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# Newsday

YOUR EYE ON LI

SPORTS FINAL



## LI Real Estate



Creating dream  
**home theaters**  
can cost big bucks,  
experts say

C8

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## COVER STORY



NEWSDAY / JOHN PARASKEVAS

The "Star Wars"-themed home theater in the basement of Ryan DeMarco's Northport home seats eight in plush leather chairs that can recline.

# BIG SCREEN, REEL MONEY

BY RACHEL WEISS  
rachel.weiss@newsday.com

Installing home theaters can run six figures

**R**ight now, it's a deep, muddy hole alongside Ralph and Debra Pollio's home in Dix Hills.

Debra walked around the perimeter of the hole, shovels lying in wait against a wooden framework below. Here is the vision, as seen through her lens: a secret doorway, built into the cabinetry of their mud room. It leads into a room filled with a dozen places to sit — bar stools against raised counters and comfortable, sectional couches. A stocked concession stand, brilliant surround sound speakers and a 150-inch screen on the back wall.

With a set of blueprints and a big team working behind the

scenes, soon it will be showtime in their own personal movie theater.

"We're of retirement age," Debra said. "And this is our final house, and so we're finally doing the dream house."

The couple bought their home five years ago, right before COVID hit. After the sales of their previous homes, they started "pooling everything together" to make this place into an entertainment oasis, Debra said.

The Pollos' theater will be 16 by 21 feet with 10-foot ceilings, built as an extension of their home. During the pandemic, there was an increased desire

for home theaters, according to local professionals who design and install them.

"The trend has always been around," said Scott Boxenhorn, president and co-owner of IDS Audio Video & Technologies in Plainview. "Now, as electronic costs have come down and the quality of what we can provide has gone up, it's more in demand than ever."

The price can vary widely, depending on your big Hollywood dreams. And there is plenty of planning needed to bring the project to life. The help of experts — including architects, designers, contractors, audiovisual pros, HVAC

technicians and sometimes even plumbers — is required when dedicating a room to a home theater.

But for movie buffs, having an authentic moviegoing experience embedded into the comfort of a home is worth the time and investment — especially when sharing it with loved ones.

"We're trying to make this a beautiful house to welcome back our family and friends, to live out the rest of our years, and have an enjoyable life," Debra said.

### ENJOYING MOVIE MAGIC

The Pollos love going to the movies, most recently taking in the high-tech thriller "Compan-

ion" and the suspenseful Steven Soderbergh-directed "Black Bag." When they were settling into their new home in 2020, they started to stream more films than ever.

"As soon as the theaters were back open, we rushed back," said Debra, who has retired from a 35-year teaching career. "But most of the people we know don't do that."

For a while, they had some high-end speakers in their living room. But in their open-concept home, the sound bounces around, echoing, and "the whole house shakes when you blast movies," Debra said.

To quote "Jaws," one of the films they're most excited to watch on their new big screen, the couple decided they were "gonna need a bigger boat."

## COVER STORY

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Ryan DeMarco's setup also has a "Star Wars"-themed candy station.

They wanted to construct a room meant for watching loud movies and big games, along with listening to the music. Among their team to make it all happen is Michael Pittoni, chief operating officer of Audio Breakthroughs in Manhasset.

"We'll take a space and either build it from scratch, or retrofit an existing space into a dedicated home theater," said Pittoni.

When homeowners choose an existing room to install a home theater, "85% of the time, it's the basement," he said.

An unfinished basement is a great canvas when building out a dedicated home theater room, or even a garage. But there are options for homeowners who don't have those spaces, said Thomas Mastrianni, president and designer at Extreme AVS Inc. in Smithtown.

"We can turn a family room into a theater, because if you don't have a basement or a dedicated room, everyone has a room that they have a TV in," Mastrianni said.

Planning out the design of a home theater with the homeowner is the most important

part of the process, Boxenhorn said. There are key elements to consider, he said: For example, the size of the space, to accommodate the number of people the client would like to fit inside, and the height of the ceilings, to account for levels of seating without possible obstruction from someone sitting in front of you. Air conditioning is a must, as the projector whirring will heat the room.

Then there's the acoustic element — figuring out the sound quality of the room, soundproofing it with insulation and adding acoustic paneling to the walls and ceilings is essential to ensuring films can really shine, before adding seating or equipment to the space.

"There's a lot that goes into the building of a theater," Boxenhorn said. "It's sort of like a mini house. It needs electrical, insulation, if there's a sink, it needs plumbing. So there's quite a bit of design work that's required."

### SHOW ME THE MONEY

The No. 1 question from clients, Boxenhorn said, is "how much is this all going to cost?"



Debra and Ralph Pollio are having a 16-by-21-foot home theater added on to their Dix Hills home.

NEWSDAY / J. CONRAD WILLIAMS, JR.

