Media relations

Shifting consumer attitudes and lifestyles continue to transform home media setups, where complete mobility, state-of-the-art electronics and sleek designs transcend any earlier limitations.

TEXT: **LISA VINCENTI**

DESIGN FORMULA

CONTENTS:

London's Soho Hotel features a private cinema with luxurious leather seating by Poltrona Frau.

The simple, clean lines of Poliform's latest wall system offer infinite possibilities.

Over the past decade, hotels have proved a barometer for future design directions and trends in the residential market. The style lessons learnt in the hotels guests visited and restaurants they dined in hit home, leading them to introduce this hospitality lifestyle into their private domains, thus the reinvention of the master bedroom as a private sanctuary and the adjacent bathroom's metamorphosis into a spa-like oasis.

However, when it came to media setups, hotels fell far behind what people were getting used to at home. The media experience at home has become increasingly mobile, inviting and seamless, not only blending in perfectly with the surrounding interior design but also offering homeowners yet another place to unwind. Multipurpose, sleek electronics, modular systems that continue to push the design envelope, revolutionary lighting options, and supremely flexible and comfortable seating prove the hallmarks of what is on the horizon for 2010.

"Post-recession and moving into autumn, we begin to celebrate and take pleasure in the comfort and joy of being at home," notes UAE-based Shelley Pond, a trend forecaster and interior designer at UK forecast agency Scarlet Opus. "We start seeing our homes in new and exciting ways; an escape from our fast-paced modern lives, a place of different home and entertainment experiences that were once satisfied by going out. With this change in attitude, a growing trend in home cinema and media rooms emerges; extending what we have already seen of hotel and restaurant styling inspiration in bedrooms, home spa and dining-in trends, to other areas within our homes."

NO RESTRAINTS

A quick look at the iF 2010 gold award winners, a renowned product and graphic design competition that is known for picking up coming trends, makes clear what we can expect from home entrainment equipment. Sophisticated designs are now de rigueur, but the most cutting-edge additions to the market also carry added functionality. Repeat iF gold recipient Apple changed the game for all home electronics, not just computers via the *iPhone* and *iPod*, which became models for new innovation. Because of this consumers have come to expect convenience, simplicity and intuitive controls, in addition to smart styling.

iF award recipient Loewe's spectacular *Reference* home audio setup is an undeniable show stopper. "Once again, a Loewe product has earned itself an iF gold award. Taken on their own, these extremely thin, floor-standing loudspeakers are a total design highlight. In conjunction with the other equipment in the range, they create a really strong impression, one that is unique in the audiovisual market," write the iF judges of their selection.

But that is only half of the story. The *Reference Mediacenter*, with its CD/DVD, iPod/iPhone, internet radio, DVB/FM radio and USB connection, is not just an all-in-one home entertainment system for the living room, it is also the core of the Loewe *Multiroom System*. The *Mediacenter* handles audio contents

This rotatable mirror TV by ad notum pairs flexibility and elegant styling.

in the main room, while the *Multiroom System* ensures that audio contents can be transmitted freely throughout the home. Likewise, LG's just-released *HB965TZ* home theatre system features not only super-slim speakers and a Blu-ray player, but also Wi-Fi connectivity and an *iPod* or *iPhone* dock.

"How we access and use media at home has been completely transformed," says Amir Anwar of Dubai Audio, which carries high-end names like Loewe and Geneva. "Networking has been the single most important factor and requirement in any home media setup. Networks continue to hold the key to driving both expectations and growth in terms of adoption of these newer technologies. Consumer habits are being modified to the point where IT products and traditional media or audiovisual products are converging in terms of expectations and possible functionality."

MOVIE NIGHTS

Design-driven boutique hotels sparked a new phenomenon in hotel design when they appeared in London and New York in the mid-1980s. These intimate, usually luxurious or quirky, spaces introduced a new level of high style and service to guests. American Ian Schrager, owner of the Morgans Hotel Group, is often credited with founding the boutique hotel, or at least generating the buzz that grabbed the world's attention, when he transformed the Spanish Renaissance décor of the Executive Hotel into Morgans, a 113-room property dressed in its now signature black-and-white style by Andrée Putman, and recently reworked by her in a Dhs33 million renovation.

