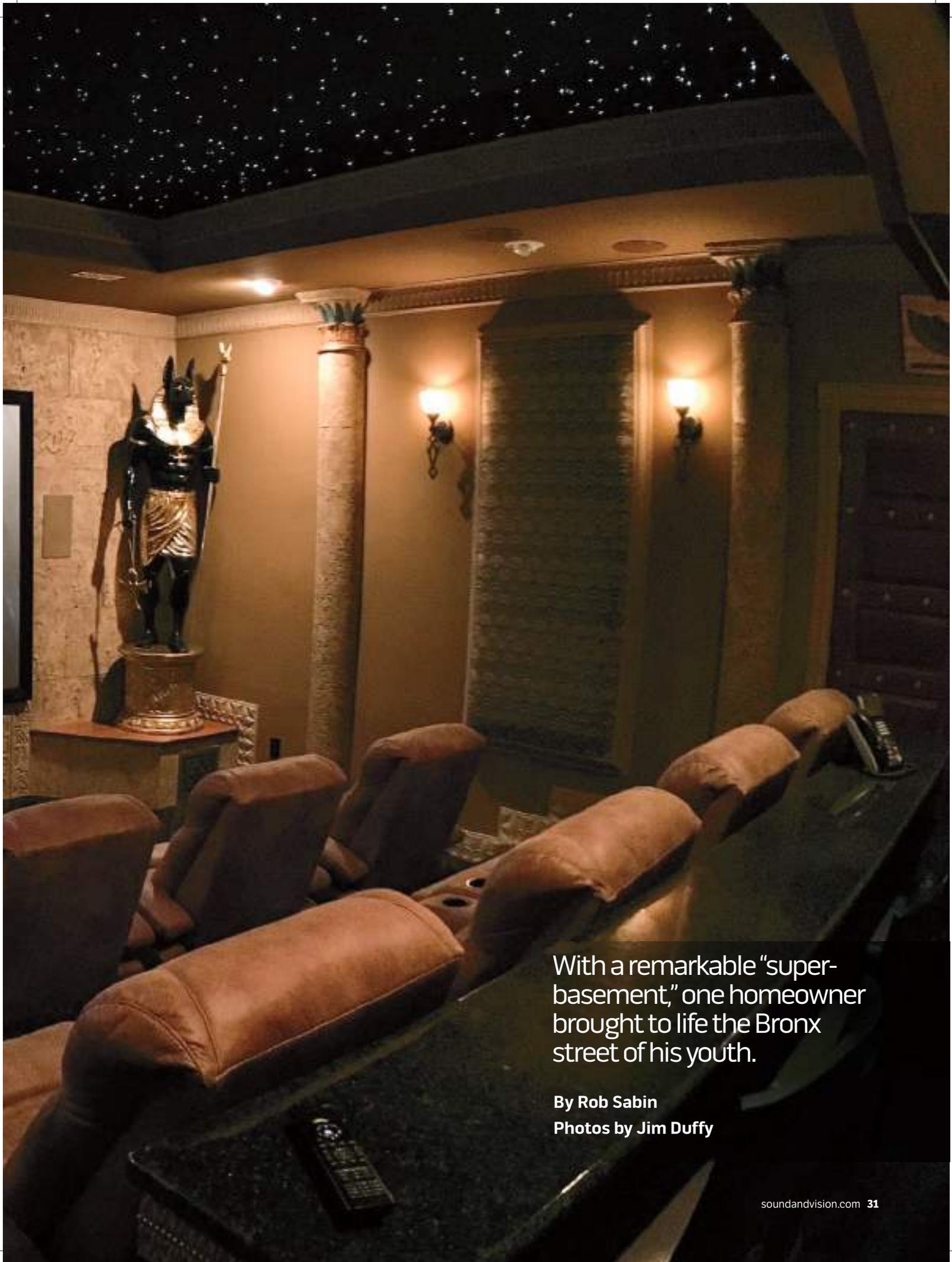


Thanks for the MEMORIES



Back in 2010, when the Duffy family began planning a move from South Florida to a new custom-designed home in the suburbs of Charlotte, North Carolina, they became fixated on one portion of the house that, for many people, is just an afterthought. But in this case, moving north meant finally being able to add a basement—a rarity in Florida, due to the state's high water table.

That said, the Duffys weren't just imagining what it would be like to finally have some extra room for storage, or a little



With a remarkable “super-basement,” one homeowner brought to life the Bronx street of his youth.

By Rob Sabin
Photos by Jim Duffy

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playroom, or even a home theater. “The wish list of activities and play spaces continued to grow and soon evolved into a street concept, where each space would occupy its own storefront on the street,” Jim Duffy explains. “We sketched out a 4,000-square-foot layout, then designed the

rest of our house around the footprint of the future basement.”

What eventually emerged is the remarkable “super-basement” featured here, which, with some exotic departures, mimics the North Bronx neighborhood where Jim grew up in the

mid-1950s through early 1960s. The stores on the subterranean street are constructed from actual brick, stone, and wood, and all of the design, decorating, and specialized paintwork was done by the Duffys.

