

## **Total home control within reach**

By Dan Simmons - Click reporter

**Smart homes are still expensive. But some items are becoming more affordable, and the benefits could encourage more people to turn their dreams into reality, finds Dan Simmons at the Smart Home Show in Birmingham.**

Adam Kent's country house may look quaint, but it could not be described as old-fashioned.

Mr Kent, who runs a business providing the latest smart home technology, has spent the last two-and-a-half years packing as much of it as he can into his own 28-room crib.

"The key thing with every room is that it is controlled by a panel," he says.

"So each of the rooms has got one in, and this allows you to control all of the devices that are connected to the magic boxes.

"We have a couple of satellite boxes, DVD, music, even CCTV."

The panels, which can be controlled remotely, are expensive at more than £1,000 each.

The perfect smart home is not just about the gizmos; it is also about looking the part.

Mr Kent has used a false wall to hide the cables, recess the plasma and house the speakers. So, if you do not mind getting the builders in and losing a little floor space, it is a beautiful solution.

### **Let there be light**

With 28 rooms, you would expect the lighting bill to be expensive but Mr Kent says smart home technology takes care of this.

For example, in the room with the plasma television, the first call for lighting is for the LEDs, he says.

"They are ideal for watching the TV, and the best bit is that they are only four or five watts.

"If we need any more light then you just select one of the settings. 'Romantic' will be 10% and 'chilled' may be 15%."



Three boxes in the control room are the hub of the system

Mr Kent's lighting software can even predict where he might go next and turns the lights on using the motion sensors in the ceiling.

He has chosen to hardwire the system to guarantee the connections rather than relying on a wireless setup.

Each panel in the house, as well as the lighting, comes back to three boxes situated in the control room which is "where it all happens".

"Each of these boxes controls eight rooms. In a conventional house you would probably only have one in here. We have three.

"They are about £4,000 to £4,500 each but that gives you the whole infrastructure for a property."

And the rest of the system can be made from equipment that is not so hi-tech, says Mr Kent.

"The whole beauty of this is that you can use the equipment that you have already got in the property.

"For example, we have got two satellite boxes, we have got a music server, DVD and three surround-sound amps.



A plasma that could be stored in a fireplace was on display at the show

"But there are three cinema rooms in here. Again, conventionally, you would probably only have one."

He adds: "What you are giving yourself is the ability to share and control all of the equipment in this cabinet from any room."

The cupboard next door houses the lighting circuit boards and it is worth pointing out that each dimmable circuit in the house cost Mr Kent £250.

### **Smart entertainment**

Mr Kent's children - Faye, Isabelle, and Luke - love the big screens in the three cinema rooms.

Ideally, you need wall space and a high ceiling to store the digital projector. Prices for these have dropped considerably in the last two years, and at around £1,000 a set-up could cost less than a large plasma or LCD screen.



At the show was a heat-resistant, waterproof LCD for the bathroom

The speakers in the ceiling also create a sense of space.

Alternatively you could get rid of the speakers altogether and have the sound coming straight from the walls.

Back at the Smart Home Show in Birmingham's NEC, a mock up uses a series of tiny but powerful speakers which dissipate the sound across the entire wall surface which is made up of a special mesh. The result is surprisingly good.

The cost of £5,000 to wire up a small room is not cheap and you will need four hollow walls.

How about storing your plasma in your fireplace? The screen is protected from the heat so when it is down you can stay warm. Again, wires are hidden and it means the TV does not dominate the room. The fireplace does that instead.

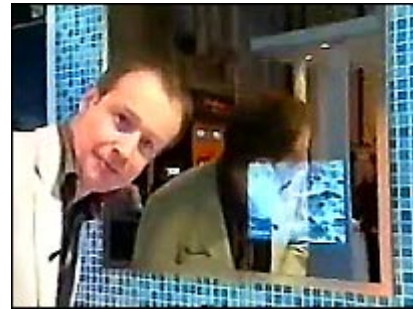
### **Wireless limitations**

In the perfect smart home anything and everything can be controlled at the touch of a button.

But the advice from many at the show was not to connect the button to a PC. Serious smart homes should not crash, catch a virus or go wandering off to the internet to get software updates.

And the fashion of wireless technologies for a whole home was thought unreliable, too; as Gary Cunningham from Sensory International explains.

"We are nearly there with wireless, but I think we are a couple of years away from wireless being the complete everything that we need for doing the entire house. I think that at this moment in time, for a single room, wireless is fine.



Yours for only £1,900 - a mirror which is also a TV

"One of the major issues for wireless is data drop-out, which is not so bad on video and audio as we can use a little bit of buffer time then.

"But if we are using a security system, the possibility of losing data could corrupt our system and make it useless."

For £1,200, you can fit your bathroom with low-voltage sealed panels and a heat-resistant, waterproof LCD.

Another addition to the bathroom suite is a £1,900 mirror which is also a TV. And there is an amazing mirror plasma for £4,000.

Or how about a TV towel rail for £2,500? And to round off the visual spectacle, simply plug in your camera's memory card to a digital picture frame, from £550.

Mr Kent does not have a mirrored plasma hanging over his bed but he does have something to keep the kids in order, he says.

"You know what it's like trying to get the kids to bed. From the bedroom, not only can I switch off whatever television they are watching, I can also switch off the lights."

However much the gadgets themselves may cost, total control over your home and kids is surely priceless.