

Command Performance

Turn on the lights, make the coffee, raise the shades. The only thing a computer-run home won't do for you is walk the dog.

By Aimee Lee Ball

That commute home is a bitch, and the neighbors are expected for cocktails. But perhaps at the end of a punishing day, you can summon up the strength to push a single button on your car phone and activate a series of events that will be interpreted as “party time” at your house—that is, if you have a “smart house.” The curtains will be drawn, and the lights, both inside and out, will be illuminated in a preordained pleasing pattern. Sinatra’s “In The Wee Small Hours” will come on the CD player—all tracks except “Can’t We Be Friends?” because it is associated with your ex and must never, ever be heard in your home. The ambient temperature of the living room will drop to 68 degrees, and the water temperature in the Jacuzzi will rise to 101, allowing you time for a brief, relaxing soak before dinner.

Sorry, you still have to heat up the shrimp puffs yourself.

Home automation has irrevocably changed the modern luxury house market. It’s impossible to consider the subject without invoking the overworked metaphor of *The Jetsons* since here, on the cusp of the 21st century, reality approaches the technological wonders of that cartoon universe. It is now feasible to coordinate, pre-program, and operate with a fingertip such myriad household functions as lighting, heating, air conditioning, audio-visual entertainment, telecommunications, surveillance, waterworks: just about anything that can be wired, from the satellite dish on the roof to the sprinklers on the lawn.

Of course, there is an unspoken caveat: You learn to rely on it—and it doesn’t always work. “Home automation should add convenience, control, security,” promises Ken Karnes of Residential Systems, Inc., in Golden, Colorado, one of the professionals known in industry parlance as a systems integrator. “It’s an electronic brain that does things you don’t want to waste your own brain power on.”

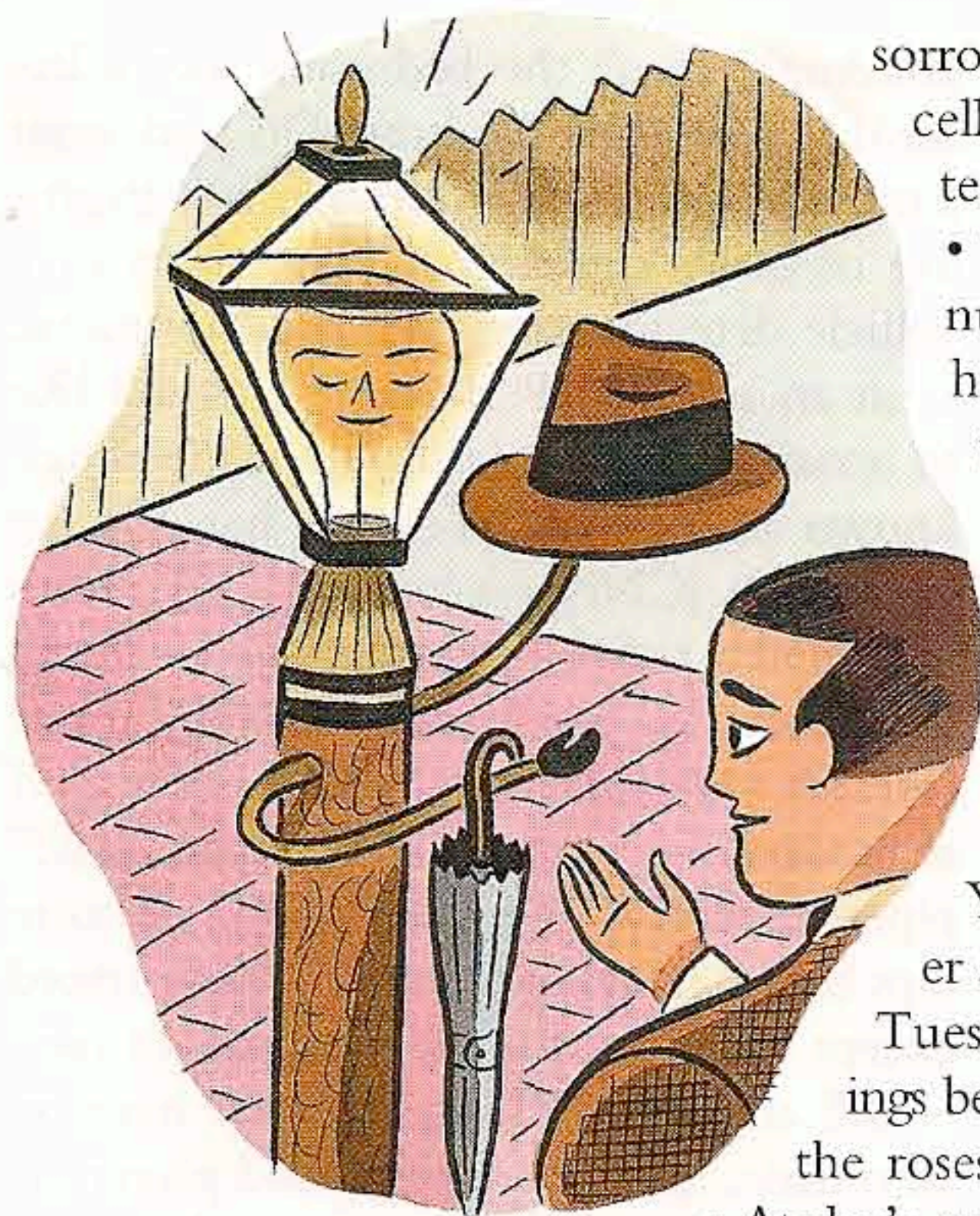
Tabling, just for a moment, the two equally awful possibilities that a house could be smarter than its occupants or else start acting like the village idiot, consider the various seductions of this brave new world:

- You’re on your boat, ready to cast for marlin, when your ne’er-do-well brother-in-law calls on a cell phone, sounding slightly sloshed, to say he is outside your house where he needs to crash, having just been fired. Entering a password into your laptop, you summon up a video display from all the closed-circuit TVs around the house. You unlock the front door and watch him go through, in real time, then activate the automated pool cover, to protect him from literally drowning his



MICHAEL KLEIN

TECHNO TOYS



sorrows, and secure the wine cellar, to protect the Château Margaux.