By the time Starwood Hotels introduced its W brand in 1998 to satisfy consumers' growing appetite for accessible style, a major trend was poised for takeoff. Leap ahead to 2010 and trendy accommodation has become the norm, but with such exposure, design hotels faced a major setback, so how do they continue to offer something fresh to guests? For some, the answer lies in the media and entertainment category, whether that means supplying the basics, offering an extra luxury or showing off the bleeding edge of design.

"For years the technology consumers have had at home has far exceeded what they can access when they check into a hotel," says Michael Stano from San Francisco's Joie de Vivre hotel group. "Consumers are using the internet to access more than just email and search content; rather, to access a variety of on-demand, web-based entertainment options such as YouTube, HULU and Netflix. We're giving them an extremely easy-to-use portal to access all of that in their rooms and leave their laptops at home."

According to proprietary data just released by iBahn, a digital entertainment and internet solutions provider for the hospitality industry, guests are spending 60 per cent more time on the internet than in earlier years, doing everything from downloading music and videos to reading the news. In addition, based on earlier surveys by Ypartnership, which conducted the survey for iBahn, guests who have a poor online experience at a hotel, will not return.

"Even through the down economy we have continued to invest in the guest experience," says Chip Conley, Joie de Vivre's founder and CEO. "This initiative takes guestroom technology far beyond what anyone else we know is doing right now."
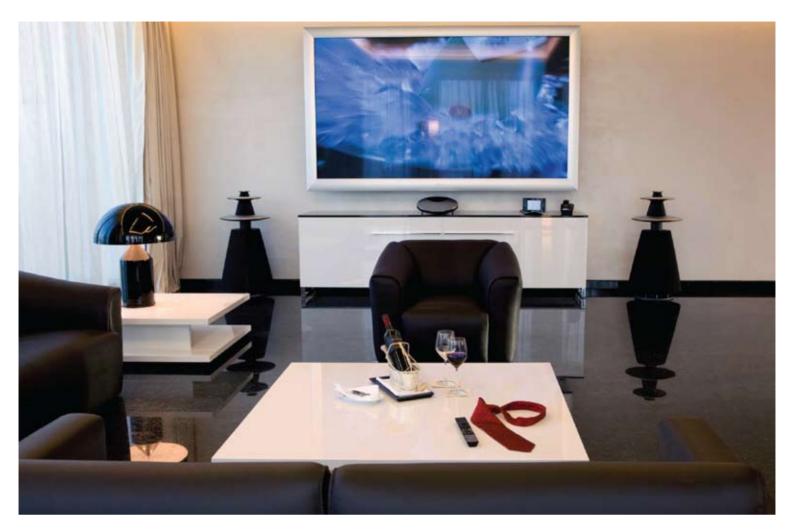
Top to bottom: This private home theatre by Goldmund features state-of-the-art technology and futuristic pop; MCZ's new *Scenerio* mirror TV/fireplace introduces a sophisticated alternative to traditional flat screens.

At the small chain's Citizen Hotel, the company installed Mac Mini computers with 107 centimetre flat screen televisions, wireless keyboards and streamlined remotes – in addition to having unfettered access to the internet.

Starwood Hotels has just signed a deal with German audio-maker Sonoro to include its stylish *Elements* radio alarm clock in W Hotels. In addition to its handcrafted wood casing and glossy, lacquered piano finish, *Elements* features an internet FM radio and *iPod* docking station. Meanwhile Kempinski hotels has opted for Bang & Olufsen set-ups in many of its properties, some of which include Bose *iPod* docking stations. For its recently opened accommodations in Croatia, it decked out all rooms with Bang & Olufsen *BeoVision* televisions. One of the Kempinski Adriatic's two Presidential suites is equipped with a sprawling *BeoVision*, two *BeoLab 5* loudspeakers, two *BeoCenter 2* entertainment centres. Such in-room features are likely to become the mainstream within the next few years.

