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# studio design trends

**DAVID WEISS**  
*Interviews a group of studio designers to get their view on what design trends are currently taking shape.*

**A**mong the bigger myths circulating about the world of sound has been the death of the recording studio. Articles in mass media no less prestigious than the New York Times predicted last year that the increased capabilities of the computer-based home studio would soon make dedicated audio facilities obsolete. Could it really be true?

The fact is, of course, that today the vast majority of music and sound made to make money is created whole-scale, or at least partly, in a professionally designed space put together exclusively for that purpose. Recording studios, mixing and mastering rooms, and post facilities that are well constructed have acoustical and ergonomic advantages, which make them more dependable, efficient and creatively inspiring places to record than a basement with a maxed out DAW.

## **Business Is Good**

*Audio Media* decided to check in on the state of the art of studio design, and found that while the scale and budget of new projects are definitely smaller than they used to be, the experts we talked to have as many orders on their plates as ever. "I keep hearing and reading about the demise of the recording studio — but our clients haven't heard about that," says Russ Berger, president of the Addison, Texas-based Russ Berger Design Group ([www.rbdg.com](http://www.rbdg.com)). "In terms of building for commercial recording, there's now more of a passion than ever for recording and doing it right. I understand the chaos currently associated with commercial distribution, but there's still a demand for product."

"Last year was kind of slow for everyone, even before September 11," adds Peter Grueneisen of the Los Angeles-based firm *bau.ton* ([www.bauton.com](http://www.bauton.com)). ▶

"But we can see there is demand to catch up. Starting in January, things have picked up and I think it will pick up more."

"A common thread among our clients right now is that most of them have a fairly large percentage of their production work spoken for already, before they build it," says John Stoyk of Walters-Stoyk Design Group in Highland, New York. "Another reason construction is up is that we're not being held hostage by equipment prices anymore. You don't have to spend a million dollars.

make it smaller because the equipment is smaller. On the other hand, due to the acoustical aspects of the whole thing, you cannot make it indefinitely smaller, so you have to find the balance between the raw spaces you can put the equipment in and the acoustical characteristics. You can make a control room smaller, but it will have an impact on the sound as well."

Horacio Malvicino of Miami's MBR Design Group ([www.mbr-design-group.com](http://www.mbr-design-group.com)) agrees that DAW-based control rooms change the

For Martin Pichner, principle partner of Toronto-based Pichner Schoustal International ([www.2psii.com](http://www.2psii.com)), the changes in room design wrought by DAWs appear in subtle and sometimes unpredictable ways. "Not in terms of room size as might be imagined," he says, "which still seems to be derived by the surround requirements of the monitoring system and room occupancy. It has changed our approach to cable management as we now have to accommodate a workstation or a large console, or in some cases both. We have had a number of rooms start with a workstation and then switch to a large-format console after the fact, and vice versa."

Outside the control room, the ever-increasing use of MIDI means designers are being asked more often to create rooms specifically for that purpose. "If they're acquiring samples, a more dry environment is often appropriate, but if you have a studio that will only do that, you've painted yourself into a box," says Berger. "So ask, 'What's the longevity of a studio? Are you going to book projects for the next five years or the next 20 years?' Look at the approach and budget, and for the percentage of time that you're really tracking, maybe you need two rooms."

"I can't say there's a trend. There are a lot more people that want little dead boxes to acquire signals out of. Those are easy to build, but doing a room with acoustical character



Pichner Schoustal-designed Carriage House Studio A, Philadelphia

Some of these studios are being put together at a near world-class level for under \$250,000 — that's not a lot, and that allows people to have a studio."

With relatively inexpensive DAWs growing in efficiency, power and popularity, engineers, producers and post houses are finding it easier to afford building their own studio or adding/upgrading a room. "Overall, the trend to smaller consoles has been going on for some years and is continuing," says Grueneisen. "More high-quality equipment is available that's smaller, cheaper and better. We are still seeing people buying large consoles as well as a large amount of computer-based workstations. Each equipment configuration demands a different approach to designing the acoustics and the ergonomics of a room. In addition to consoles, the format of the audio, such as stereo or surround, and the demand for picture make a big difference."