- The gardener has his own numerical password giving him access to your property but not the house. One day you come home unexpectedly in the middle of the afternoon to find him in a thong bikini entertaining several friends on your patio.

You give the new gardener a new code, valid only on Tuesday and Thursday mornings between eight and 10, when the roses like to be watered.

- At day's end, you want to hear some music. First the system asks, "Is Susan home?" If your wife (not an Aerosmith fan) is out, the system cranks up your favorite rock station. If she is home, and you're a solicitous spouse, you use a "touch screen," like the one at the bank's ATM, to peruse an electronic jukebox inventory, scrolling through the actual cover art of each CD to find some acceptable, wife-approved sounds.

These are splendid options and possibilities, indeed. But except for the most dedicated techie hobbyist, delving into the world of home automation is like looking under the hood of a car. "It's even worse," admits Corey Ferrell of Tech-Know House in Oxford, Connecticut. "If you want to buy a Mercedes, at least you can take it out for a test drive. You can't do that with a \$250,000 home automation system. There is a vast number of components coming from various vendors and advisors. You've got to pick good building blocks to make this automated castle a success."

The obvious initial considerations are: What do you want the system to do, and how much do you want to spend? (Your house's higher education can cost a few thousand or a few hundred thousand.) "When we talk to potential customers, we tend to sit down and listen to their wish list," says Thomas Callahan of Sawyers Control Systems in Frenchtown, New Jersey. "We give them a shopping menu, and they often interject their own ideas." Should the TV or stereo be muted anytime you answer a phone in that room? Would you like every phone to be an intercom, so you can bid

Total Control



Among the manufacturers specializing in high-end custom electronics systems, the two regarded as the best are AMX/PHAST (800-979-9637),

which offers sexy black touch screens (right), and Crestron Electronics (800-237-2041), whose wireless touch screens (above) have a range of 1,000 feet, sending a signal that even reaches through walls.



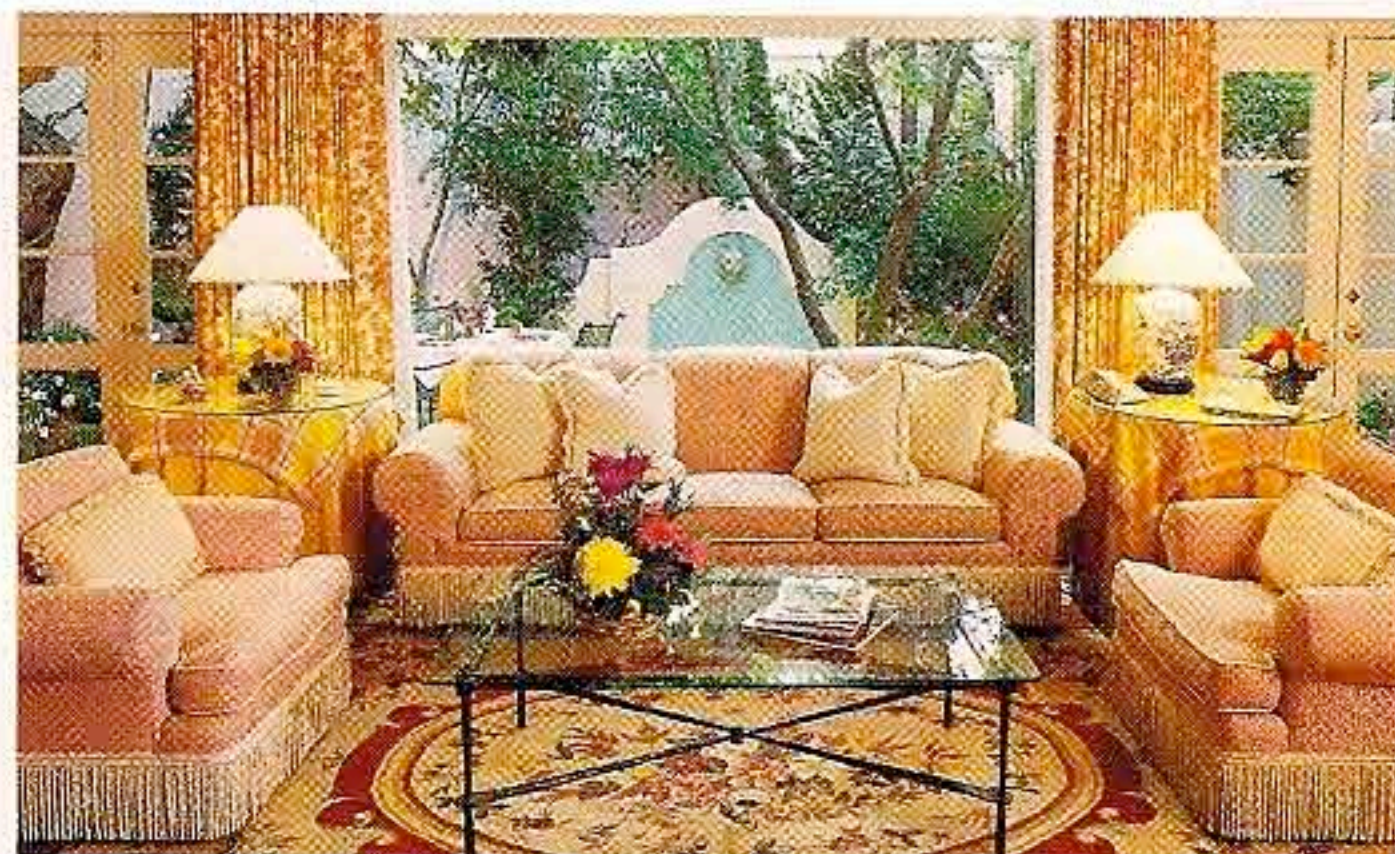
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LOS ANGELES



