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Tech comes home

Whole-house audio, remote-control cooking, carwash-style showers. Some of the coolest custom-home gizmos are trickling into the mainstream as standard features.

By Diane Wedner
Times Staff Writer

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"Our home food dispenser broke and I had to wait 20 seconds at the checkout counter. Such inefficiency!"

— **Jane Jetson**

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WE'RE not quite living in the Jetsons' Orbit City, where the posted speed limit is 500 mph and parking meters pound fists on the hoods of cars whose time limits have expired.

But today's new high-tech homes, with ovens that can keep a raw roast cold until instructed — remotely — to cook it and dishwashers that both wash and dry in 120 seconds, would surely bring a smile to Jane's face. Not to mention remote controls for window blinds, iPod docking stations and under-cupboard computer screens in the kitchen for writing e-mail while braising the brisket.

"Today's home technology is what electricity and running water were in yesterday's homes," said Sean Fields, head of Laguna Niguel-based Audio/Video Entertainment, a leading in-home technology company. It's revolutionary. And, Fields added, "We've seen a huge change in just two years."

High technology has entered Southland homes, and we're not just talking custom ones. Mainstream home builders are offering 21st-century technology options to buyers in all price ranges who no longer want to see octopus wiring and tech components stacked up on shelves like encyclopedias.

"Buyers want to choose their granite and carpet colors," said Ron Zimmer, president of the Continental Automated Buildings Assn., an industry information and education group. "But they also want wiring options. Builders are finally getting that."

In many KB Home developments, for example, Internet connections now come as a standard feature in some rooms, with the option to add more outlets in other areas, said Jacob Atalla, director of business development for the builder.

Chateau Interiors & Design, which oversees showrooms for Warmington Homes California and William Lyon Homes, has introduced optional iPod stations — outlets into which the portable devices can be plugged so music can be piped throughout the house — as well as whole-house audio systems even in entry-level homes in the \$400,000-to-\$500,000 range.

The more expensive the development, the greater the number of standard and optional amenities, said Nancy Giangeruso, Chateau's president. Items such as surround sound, with pre-wiring and speaker options, can add at least \$2,000 per room to the home's price tag.

Truly wired

Laing Luxury Homes, a division of John Laing Homes, made several high-tech features standard in the company's upscale SeaCrest at Crystal Cove development in Newport Coast. They include Lutron lighting systems, which control mood settings, outdoor security and garage lighting with a remote; category-five wiring to allow computers, cable, phones and home electronics in every room; surround sound; programmable touch pads for security; and whole-home audio systems, said Joan Marcus-Colvin, vice president of sales and marketing. Those homes sell for \$5 million to \$8 million.

Some Laing Luxury buyers also may choose the optional TMIO cooking system, which is a refrigerator and oven all in one. The system can be operated via the Internet and cellphone and allows the user to refrigerate cookie dough in the morning, for example, then, from the office, switch the unit from refrigeration to bake at 3 p.m. so the kids can enjoy fresh, warm cookies straight from the oven when they get home. The system costs about \$8,000.

Randy Scott Wong, an attorney, recently bought a Laing Luxury home in a gated Irvine community, where he spent his extra dollars on audio technology. The music buff opted for wireless touch-screen audio controls — one hand-held and one affixed to a wall. He chose surround sound and a home theater with a plasma television — there's an additional flat-screen TV and music speakers in the garage — and security cameras outside and inside the house, the latter to monitor the baby in the nursery.

"I'm not a techno-geek," Wong insisted, but added, "It's made our lives better."

Lou Werbe, a consultant and custom-home builder, recently put the finishing touches on his Malibu monument to high-tech living. The contemporary, tan-colored stucco-and-glass house he's listed for just under \$5 million atop Las Flores Canyon appears to be a standard-issue modern home with a view. Not on the inside, however.

From his dining room, Werbe can use a remote control to turn on the backyard pool's waterfalls, jets and lighting.

The master bathroom features a 10-head shower that sprays from all sides, like a carwash. It also has an electric, push button toilet and an infinity tub that fills with water that cascades from a no-splash, no-faucet outlet in the ceiling. Yes, the ceiling.

There are miles of wiring hidden in the house, for speakers, cable and other items. Music streams into every room. Wall-mounted keypads throughout the house control selective lighting.

The "smart house" is wired so that features can be accessed from anywhere: Werbe can turn on the lights, TV and stereo through his computer. A utility room houses the cable outlet for "a zillion channels," Werbe said, and is the command center for much of the technology.

The kitchen, with a medical-examiner-room/stainless-steel décor, is a chef's dream: a commercial refrigerator and freezer, an eight-burner stove with a built-in griddle, a deep fryer, two commercial dishwashers that wash and dry in 120 seconds, and three compartment sinks that come with everything but someone to scrub the pots and pans.

"It's for larger-than-life people who like to entertain," Werbe said.

So what's next? The Continental Automated Buildings Assn.'s Internet Home Alliance Research Council and a consortium of companies recently tested an experimental laundry system designed to appeal to the ultra-busy family on a budget.

Even the laundry

The pilot program began in July in an Atlanta suburb, where families signed on to test appliance technology for eight weeks. Laundry Time, the brainchild of the Whirlpool Corp., Hewlett-Packard, Panasonic and Procter & Gamble, with Microsoft software, is an "intelligent" system that allows users to receive pop-up alerts — from transceivers attached to the laundry machines — on their PCs, cellphones and television screens informing them that they forgot to start the washer or dryer, that it's time to add fabric softener or that the cycles are over.

The Hafford family was among participants in the experiment. The Snellville, Ga., family of four generates six loads of laundry a week. Michelle Hafford, a human-resources consultant, doctoral student and mother of two, said what she wants most is high-tech devices that make her life easier.

"I'm not looking for bells and whistles," said Hafford, who said she would like to see the system simplified.

In the San Diego area, KB Home is testing an integrated entertainment system in which owners use one remote-control device to access TVs, DVD players, the lighting system and the fireplace starter.

Homeowners living in older houses also can join the high-tech revolution, said Fields, the audio-visual expert. Experienced electricians can retrofit homes without destroying walls. The self-described electronic architect recently rewired a Wallace Neff-designed home in Pasadena, a process that he said was as delicate as "taking scissors to a Picasso."

After mapping the structure of the house and using special tools, he and his team were able to install hidden wiring — through just nine small holes in the plaster — providing music to every room in the home and creating two theaters with plasma TVs and speakers. The rewiring cost \$4,000; the entertainment equipment, \$75,000.

Now, if transportation planners could only figure out how to get freeways moving at 500 mph.

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