The answer: It depends on what exactly you want. That's why Boxenhorn's company offers a home theater cost estimate calculator on their website as a starting point. "Giving the client an idea in advance sets the stage for expectations," he said.

"The least expensive home theater I can do, because I've tried, was somewhere around \$15,000," said Mastrianni. That project included a surround sound system, a 120-inch screen and a 4K projector, but no seating.

On the higher end, Mastrianni recently completed a project with a 200-inch screen, three levels of seating to fit 18 people, a high-end projector, a 15-speaker surround sound system and an "acoustically transparent" screen, which involves tucking speakers out of sight behind the screen. That home theater totaled about \$350,000, he said.

Pittoni said that \$15,000 may be the least a homeowner can spend on a home theater before seeing "a significant drop in performance." But re-creating the experience on a budget is possible, he added.

"If someone comes in and they just need a pair of speakers, we'll help them, even if their budget is \$300," he said. "On the flip side, we will do massive, sprawling six-figure projects that include lighting, shades and automations."

For the Pollos, the cost of the home theater equipment is coupled with the construction of their home extension. The shell of the space alone is \$100,000, Ralph said, and because they're starting from scratch, they're expecting to spend \$15,000 on the HVAC system.

Equipment costs include \$30,000 for the projector, large MartinLogan speakers for \$30,000 and \$6,000 for the screen, Ralph said. Then there will be additional costs for the work of an electrician, plus carpeting and furniture.

"The problem is, when you start getting involved in something like this, since we're doing an extension, I want to do it right," said Ralph, who runs an SAT and ACT tutoring business. "And doing it right with this kind of thing gets really costly, and it's hard to compromise."

Costs can rise while selecting the equipment that will guarantee the sharpest picture possible, like what you see on a standard-size television, replicated on a 150-inch screen, Ralph said.

Some companies have showrooms where customers can test out theater seating and lend an ear to various sound systems to decide what they'd like.

"There are so many options at many different price ranges," Debra said. "And technology is moving really fast, so doing your homework and knowing what's available and then prioritizing which features are more important to you, whether it's sound or picture, that's how you're going to get closer and closer to your desired result."

### LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION!

Long ago, in a galaxy not so far away (Northport, to be exact) — Ryan DeMarco constructed a "Star Wars"-themed movie theater in his basement.

With Darth Vader working the ticket booth and stormtroopers guarding the entrance, an

See THEATERS on C12

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SCOTT BOKER/Newsday

Scott Boxenhorn, of IDS Audio Video & Technologies, is shown in the vestibule of the "Star Wars"-themed home theater his company built in Northport.

# THE COST OF PUTTING IN A HOME THEATER

**THEATERS** from C9

aluminum starship door leads inside: three levels of seating, a dozen Dolby Atmos surround sound speakers (and two subwoofers), a fiber optic ceiling covered in tiny twinkling lights and, the star of the show, a 150-inch screen.

"First, it started off as a big TV, about an 80-inch TV, and some surround sound," said DeMarco, 50, a stay-at-home dad. He looked out over the rows of leather seats with a grin. "And it morphed into a movie room."

As a father of three boys, taking them to the theater can be a challenge, he said. "So why not create an experience here, for me and the kids?"

That is among the reasons homeowners reach out to Boxenhorn, who collaborated with DeMarco on his home theater.

"It eliminates a lot of things that people don't like about going to the movies, which are disruptions," he said. "Noise, people talking, people kicking your chair, hearing sounds from other theaters. So people are very excited about having this experience in their own home. Also, it's a great way for the family to get together and share an experience."

Pitoni recently took his children to see the new "Paddington" movie in theaters, and felt distracted by the glowing green exit signs near the screen.

But with a home theater, "you now have control over the lights, the thermostat, you get to pick out your seating . . . You're really making it an optimized experience for yourself," he said.

In DeMarco's basement, they had to dig down 2 feet to accommodate the home

theater seating levels. The six-figure project took about six months to complete, in 2023. When his family moved into the house in 2010, the space was unfinished and being used as a garage.

There are movie posters on the walls, in the hallway that leads into the home theater. That includes "Top Gun: Maverick," "The Hangover" and "Deadpool & Wolverine." These special touches were DeMarco's ideas, and "Star Wars" was emphasized to honor "the most classic movie of all time," he said.

"I came up with the idea of the hallway and the posters, ticket booth and everything else, versus just having a room with a big-screen TV," said DeMarco.

DeMarco can sneak down here after his sons, ages 12, 10 and 5, head off to school, and said action movies pack the best punch for the high-quality screen and surround sound system.

The Pollos hope to wrap up their own home theater construction this summer. Ralph doesn't mind watching the same movies over and over, and looks forward to enjoying them the way they're meant to be seen: on a big, cinematic screen.