A Helping Hand

"Smart-house" functions that are merely life-enhancing for the general population can be life-saving for the handicapped, a premise that was put into brilliant action at Gizmo House in Plantation, Florida, a 3,200-square-foot residence for young adults with severe developmental disabilities. "These people have a good deal to offer," says James McGuire, executive director of the Ann Storck Center, the larger assisted-living community that spawned Gizmo. "Their biggest barrier was physical. They'd never be able to get from the bedroom to the bathroom."

The modern facility, which cost \$800,000 to build, was designed by David Sigel of Integrated Electronics in Davie, Florida, who automated 900 doors at the Miami Airport to lock down at the touch of one button. The doors of Gizmo House are automatic too, and the six residents, ages 18 to 35, use

touch screens to operate lights, fans, curtains, TVs, and stereos, as well as to lift and lower dining tables and countertops. "The microwave is programmed with icons for hotdogs or popcorn," says McGuire, "and the telephones have icons for pizza delivery, girlfriend number one, and girlfriend number two." The refrigerator and pantry are both rigged with "ferris wheels" that roll up and down, with cereal on one shelf, peanut butter and jelly on another. The same mechanism is designed into stainless-steel armoires that allow easy wardrobe selection.

Gizmo House, outfitted with 22 miles of wire, is designed as a lab to test new technology. Thus the residents are soon to have five-button, color-coded infrared controls mounted on their wheelchairs that will be even easier to access than the touch panels.

Integrated Electronics, Inc.

Box 290074, Davie, FL 33329; 800-209-9746; dsigelec@aol.com.

goodnight to all the bedrooms like a latter-day John-Boy Walton? Do you want a motion detector in your driveway (warning of every car, human, pet, deer) or a vehicle detector (triggered only by metal, as in an airport)? Perhaps you would like to arrange certain concurrent happenings, known as "macros": You can have "wake up" mode (CNN on bedroom TV, Imus on kitchen radio, heated bathroom floor/towel rack/lap pool) and "vacation" mode (orchids watered, lights turned on and off at random intervals for a "lived-in look," pipes drained if the outdoor temperature dips below freezing, security system armed except one door for the cat-sitter to use).

Bill and Joyce O'Meara even have an automatic, space-age baby grand player piano in the foyer of their smart house in Naples, Florida. The O'Mearas love having a real pianist provide background music for a dinner party, creating quite a sight gag when he gets up to stretch his legs and the music keeps playing.

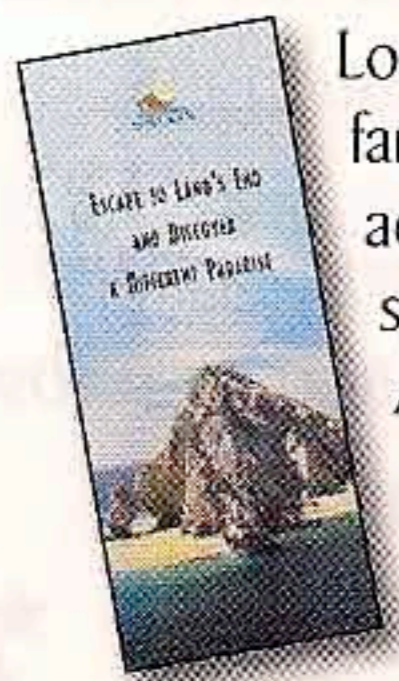
"We've owned large homes in California," says O'Meara, who spent 30 years in