Some hotels are entering fresh territory when it comes to the guest entertainment experience and offering visitors a taste of the future. In Las Vegas, the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino's newly opened Tower Suites, where the owners say "sophistication and fantasy reign supreme", has taken the media experience to an extreme. In partnership with Skullcandy, a maker of hip audio headphones, the HRH Tower Suites in-room music system lets guest sample a special playlist created by Skullcandy on its *Sound Matters Sound Bar*, an AMX 30 centimetre touch panel music system with *iPod* dock that includes over 2,000 HRH-owned songs and playlists.

Kempinski Hotel Adriatic decks out its presidential suites with *iPod* docking stations and Bang & Olufsen's *BeoVision* TV/audio system.

But the icing on the cake is the specialty penthouses, which put high-resolution video displays to new uses. In the Provocateur Suite, one of eight themed penthouses, sensors detect when someone lies on the bed, and immediately produces silhouette images elsewhere on the bed. In another suite, a sensor and tracking system projects images directly onto a billiards table, displaying corresponding animation that makes it appear the game is being played on water or fire, among other effects. The Altered States Suite leverages 11 video projectors to create a 360-degree, wraparound interactive video environment influenced by music and motion. As the style of music or the activities of the room's occupants change, the system intuitively alters the display images to match.

Between the glitz and blare of the Hard Rock and more standard room amenities such as *iPod* docking stations and computer setups, another generation of boutique hotels are adding a third, more chic layer of invention to capture the attention of the fashionable crowd. In New York, the Tribeca Grand offers a private screening room as well as complete connectivity. The iSuites are fully-loaded with Apple gear including a *G5* computer outfitted with film, photo and sound editing software, as well as *iSight* cameras, a user-friendly video conferencing camera with integrated microphone that will allow guests to have face-to-face chats, and an *iPod* and Bose *SoundDock* digital music system. However, it is the Grand's private screening room, with seating for 100 that really captures the imagination.

"The Charlotte Street Hotel was the first hotel in London to offer a screening room and it certainly enhanced our guests' experience," says Madelein Duxbury of the Firmdale group of hotels, which includes Charlotte Street, Covent Garden and Soho hotels in London.

"I have never been to a cinema that I have enjoyed being in – except in the dark. I really wanted to design a cinema that I wanted to sit in when the lights go up," adds Kit Kemp, co-owner and design director for Firmdale, who introduced Poltrona Frau Italian leather seats in the Firmdale hotel cinemas. "Having wide, extremely comfortable seats and a lot of leg room makes for a very luxurious experience"

OUTSIDE THE BOX OFFICE

For those that can afford a dedicated cinema room, there are now no limitations and some are taking a far less traditional approach to the screening room. Forget the days of rows of individual seats with built in cup holders and red velvet drapes, new personal cinemas are taking inspiration from the major design trends that have swept through design fairs in the past year.

For one private installation underway in St Petersburg, the challenge was to create a screening room based on organic forms and nature. "Entering the room is like experiencing a spacewalk: infinity and the depth of the black sky; clouds of galaxies on dark blue walls; plush white carpet underfoot; and gentle streams soft light," notes the designer, PIC Gallery in St Petersburg, of the cosmic creation.

With rounded corners and soft edges, the cinema room clearly has taken pointers from the furniture fairs in Paris, Milan and Frankfurt, where more

Media centre by Molteni.

Meystyle's just introduced LED wallpaper collection combines LED lights and crystals for a fantastic, atmospheric backdrop.

organic and feminine shapes began taking hold, and futuristic statements were cast in a subdued and more inviting note.

With a five-star sound system by Swiss-based Goldmund, the St Petersburg residence includes 46 speakers to completely immerse movie-goers in the experience. Additionally, advances by companies like Goldmund have allowed for increased flexibility and creativity in the design of home media rooms, where furniture and speakers no longer have to be placed in a certain location to achieve optimal sound. This allows designers more leeway in their media room designs and even the furnishings they pick.

