



NOT JUST SHOOTING MOVIES

Lebanon last year was not the easiest environment in which to install a high-quality home cinema but French company Audire managed it, as **George Cole** found out

When installers talk about a ‘challenging’ install, they usually mean that there were some tough technical hurdles to overcome or that the client had strong views that didn’t always coincide with the installer’s.

But there can be few things more challenging than installing a system in the middle of a war zone. That is what faced the Paris-based design and installation company Audire when it started work on an installation in Lebanon last year.

The installation began just before the one-month conflict between Israel and Lebanon, which broke out in July 2006. Work resumed in October, after an official ceasefire had been brokered. But even then, life was not without its hazards.

“It was certainly a different situation!” says Dominique Rigolet, Audire’s founder. Audire got the Lebanon contract thanks to an earlier installation it had carried out in the country.

“About two years earlier, we had completed an installation in a huge apartment – it was about 1,000 sq metres in

size – and client recommended us for the new job,” recalls Rigolet.

The new install was at a massive villa that formerly housed the British Embassy. The villa is located in a suburb of Beirut – or Beyrouth, if you prefer the French spelling – on a high hill overlooking the sea and the town below.

“It’s in a place called Rabieh, which is like the French Riviera, with beautiful pine trees,” says Rigolet. The first meeting took place in May 2006 in the grounds of the former ambassador’s residence.

The client wanted a system that offered cinema-like picture and sound and at the same time, was almost invisible (there was a maximum size of 15cm for the sides of the components and 10cm for the rear).

Rigolet flew back to Paris, designed a system and, about a week later, contacted the client. He approved and within three weeks, the contract was signed.

This was going to be a difficult install from a purely logistical point-of-view, even before the conflict broke out. “You obviously had to be very careful about what you shipped out,” notes Rigolet. “It wasn’t like the client was in Paris and so if you arrived

on-site without a component, you could say: Oh, I’ve forgotten a cable; I’ll just drive in my car and get it.”

Work begins

There was also a cultural challenge. “Lebanese people are very warm, but it takes time in order to be accepted. You have to be modest and you have to be sensitive. For example we knew that certain things had to be made locally and we wanted to use a mix of our people and local people.”

The installation team consisted of a Lebanese decorator, Joseph Rizk, and from Beirut, electrician Elie Bassous, project manager Jean-Louis Edde and architect Sheriff Mouinaoun. The Audire team consisted of Rigolet, head of operations Didier Michon, graphics specialist Hung Ho Thanh and programmer Antoine Gruber.

“It was a great team to work with and the local people couldn’t do enough for us. I also think they appreciated the fact that we had flown to Lebanon to do the job,” recalls Rigolet.

Work began in June, with Rigolet flying back to the Lebanon to coordinate operations. But it was soon obvious that

Above: The completed installation very much looks, feels and sounds like a ‘real’ cinema, from its high-quality sound and picture, to its architectural details. Far Right: The screen proved to be the only source of initial disagreement between installer and client. But in the end, the client went with Rigolet, and one with a 3.5m base was installed.

Below Left to Right: 1, The cinema has its own entrance area, where it is possible to relax while looking at the impressive racks of electronics, held in their own glass-fronted environment. 2, Behind the metal frame of the centre light fitting, the underlying concrete shell of the room can be seen. 3, Acoustic treatment was extensive and complex, resulting in great sound at every seat.

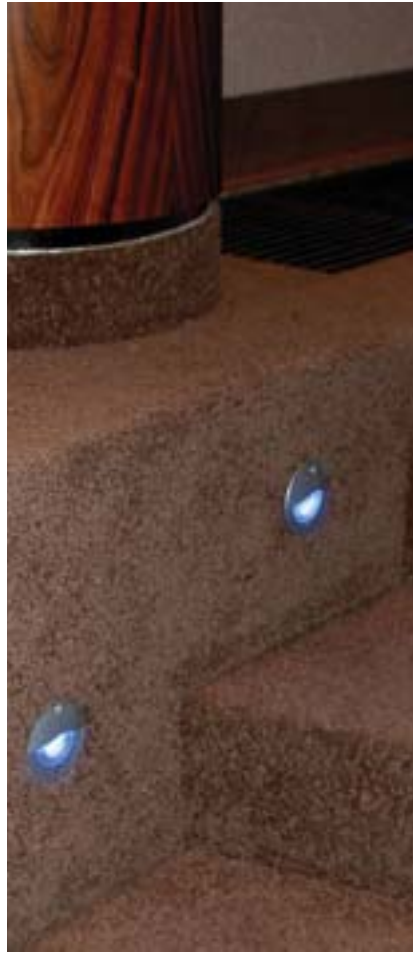
‘I took the last plane that flew out from Beirut to Paris and the next morning, I looked at my TV, and saw smoke rising from Beirut airport’

