

consumer electronics/major appliances



Digital Minimalism

By Michael Fucnick

NEW YORK—It's down to the bare minimum in home-entertainment design these days.

As home theater gets slimmer and sleeker, unobtrusive is the key to audio and video design. Consumer electronics manufacturers are increasingly migrating to stark minimalism, especially in regards to flat-panel and home-theater system design.

**THE
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ISSUE**

Bang & Olufsen, known for its high-end design-driven audio and video, exercises an eye toward minimalism in an effort to integrate its products into contemporary home décor.

"[Consumers] want equipment to blend into the home environment when they are not using the product," said David Zapfel, product manager at Bang & Olufsen America. "We use very basic controls. Most of our systems look more like a piece of sculpture than a piece of equipment," he added.

Zapfel said that one of the best exam-

ples of this minimalist design is the company's BeoVision 5 plasma television. "It is simply a plasma screen with an aluminum frame. There are no controls on the TV—it is completely operated by remote. When it is not on, it can be a piece of art," he explained.

Bang & Olufsen's video and audio design is inspired by the Bauhaus movement of the 1920s and 1930s, which, Zapfel said, focuses on clean lines and minimalist design. This German design movement emphasizes straight edges and smooth, slim forms.

Bruce Tripido, Sharp's director of product marketing for digital-display devices, said that the focus in television design today is maintaining the cleanest look on the front of the television by minimizing the display. He said that Sharp has gone in the direction of "smoked and mirrored" LED display screens that are hidden when the set is off.

Display minimalism is also evident in home-theater components, Tripido said, noting that manufacturers tend to hide control panels behind doors.

Tom Alessi, director of product de-

velopment at LG Electronics, said that flat-panel televisions must look sleek and elegant when off. He also said that the key to this elegance is unobtrusive controls. "The technology is not in your face, but accessible when you want to use it."

LG recently introduced a higher end plasma line, the high-gloss black PY2DR series, which was designed with this minimalist ideal in mind. Alessi explained that the TV's channel display is backlit and only visible when in operation. All other controls are positioned on the side of the set, out of view. He said that this design is funneling down to midlevel products as well.

Eric Chan, principal at Ecco Design, agreed that hide-and-seek technology is the key to unobtrusive integration of products in the home. "To magically integrate technology, [manufacturers] use hidden controls, no lights flashing in front of you. This softens the face of the product," he said. "Before you turn on the equipment, it should almost look like nothing. Technology only looks at me

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Less is more in flat-panel and home-theater system design with slimmer, sleeker and unobtrusive features

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