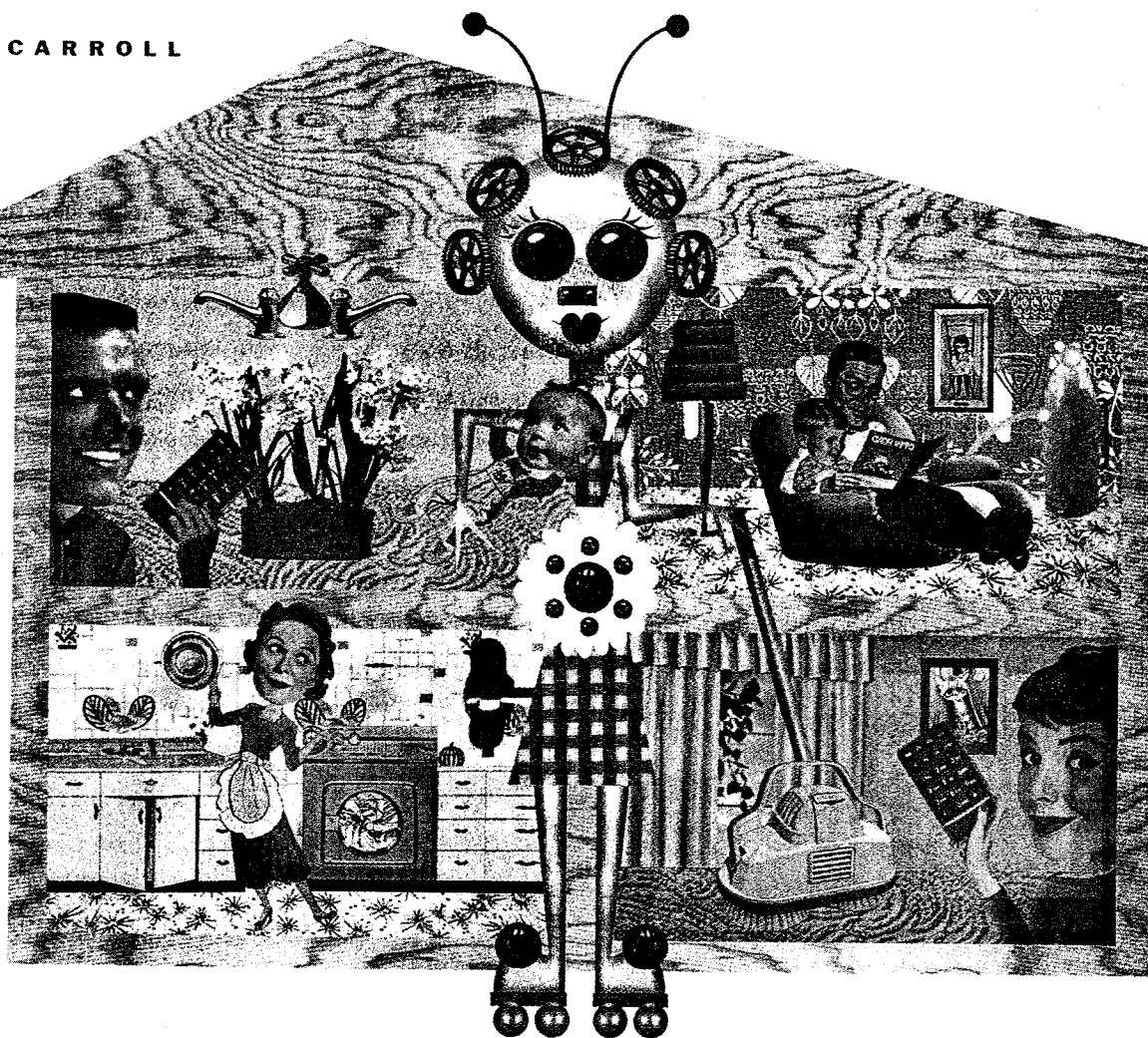


BY JIM CARROLL



Smart homes

SOON YOU'LL
BE PROGRAMMING
THE DRAPES

The last few decades have been marked by promises of innovative new technology for the home. The presumption, of course, is that more technology is good for us and that, in the process, our homes will become "smart." Yet today, as we consider the number of people whose VCRs still flash 12:00, we wonder just how smart our homes have become. ▶

YESTERDAY

Ever since the 1930s, many industries have predicated that fanciful technologies would find their way into our homes and make our lives much easier. Most predictions are, in retrospect, hilarious.

