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The Last 20 Percent

"The last six years or so, the public's perception of custom entertainment has gone from 'Wow, I didn't know anyone did that!' to 'Oh, my brother-in-law does that.'" So says Murray Kunis, president of Future Home, a leading Los Angeles custom installer. And he has a point. When he entered the custom home theater business in the late 1980s, Kunis was one of only a handful of practitioners working in Los Angeles. Now there are hundreds ... and perhaps even thousands.

What are we to make of the tremendous growth of custom-installed audio/video systems? Is today's competitive environment a boon to homeowners? Or has the market grown faster than the number of qualified home entertainment specialists? As a founding member of the Custom Electronics Design and Installation Association (CEDIA), a member of an elite group of installation firms named the Private Theater Design Association, a winner of CEDIA's award for best theater in the \$600,000-and-up category, creator of an installation featured on a past Home Entertainment cover, and a man with a celebrity client list that might make Diane Sawyer's Rolodex seem undistinguished, Kunis surely knows what is going on in his field. Let's hear what he has to say.

BRENT BUTTERWORTH: How has the explosive growth of custom audio/video installation affected the quality of those installations?

MURRY KUNIS: Everyone has jumped on the bandwagon with various credentials and various experience levels, driven by an extended demand for system integration and private theaters. But technology has made 80 percent of the job easy to do.

BB: Why is it so much easier?

MK: Because the electronics manufacturers have embraced custom installation. One benefit of founding CEDIA was to foster communication between installers and manufacturers. Before, if I went to Mitsubishi and said, "I need a TV that has a couple of special features, and price is no object," they'd have asked how many I can sell. I'd say 12, and they'd say good-bye and good luck. But the entire membership of CEDIA might sell 600 or 700 of these high-end special TVs. So now the manufacturers make products that are well-suited to custom installation, and that makes the job much easier.

Ten or 15 years ago, we needed to build a lot of black boxes to make all the components talk to one another. The systems were clunky and unreliable. But now someone with a lot less experience and knowledge can get a big picture on the screen and not have 15 remotes on the coffee table. The difference is in that last 20 percent.

BB: What do you mean when you say, "that last 20 percent?"

MK: Hiring an inexperienced installer is like buying a car whose engine isn't tuned—it doesn't get anywhere near the performance or mileage that it could. We see a lot of home theaters where they bought the right gear but aren't getting the performance out of it. With a home theater, hooking up the gear is only a portion of what we do. We also work with the interior designer and the architect to optimize the space. We plan room acoustics and seating, and we even specify the air conditioning so it does not make noise in the theater.

The \$50,000 or \$100,000 home theater has become commonplace. Our projects are very special; they often run \$300,000 and higher. If you're spending that kind of money, you want the room to be special. For the room to be special, the installer must understand what makes a home theater unique. It's not just a living room with a big screen.

Any installer can put in a halfway-decent A/V system. Los Angeles theater designer Murray Kunis explains why that's not worth the trouble. (*Click image to enlarge*)



BB: But doesn't every installer start out not knowing much, then learn the finer points as he or she completes more jobs?

MK: No. My background started with a double major from the University of Miami in music engineering and electrical engineering. By the time I was 25 years old, I had designed and installed multimillion-dollar recording studios. My recording studio work has been featured in dozens of magazine articles, and this is all before I got into residential work. In the mid-'80s, when home entertainment started going beyond a TV set with a VCR, some of my clients said, "If you can design studios, you can come to my house and make my TV work." Within a couple of years I was doing only residential work. Most of the best theater designers have a comparable depth of knowledge and experience.



For a theater featured in the January/February 2004 issue of Home Entertainment, Future Home combined film and video projection—and of course, created a custom touchscreen interface. (*Click image to enlarge*)

BB: I know that the group you belong to, the Private Theater Design Association, is promoting some of these same ideas. What can an association like this do for the Home Entertainment reader?

MK: When you go to a company in the Private Theater Design Association, you know you're working with a very high-end, very experienced installer. It's a group of eight installation firms from around the country. We saw that the market was flooded with people whose business model is to do theaters for the absolute minimum they can charge. Our business model is to create the finest theatrical presentation we can deliver. We're working together to raise the bar and promote the idea of a quality experience—of getting that last 20 percent.

BB: Besides your company, who's in the Private Theater Design Association?

MK: Besides your company, who's in the Private Theater Design Association?

MK: ProLine Integrated Systems in Chicago; La Scala Home Cinema in Vancouver, British Columbia; Smart Home Systems in Calgary, Alberta; Overture Audio/Video in Wilmington, Delaware; EPI in Stamford, Connecticut; HomeTronics in Dallas; and All Around Technology in Rockville, Maryland.

For a theater featured in the January/February 2004 issue of Home Entertainment, Future Home combined film and video projection—and of course, created a custom touchscreen interface. *(Click image to enlarge)*



BB: What should you experience when you enter a properly designed home theater?

MK: First and foremost, it must be effortless and intuitive. We had a project where on the first day it was ready, the homeowner and the president of the United States went in there, fired it up and had no problem. It should be like a shower: Nobody has to teach you how to use your shower.

The whole process of using the home theater should be fun. For example, on our touchscreen panels we put photos of the room itself, and you touch articles in the room to make things happen. All of our Crestron touchscreen programming is done in-house. A lot of installers use outside programmers.

BB: What's the disadvantage of using outside programmers?

MK: If the client wants something changed, we can do it immediately. And we can give them a completely custom interface styled to their taste and to suit their decor.

BB: Beyond the control system, what should the home theater experience be like?

MK: Movie directors use the phrase "suspension of disbelief." The image shouldn't just be clear, it should be nearly three-dimensional. We just did a project for a famous actor, a top box-office draw. He had a roll-down screen in a dedicated theater. We told him he had to go to a fixed screen. He did, and he agreed that the picture looked substantially better.

BB: Really? Switching to a fixed screen made that much of a difference?

MK: I'll put it to you this way: Our clients trust us so much they often sign off on installations costing hundreds of thousands of dollars without even reviewing our proposal