Maybe, he said, he'll go out to the theater less frequently once his own is completed. But there are some parts of the movie-going experience that are one-of-a-kind.

"There's a certain vibe you get in the movie theater," Ralph said. "It doesn't matter to a lot of people, but to me, when everybody laughs at the same jokes, I love that."

But, Debra added, "this is a way for us to invite friends and family over to share that experience with them."

"We're of retirement age," Debra said. "And this is our final house, and so we're finally doing the dream house."

The couple bought their home five years ago, right before COVID hit. After the sales of their previous homes, they started "pooling everything together" to make this place into an entertainment oasis, Debra said.

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REAL ESTATE

## Home theaters: What they cost and what Long Islanders love



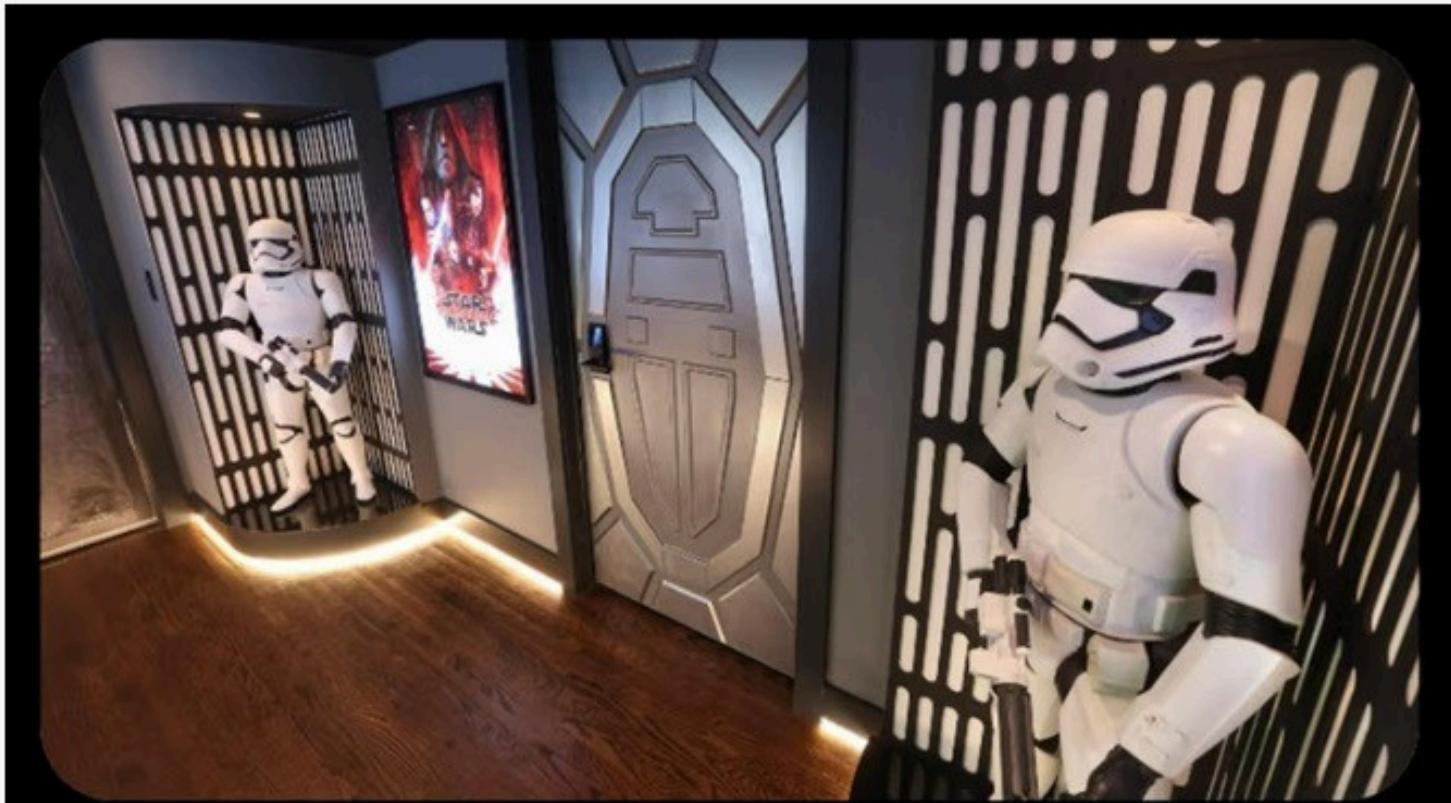
**“There's a lot that goes into the building of a theater. It's sort of like a mini house: It needs electrical, insulation, if there's a sink, it needs plumbing.”**

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Ryan DeMarco's six-figure home theater was designed with a Star Wars theme and seats eight under a fiber-optic ceiling that glitters like a starry sky. Credit: John Paraskevas