Perhaps one of the earliest examples was the introduction of the automatic dishwasher at the 1939 World's Fair in New York City. Westinghouse presented a dishwashing contest between Mrs. Modern (using a Westinghouse dishwasher) and Mrs. Drudge (cleaning her dishes by hand). At the close of the contest (you know who won), the modera-

tor commented that in addition to losing, Mrs. Drudge was not nearly as "neat and refreshed as when she started." Yes, technology would make us feel better!

Washing dishes seemed to be a favorite theme of the World's Fair: some 25 years later, the 1964 Fair featured the Norge Dish Maker. The appliance washed and dried plastic dishes, ground them up into tiny pellets, and moulded them into new plates, cups and saucers!

Walter Cronkite got in on the act in 1967, appearing in *At Home 2001*, a half-hour show about the nature of the home at the dawn of the new millennium. He

explained, for example, the duties of the host: "When a guest arrives, he just pulls out his inflatable chair – a small pressurized air capsule would inflate it and it would be ready for use." Need to cook for the guests? Simply reach for the ultimate in convenience food. "A meal might be stored for years and then cooked in seconds," he said, without a trace of skepticism.

Optimism continued to reign. In 1977 the *Vancouver Sun* reported on a "domestic android" that could "serve your dinner, vacuum your rugs, baby-sit your kids and insult your enemies."

There was a common theme to many of the predictions about the "smart home." We would have push-button control over everything, a "remote control for the home" that would allow us to draw the drapes, water the plants, adjust the thermostat and control virtually every aspect of the house by punching a few buttons.

TODAY

Of course, few of us today have such capabilities – and we wonder if we'd be able to use them even if they were available. After all, how useful would that "remote control for the home" be when we can't handle the typical VCR remote control?

The industry is certainly trying to deal with the problem. There is no shortage of "smart-home" technology available and apparently some people are buying this stuff – the U.S.-based National Association of Home Builders estimates that, world-

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wide, some \$2 to \$4 billion is spent each year on devices that link security systems, lighting and entertainment systems.

Who buys them? John and Missy Butcher of Chicago, for example. They have spent \$100,000 on a home automation system. So, if they are so inclined, they can click the "Romance" button on their home automation controller and watch as the curtains are drawn and the lights dim, while listening to mood music. "Our lives are much easier," they note.

Of course, we might think, anyone who can spend \$100,000 on a home automation system already has an easy life.

TOMORROW

Will the smart home remain largely a concept, an expensive curiosity available only to the richest and most gadget-hungry among us? Likely not. This is one technology that will explode, in terms of the number of customers it will gain and the role it will play in our lives. There are several reasons for this.

First, many people now have more than one computer in the home. The computer industry recognizes that linking them together in a home-based local area network is going to be one of the biggest opportunities of the next three years.

We won't simply be linking the computers in our home. The technology will link all of our devices based on the computer chip into a central control panel, bringing us one step closer to the remote control concept of earlier decades. Three

years from now, the drapes you buy might have a microchip. Plug them in, program them – and forget about them.

Second, the Internet will play a significant role. One day this technology will link our refrigerator to its manufacturer, notifying the company when the appliance is about to break down – and, in the process, take us through the next step in home automation.

There is also the ever-decreasing cost of technology. The smart home has always been held back by the fact that the minimum investment was at least \$2,000, but that figure is dropping quickly.

And, most significant of all, we'll barely notice the technology as it sneaks into our home! We'll be buying appliances, garage door openers and the like, unaware that they contain the necessary intelligence to plug into our home network.

It's not that we'll choose to have a smart home – one day, we'll discover that it's already smart.

Not quite convinced? Let me quote Walter Cronkite, from that 1967 program. "Sounds preposterous," he told his audience, with a bit of a smile, "but some people are convinced it will happen." ■

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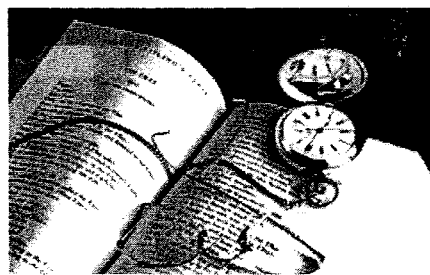
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