

A couple of months back I found myself buying half the Dolce & Gabbana's product line during a trip to Washington with a daughter who has inherited all her mother's genes when it comes to shopping. Whilst this was a welcome contrast to tramping through mud and horse manure in Virginia; my Yorkshireman's wallet was clearly distraught until an escape route to Indianapolis beckoned.

So began my first visit to a CEDIA USA Expo and Convention for this relatively recent convert to full automation home installs. The original more modest concept of multi-room sound and vision never really attracted me since I spend much of my life trying to avoid the depressing wallpaper noise of much of today's television and radio. For me breakfast is a period of contemplation undisturbed by Gabby and George spouting inanities from their sofa or the dulcet tones of Terry on Radio 2. But today the means exist to wire the whole house as a computer network using inexpensive twisted pair cabling through which you can pass computer data; video and audio signals; lighting and security signals and even access to appliances such as refrigerators; and central heating systems. And already a small start has been made at Schloss Curtis.

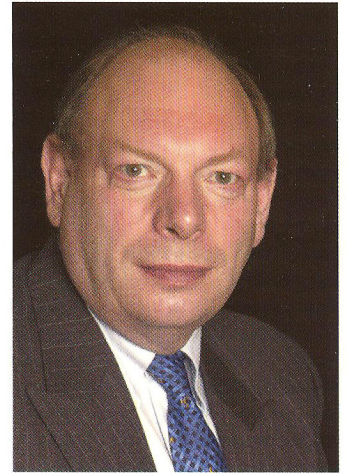
In the course of the show I talked to a number of installers over a Bud or six and a curious yet strangely predictable consensus emerged. The big commercial installers look down on the specialist residential installers; the specialist residential installers look down on the dealer-installers and most everybody looks down at the dealers who are "having a go at a multi-room installation". Nothing new there then. Each of these groups has an arguable point of view but mostly it comes down to each "installer" sticking to the projects that logistically, financially and technically they can support and then passing on those that they cannot support no matter how financially lucrative they may appear. Certainly now that I'm getting into install technology I'm finding that there are some integration issues which are far

from trivial and yet I'm no dullard on matters technical. The thought of the inexperienced dealer "having a go" brings to mind images of "Watchdog"; "Trading Standards" and "Wyatt Earp" in no particular order. But it need not be this way because both the manufacturers and CEDIA, the trade organisation, offer some splendid training courses which could well turn young David from the "Heartbeat" series into a competent systems technician.

For the specialist retailer the move into home installations appears superficially tempting but it can be a mixed blessing. There are some who offer both a keen price on the components and a low cost (or even no cost) for the work of installation. Whilst this works with many simple two-channel hi-fi systems it can become marginal or even loss-making when you send out two guys to drill the wall to mount a plasma screen upon which you make a 12% margin. A better future lies in the

forth all have to be paid for their services. And it seems to be a formula that works. I have only to contrast the vibrancy, enthusiasm and optimism that radiates from the install industry with the often depressing "We're all doomed, Captain Mainwaring" atmosphere that has pervaded much of the hi-fi and home cinema industry this year.

As I mentioned earlier one of the highlights of any CEDIA Expo is the manufacturer's training courses which range from introductions for beginners to some heavy-weight technical sessions. I attended a few such sessions on the basis that you are never too old to learn and indeed I did learn a few things. One particularly inspiring nugget of knowledge was how to tunnel a port through the client's broadband router to gain full control of his system. This allows the installer to diagnose and sometimes to fix problems remotely without the need for a home visit as well as providing



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format described to me by some American installers who price the components keenly but charge fully for all the design, installation, commissioning and maintenance work. They are selling their experience and ability as a service in exactly the same way that a kitchen company or a curtain manufacturer clearly separates the costs of materials and labour. When homes are built or re-modelled the client accepts that the architect; the kitchen designer; the interior designer and so

the means to update software again without disturbing the client. I'm not sure whether this technique is legal in the UK especially when you consider that the installer could then simply access the video stream from any IP addressable video cameras. Any indiscretion on the part of the archetypical bored footballer's wife could be innocently recorded for posterity. Perish the thought that a bit of high-tech blackmail could form the basis of a wholly new business model.