



Lights, Camera, Action: Sharp and NEC Technologies Add Polish and Precision to a High-End California Cineplex

When a growing movie theater company was selected as the anchor tenant for a new high-end entertainment destination in San Ramon, California, the digital display and cinema projection technology the company planned to incorporate would not only need to be reliable and robust; it also had to blend in with the stylish, elegant feel of the rest of the space.

The Challenge

Opened in late 2018, City Center Bishop Ranch is a two-story, open-air hospitality and entertainment hub offering dining, retail and theater attractions. Designed by renowned architect Renzo Piano, the location touts itself as an “open public square,” providing a luxurious enclave for shopping, eating, gathering and socializing.

While still in the planning stages, City Center Bishop Ranch project leaders interviewed a number of movie theater companies to select an anchor tenant, eventually choosing THE LOT, an entertainment experience company that has other locations in Southern California.

“[City Center Bishop Ranch] wanted something high-end in look and feel,” said Dennis Pappenfus, a partner and AV designer for Fluid Sound, a boutique AV integration firm that worked on the project. “THE LOT movie theaters feel much more unique than the average cineplex, which got them significant consideration and landed them this new location.”

Once the theater selection process wrapped up, it was time to ensure its design and development was in line with the rest of the project – including digital display and cinema projection technologies.

The Challenge:

- Create a high-end experience for a new luxury cinema and entertainment destination using the latest digital technologies

Solution:

- (9) NEC UN551VS in a 3x3 video wall configuration;
- (18) NEC C431 43-inch displays;
- (8) NEC NC1201L1-A digital cinema laser phosphor projectors;
- (2) NEC NC2041L 4K laser projectors

Result:

- THE LOT City Center – a 10-auditorium cinema and bar/restaurant/café that incorporates sleek digital displays and powerful laser projectors to enhance the customer experience.



Finding the Right Technology

City Center Bishop Ranch was new construction from the ground up, so once THE LOT was chosen as the anchor store, the company turned to Fluid Sound – a partner since its very first theater concept was designed and built in 2013 – to provide technology and AV guidance from design to completion.

“THE LOT was not looking for someone to give them a templated solution of what was used on the last project, or a three-bid, low-cost offering,” Pappenfus said. “They were looking for a creative design partner who would look at project goals and put together a tech solution that met those goals, and we were happy to assist.”

When THE LOT asked for digital display product recommendations for the theater and gathering areas, Fluid Sound had an answer at the ready: Sharp.

“THE LOT always knew they wanted digital signage in the City Center facility; it was just a matter of choosing a vendor with support and reliability for a project like this – someone they could be comfortable having chosen,” Pappenfus said. “NEC is not in the consumer market; this is a b2b professional display manufacturer, and they understand the features necessary for this kind of project.”

Why Sharp was the Answer

Sharp was the best choice for a number of reasons – for starters, the way its products look. “THE LOT needed something to accompany its high-end, luxury experience, and Sh’s pro-grade UHD displays have a nice aesthetic, with slim form factor and ultra-thin bezels,” Pappenfus said. “They were the right products for this application.”

It wasn’t just about the appearance – what’s inside counted as well. The displays had to be capable of a 24/7 runtime, and integrate with the control and automation system seamlessly and unflinchingly, so the Crestron control capabilities were attractive to THE LOT.

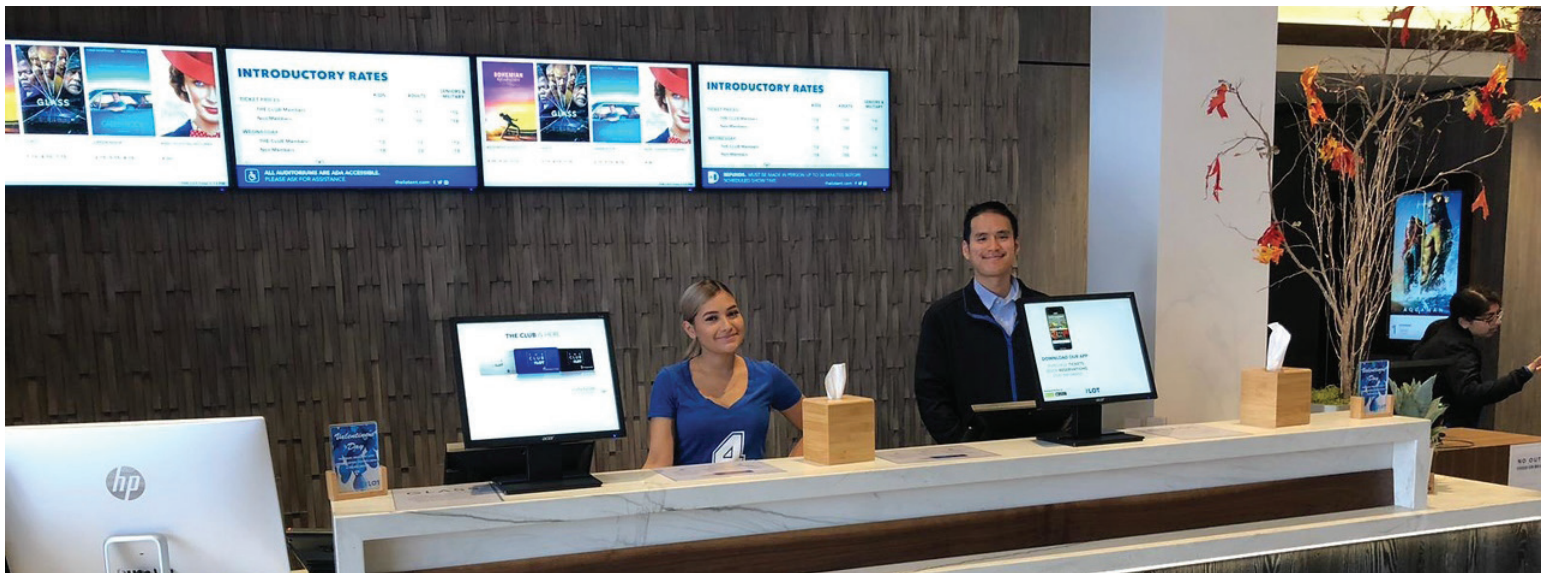
“We tend to recommend Sharp for couple of reasons,” Pappenfus said. “They have phenomenal customer support if there are any issues, and the trustworthiness and reliability of the company’s third-party control API is critical for deployments like this.”