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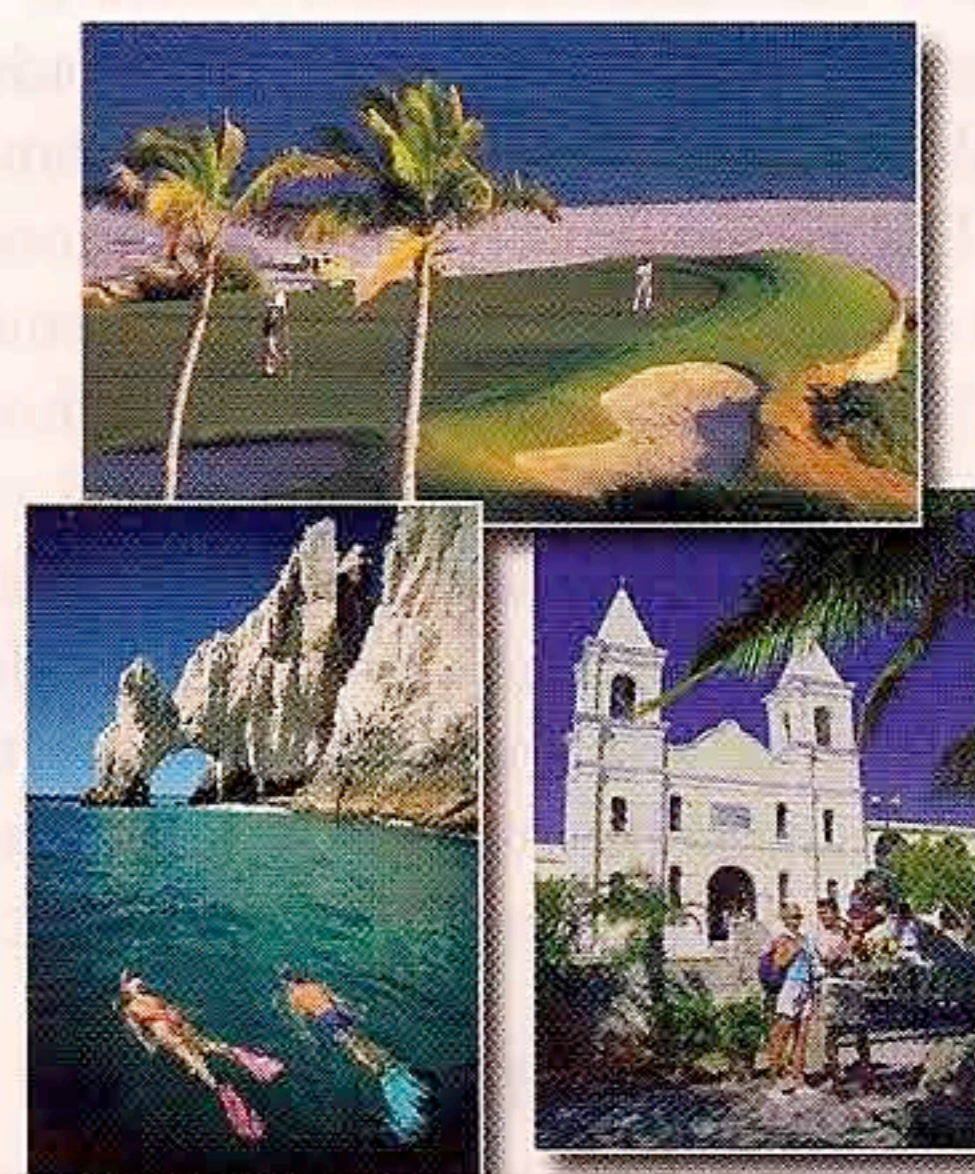
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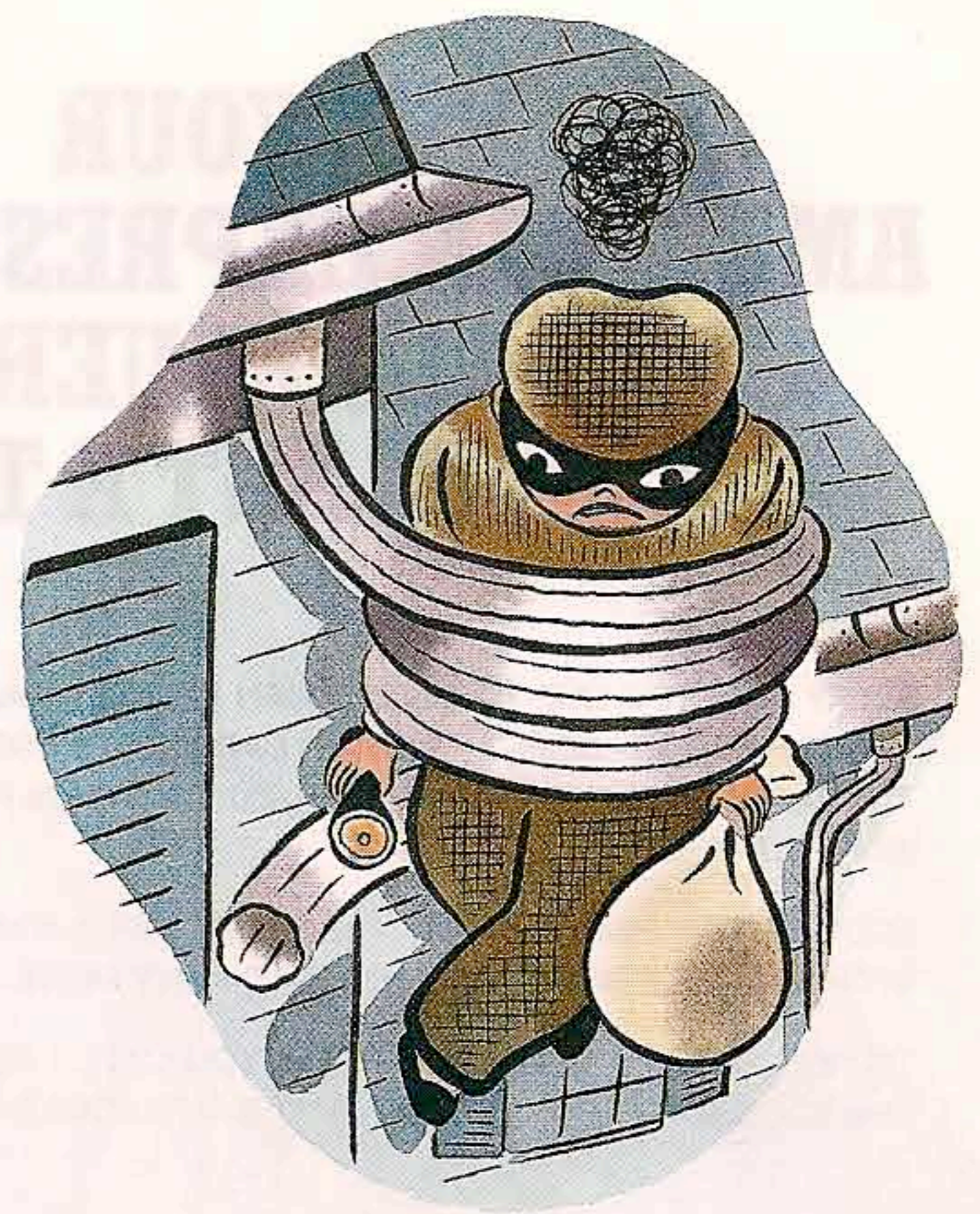
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the semiconductor business of Silicon Valley, "and when we were going out, it always took fifteen minutes to adjust the thermostats, close the drapes, and turn out the lights. The house was running us. If we hadn't gone to automation, we would have been overwhelmed by this new house, which is fourteen thousand square feet. I want to walk out and press one button. I want to come home from a concert at the Philharmonic, open the garage door, and have the hallway lights come on. I like the idea of controlling the music and the air conditioning while I sit in an easy chair."

