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Cutting Edge Today, Passé Tomorrow



POOL POSITION

The swimming pool's temperature and fountain at Sam and Susan Fiori's Fort Smith, Ark., home, left, is controlled by a touchpad, above. The couple underwent a big technology renovation in their previous home before building this fully automated home from the ground up.

CELLAR SCIENCE

Behind a glass wall in the 'tasting room,' right, is the Fioris' wine collection, which has automated temperature and humidity controls. Music in the tasting room is adjusted using a touchpad.



As Home Technology Advances, Keeping Up With the Joneses Calls for More Frequent Renovations

By Heidi Mitchell

The living room was so cutting edge, tricked out with big audio speakers, a hefty modem and a desk with a special drawer for the computer's CPU. But that was five years ago. Now it's a sad den of outmoded technology.

Homes with high-tech systems that seem edgy today quickly look antiquated and passé—and sometimes require tens of thousands of dollars to update.

Dallas-based interior designer Emily Summers says her clients accept the reality that home tech has a shelf life, and they are willing to upgrade every five years or so to keep up.

"We used to have 36-inch televisions with built-ins, power sliders that took up whole art walls, and speakers sticking out in every direction," Ms. Summers says. "Can't have that anymore."



A home interior in Palm Springs, Calif., designed by Emily Summers has panels that fold back to reveal a TV recessed in the wall.

It's not unusual for her clients to demand 103-inch plasma screens showing eight sporting events at once, and pools with programmed fountains and electronic covers. "But they still want everything tucked into a closet, flush with the wall, and easy to use," Ms. Summers says. She recesses even flat-screen TVs into four-inch cutouts, covers light switches with pop-up panels, and builds speakers right into the drywall.

The problem comes when it's time to upgrade all that technology—and all the plaster and drywall used to conceal it. This can be particularly painful when it comes to big audio-visual systems and "smart" home automation systems that control everything from radiant floors and humidity to light dimmers and pool temperatures.

When interior designer James Magni looked at renovating a client's Los Angeles home, he quickly

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Continued from the prior page ran into obstacles.

The 1980s legacy AV system had hundreds of feet of expensive wiring hidden behind Venetian-plastered walls. "All the wiring went to the custom key-pads, rather than being wired individually to the brain of the system, and all of it was outdated," says Mr. Magni, who had to gently break this news to his client. "We had to rip everything out—at a huge cost—and start from scratch."

John Myer, chief executive of MyerConnex installation in Washington, D.C., recalls putting three-gun projectors into media rooms for \$15,000 and lighting systems with remote

Home systems can be monitored using iPads.

controls that had 100 buttons. Now he is installing iPads and off-the-shelf flat-screen TVs that perform better—and cost a tenth the price.

"The '80s were the worst era," says Mr. Myer. "All these manufacturers were developing proprietary systems that couldn't talk to one another," he says. "Those clunky pieces of hardware—intercoms, projectors—all ended up in the dumpster."

Mr. Myer himself lives in a circa-1880 home with plasma TVs, Lutron motorized shades, and a button marked "movie time" that dims his great room and lowers the blinds. He estimates he has about five years before he needs to upgrade. "That time frame is generally when the new [technology] benefits make sense for an upgrade," he says. "That doesn't mean trashing everything. It

Online>>

See a video on how to avoid tech renovation disasters at WSJ.com/Lifestyle.



Sam and Susan Fiori use an iPad, left, to control systems in their Fort Smith, Ark., home including lighting. Below, a control panel near the kitchen. Below left, a screen-filled Beverly Hills, Calif., home. James Magni designed the interior.



(clockwise from top) Wesley Hitt for The Wall Street Journal (2); James Magni

could mean simply integrating the latest and greatest into your current system."

At the high end of the market, there's Crestron Electronics, a manufacturer that installs systems to tie all of a home's technologies together, ranging from \$5,000 to \$1 million, says Jeffrey Singer, director of global marketing campaigns for the company. New Jersey-based Crestron did \$200 million in home-automation sales in its last fiscal year ended June 30.

One Crestron client in the Gulf Coast has a weather vane and cameras that detect wind and automatically shut storm windows in the event of a hurricane. Another has a \$250,000 system to feed goldfish that are then fed to more exotic

fish, whose tank system tracks pH and water levels. Everything is monitored by the client's iPad.

According to ABI, a technology research firm, 1.8 million home-automation systems had been shipped world-wide as of last year. That number is expected to grow to 12 million by 2016.

Having a souped-up home with a Crestron or Vantage system is now shorthand for high-end, the way Sub-Zero, Viking and Wolf were in 2007, says Holly Hawes, an executive vice president at real-estate agency Halstead Property Connecticut. Ms. Hawes notes that high-cost systems can quickly become outdated. "For any system—alarm, windows, phone, AV—older than five to

10 years, we are telling our sellers to rip them out and update," Ms. Hawes says.

Sam Fiori, president of K-MAC Enterprises, which operates more than 200 chain restaurants, knows this all too well. His former home in Fort Smith, Ark., had light switches on every wall and tube televisions that took up precious square footage. In 2006, he hired Digital Entertainment Systems, a local firm, to replace his old screens with projectors that came out of the ceiling, and a Kaleidescape hard drive loaded with 500 movies.

When it came time to move in 2010, Mr. Fiori, 53, and his wife Susan, 52, built a fully automated home from the ground up. His 1,000-bottle

auto-temperature wine cellar is separated by a glass wall from his "tasting room." The colors in what his wife calls his Kohler "disco shower" can be changed to suit his mood. His 14 televisions and each light in the 14,000-square-foot house go on automatically when there is a security breach.

All this is monitored on Mr. Fiori's iPad. On a trip to Los Angeles, he was able to control power in various zones in his home by touching his iPad.

His five-figure investment is worth it, he says, especially in the winter, when he switches on his home's thousands of holiday lights.

"And if I get tired of them," he says, "I just hit 'Christmas' on my iPad, and they all go off."

The Costs To Automate Home Tech

Whole-house automated systems that control televisions, temperature and even feed the fish can be a hefty investment. In the past few years, some products have emerged that promise the same functions at a fraction of the cost.

Pete Pedone, who installs AV systems in the New York tri-state area, says he used to suggest to clients a \$25,000 hard drive that uploads DVDs and feeds them to any TV in the home. Now he encourages clients to purchase an Apple TV box for \$99, a Sonos Wi-Fi speaker system that accesses the Internet for music and starts at \$2,500 for six rooms of sound, and a Crestron "brain" for \$899 to make them all talk to one another.

Sonos spokesman Eric Nielsen says the Santa Barbara, Calif.-based company has launched in over 6,300 U.S. stores including Target and Best Buy since it was introduced in 2005. Upgrades are "pushed" to clients, so they never have to call their AV guy, at added cost, to upgrade software.

Apple-based automation system Savant was born out of frustration. Former telecom executive Robert Madonna launched Savant after hours in his kitchen with a programmer writing code for his legacy control systems.

"This guy was working on this for days, and I thought there has to be a better way," he says. Hyannis, Mass.-based Savant has brought the entry price for automation systems down from around \$30,000 to \$4,000.

"The biggest difference has been the iPad," says Mr. Madonna. "The \$3,800 custom control panel built into the wall now just costs the \$500 for the iPad," he says. "And no one has to ever write code to get your new Blu-ray or plasma screen working." — Heidi Mitchell