### Working In A DAW World

When asked to build a control room around a DAW instead of the traditional large-format console, Grueneisen points out that designers can find themselves in a dilemma "You can

equation in more ways than one. "My mentor, Glenn Phoenix of Westlake Audio, once told me the perfect sounding room would be one without a console, which is true. It's a big object that generates reflections. The fact is that now we're dealing with smaller units, and we're still concerned about reflections, but it's a lot easier to locate in a sweet spot when you get a controller that's not as big and bulky. It also helps because wiring troughs and conduits on the floor are smaller now, with less wiring. With a smaller console, you also have the ability to work in a better eye contact situation across the room, especially with Foley or ADR rooms."

"The big drawback is that there are a lot more visual displays, like monitors, that come with that. Sometimes I tell people you can get an extender and a switch and work off one monitor, but people don't like that. With up to four monitors for a Mackie d8b console, one for the Pro Tools, one for locking to picture, and then one for the computer that handles MIDI, that becomes a pain in the neck. You get reflections and lose all of the things you gained by not having a big control surface."



RBDG-designed Patchwerk Studios, Atlanta

and resonance that's pleasing — that's more challenging."

"Most of the time in a small studio situation, people have a tendency to sacrifice acoustics for MIDI," notes Malvicino. "I think it's wrong. I believe smaller facilities need to be treated with the same approach and

quality as a big facility. When you think about small rooms and large rooms, I do believe variable acoustics are the way to go. When you're dealing with a dead room, it's dead no matter what, but a live room can be treated to become a dead room."

### Rooms For Discussion

While everyone agreed that variable acoustics can help to maximize the functionality of a live room, there were varied opinions on how deeply they should be engineered into a facility. "The key is always to focus on what a space is going to be used for — a specific purpose, more across the board or maybe variable acoustics to accommodate different aspects of the same room," says Grueneisen.

Grueneisen reports that client requests for variable acoustics have remained pretty consistent. "It's still not a very popular thing, for several reasons. It does cost more, and it requires a whole new level of learning by the users to really learn how to use it. What we've tried to do is keep it as low-tech as possible, for example, something that can be changed very easily by someone in the room like pulling a curtain, versus a very highly complex system — people just don't use them if they're too complicated.

"The problem is that the people who use the rooms have so much to think about. On the one hand we want to give them as much flexibility as possible, on the other hand, we have to be aware that it's just another layer of difficulty that they have to deal with."

To Berger, its applicability is a topic that's always worth discussing. "For many years, the issue of variable acoustics has been misunderstood in that there has been much confusion regarding large room versus small room acoustics," he says. "Variable acoustics are not as effective or dramatic in small rooms as they are in large rooms. Because of the physical size of a small room, you can't change the ambient decay like you could in a large room. Say you've got this fuzzy panel that you can swing open, now you're more reflective, but it's only five feet away from the artist. What does that sound like? You haven't added reverberation, just a close reflection, and that creates an anomaly, not really an ambience. There is a technique we've developed called loosely coupled space, so you can get perceptually long reverb in a small room if you have enough ceiling height, but you do need considerable ceiling height to do it in a small area."

Malvicino is a little more blunt about the potential hazards of variable acoustics. "They're a great tool in the hands of people who know how to handle them, but in a home studio they're like a weapon. It goes back to square one: How many people that record in their house have no background in recording?"

### Building Outside The United States

Although Malvicino has been doing his share of smaller, home-based studios, his extensive international portfolio and contacts sees him working outside the United States on much larger projects. Recent builds for him have included a thorough upgrade of the Arab Media Corporation facilities in Cairo, the big DEMK studios in Mexico and the huge ABS-CBN TV facility in the Philippines, with 17 control rooms and 18 studios. While the logistics of constructing these giant places in a foreign country may seem daunting, Malvicino explains that there are reasons why these jobs are actually easier.