Based on Fluid Sound’s previous recommendations, the other three locations of THE LOT also feature NEC video walls and digital signage, so when Fluid Sound suggested that manufacturer again, THE LOT saw no reason to rock the boat.



“We’ve been using NEC for years, and rely heavily on their technology,” said Carlos Wellman, managing director for THE LOT. “We keep the displays up and running for many hours of the day, so we bank on their reliability, and the NEC laser projector we selected for the auditorium is the best in the market for what we do.”

Wellman said THE LOT had experimented with other manufacturers in a previous project, until Fluid Sound suggested Sharp for the first LOT location, “and that has turned out better.”



"Consistency and reliability is really important, as well as selecting something intuitive and user friendly," he said. "I want something that turns on when we need it to."

The Construction and Installation

City Center Bishop Ranch broke ground in May 2017, with the opening date scheduled for mid-November 2018, in time for Black Friday – a tight timeline, considering everything had to be built from the ground up on a dirt lot.



Once Sharp was selected as the technology provider, Fluid Sound worked closely with the project architect during the latter part of the design and development phase, and with the general contractor in coordination drawings, to ensure the tech was planned for and properly integrated into the space.

"We were on a hyper-compressed schedule," said Phil Borkowski, partner at Fluid Sound. "We had to ensure all infrastructure provided by the project electrician was laid out appropriately and on an appropriate timeline to keep everything on schedule. We created detailed coordination drawings and worked nights and weekends to integrate the infrastructure into the building."

Construction of the mall had to reach a certain point before tenants, including THE LOT City Center, could build in their own spaces.

"All of the trades were working on top of each other to make that Black Friday deadline, which required a lot of coordination," Borkowski said. "We didn't get on site to pull cable and rough-in until eight or so months before the deadline."

Despite the strict deadline and coordination challenges, City Center Bishop Ranch – and THE LOT – opened right on schedule.

THE LOT City Center's Design

At City Center Bishop Ranch's core is THE LOT City Center – a 10-auditorium cinema combined with an upscale restaurant, café and cocktail bar that also hosts special events and corporate outings. THE LOT features an open floor plan of avant-garde, sophisticated design, offering comfortable seating, an inviting lounge, fire pits and more.

THE LOT City Center's aesthetic complements City Center Bishop Ranch's high-end boutique design. The main gathering area features a 3x3 NEC video wall that comprises nine NEC UN551VS ultra-thin-bezel displays, allowing THE LOT to show as many as nine different channels (one for each different display), or use the full 3x3 wall to show something like a major sporting event.

"The video wall is set on top of an elegant 3D wood veneer," Pappenfus said. "Every part of the design in THE LOT City Center has some texture and depth to it, and NEC's displays were just





right for this look. This seamless integration makes the technology truly part of the environment, not something bolted on after the fact.”

The mall’s main entrance comprises about 100 feet of glass fenestration that allows the entire lobby to open to the outdoors. The 3x3 video wall can be seen almost the full length of the mall’s open-air courtyard, making it a central visual focal point that captures the eye.

Additional NEC technology is used all around THE LOT City Center, including eight NEC C431 for digital signage geared toward food and beverage sales and general movie information.

“We use those to advertise our ongoing events like Taco Tuesdays and Sunday brunch, as well as special events like Mother’s Day or Oscar parties,” Wellman said.

Ten NEC C431s stationed at the front of each auditorium entrance advertise films using digital movie posters that show trailers and graphics as well as screen times. Auditoriums 1 through 4 and 6 through 9 each feature a NEC NC1201L1-A digital cinema laser phosphor projector, and auditoriums 5 and 10 have NEC NC2041L 4K laser projectors. Additionally, the auditoriums are not only used to screen films, but also for private events, film festivals, and corporate meetings and presentations, making THE LOT City Center a multipurpose facility.

“We control each display via IP connection to a Crestron CP3 control processor, and there is a lot of automation built into the control environment, with different scenarios and profiles created,” Pappenfus said. “The video wall does things at the touch of one or two buttons that would normally take more end-user effort, and in order for all that to work, NEC had to have a reliable, rock-solid control protocol and API.”

“Everything talks to each other,” Wellman added. “We like the versatility of how the NEC technology interacts with and connects to the other AV components. It’s easy to use.

“THE LOT’s success at Bishop Ranch and its other locations means the company is looking to build additional theater projects in Southern California, and THE LOT already has an idea where it can turn for the display technology, Wellman said.

“We’re still very early in the development process, but once we get approvals, we plan to get started – and we’ll likely use Sharp again for those venues,” he said.