The family members brought their own



● The Duffy family’s Bronx Street features themed storefronts that lead into the play areas. Clockwise from top left: entries to the Cavern Club and Egyptian Theater; Cavern Club interior; Sam’s Soda Shop interior and facade. Bottom: Bronx street with faux cobblestones and star ceiling.

special skills and experience to the project. Jim and his wife, Kris, are both longtime video and television producers with a well-developed eye for dressing a set. His son and daughter-in-law are professional artists who make and sell full-size sci-fi and horror figures and masks for their own shop and studio. And Jim's parents contributed vivid recollections of their life in the Bronx from the '40s through the '60s.

Obsessive attention to detail was paramount in bringing to life a 1966 Bronx neighborhood: No decoration, fixture, or architectural detail beckons beyond that year. "The original spark came from a desire to do more than just 'think back' on my great childhood," says Jim. "I wanted to literally *re-create* my childhood in this basement." Building out and finishing that dream took from the fall of 2015 through the spring of 2016.



If you're lucky enough to be a visitor to this super-basement, the adventure begins when you take an elevator down from the home's upper floors; it opens up into a faux apartment-building foyer. Step out, and you're standing on a 52-foot-long path. Cobblestones were created from stamped concrete with dark gray coloring and a black wash to age them. There's even a real manhole cover cut flush into the foundation. The 12-foot ceiling allows for realistic scale for the storefronts, and an end-to-end fiber-optic starfield, complete with shooting stars, evokes the night sky above the eight different façades.

Some of the façades, such as Arnold's Toyland and the Campano Brothers Grocery, are merely mock storefronts with windows and props. They're based on real stores that Jim favored as a kid. The toy-store display window shows off the family's collection of '60s vintage toys, while the grocery, modeled after his great-uncle's own shop, features classic fruit and vegetable stands out front.

The rest of the street takes you to fully functional play areas. Sam's Soda Shop resembles a '50s/'60s diner-style hangout, with a working kitchen, a soda fountain counter, and a comic book rack. There's also a Coney Island-style funhouse, called simply the Arcade, with pinball games, a carousel horse, and a classic mechanical shooting gallery. Down the street, the doors to Tony's Cafe open up to an actual

outdoor patio space that's part of the Bronx Italian-American Club.

Head off in either direction, though, and you'll know you're not in the Bronx anymore. McDougal's House of Horrors, anchoring one end of the strip, is a knockoff of a wax museum and chamber of horrors, featuring life-size figures of classic monsters created by Jim's son, Greg, and his wife, Jenn. At the opposite end of the street is the Cavern Club, named after the cellar in Liverpool, England, where the Beatles became regulars and were first seen by Brian Epstein in 1961. Here, it has been re-imagined as a comfy British pub, featuring a band stage (with an authentic-looking Beatles drum kit), a bar, pool and shuffleboard tables, and a darts area.

Which brings us to the room of greatest interest to *Sound & Vision* readers: the Egyptian



● Top row: Some storefronts, such as Arnold's Toyland and the Campano Brother's Grocery, are strictly facades that bring back authentic stores from Jim Duffy's childhood. Middle and bottom row, clockwise from left: The Arcade entryway (notice the dried "wind-blown" fall leaves), McDougal's House of Horrors with life-size creatures, and The Arcade interior.

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Theater, meant to evoke the famous Grauman's Egyptian Theatre on Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles. Basic construction and carpentry was handled by the general contractor on the full basement project, Holevas & Holton Custom Home Builders, while the A/V contractor was The Integrated Home, both based in Charlotte.

"Patrons" enter the theater by walking past the classic ticket booth and beneath the lit-up marquee through elaborate movie-palace double doors. Once inside, you find yourself in a small lobby complete with a candy counter, a popcorn machine, and Egyptian artifacts that include a mummy display. There's a dedicated restroom off the lobby; should you need to use it during a screening, it's equipped with a

40-inch Ultra HDTV that plays along with the movie inside so you won't miss a key plot point.

The elaborate décor in the 12-seat, 19 x 20-foot theater takes things to a whole 'nother level. There are two prominent golden statues of the Egyptian gods Anubis and Horus that were purchased from a distributor of Middle Eastern statuary. The hieroglyphic panels are prefabricated fiberglass obtained from a haunted-house supply service for use in mummy scenes; Jim painted them beige and stained them with dark brown wash to give the proper color and effect. Faux stones framing the screen are molded from hard architectural foam and painted in beige and a brown wash to make a sandstone-like texture. The same material appears on the projector housing—which includes two fans

that bring in cool air from the theater and blow out warm air to the street (through old-style ventilation ports you might actually see on New York City buildings). The theater's columns are made similarly, though to embellish the capitals on top, acrylic paint was applied with a dry-brush technique to effect fading.

