

# TIME

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## Simplifying (?) Our Lives

By APARISIM GHOSH / San José

When did you first read about wired homes, those incredibly "intelligent" houses where every appliance has a built-in computer and communicates with every other appliance, and everything connects to the Internet? Years and years ago, right? Technology prophets have been anticipating the coming of the wired lifestyle pretty much ever since the Net entered our lives. By now, you'd expect the Jetsons to be moving in next door.

In fact, the wired home doesn't really exist. Not yet anyway. There are "smart" houses, to be sure, equipped with sensors that can tell when people are inside and can be programmed to adjust heat and lighting accordingly. There are also Internet-ready homes with network cabling, where you can simply plug in your computer in any room and be online. But these only tantalize us with hints of what technology can do.

So when can we move into truly wired homes? Computer industry experts, like Tim Bjarin, president of Creative Strategies in Campbell, California, say it's already possible to build one — if you can afford to throw cash around like Bill Gates. "The pieces are there and you can put them together, but only if you have a lot of money and are prepared to endure all the teething troubles," Bjarin says. Unfortunately, most of us lack that kind of dough. Not to worry, he says: "In a couple of years, all the pieces will be mass-produced and relatively cheap. You'll be able to build a wired home by starting simple and then upgrading gradually."

In San José, California, I get a firsthand look at what the future might hold. Here, at Cisco's sprawling headquarters, is a demo home that practically defines the cutting edge of wired-home technology. Built into a corner of a large office block, it's a 160-sq-m monument to every techie's fantasy. The place is bristling with gadgetry. Apart from the usual household appliances and entertainment systems, there are webcams, motion sensors, and electronic photoframes — thin lcds where you can show off several photos at the same time from that Hawaiian holiday or switch pictures depending on who's visiting. Everything in the home

seems to communicate with every other thing. You can watch TV on the computer, do e-mail on the TV screen, check the weather online from a portable webpad. You can control lighting, heat and security systems from the Internet.

But what, exactly, does the technology add up to? The engineers showing me around try to put it into perspective by offering me an example of how it will simplify our lives. Imagine, they say, that it's Saturday afternoon and you're feeling hungry. So you pull out that webpad and go to Whirlpool's website (the company providing all the appliances in Cisco's demo kitchen) and look for a list of recipes. Click on the one you like, and you get a rundown of the ingredients required. As you have a "smart" fridge that includes a bar-code reader and can therefore tell what's in the cartons inside, you can check — still online, without having to physically go to your fridge — whether you have all the ingredients you need. If you do, you can step into your kitchen and make yourself that snack. (Elbow grease admittedly required.)

As the engineers are painting me this complicated picture, I'm thinking: "If I'm peckish, I'll go to the fridge and throw together a sandwich with whatever is available." But maybe that's dangerous, Old Economy thinking.

To be fair, there are plenty of useful things I could do with the technology that fills the Cisco home. On a hot summer's day, I could phone my air-conditioning system and tell it to switch itself on half an hour before I arrive. I could have carpenters fix a kitchen shelf and monitor their progress from my office, using a webcam. And I'd love to have a webpad that allows me to access the Internet wirelessly from anywhere in the house, including the john.

Ultimately the question is this: Will having all that technology in the house empower us or make us feel uncomfortable? For that I ask Karuna Uppal, a program manager at the Yankee Group in Boston, a consulting firm that has polled Americans to gauge the extent of their desire for connected homes. Surveys show that only 20% would go the distance, buying the kind of house I saw at Cisco. Most, Uppal says, just want technology that allows them to network two or more computers at home and simultaneously access the Net from all of them. "We're seeing more and more two- and three-computer homes, where people don't really want separate phone or cable lines, modems and complicated wiring," she says. That's partly, she adds, because most people don't yet know what wired homes are about or what the technology can do. Cisco is tackling that problem, joining hands with such multinational titans as 3Com, General Motors, Panasonic, Sears, Roebuck & Co. and Sun Microsystems to

set up something called the Internet Home Alliance. The task: to sell the world on the benefits of the Internet lifestyle. Kristine Stewart, Cisco's director of market development, says the IHA will "spend a lot to develop this market." Consider yourself warned.

There's another version of smart living up and running in rural Hertfordshire, just outside London. When I visit, specialist construction company Laing Homes is showing off a beautiful five-bedroom home that in part replicates the Cisco template. The house comes with built-in Cat 5 network cabling; each room has a socket that can accommodate a phone, computer, audio speakers and webcam. You can access the Net or listen to your stereo from anywhere in the house. Sarah Bailey, Laing's sales and marketing director, says the wiring ensures the house "can be upgraded to any level of wiredness that the buyer desires."

Laing has also built several wired homes in the Battersea area of London, complete with "intelligent" heating and lighting, which can be controlled from a mobile phone. I speak with a 39-year-old venture capitalist who bought one of the homes four months ago. "We've been told the house can do all sorts of things, but we're still learning how to use the different features," he says. "We're not very technology-savvy. Maybe our son will know how to use all this stuff." It will be a while before I can interview his son: he's a few weeks old.

Also at the teething stage is a project involving 50 families in Ballerup, a sleepy little Danish town not far from Copenhagen. Here, E2Home, a joint venture of mobile-phone maker Ericsson and appliances giant Electrolux, has equipped each family with Electrolux's much-publicized Screenfridge, an appliance I saw last fall at another demo home, in Ericsson's Stockholm compound. The engineers there thought it was the coolest thing in the world — a fridge with a full-fledged computer built into its door, with a large screen and an Internet connection. I recall being very skeptical. Who surfs the Net from the kitchen, for crying out loud?

Well, Rikke Clausen does. In fact, she constantly uses the PC built into her fridge. Clausen, 34, is on a break from her job at the Girl Guides to care for her two young sons. In her home, the kitchen, dining area and living room all merge seamlessly into a whole: one corner serves as the boys' playroom. In this setting, the Screenfridge makes perfect sense. "I can surf the Net, cook and keep an eye on my children at the same time," says Clausen. "If I had to use the family computer, I'd have to go into the study in the basement, leaving the kids unsupervised."

I have no kids and my kitchen is a separate (and tiny) room, where my wife and I cook steamy, oily Indian meals. Would I consider putting a \$3,000 fridge-cum-computer in there? Never. Still, I figured out a while back that the world doesn't revolve around me, so I'll grant that some people — maybe many people — would love to have a Screenfridge. Or a Screenwashing-machine. Or a Screenvacuum-cleaner. Me, I'll just take that house in San José if they ever put it on the market — at a deep discount, of course. I'm no Bill Gates.

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