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Beware of Virtual Dog

From Canine Burglar Alarms to Kid-Watching Cameras, Here's What the New High-Tech Homes Can Offer

By LAURA LEWIS

IT'S FRIDAY NIGHT, AND YOUR GUESTS should be arriving soon. You decide to watch TV in your home theater while waiting. A few minutes into the show, the doorbell rings. You flip to an in-home video channel and see that one of your guests has shown up early.

Heading for the front door, you realize the house is not lit for a party. You press NIGHT ENTERTAINMENT on the control panel in the foyer, and your home transforms: lights dimmed, artwork highlighted, festive music on the central CD stereo system, all with the press of a button.

This is not a scene from *Futureama*. It comes with the installation of a home-automation system.

"The way people are living has changed so drastically, and homes have not kept up with technology," says Terri Stagi, VP of marketing at Jack J. Morris Associates, a Falls Church ad agency. Sophisticated buyers want their new houses wired for the future. Says Stagi, "The home is the new IT frontier."

Home automation is not new, but it is becoming more widespread. In response to consumer demand, several builders around Washing-

ton—including Pulte, Miller & Smith, Drees Homes, and Van Metre—are installing the Bell Atlantic Ready system as a standard feature. This year 25 percent of new area homes will have this system. In the past year, Bell Atlantic and IBM have joined to install the IBM Home Director—the hardware that integrates all this technology—in all Bell Atlantic Ready homes. A similar system is made by Phast.

The Bell Atlantic system creates a high-tech network using Category 5 wiring; every room is prewired to a central panel in the basement, utility room, or closet. "We've moved from putting one jack in every room to two jacks—one for phone, one for data hub," says Griff Gosnell of Monroe Development Corp. in Vienna. Each jack can both receive and send signals.

Now you can have multiple phone lines, high-speed Internet connections, in-home video channels, surveillance cameras, com-

puter networks, fax machines, a home theater with Dolby Surround Sound, remote controls, and capability for future advances. With a network in your home, information travels faster than ever—and the new configuration of all outlets can accommodate any new technology without overloading the circuits. Depending on the size of your home, a basic system starts at \$1,500 and can reach \$3,000 with added features.

Home automation "changes the whole living experience," says Greg Farmer, sales director for Bell Atlantic Ready. "It allows you to do what you could previously do only in the office." With residential networking, there is less need to commute to work; many of its users work out of their homes.

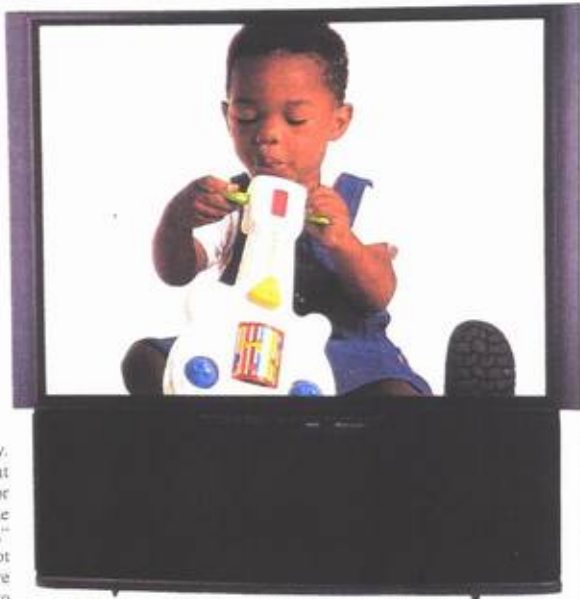
There may also be no need to leave the office to make sure things are okay at home. With PC cameras, you can watch your house from your computer at work—and turn on your lights, electric blanket, Jacuzzi,

and music from the office or a remote in your car, so they'll be ready by the time you get inside.

Is all this necessary? No, but it's possible.

HOME BUILDERS NOW are considering the office needs of the whole family, not just the parents. With multiple phone and Internet connections, one child can surf the Internet while another prints a paper and Dad talks on the phone. To address children's computer needs, Rockville new-home builder Mitchell, Best and Visnic offers "brain space," a networked homework area for children, usually in a large upper hall or adjacent to the kitchen so parents can help with homework while preparing dinner.