"I'm lucky that I'm building so much overseas," he states. "These are the last of

the Mohicans. I love building big studios; it's a real thrill. The good thing about a big company is that you're dealing with an engineering staff that is the end user — not one person. I ask them what their intended use is, do a CAD design, go back and forth, and from there on it's a locked situation and will be built as projected.

"With small studios, those situations are prone to a lot of change. Home studio users often have an inability to project into a finished product, and you have to be patient and explain things. To me, it's a lot harder to build a small studio than a big studio. It takes a lot more pampering and hand holding."

While things have been holding relatively steady in the United States and many international zones, Malvicino notes that the



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▶ once-booming South American scene has lost momentum. "The whole South America situation has been bad for two years," he says. "I have an office in Argentina, and business in South America is at a complete standstill. Not

been proven time and again that the main factor in achieving a good sounding and good looking facility is not really the cost of the materials, but the fact that someone is actively thinking about their application.

a way to develop it," Pilchner says. "Our interests are in using normal materials and combining them in interesting ways to achieve the acoustic performance and look required. We are not big on fake finishes, which tend to be gimmicky and date themselves rather quickly. Budget is always a concern regarding finishes, so using common materials in interesting ways tends to stretch farther than using cost prohibitive specialties."

Whatever they use to put together the next magic room within a room, the most important resource that studio designers are working with is a love for their craft and the music that results from it. "It is exciting to see all the new opportunities afforded by new technology, new formats and new equipment," says Peter Grueneisen. "At the same time, it is nice to know that the real basics — acoustics and architecture — are alive and well. The challenge is to keep up with the developments and to find the right expression for whatever is happening."

"The more people who have studios, the better it is for us of course, but as a music lover it means there's more content," adds John Stork. "It's about the music, not the equipment or the studio design. So if someone builds a studio in a garage and some interesting content comes out of there, then that's fine, too."

And hey, a little of that aforementioned passion doesn't hurt. "Studio design is so satisfying: You're creating something, expressing yourself," says Russ Berger. "People say, 'Haven't they built all the studios they're going to build?' Well, haven't they



Pilchner Schoustal-designed Masterhouse Mastering, Miami

only is the economy bad, but everything is so unstable, so unpredictable — that's what makes it difficult. Brazil is still doing well though. They're isolated from the world economy; they have their own vibe, 140 million people, and a very strong music market."

Grueneisen, whose firm just finished 25 studios for Sony Music Entertainment in Japan (a project that took three years and measures 70,000 square feet), points out that with the right planning and the overall improvement in communication of the last few years, working overseas doesn't have to be overly stressful. "The logistics are important, and to know what can be done locally and what should be done from a distance is important to a job. It's so much easier to do these projects across the world than it was five years ago, and cheaper too."

## A Material World

As budgets shrink, studio builders are on the lookout for more affordable materials that can serve as attractive and effective surface treatments, as well as serve isolation and enclosure duties. "We're always trying to find less expensive materials that are unique," says Berger. "Budget is always an issue, but that's the fun part of our job, because the guys I work with are very creative about using materials to get a good look and keep costs down. Budgets are always forcing you to pay attention to materials."

"It has always been our philosophy to use materials in an innovative way and perhaps get more out of them than you would expect from their cost," says Grueneisen. "It has

"In the last few years we've found some innovative things, like aluminum products that can absorb sound. There are other things like felt products, also for absorption, and acoustical plaster materials that are very effective and fairly new."



Studio boucton-designed Sony Studios, Japan

Then again, if you can't find the materials you want, you can always just come up with new ones yourself. "If there is no product available that we are looking for, we will find

written all the songs and all the books, too? No, of course not. Everyone always has some excuse for why it's not a good time to build, but the question is: Do you love it?" □