Fresh cinema room designs will forgo the classic row of theatre seats, opting for more casual arrangements in their place. For the St Petersburg screening room, contemporary, over-sized round armchairs and oblong sofas comprise the viewing area. The overall effect is cosmic cool. "The light dies away and we are completely plunged into a film atmosphere where only the image and sound exist," PIC Gallery notes. "Walls disappear, cease to exist and do not distract the attention of a viewer, making him a participant of events, the protagonist. It is a comfortable space-cocoon in which the person is completely immersed in another reality."

Even if the St Petersburg setup is out of reach, the media room in all homes is undergoing change. "Media rooms are becoming more open and light in their styling, and are therefore much more inviting spaces to spend time in," says Victoria Redshaw, Scarlet Opus' founder. "Rather than trying to recreate cinema styling we are seeing a move towards a less gimmicky and certainly less ostentatious styling that is all about coming together and sharing in a comfortable space that is increasingly a hybrid room that houses gaming entertainment as

well as a home cinema. This is all about simple pleasures made possible via high-tech developments."

Or imagine the home media room serving as a relaxation lounge like the one conceived by Italy's International Friends Corporate (IFC) for Salone Internazionale della Piscina last year in Barcelona. The *Water Wellness Lounge* included a low-table, a few chairs and three large screens: a peaceful atmosphere with the soothing sounds of nature and a changing panoramic view of water, fire, land and air.

GOING MOD

When architect-turned-critic-turned-industrial designer George Nelson dreamed up *Storagewall*, a new concept for modern living, he created a sensation that landed him in the pages of *Architectural Forum* magazine and *Life* magazine in 1945. Herman Miller founder DJ Depree was so impressed by what he read that he paid a visit to Nelson and convinced him to be director of design for the now ubiquitous, mid-century styled Herman Miller furnishings. Under Nelson's leadership the company produced designs by heavy-hitters such as Ray and Charles Eames, Harry Bertoia, Richard Schultz, Donald Knorr and Isamu Noguchi.

But it all began with *Storagewall*. The concept for *Storagewall* came to Nelson while penning a book, *Tomorrow's House*, alongside Henry Wright, in which he proposed the novel idea of the "family room". Nelson, a multidisciplinary thinker and questioner of the status quo, posed the question "what's inside the wall?" He began pondering the wall, an unused interior space that could serve

Top to bottom: Molteni&C updates its modular *505* wall-system designed by Luca Meda; Philippe Stark makes over the wireless speakers and *iPhone* docking station with an inventive twist for Zikmu Parrot.

a much more functional purpose. In fact, as post-war consumerism began to surge, people's homes filled with the clutter of this new prosperity, and Nelson's creative and non-architectural solution was *Storagewall*, an oeuvre inspired by the shelving systems found in drugstores, hardware and grocery stores.

Storagewall was a leap forward and organised storage with tube lights, curved corners (for easy cleaning), separated doors, variety in defined spaces and offered a comfortable place for everything. When Nelson joined Depree he was asked to conceive a similar system for Herman Miller and the result was the *Comprehensive Storage Solution* (*CSS*). *CSS* featured tension rods between the floor and ceiling, with no attachment to a wall. Configured with multiple components including shelves, storage cabinets and files that could be used in any part of the house, as well as in offices or at exhibitions.

But *CSS* did much more than provide a modernist framework to reduce clutter; it provided the first instance of modular design (an approach that divides a system into smaller parts that can be independently created and used in different manners) and a forerunner of "systems" furnishings. Many of the top Italian names (including MisuraEmme, Tissetanta and Lema), have continually pushed the design envelope. In fact, after decades of introducing one ingenious system after another, there seems no end to the infinite possibilities of this old workhorse, which is today essential to the minimalist setting. What's more, the continuous introduction of new home-entertaining products has produced a new breed of sophisticated models that allow the clutter of audio and visual gear to disappear behind chic sliding doors, or at least hides all the cables and paraphernalia.

