

Flat screens pose design dilemma

On the wall or on a stand, new TVs require new display methods

By DANIEL DRIOLET
For *CanWest News Service*

Ottawa designer Carol Gunn has witnessed the technology-versus-design battle many times.

It usually goes like this, she says: The husband sees a flat-screen TV in an electronics shop and decides to buy it. It's huge and often comes with extra speakers. But when it arrives home, the wife has a conniption because the living room now looks like an electronics shop. The new flat-screen panels are so large, they become the focal point of any room.

And as they become more popular, flat screens have created a whole range of design headaches — and design solutions. Plasma and LCD televisions are now priced within reach of many consumers. Market research firm iSupply says the average North American price of LCD TVs in the most popular size dropped by nearly 50 per cent during the past year.

And flat-panel LCD or plasma sets generated 63 per cent of all sales compared to just 39 per cent a year earlier. Old-style boxy cube televisions needed wide shelves or special stands and created their own issues. But walk into electronics stores today and you will see TVs with a whole different look: screens that are rectangular rather than square, and television sets as flat as a painting.

And guess what? The new models won't fit into "home entertainment centres" designed for the old-style cubes. So if you buy a new flat-screen model, you are going to have to do some retrofitting. These things are not plug-and-play. From a design perspective, you first have to decide where to put the TV. Then you've got to decide how you are going to mount it — on the wall, in a specially designed entertainment unit or framed by custom cabinetry. Placement is crucial because TVs these days are so much larger than they used to be, they demand a big wall and proper viewing distance.

For example, Anthony Di Lecce, president of Intelligent Sound and Vision, a Toronto company that offers what he calls "turnkey solutions" to flat-screen TV installation, says a 40-inch TV should be viewed from 10 feet away. Then there's natural light to consider.

In a bright room, it's better to go with an LCD screen, says Di Lecce. "You should not have direct light on your plasma. It will wash out the image." In the end, there might not be many places where the TV will fit and offer proper viewing distance. Sometimes, the only one is above a fireplace. Many designers view this with horror. Why? Because you end up with two competing focal points.

Gunn says one Ottawa builder she worked with created TV niches above the fireplace in some of its homes. But she adds people ended up with kinks in their neck from staring up at the TV. So she and other designers say it's much better if the TV is on another wall.

Once you've decided where the TV is going to go, you need to figure out whether to put it on a stand, bolt it to the wall, buy special furniture or build custom cabinetry around it. Flat-screen TVs look cool hanging up on the wall, almost like a work of art. But the problem with wall mounting is the wires.

Wires? What wires? I don't see any wires dangling beneath those wall-mounted units in the Sony Style catalogue. That's because they hidden inside the walls. David Tsuyuki, team manager at G&G Electronics in Toronto, says people don't realize all the work that's involved in getting a flat-screen TV to look good on a wall. Wires for cable and electricity have to be fished through the walls to new outlets behind the TV. So do wires for speakers that are mounted elsewhere on the wall.

"The trend in the industry is in-wall speakers," says Tsuyuki. "Sixty per cent of people get surround-sound, plus a lot of TVs will work on a computer monitor."

It's a lot of work to install them. Tsuyuki says his average bill for installation of a flat-screen TV will include \$350 to \$450 in labour for such things as fishing wires through walls, plus \$200 to \$400 for cabling. He advises people to have the wiring done during new construction if they can.

Wall mounting raises other issues. Gunn says most TVs look good on the wall. Some flat-screens even turn into a mirror when turned off. But they do have visual bulk. So for anyone who wants to minimize the visual impact of a wall-mounted TV, she suggests painting the wall behind it a dark colour "so it sort of forces the TV to bleed back into the wall."

If you're not wall-mounting, then you've got to buy a TV stand. But furniture manufacturers were at first slow to react to the arrival en masse of the flat-panel T, says Tamara O'Leary of M.Y. Home, a store in suburban Ottawa.

"Only in the last year have I felt that I had anything to offer people," says O'Leary.

There's another choice — halfway between wall mounting and shelving units — and that's creating a false wall that hides the wires without having to fish them through the walls.

"We've been making our mounts for 20 years, trying to solve customers' issues of getting TVs up on the wall," says Don Burns, CEO of Vantage Point Products Corp. of Santa Fe Springs, California, creator of the Evo System.

The Evo System is simple. You bolt metal rails onto studs in the wall, and that secures a modular system of square panels and shelves, which can be as extensive as needed. Wires are hidden behind the panels and all electronics — TV, speakers, whatever — are mounted to the system itself instead of to the wall. "You can grow this system section by section," says Burns, adding that it can also be taken with you if you move.

O'Leary says that, too often, with flat-panel TVs, furniture is an afterthought. "I think it's going to switch over the other way," she says.

"I think people are going to realize that having the TV on the wall is not that attractive." Though right now, of course, "people aren't so desperate to hide the plasma: They want to show it off."

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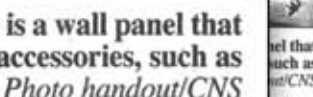


Photo handout/CNS

One alternative display for flat screens is a wall panel that hides wiring and provides storage for accessories, such as the Evo System, above.