling speakers are less distracting to the eye than wall mounts," Baker says.

Home theater connoisseurs can go farther, Baker says, with treatments that improve sound clarity such as acoustical material on walls or sound panels, all covered with special acoustical fabric. Aesthetic elements like flooring can also enhance sound in media rooms and contribute to darkened rooms for optimum viewing. Carpet only absorbs high-frequency sounds but it does reduce foot traffic and other noises. "Use low-pile

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high-tech builder

Hans Hagen Homes, a Fridley-based home builder of single-family and townhomes, recognizes the desire for technology. "It's important for today's family to have a space that provides for more of their media needs, whether it's surround sound, watching theater-quality movies and having the kids play video games, or a wireless connection for the home office," says Nate Smith, vice president of sales and marketing.

Smith says Hans Hagen partners with integrators to deliver networked home solutions. These companies work closely with buyers to plan out their pre-wires on a customized basis based on their technology needs. "We send buyers to their studios to pick out surround sound, security, central vacuum, intercom and other low voltage, including TV, telephone, high-speed Internet and digital satellite."

At the sprawling 230-home Lakes development in Blaine, Hans Hagen's two-story row homes (Parade Home #182, and offered in two floor plans), feature media loft spaces complete with an in-wall alcove suitable for a large-screen flat-panel TV mount, says Beth Vitzthum, Hans Hagen sales manager. "The space is about 13 by 10 feet, adjoined to a bathroom and bedroom. Ninety-five percent of home owners take advantage of the media option to plan these spaces," she says, noting many of the units offer in-ceiling speakers. "We can rough them in and cap them off if they want to add speakers later."

To avoid annoying the neighbors that share a common wall, Hans Hagen takes extra measures. "In common walls, we use an acoustic sealant that goes over the insulation. We seal off all our electrical boxes,

outlets and switches as a noise barrier." Insulation, at 3.5 inches thick, also helps absorb sounds.

"The key is dead air space around the insulation to absorb the sound."

— M.J.



sorting it out. technology tips

In outfitting your media room, it's good to know your TV terminology. High-tech media rooms start with digital, HDTV (high-definition) TVs which come in many forms. HDTV is a standard for digital TV, considered the best quality format currently available, characterized by higher resolution and better picture color and clarity compared to old analog CRT counterparts.

Today's high-definition-ready TVs in flat-panel varieties, at about five inches deep, are great for wall mounting, including:

- Plasma TVs: good for larger size screens starting at 42 inches;
- LCD TVs: a good bet for 32 inches and under; in larger sizes, more expensive than plasma;
- Longer life expectancies: Plasma and LCD TVs offer around 60,000 hours of use compared to about 10,000 hours for CRT TVs.

In addition to dedicated theater rooms, for entertainment centers, TV stands, built ins, or floor-standing TVs, consider rear-projection microdisplay TVs. They are durable and offer more for the money in the large-screen class.

— M.J.



GIL ROBLES PHOTO. COURTESY MENDOTA HOMES, INC.



Most townhome and condo buyers leverage multi-purpose spaces to create media havens. Parade Home #211 by Mendota Homes, Inc.

carpets in darker colors that don't reflect as much light," recommends Kurt Seydow, vice president of STS Flooring, a Plymouth, Minnesota-based flooring contractor

Planning the media room

Leah Palmer Johnson, senior project manager and interior designer with Ramsey Engler Ltd. in Minneapolis, says once a buyer knows the specifics of their layout, they need to plan elements such as lighting and audio video. "Before you close up the ceiling, think about all the uses of the space." Lighting, security systems, HVAC and media all start with the proper structured wiring inside the walls, known as pre-wire when wiring is installed in the construction phase, which is highly recommended to avoid the costly opening of walls later to run wires. "Technology tubes" such as two-inch conduit to house wiring to electronics can be installed in media room areas for easier finishing later.

While pricing for structured pre-wiring varies, builders estimate costs at around \$2

to \$3 per square foot to make a home ready for advanced lighting systems, HDTV and security systems. (Offerings for wiring among builders varies, in part, because there are no agreed upon industry standards and definitions of what constitutes a structured pre-wire.) A good structural wiring should include the following: basics like telephone wiring and using only UL-listed cable, two runs of Category 5 or 6 cable to each media-related outlet, and two runs of quad-shield RG 6 cable for video.

The townhome or condo is thus enabled to communicate within itself and the outside world effectively, including any future amenities like security, lighting and audio-video.

No matter the form, association-maintained home dwellers are finding plenty of options in media rooms to meet their current and future needs.

Marcia Jedd is a Twin Cities based freelance writer.