At Lema, a designer of furniture systems whose design director is the renowned Piero Lissoni, one of most flexible and popular storage solutions

Top to bottom: With its built-in TV and PC, *Hi-Can* reworks the traditional canopy bed; LEMA art director Plerro Lissoni interprets the wall system in his signature minimalist style.

is the *Selecta*, a library of vertical and horizontal panels. Building off one basic structure, a bookcase, it can morph into complex configurations that can serve as room dividers or a wall shelves. Tissetanta's *Acropolis*, a new version of which was showcased at this year's Salone Internazionale del Mobile in Milan, was designed by Paolo Piva. The fitted wall unit brings out the beauty inherent in its wall-grid structure, an elegant play on geometries and asymmetry. A lighting system can be applied to its compartments while the shelving can be either a wafer thin 2.8 centimetres or a bold, chunky 6 centimetres. Sliding doors, now available in leather and *cuoietto* finish, offer a refined solution.

The storage wall has come a long way since Nelson and is likely to change even more if 2010's new offerings are any indicator.

"There is an increasing need for products to adapt and change with our changing lifestyles," Redshaw says. "Furniture in particular needs to offer versatility and flexibility, and provide solutions to our everyday practical problems, making life easier and supporting our needs, working with us rather than simply being inanimate objects."

MOOD LIGHTING

Soft technology is another important direction that surfaced during the home fairs earlier this year and its application is ideal for the media room. Forecaster Milou Ket, from APS Media Group, predicted at the end of last year that "soft technology" would be a driving force of interior designs in 2010.

"This young direction in almost acid pastel colours is influenced by the colours of technology, as in a laboratory. White is indispensable in colour combinations to obtain a fresh and clean effect. We see different interpretations: from clean and modern, sometimes even futuristic based on the results of modern technology… The effect of light is very important," Ket noted. "A soft artificial effect of colours seen through a transparent or translucent synthetic material is the key. Artificial materials such as glass, plastic, Plexiglas, silicone and rubber give such a diffused, yet colourful effect to obtain a modern result."

In the media room, such mood lighting was once the providence of the entertainment system, where backlit television sets glowed blue, green or red, but techno-infused ambient lighting options have moved well beyond early

applications. The modular *Asami* sofa by Italian furniture maker Colico, which can be used outdoors as well, is right on point. It incorporates LED lights into a translucent base and, controlled by a remote, you can change the *Asami*'s colour as often as you wish, setting the mood as the evening requires.

There are also other innovations, such as LED wallpaper, that began cropping up in special installations such as those created by the German-born artist/designer Ingo Maurer in 2006-2007, and Dutch designer Jonas Samson, who gained the attention of design blogs with his conceptual LED wallpaper, which he has just begun taking orders for. At British-based Lomox, which expects to be able to sell its LED wallpapers by 2012, the wallpaper, which uses less electricity than conventional lighting, has a chemical coating to produce a glow that mimics natural sunlight and the brightness of the paper can be controlled by a dimmer switch.

Already on the market are visually striking LED wallpapers by Meystyle, which integrates LED lights and crystals into its work. Digital designs are printed onto synthetic fabric for the wallpaper and can be complemented by matching designs for upholstery and cushions.

"The low level lighting adds an aesthetic quality but also provides a spatial marker at night when all other lights are off," notes Ekaterina Yaschuk, a spatial designer and co-founder of UK-based Meystyle. "The digital prints are futuristic especially in their treatment of colour gradation, but often take the dramatic scale of 1970s interior prints as their starting point. The use of Swarovski crystals accentuates the impact of the LEDs as the two work in harmony to create a dramatic statement."

Whether for its functional role of infusing a room with a subtle glow or for its aesthetic effect, mood lighting helps create a more soothing atmosphere. "The home media room satisfies a growing desire to take a step back and take time-out from our intense interactions with the rest of the world," Redshaw points out. "We anticipate a mental and physical withdrawal into the privacy of our homes to reassess our priorities and enjoy a sense of sanctuary. Essentially we need to take stock and have a 'time-out'.

"Perhaps most importantly, the media room offers a sense of much needed escapism from the worries and drudgery of everyday life. We can escape to another world within our homes whenever we want with the minimum of effort." id

For a luxurious statement, Bang & Olufsen's *BeoVision* TV and audio collection is now available in gold.