

Am I smart enough for the 21st century?

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My kids tell me that I am “so 20th century”. This irks me. A chap likes to feel that he is “with it”, as we used to say in the 20th century. True, I spent 46 years of my life in the same century as LPs, Spam and the Light Programme. But since the Grim Reaper seems to call later and later these days, and the Grim Chancellor has made it all but impossible to retire before the age of about 103, it’s quite possible that I may live and work for even longer in the 21st century than I did in the 20th.

So I have been thinking how I might convert myself into a true 21st-century man. Clearly, in my advanced state of physical decrepitude I would be foolish to attempt some wild leap into the swirling eddies of contemporary fashion. And anyway, my distinctive “take” on *haute couture* attracts much favourable comment. Only last week a young journalist gave me an admiring glance. “Where *on earth* did you buy that green pullover?” she asked. “C&A, in 1980,” I replied. “Wow,” she said, clearly impressed. “It’s actually older than I am.”

She should see my Y-fronts. They probably qualify for a blue plaque. But if my clothing is too iconic to change, perhaps I should do something about my lifestyle. After all, a 21st-century man needs 21st-century toys. So last week I took myself to the NEC for the Smart Home Show. Which, as I’m sure you know, is “the UK’s only exhibition dedicated to all the latest trends in smart home technology”.

It was a revelation. How could I have lived for half a century without “intelligent blinds”? Or a fingerprint-operated front door? (“Never lock yourself out of your home again!”) Or vacuum cleaners that suck fluff straight into a dustbin, via a system of pipes in your house walls? (All you have to do is rebuild your entire home.) Or automatic garden sprinklers which are so smart that they switch themselves off when it starts to rain? Of course, you could just look out of the window, observe that it’s raining and switch them off yourself. But that would be so 20th century.

Besides, those were just the simpler gadgets. For the truly discerning smart-home owner, a plasma TV fireplace is a must. At first glance it’s just an electric fire with a mantelpiece. But press your remote and a giant TV screen rises from the mantelpiece. “Thieves won’t even know it’s there,” a spokesman claimed. Just as well. At £5,280, it would be a pity to have it pinched. And to go with your incredible

disappearing TV, what about invisible audio speakers, plastered inside your house walls? “The whole wall becomes a sound source,” said a spokeswoman. “It means you can hear James Blunt, but not see where he’s coming from.”

“But don’t the vibrations shake your house to bits?” I asked. The spokeswoman’s voice fell to a whisper. “This is revolutionary technology,” she said. “Developed by the military.” Only later did I wonder why the military would want to make a wall sound like James Blunt. Some horrible new form of interrogation, perhaps.

If you are wondering how to decorate your sonic walls, the Smart Home Show has the answer to that, too. It’s the Digital Picture Frame. You plug in the memory card from your camera and immediately produce an ever-changing display of your favourite images. “Two restaurants in Aberdeen have already installed them!” I was told. Exciting news indeed for northeast Scotland.

But the real revolution has happened in the bathroom. Never again need you feel cut off from world events as you go about your ablutions. Forget the mirrors that turn into TV screens. They’re old hat. The buzz in bathrooms now is all about *heated towel-racks* that turn into TVs. I eavesdropped on two punters discussing this curious device. “It’s all about total info-mersion,” one was saying. The other nodded enthusiastically. “We are looking at the end of discrete media delivery solutions,” he replied.

Enough! I was convinced. I want a smart home. I too want an end to discrete media delivery solutions. After a hard day, we Morrisons deserve to come back to a house that has configured its lighting to suit our mood, cooked dinner, run hot baths, even watered the plants. And all these things are indeed possible in the smart home of 2006. There’s only one problem. The cost. “The whole package?” asks Adam Kent of Telestial, which installs this sort of thing. “Audio, visual and computer in all rooms? Automated lighting, blinds, security and temperature, all centrally controlled? You are looking at £18,000 to £25,000 for an average home.”

Hmm. I won’t be entering the 21st century just yet, then. And perhaps it’s just as well. After all, who wants to live in a home that might be smarter than you are?