

## SHOWROOM



Chicago-area-based integrator Artisan Electronics Group teams up with ELAN to help designers include home technology in their planning process

# Putting Wires Before Walls

By Eric Gross

For professionals working in high-end architectural and interior design, home technology integration has historically been a lesser concern. This is finally beginning to change, in Chicago at least, thanks to an intrepid electronics integrator's new technology showroom in one of the world's largest and most iconic interior design marketplaces, the Merchandise Mart. Featuring about three million square feet of floorspace dedicated to every luxury home accent and furnishing one could imagine, there was one notable exception until 2017: the Merchandise Mart has never had any sort of electronics business or showroom.

### Filling A Void

Upon discovering this void, Artisan Electronics Group, a Chicago-area electronics integration firm, decided the time was right to give the Merchandise Mart and its clientele the high-end home electronics showroom they deserve. After years of planning and research, the company launched

its brand-new experience center on the Mart's 14th floor this June. The inviting space offers designers and buyers a captivating introduction to the newest control technologies from ELAN, where they can sit in the most luxurious home theater seating available from AEG partner CinemaTech, experience a \$175,000 Dolby Atmos-powered home theater, and find out what modern home automation and AV is all about.

According to Ken Walker, founder and artistic director at Artisan Electronics Group, the company's new experience center finally brings the Merchandise Mart into the 21st century.

"When the market crashed and business attitudes changed in 2008, we decided to buck the trend of integrators pursuing commercial work, and instead focused on the design element of home electronics integration in Chicago, which nobody else was doing," Walker said. "I joined ASID (American Society of Interior Designers) and got involved with the Illinois chapter, and was recently elected to its board of directors. Engaging

with ASID brought me to the Merchandise Mart on a more regular basis, and I started to research the showrooms there to see if any existing retailers would be willing to exhibit the products we sell. After securing some entries that resulted in little business success, it became clear we needed our own showroom.”

Designers like Andy Lauber, director of Soucie Horner, Ltd., a luxury interior design firm headquartered just across the street from Merchandise Mart, are beginning to recognize the need as well.

“To many buyers and designers, the main aspects of a house are still all the traditional focus points, like the kitchen, bathrooms, flooring, windows and wall coverings,” Lauber said. “But being in the high-end residential space, we don’t work on very many homes that don’t also involve some component of integrated audio/video or automation, and those purchasing decisions are often left until late in the build process.”

#### Early Planning is Key

Exhibiting their skill and professionalism is another big benefit of Artisan Electronics Group’s decision to operate a prime-location showroom. Lauber hopes that Walker’s experience center helps to shift the conversation earlier in the build process, because he’s fully aware of the complications that can arise when it is put off until the budget is already allocated.

“A robust control system requires planning and cooperation with other subcontractors,” Lauber added, “and putting a beautiful experience center right next to the furniture showrooms is a huge step toward getting more buyers and designers to think about home technology earlier. It could be the difference between having one button to shut off all the lights at night, or having to walk around and do it manually every night for the entirety of the homeownership. Showing potential buyers what is possible early on increases the perceived value of home technologies.”

The experience center does a wonderful job of introducing buyers and designers to leading home technology brands and the benefits they offer. Walker worked directly with the main brands he loves, including ELAN. According to ELAN parent company Core Brands’ director of builder sales, Bret Jacob, this

project was made for the ELAN system.

“ELAN and interior design go hand-in-hand in a way that no other automation platform can, because the platform’s capabilities are as intuitive as an architect’s or designer’s sense of design,” he said. “It is the embodiment of individual expression, allowing detailed control through effortless home automation.”

Once visitors walk beyond the theater seating at the storefront, a corridor takes them past the “great wall of ELAN,” as Walker calls it, and they begin to get a hands-on look at smart, integrated control and automation for every part of the home.

ELAN is the only control system Artisan Electronics Group installs, largely because they consider it the easiest system to use and learn, and it is fully upgradeable to accommodate future innovations. ELAN recently added support for Amazon Alexa voice control, for instance, and current owners received the update free of charge.

“Right now, most firms aren’t making integrated technologies a separate line item in the budget process or the thought process,” Lauber added. “At Soucie Horner, Ltd., we believe a home is a reflection of the lifestyle people want to live, and in any new build, there is an incredible opportunity to improve the simplicity and functionality of many aspects of daily home life with integrated technologies.”

From showing basic and advanced ELAN automation features to the 12-seat 4K home theater with an invisible 5,000-watt Dolby Atmos 5.2.6 system, (11 speakers and four subs total) visitors can explore the full range of high-end home technologies at the experience center. The last separate section of the showroom is a designer’s workspace where the team can lay out blueprints or floor plans, discuss minute details and develop actionable plans for electronics integration.

“This is a great undertaking for our company, and we are excited to see what the next years bring,” Walker concluded. “Our staff, including Director of Field Operations Steve Rainey, who programmed the showroom’s ELAN system, have created a phenomenal representation of what we can do. We will be hard at work spreading the gospel of home electronics integration to designers and builders, and are excited to become one of the first stops on every design planning tour.” ●



L. to r.: Ken Walker, Bret Jacob and Steven Rainey



Visitors to Artisan enjoy in comfort a fully outfitted home theater with the latest home automation features and cutting-edge video and audio technologies

#### CONNECTED DESIGN



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