In the new high-tech home, convenience is at a premium. There is no need for keys. Each family member can



New technology makes it easy to keep an eye on your child—or your front door—while also watching a TV show.

choose a code to use on the panel at the front door. One Virginia father uses this technology to monitor whether his daughters meet their curfews.

You may never have to run to the phone to read your Caller ID, either. In the latest home theaters, the name of the person calling pops up on the TV screen when the phone rings.

You can now distribute programs from the VCR, satellite dish, or cable station into any TV in the home. If you're trying to concentrate on your favorite video and the family isn't cooperating, you can go to another room and connect to the same video—without removing the tape or DVD.

The same is true for music. Many high-end homes have a central 200-CD stereo that connects to all rooms of the house. While Mom relaxes to Beethoven in the living room, a child can rock to Third Eye Blind in the family room, all from the central player.

Aside from convenient features, home automation provides for added safety. Surveillance cameras have been around for years, but home automation allows them to do more. Many people set cameras at their front door to screen solicitors and unwanted guests or to prepare for the person at the door. When the bell rings, you can turn to an unused channel on the TV or use the picture-in-a-picture feature to get a view out front. A sensor can also be placed under the driveway to trigger a camera when a car approaches.

Instead of using a baby monitor, you can keep an eye on your child while watching a favorite television program. Some homeowners install cameras near the swimming pool to protect against accidents with small children. A sensor on the pool gate makes a siren go off or an image pop up on the TV screen when the gate opens.

Another safety option has nothing to do with cameras. When you leave town, a "virtual dog" can keep intruders at bay. When someone presses the doorbell, the sound system pipes a programmed sound bite of a barking dog through the intercom out front. The barking then travels from speaker to speaker inside, creating the illusion that an angry dog is running through the house.

There are conveniences for real dogs, too. **Larry Weinberg of McLean's Bowa Builders** is programming his own dog door to use sensors on the door or in the yard: A rain sensor, for instance, can keep a wet dog outside or a dry one in the house. The same sort of programming has been added to sprinkler systems. With wind sensors, the system will automatically shut off when winds reach a certain speed so that you don't water your home instead of your lawn. The system then remembers the last time the lawn was watered and turns on again when needed.

One homeowner in Falls Church is even wiring his wine cellar. He uses a wand to

scan the barcodes on the bottles; the details can then be accessed through his PC, so he can track his inventory online.

Programmed lighting is another popular luxury. You can add to the standard settings with a Windows-based program that displays a map of the home and lets you determine the intensities of individual lights. By pressing one of 15 buttons, you can choose specific lighting designs for each occasion. In "away" mode, the lighting mimics your typical usage—thus taking the place of those old-fashioned timers. This setting also lowers the heat to conserve energy. "Night mode" turns down all lights with a press of the button. An added bonus of programmed lighting: The new systems gradually raise and lower light intensity, thus extending the lifetime of the bulb.

The Reserve, a luxury development in McLean, proves it's possible to connect an entire community. Starting next year, an online concierge will provide services electronically to the community. With the use of a PC, residents can have their dry cleaning picked up, order groceries or theater tickets, and set up last-minute catering. There are also plans for an online community newsletter. To learn more, check www.reserveinmclean.com.

WHEN CHOOSING A BUILDER AND CONTEMPLATING home automation for yourself, consider both the costs and the benefits of wiring. A system usually costs less than 1 percent of the price of the home.

Convenience, though, is immeasurable. Tending to your home takes time and energy, and home automation makes it easier. There are also the obvious safety features. By installing cameras in crucial points, you are in touch with what's going on at all times.

Some features may seem superfluous, but they add to **what Weinberg calls the "wow" factor**, which can increase your home's value. "No one should buy a home not wired for technology, because the home will become obsolete," says Stagi of Morris Associates. It's not only young computer-industry types who see the value of this technology: high-end empty-nesters are wiring their homes so as to communicate with younger generations of their family.

According to Ted Visnic of Mitchell, Best and Visnic, technology is moving so rapidly that "high-tech has become regular tech." Visnic envisions a kitchen of the future with touch-screen monitors that let you create a monthly dinner menu and automatically e-mail your grocery list to the store. When voice-recognition technology and "screen phones" become more refined, you will be able to incorporate these features, too.

"It will be just like *Star Trek*," says Weinberg. *Futurama* is not far behind. □