O'Meara has invested in Integrated Electronic Environments, or IE², a home systems integration company that planned the

house with redundancy worthy of the Space Shuttle, so that lighting, entertainment, security, energy management, pool, and spa are controlled under one umbrella system, but each can stand alone. The in-laws' suite and VIP guest quarters have the same capabilities as the rest of the property, with lots of potential tweaking: Telephones in those rooms could be programmed not to ring after 10 p.m. (for early-to-bed grandparents) or dial 900 numbers (for business associates with cheesy sexual proclivities). Tweaking even accommodates nonhuman special needs: An auxiliary air-conditioning unit in the master bedroom humors the silk wallpaper, which must be kept at precisely 72 degrees. The



Pro Shop

"The biggest decision is not what home automation system to use," says Mitchell Klein, president of the Custom Electronic Design and Installation Association (CEDIA), "it's which expert you're going to hire. We consider everything from aesthetics to budget. We uncover needs, desire, intent."

Here's a list of some of the most knowledgeable people in the home automation field. For referrals you can also contact the **Home Automation Association (HAA)**, 202-712-9050, www.homeautomation.org; the **Continental Automated Buildings Association (CABA)**, 888-798-2222, www.caba.org; or **CEDIA**, 800-669-5329, www.cedia.org. For information on specific home automation products, try the bimonthly magazine *Electronic House* (EH Publishing, Inc., 800-375-8015; www.electronichouse.com).

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Media Systems

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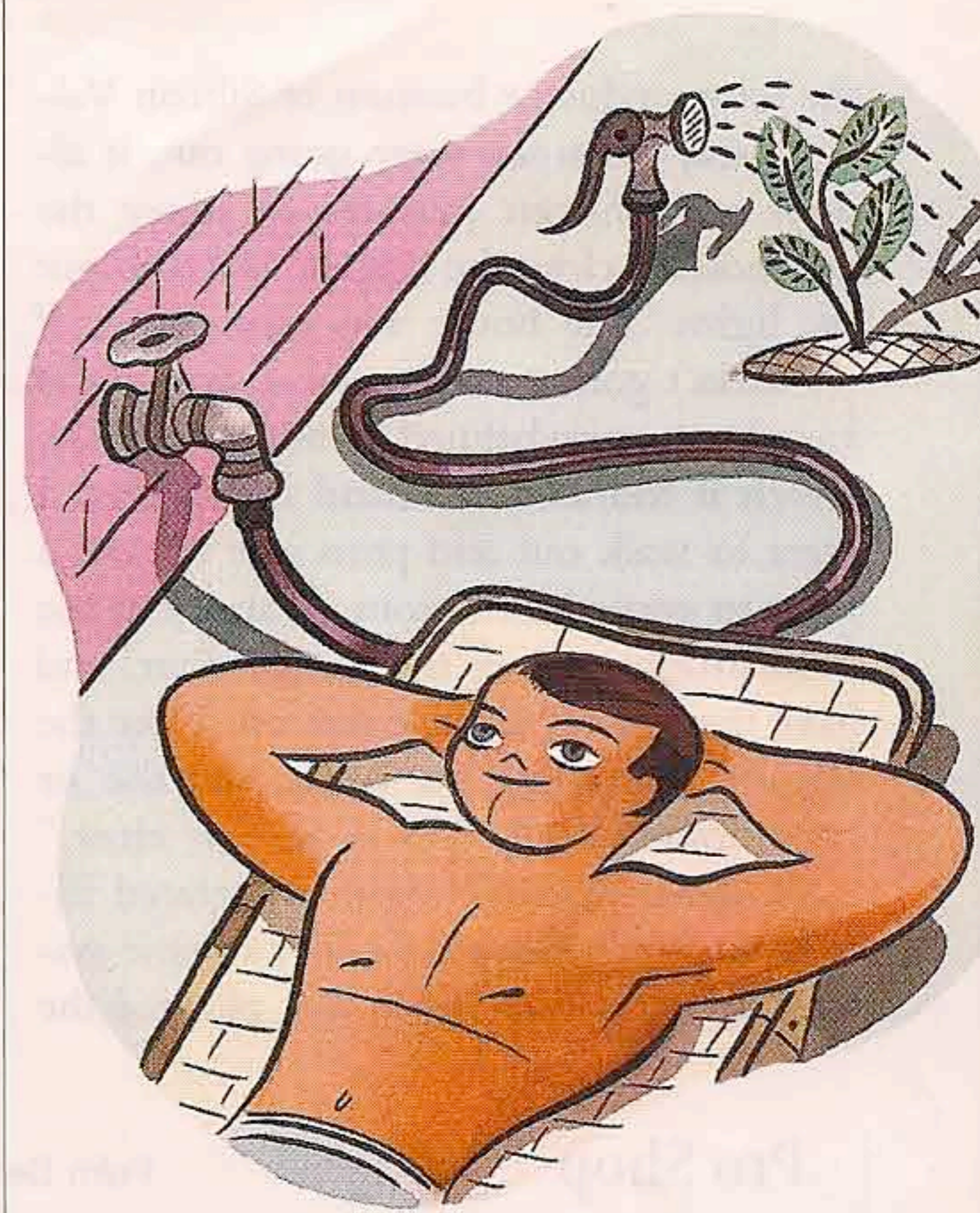
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audio-visual system speaks as many languages as a U.N. interpreter, accepting any format of CD, DVD, laser disc, or movie, and the screen will be adjusted with "masking" bands so *Gone With the Wind* is seen without the irritating black bars of letter-box mode. Although there is video surveillance via 16 closed-circuit TVs, there is no audio surveillance. "There's a lot that the system is capable of," says O'Meara, "but that's none of my business."

