

THE FIX

It's Time for a Better TV Room

Admit it: You're spending a lot of time with the TV. And the room where you're binge-watching could be more comfortable.



By Tim McKeough

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With so much time spent at home, many of us are binge-watching TV in alarming amounts — and that's unlikely to change anytime soon.

To get the most out of your time in front of the TV, you need more than just a handful of streaming services: You need a comfortable room where you want to flop down for hours. Designing a TV room, however, isn't like designing a kitchen or bathroom. There are few hard-and-fast rules.



"We often try to put the TV on a wall that has some color depth to it, just so it doesn't look like such a sticker on the wall," said Thomas Morbitzer, a partner at Ammor Architecture. Garrett Rowland

Why? While homes have accommodated activities like cooking, dining and sleeping for centuries, watching TV is still relatively new. It's "only been a design problem for about 70 years," said Thomas Morbitzer, a partner at Ammor Architecture, in New York.

And during that time, the technology has changed dramatically. Where boxy TVs once filled up space-hogging cabinets, now some flat-panel screens are as slender as picture frames and mounted much the same way.

"The TV is a big deal in most houses," Mr. Morbitzer said. "But what's funny is that everybody's is totally different."

Still, the architects and designers we spoke to offered plenty of ideas for creating inviting spaces for watching TV, whether your screen is in a dedicated media room or a corner of the living room.



Planning ways to hide cords and components during renovation or construction makes for clutter-free TV installations, as in this San Diego house by KAA Design. Roger Davies

Position the TV

Plunking down a TV on a cabinet or mounting it on a wall sounds simple enough. But before you do that, take note of the rest of the room.

Often, a TV competes with other elements for attention. “There’s always that challenge between the fireplace, the television and the view,” said Grant Kirkpatrick, a partner at KAA Design, in Los Angeles. “Every day, we’re dealing with where we can put the TV so it’s practical but not the focal point.”

In a room with a fireplace, the TV is often mounted high above the mantel, but that isn’t always the best choice, Mr. Kirkpatrick said. Sure, it makes one wall the focus of the room, but it also requires viewers to look up when they’re seated, which can be uncomfortable. (And decorating the mantel is more difficult.)

So what’s the ideal height for a TV? That “depends on the distance from the TV, the size of the TV and the height of the sofas,” Mr. Morbitzer said. Generally, he said, “we’re comfortable putting TVs between 50 and 54 inches, on center, from the floor.”



When you're deciding where to put the TV — and what should be the focal point of a room — “there's always that challenge between the fireplace, the television and the view,” said Grant Kirkpatrick, a partner at KAA Design. Manolo Langis

In a room with a fireplace, a spectacular view or beautiful art, you may have multiple focal points. At one home in Manhattan Beach, Calif., for instance, Mr. Kirkpatrick's firm designed a room with an off-center fireplace and a low plinth beside it to hold a TV, with space for firewood storage below.

Other designers prefer to mount the TV on a wall perpendicular to the fireplace, so people can choose to sit facing the fireplace or the TV.

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Consider the TV Wall

When TVs had smaller screens and larger enclosures, hiding them in armoires was a popular strategy. Now that larger screens are de rigueur, hiding a TV in a cabinet is more difficult. But it's not impossible.

Ammor Architecture designed a SoHo loft with a retractable screen and a hidden projector, doing away with the big-screen TV entirely. Workshop/APD, a New York-based firm, sometimes hides the TV behind a large piece of art with a motorized mechanism that slides the artwork out of the way when it's time to watch “The Queen's Gambit.”



In a SoHo loft, Ammor Architecture installed a hidden projector and retractable screen instead of a big-screen TV. Garrett Rowland

“We get into these discussions about how to create an amazing space that’s enjoyable to sit in, where it doesn’t feel like you’re just looking at a black box the whole time,” said Matthew Berman, a principal at Workshop/APD.

That doesn’t always require motors and sliding panels, Mr. Berman said. Sometimes he positions the TV in a wall of built-in shelving, so it becomes just one element in a larger expanse of books and decorative objects. Or the shelving might be installed on either side of the TV for a similar effect.

Covering the wall behind the TV with a dark wallpaper or paint color can achieve the same thing, Mr. Morbitzer said: “We often try to put the TV on a wall that has some color depth to it, just so it doesn’t look like such a sticker on the wall.”



Deep sectional sofas, like those in this media room by Workshop/APD, provide plenty of space for spreading out. Read McKendree

Plan the Seating

Furnishing a TV room isn't like furnishing a formal living room. "Eschewing formality is typically good practice for a TV room," said Andrew Bowen, a partner at ASH NYC. "We think about it as a place where people really just want to relax, unwind, turn off the world outside and focus on whatever entertainment is in front of them."