Dominique Rigolet, Audire

tension between Israel and Lebanon was increasing. So much so, that by late June, Rigolet decided it was time to fly back to Paris.

“I took the last plane that flew out from Beirut to Paris and the next morning, I looked at my TV, and saw smoke rising from Beirut airport.” Work resumed in earnest in the autumn, when the team was assembled.

The installation included a seven-channel sound system with 11 speakers (three Cabasse Baltic and 11 B&W in-wall satellites, plus three Triad Platinum in-wall subs and



one in-wall Atlantic Technology sub) all separately amplified using a series of Arcam amplifiers).

Two QSC Audio DSP 4s were used for phase and acoustical corrections for the bass management. The four thick walls were also acoustically treated and an iPod docking system was a late addition to the system.

The video system consisted of a JVC HD 10K D-ILA projector and a Screenresearch XMASK Ultimate 16:9 screen with a 3.5 metre base. A fully customised control system was developed (the client even chose the colour of the system).

This included a Creston AV2 controller that not only controlled all the devices (such as the DVD reader and video server) but also the lighting system, via an EIB network. The client can address all of this with a Creston 12in touch panel.

Also installed was a high-speed internet link, a fully filtered and regulated power supply, including an uninterruptible power supply dedicated to the home theatre system

and a private electric generator – there's nothing like being prepared for a power cut...

Remote operation

The French team stayed at a local hotel (the Hotel Gabriel in the Christian quarter) and remained in Lebanon for around a month and-a-half. The complete installation process involved around a dozen flights between Paris and Beirut.

"When you're 4,000 kilometres away from your client's home, you pay a lot of attention to reliability!" says Rigolet. In this situation, remote control operation via the internet is important and Creston Kaleidescape is used for this purpose.

There was a lot of work going on at the villa, and at one stage, up to 80 people were working inside it. "There were a series of small interruptions, so you might have to stop what you're doing while the electrician does his work. You had to be highly organised," says Rigolet.

What's more, the client wanted all the

work completed by Christmas. "There were times when 28 people were working on the home theatre installation!" recalls Rigolet. But relations between the installer and the client were good, he adds.

"The only time I can think of where we had any significant difference of opinion was regard to the size of the projector screen. I wanted to use one with a 3.5-metre base, while my client wanted a four-metre base. We had a discussion and he agreed to go with the size I suggested."

The installation was hot work, with long hours and often carried out under very dusty conditions. But the enthusiasm of the local team did much to keep morale high.

"It was an unstable situation and you never knew what was going to happen from one day to the next, but the local workers always had a smile for you and nothing was ever too much trouble. You'd need something from the town and one of them would immediately offer to get it for you," says Rigolet.

With just a few minor jobs remaining, the installation was finished in time for the Christmas deadline. A lot of work was devoted to getting the acoustics right and the results are startling, with very precise stereo soundstaging at every seat and a linear bass response that is powerful, fast and articulate.

"The client is extremely happy and our relationship is beautiful," says Rigolet – and what's more, Audire's client has recommended the company to three of his friends, who also want home theatre installations.

Since then, the projector has been upgraded to the new Panasonic PT-DW 10000, and the French company is returning to Lebanon in a few weeks to upgrade the system, installing Blu-ray and HD-DVD players.

The experience of Audire shows that, even when working under the most adverse conditions, it's possible to complete a high-class installation, on budget and on time. **RSE**

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