There are some ethical considerations to home automation: Few would question the legitimacy of a "nanny scan" to ensure the welfare of children, but what about the bachelor who wants to make videos secretly in his bedroom? Custom installers must wrestle with such issues, as well as silly and fatuous notions: There is an automatic toilet on the market with a fountain to wash you and a remote flusher. You would never run out of toilet paper, but aren't there *some* things you really ought to do for yourself?

"When we meet clients, we have to set their expectations and priorities straight," states Mitchell Klein of Media Systems in Boston. "One of the worst examples I ever saw was a guy from IBM showing how you could program a blender to go on at six each morning. I thought: This sets my industry back ten years. The examples are just plain dumb. Home automation is for taking complicated subsystems that are becoming mandatory and making the home obedient to them. It's there to simplify

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Open Sesame

Peter Monahan's smart house is also a bit of a smart aleck. Not only does it refuse to bring him a beer, but it responds to such requests by saying, "Go to hell. I'm busy running the house."

Monahan, a systems integrator at **Home Control, Inc.** (520 Inlet Woods, Alpharetta, GA 30005; 770-569-1586; www.homecontrolinc.com), has the latest automation wrinkle (with an irreverent twinkle): voice activation. HAL 2000—a PC-based system named after the talking computer in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, but also the acronym for HAL's parent company, **Home Automated Living** (14401 Sweitzer Lane, Sixth Floor, Laurel, MD 20707; 800-935-5313; www.automatedliving.com)—operates the "peripherals" of the house (appliances, thermostats, lights) much the way Windows runs the peripherals of a computer (modems, printers, scanners), but using spoken commands via telephones or microphones and speakers scattered throughout the rooms.

The day begins when Monahan says "Good morning, Elliot." (The system can be "male" or "female," and the voice can be adjusted for tone, rate, and pitch. Future technology promises a new and improved "concatenated" voice that sounds less synthetic). That prompts Elliot to start the coffeemaker, adjust the temperature, water the lawn (on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays), and turn on the TV to MSNBC, which—showing great consideration—is muted "because I don't know what the volume was when it was turned off," says Monahan, "and I don't want to wake the whole house." Apart from sniveling about fetching a beer, Elliot is otherwise a Southern gentleman, at Monahan's insistence. "We went back to the manufacturer and said, 'We need to have some *please* and *thank you* in there.' " Driving home at the end of the day—at Exit 10 to be precise—Monahan calls Elliot on the cell phone and utters the phrase, "We're almost home,"

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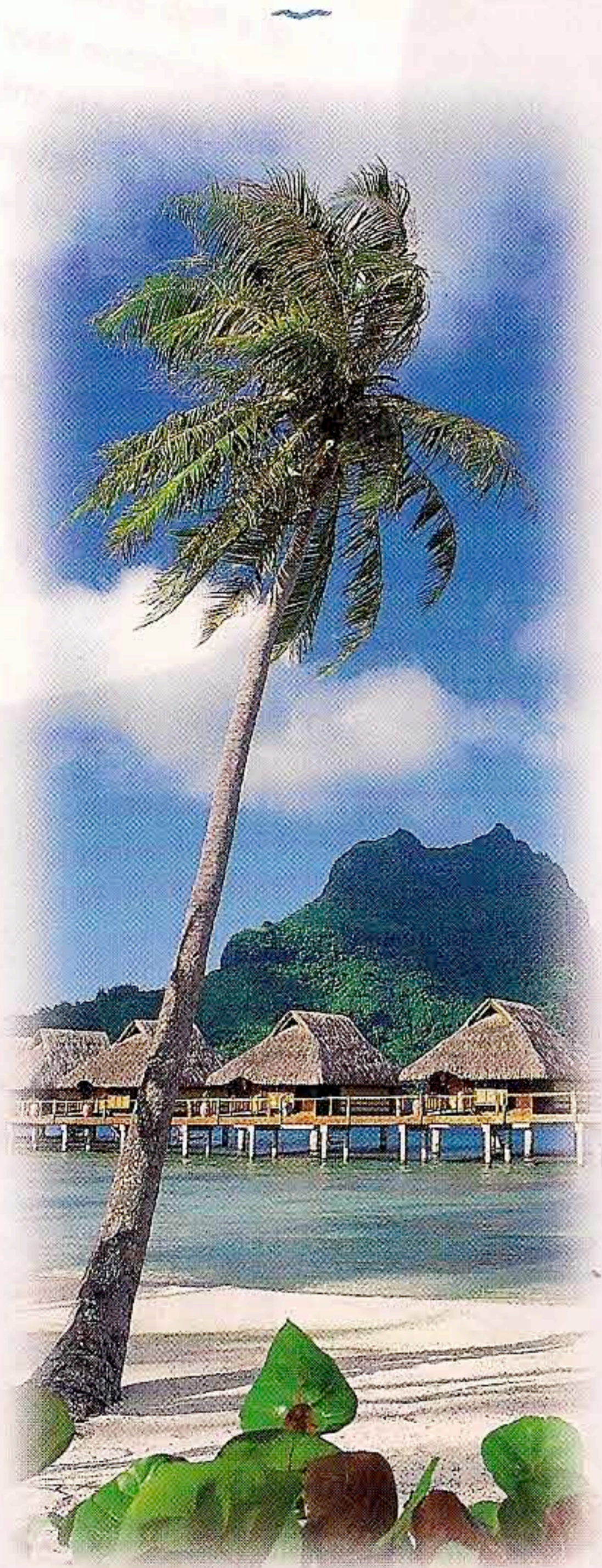
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which cues Elliot to open the garage, disarm the security, and turn on the lights and TV.