That means, "first and foremost, you really need ample comfortable seating," he said. "In general, it's good to have deeper seats" than you'd have in a normal living room, because people often prefer to recline while watching TV, rather than sitting up with perfect posture.

Many sofas have a depth of 36 or 37 inches, but one with a depth of 40 or 41 inches might be preferable in a TV room, as it offers more space for spreading out.



“Eschewing formality is typically good practice for a TV room,” said Andrew Bowen, a partner at ASH NYC, who favors sectional sofas and floor cushions. Christian Harder

Sectional sofas are popular in TV rooms for similar reasons: They foster a casual vibe and support various modes of seating, while allowing people to face different directions in rooms with multiple focal points.

“If you can, do an L-shaped sectional,” said Joyce Downing Pickens, the founder of Los Angeles-based JDP Interiors. She prefers sectionals with back support along two sides over those that merely add an ottoman-like extension to a standard sofa.

Or use two sofas to form an L, with a side table in the corner where they meet, as Ms. Pickens did in a home in the Hollywood Hills neighborhood of Los Angeles. Then complete the seating arrangement by adding a chair or two opposite the sofa.

“You want to create a rectangle,” she said. Swivel chairs can be especially helpful with this type of furniture layout, as they can face the sofa for conversation and rotate to face a TV or fireplace.



When you're arranging the furniture, "you want to create a rectangle," said Joyce Downing Pickens, the founder of JDP Interiors. She did that in this house, in the Hollywood Hills section of Los Angeles, using two sofas, stools and a lounge chair. Amy Bartlam

Manage the Wires

You may have a number of components running in and out of your TV — cable boxes, streaming devices, sound bars, video game systems. To keep them and the wires that go with them from looking cluttered, you'll need a plan for where to put everything.

A low cabinet below the TV can hide extra components, and with holes drilled in the back, it can provide access for wires. If you have multiple cables running from the TV to the cabinet, tie them together using Velcro straps or zip ties.



"My go-to way to incorporate a TV into a room is creating a built-in around it," Ms. Pickens said. Cane doors allow infrared remote controls to work with components hidden behind them. Amy Bartlam

Better yet, think about built-in cabinetry. Mr. Morbitzer said his firm often mounts the TV on a panel that sits slightly out from the wall, so cords can be concealed behind it. If the bottom cabinets have doors made of a semitransparent material like metal mesh or woven cane, you can hide components and still operate them with infrared remote controls.

If you're renovating, consider adding a recessed box with an outlet and all necessary cable connections directly behind the TV, and connect it to components housed elsewhere.

"It's all hidden behind the TV," Mr. Berman said. "All of the wires run inside the wall to wherever our remote location is. Sometimes it's an AV rack in a closet, sometimes it's in a basement, sometimes it's just in a piece of furniture."



Accessories like pillows, throws and baskets increase comfort and help create a casual vibe, as in this Palm Springs, Calif., home by ASH NYC. Stephen Busken

Control the Light

It's nice to be able to control light levels in any room, but in a TV room it's especially important.

First, study the natural light in the room. If one wall is often drenched in sunlight, try to put the TV somewhere else. "There are ways to orient a TV so you can enjoy it day and night" without glare, Mr. Kirkpatrick said.

If the entire room is generally bright and sunny, it might be worth adding blackout shades or heavy drapery that can be pulled over the windows during the day. For additional flexibility, Mr. Morbitzer recommended using multiple fixtures on dimmers, so you can have a bright room when you're not watching TV and a darker room when you are.

Be sure to include floor or table lamps beside some seats, he advised, "so if somebody wants to read a book while people are watching TV, they can do that discreetly, without having to have the overhead light on."

A Manhattan living room by Workshop/APD offers several ways to control the light, including curtains, recessed and suspended ceiling fixtures, and table lamps. Donna Dotan

Boost Comfort With Accessories

“There’s a time and a place for ample throw pillows,” Mr. Bowen said. “And the media room or TV room is it.”

Throw pillows allow people to customize their comfort, especially with a deep sofa. By piling up pillows or stuffing them behind you, he said, “you can sit at exactly the angle you want, in the position you want.”

Having a throw or a blanket draped over the sofa will also add to the laid-back vibe and make it easy to get cozy on cold nights.

Because the TV room should be a casual place, Mr. Bowen likes to add floor cushions or poufs as well, for those who might want to spread out on the rug.

And to keep the room tidy, Ms. Pickens suggested adding decorative trays, boxes and bowls. “I always try to find a pretty box or bowl to put on people’s coffee tables,” she said, “so they can put their remotes inside that.”

A container also offers protection from the scourge of any TV room: the sofa with cushions so deep they swallow the controls.

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