Meanwhile, the fabric wall panels—which function as absorptive acoustic treatments—are made from foam air-conditioning batting covered with an Egyptian lotus print material, framed with crown molding that's stained to match the rest of the décor. Also helping with the acoustics is the soft fiber-optic starfield nestled into the coffered ceiling. "The idea was to give the visual impression of a theater built into an Egyptian temple that's open to the stars,"



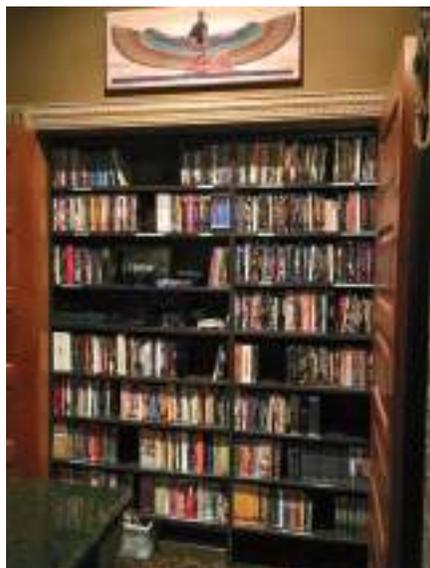
● Left to right: Theater entrance and marquee with classic ticket booth; theater lobby with Egyptian mummy and candy counter (not shown); A/V and control electronics for the Bronx Street are housed in two racks hidden in The Arcade.



● The hieroglyphics panels are prefabricated fiberglass haunted-house props painted to look like stone.

says Jim. For sound isolation, the theater is built from double-layer acoustic sheetrock panels, with rubber spacers used between the sheetrock in the ceiling to create an air gap that prevents sound from moving to the upper floors of the house.

The décor is something to look at; so is the picture something to see, and the sound something to hear. A Sony VPL-VW665ES 4K projector beams images onto a 140-inch-diagonal Screen Innovations Slate 4K 16:9 screen, from source components that include a Sony Blu-ray player and PlayStation 4 console, a Roku Ultra 4K media streamer, and any of the six TiVo Bolt cable boxes used around the house. Audio comes out of an Integra DTR-60.6 9.2-channel A/V receiver. It drives a 7.2.2-channel Dolby Atmos/DTS:X system featuring all Episode speakers. Three of the company's Signature ESS-1700T IWLCR in-walls with 6-inch woofers are up front for the left, center, and right channels. Two pair of ESS-1700T Point in-ceiling speakers function for front and back surrounds, while a third pair placed about midway back perform Atmos/DTS:X



● The Egyptian Theater's media closet houses software and local sources such as a Blu-ray player and game console.

height-channel duties. A couple of ES-SUB-TRP10-500-BLK 10-inch powered subwoofers are nicely hidden up front in the elaborate pedestals constructed for each statue.

A double-door media closet at the rear of the theater swings open to provide access to a disc library and key local sources, such as the Blu-ray player and game console. But the real heart of the system is in a hidden closet back behind heavy curtains in the Arcade. Two tall equipment racks house a variety of gear, including the A/V receiver, Control4 processors (which run lighting and automation for the theater and the rest of the home), TiVo boxes, and the guts for the Sonos multiroom audio system.

Theater system control—as well as lighting, HVAC, security, and distributed music—can be accessed with any tablet or smartphone running the C4 app from anywhere in the house, or from the wall-mounted touchpanels found in each room. But a single Control4 handheld remote is really all that's required to run the theater. “The Integrated Home techs did a great job programming the remote,” Jim says. “We start the show with one custom button-push, which fades out the lights and starfield, fades the vintage movie-theme walk-in music down to zero, and starts the projector. The projector warm-up time matches the music and lighting fade right to the second. We then select our source right on the remote, and we're off and running. At the end of the movie, we hit another single, custom button, and the process reverses.”

The music for the theater and throughout the basement is provided by the eight-zone, 31-speaker Sonos multiroom system. Different themed playlists are fed to each space according to its motif, and special sound-effect tracks programmed to change seasonally are piped to the street. During spring and



summer, you can hear children playing, with a backdrop of traffic noise. In a nod to Halloween, fall brings the eerie sounds of blowing wind and howling dogs. And for the holiday season, it's back to traffic noise—with Christmas carolers performing in the distance.

Of course, all of this elaborate planning and Disney-like attention to detail would be for naught if the Bronx super-basement was simply that forgotten place downstairs. But Jim says it gets plenty of steady action. “The soda shop is the food hangout for fun meals, milk shakes, and New York egg creams,” he says. “The pub is the party room when we have visitors and jam sessions. Visitors also love the Arcade because it's so unusual to be able to shoot at a Coney Island shooting gallery or play authentic vintage pinball games inside a house. The theater probably gets used the most—almost every night. We do our own film festivals, showing horror films for all of October, holiday movies for December, and special weekly themes like Film Noir Week, Abbott & Costello Week, War Movie Week, etc.”

Perhaps best of all, Jim gets to enjoy watching his elderly parents revisit their own rich New York City history, any time they want to. The elevator helps them get up and down. “They use the basement just as much as we do,” he notes with satisfaction. “They love watching old films from the '30s, '40s, and '50s in the theater.” Who says you can't go home? ♦



● Top to bottom: Theater sconce; the Control4 theater remote; projector housing and decorative wall panel.