Such bells and whistles may sound like the penultimate in gadgetry, but many experts have scurrilous things to say about voice recognition ("You want to be leading edge, not bleeding edge") and insist that no one considering high-end home automation should bother with it since the technology is still imperfect. The system must be trained to recognize a homeowner's speech, in much the same way that a PalmPilot must be trained to recognize handwriting. (Though Monahan says this step is no longer necessary.) It responds best to people who speak in a natural voice rather than in monotone, and it has trouble with strong accents and nasal pronunciation caused by a cold or a hangover. Success also depends on the acoustic characteristics and background noise of a room: Under certain circumstances the house may get confused and act hard-of-hearing. "Open microphones are not for the faint of heart," admits Monahan, "although phones work perfectly. In a 'hot room,' like a kitchen with hardwood floors and ceramic tile, the system hears reflected sounds. It might hear, 'P-p-p-peter.'" Such electronic stuttering is less likely in a bedroom with carpets.

"Voice recognition has come a long way, but it's not there yet," confirms Tricia Parks, a Dallas automation consultant. "Big companies like IBM and Texas Instruments have put a billion dollars into research. But for the classic consumer, products should work without a lot of fuss or rules or mistakes. If I have to pound on something, I want it gone."

There are customers for whom the irritation of flawed technology is offset by its benefits. "If you're handicapped, it's a godsend," says Parks. "You can endure imperfect. For older people who are physically limited by diminished eyesight or arthritis, so what if it takes you three attempts to get something done? Another group that meets the same requirements for different reasons is the very young. You don't want them controlling the house, but children can use voice commands if they don't read or are too small to reach a switch."

Despite its obvious application for the nursery, HAL may be puzzled by the timbre of pre-pubesence, according to the manufacturer. "It doesn't do well with children's voices," admits George Snyder, director of communications/marketing for Home Automated Living.

Julie Jacobson, as a writer for the industry magazine *Electronic House*, decided to test-drive HAL 2000 in her own home outside Boston, Massachusetts. She found it allows more natural speech patterns than previous voice systems, which required communication in a stilted, Tonto-and-Lone-Ranger syntax. "You don't have to say, 'Computer on,'" explains Jacobson. "You can say, 'In ten minutes, turn on the dining-room lights.' Or 'Set the thermostat to seventy-two.' Or 'Tape Oprah.' Its most useful feature is its ability to operate audio-visual equipment because you don't have to scroll through a bunch of menus. You can say, 'Turn on *Seinfeld*.'"

To initiate the system, Jacobson provided information such as her zip code, so when she requests a weather forecast she gets the conditions in her own backyard. An "ultimate frisbee" player, she can ask, "Is today good for a game?" and HAL 2000 will gauge temperature, barometer, wind speed, and dew point. She can connect the system to her morning alarm, so that HAL wakes her for frisbee on Saturday when it is clear and dry but lets her sleep in inclement weather. If it's a couch-potato day, she can ask, "What's on TV at nine o'clock?" or have HAL read news headlines off the Internet. On Wednesday mornings, HAL's first comment is, "Take out the trash." Certain functions, such as disarming the security system, can be set with a code to prevent unauthorized use. "But basically it presumes that someone in the house is a friend," explains George Snyder.

Although Jacobson has experienced minimal glitches with her system, she concedes it's a little weird talking to air and walls. "No one uses voice to control a whole house," she says. "When you get home automation, make sure you don't buy it just for voice. You want a robust control system in which voice is one option. Otherwise it's a toy."

lives not do silly things." The gold standard for automation is that children, nannies, or visiting cousins should be able to adjust the lights or heat without summoning the cavalry. "You shouldn't have to give guests a course to stay at your house," says Yves Richarz of Interior Systems Design in Sun Valley, California. "You want people to feel comfortable using the telephone or TV without screwing something up."

Yes, well. . . . Two years after moving in, Debbie and Arnold Simon still go from room to room of their 35,000-square-foot home in Saddle River, New Jersey, flummoxed by the lights, wondering which button does what. They'd love to show off their aquarium, with rare tropical fish that look as if they're wearing Christian Lacroix. (Better make that Calvin Klein: Simon is the former CEO of Calvin Klein Sportswear.) But they must wait until the tank is lit at preset intervals, having not a clue how to illuminate it by themselves.

For the most part, their smart house works brilliantly, including the 52 phones (with speed-dialing to dozens of numbers); 90 lightbulbs in the cathedral ceilings; and numeric keypads at each door. ("There are no keys to this house," says Debbie; "if I fire the housekeeper, I simply change the code.") No televisions are visible—at the push of a button a wide screen descends over a Botero painting, disappearing again automatically when the TV is turned off. The best sound-and-light show is in the theater: Simon helped cull the components at an electronics show in Las Vegas with a consultant from Theo Kalomirakis Theaters. The consultant then re-created in spectacular detail the Loews of his client's Brooklyn childhood. The biggest miscalculation was not providing a backup generator for the panoply of equipment in this house with four children and eight staff. "We've had blackouts when we can't even get out of the garage," says Debbie.

Home automation definitely elicits personal idiosyncrasies. "What's important to the Smiths might not be important to the Joneses," says Corey Ferrell. "Each project is unique, with a different set of trials and tribulations." One of his clients purchased a home in cool weather, unaware of the proximity of a public park. The noises of picnics and ball games during warm weather were a nuisance, so he designed an outdoor sound-masking system: Microphones

"listen" for park babel and override it with the sound of waterfalls, wind, or music from speakers in the trees. Another client with a horse farm needed to track the animals' water consumption, a key health indicator. Ferrell automated the troughs, resulting in a graphic display of each horse's libations, stored in seven-day records.

In order to ascertain his clients' criteria, Randy Stearns of Engineered Environments in Hayward, California, sometimes asks them to complete a 20-page questionnaire, from which he gleans a fairly accurate self-portrait. In answer to "What are your internal communications needs?" they might respond: "Whole-house paging" or "None—we like to yell." They can check: "We purchase items on the cutting edge of technology" or "We're generally content with the way things are." "We're extremely security-conscious" or "We may not even use the system, except when out of town."

Recognizing that people who spend big bucks on home automation love customization, the industry attempts to satisfy the most individual and arbitrary choices. "The limits of a security system depend on the client's state of paranoia," states Richarz. "Some people have systems that would work for an embassy, and some are more afraid of a siren going off in the middle of the night than of somebody breaking in. Some people want every speaker hidden, including those in the garden already disguised as rocks, and some choose to make Swiss cheese out of their ceilings. You can have the system respond to an astronomical clock that calculates sunrise and sunset so that certain things happen at sunset minus thirty minutes every day. But other people detest things happening automatically. Actually, what most people are looking for is not automation but ease of control. You don't necessarily want the same routine every day because your needs change every day."

In the Beverly Hills home of real estate developer Ron Bloom, there are three automatic schedules, for summer, winter, and "away." But the system will guide him in making modifications, say, during an unexpected February heat wave, reporting in plain English: "This room is now seventy-five degrees—do you want to change it? Do you want to check any other rooms? Do you want to change all the rooms?" It's the sort of tinkering he enjoys. "But



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lighting," Bloom says, "is far too personal and changeable to be preprogrammed. I may want to walk into my bedroom without *any* lights."

Bloom is a self-described sports maniac who especially loves having the ability to toggle between two games, or to send the same picture to every TV in the house (including the one that pops out of the vanity in the master bathroom on an air-driven shaft) for a Superbowl party. Without missing a single touchdown, he can check (via CCT displays on his touch screen) who's at the front gate, whether his family is getting sunburned by the pool, even what's cooking at the neighbors' barbecue across the canyon. (The camera has a zoom lens.) When his system was first installed, the alarms in his house were often tripped by such nefarious intruders as a raccoon or a tree branch. These lapses in smart-house judgment require a sense of humor, evident in the message displayed on the control panels for Bloom's system, which says, "Touch me and I'll scream."

"There is a research and development aspect to a project, even a Rube Goldberg aspect," says Ken Karnes. "We don't contract with clients—we marry them. We have to integrate the system into their lives so they're not burdened. But I'm always looking for things that will excite them, once they've exhausted their list. There's a lot of trust involved, because they don't buy exactly what we show in a model—they must extrapolate from what they've seen to what their new system will be."

You'd better like this mad scientist who is smartening up your house because you'll be seeing a lot of him. "Your installer is going to be at your house several times a year, that's the nature of the business," says Robert Eitel of Robert's Home Audio & Video in Los Angeles, who compares a smart house to an overbred poodle. Even Bill Gates, according to one of my sources, has trouble with what is arguably the world's smartest house, including buttons for guests to wear that remember and cue personalized music selections as they move from room to room. But Gates admitted at one trade show that when he couldn't get a screen at the foot of his bed to stop glowing at 3 a.m. he just threw a blanket over it. "The system will do anything you want, but it's going to break down," says Eitel. "And the more complex the system,

the more it's going to break down. We get it pretty bulletproof, but the failure rate on high-end equipment is about fifteen percent. These systems are finicky—Ferraris, not workhorses."

A few interior decorating decisions are influenced by smart-house dictates. You can't motorize just any window shade, and the hardware driving such extensive systems must go somewhere, often demanding a dedicated mechanical room. Any house can be smartened; you can teach an old house new tricks, retrofitting it with smart stuff. With new construction, "if you don't know exactly what you want, or how much you want to spend, you can defer those decisions without a lot of extra pain," says Tricia Parks, whose Dallas-based Parks Associates studies emerging technology and does consumer research in the automation field. "What you cannot defer is putting in the wires. The future will be facilitated by adequate wiring." You should end up with a set of "as built" plans, containing imperative information for you or any new owners. "When things were simple, it wasn't such a big deal," says Richarz. "Now good documentation is a major issue for the resale of the house."

Many clients are oblivious to the origins and manufacture of their smart-house components, according to Richard Goldman of Home Systems Plus in Owings Mills, Maryland, which supplies automation products to hundreds of high-end installers. "People are buying benefits, outcome, and reliability," he says. "How it's done isn't important to them." This isn't artificial intelligence: The smartest components cannot compensate for careless programming. "The biggest part of the equation is the talent of the professional," says Goldman, "but it's your taste. This is not like investing in commodities. It's like purchasing an oil painting. You're going to live with this stuff."

One further caveat worth consideration: Richarz relates explaining to a prospective client what automation could do to facilitate entertaining, extolling the praises of lamps dimmed, skylights opened, music selected. . . . "But that's what my butler does," said the client, unimpressed.

"The best remote control," says Richarz with a smile, "is still a good staff." ■

AIMEE LEE BALL WROTE ABOUT COLORED DIAMONDS IN THE SEPT./OCT. 1998 ISSUE.

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