

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Monday, June 26, 2000

TECHNOLOGY

GADGET HEAVEN

Rick Newhauser's new house will do it all, at the push of a button

By JENNIFER REWICK

RICK NEWHAUSER can't keep from grinning as he walks the grounds of his seven-acre estate and points to where his new toys will go.

If you lived where Mr. Newhauser does, you would be grinning, too. The 53-year-old former medical-supply-industry executive's property commands 1,200 feet of shoreline in an exclusive neighborhood of Coral Gables, Fla. His sand volleyball court and putting green will overlook Biscayne Bay, where his 43-foot Hatteras yacht is moored. Once 80 coconut trees are planted along the property's secluded beach walkway, family and friends will feel like they're strolling across a tropical island.

But that's nothing compared with what Mr. Newhauser has planned for indoors.

Forget pool tables and big-screen TVs. Mr. Newhauser is building a custom electronic household in which most everything from the DVD player to the security system will run at the touch of a liquid-crystal-display panel. The \$300,000 project is part of a top-to-bottom remodeling of the 15,000-square-foot house, where slabs of Italian marble are lined up against an exterior wall and a commercial oven imported from France is still wrapped in plastic.

Temperate Zones

Mr. Newhauser can't wait to play out some of the scenarios his system will allow when the work is finished. Suppose a group of friends are coming for Chinese food. Press a few buttons on a small touch screen near the stove, and voila: The temperature in the kitchen is set at a cool 60 degrees, while the temperature in the dining room rests around 65 degrees.

A few more presses on the panel, and Bruce Springsteen is belting out "Born in the U.S.A." above the stove while music from the Chinese Ping Opera Company hums above the dining table.

After dinner, the guests retire to the media room. Touch the digital touch-screen panel next to the couch, and icons for the DVDs available for viewing are projected onto the 110-inch video-display space on a far wall. Point and click a "radio-frequency mouse" (read that: remote) at the icon for "2001: A Space Odyssey," and the front-projector video system plays the sci-fi flick in surround-sound stereo.



Touch another part of the panel, and the lights dim to "Movie" mode.

"There is no question that the integration of computers, TV, music and phone systems is going to happen," says Mr. Newhauser. "It's going to be sort of like 'The Jetsons.'"

Until recently, such ultra-sophisticated media rooms and electronically tricked-out homes were solely the domain of indulgent media moguls and technology executives: Microsoft Corp. Chairman Bill Gates made headlines a few years ago with his house's ability to change not only temperature and music but also artwork to suit a guest's tastes.

But custom electronic installers say such technology is becoming more accessible. As its cost continues to drop and computers increasingly take over everything from refrigerators to sprinkler systems, the wiring together of these different technologies for a homeowner's convenience is becoming more popular.

Within Reach

"It's moving to mainstream America," says Jan Vitrofsky, chief executive of Miami custom electronic-installation company HED South Inc. and the architect of Mr. Newhauser's system. "Before, it was only the upper echelon — the billionaires — who did this kind of thing."

Well, it may not be moving to the mainstream just yet, but it is within reach of mere millionaires, instead of multibillionaires. Mr. Vitrofsky, who has done work for executives and entertainers such as Madonna and Quincy Jones, says clients today are spending anywhere from \$25,000 for a high-end home-theater and music system to \$1 million for a state-of-the-art automated home.

Mr. Vitrofsky, an industry veteran, recalls that when he started offering custom electronic installations a quarter-century ago, the stereo system was the most technologically advanced feature available. By the end of the 1970s, he was hooking up stereos to TVs for \$1,000 and building multiroom stereo systems for \$3,000.

Now, though, that seems like child's play. "The digital revolution has changed everything," he says. "It's brought the cost down, made miniaturization possible, and enabled everything to talk to each other."

Mr. Vitrofsky met Mr. Newhauser at the seafood bar of the 1997 Custom Electronic Design & Installation Association trade show in Atlanta. Mr. Vitrofsky was impressed to find a potential client at the industry exhibition: "It's rare to find a customer who is so into it that they come to a trade show," he says. "Rick was doing his homework."

With his ruddy cheeks, white T-shirt and flip-flops, Mr. Newhauser looks more like an aging surfer than a retired Midwestern businessman. He has played around with technology since childhood, when he and his pals would shoot model rockets and race CO₂-charged toy cars.

But other than that, he is hardly a techie: He doesn't write his own software code or even carry a Blackberry (a popular portable e-mail device), though he and his wife do coordinate their schedules on their Palms.

In fact, Mr. Newhauser didn't have a personal computer until after he retired in 1996 and bought one to research home-theater equipment online. (He has certainly been bitten by the bug, however, deciding to come out of retirement in January to launch Asoki Inc., a start-up that will offer computer services and software upgrades over the Internet. Mr. Vitrofsky is his business partner in the company.)

For Mr. Newhauser, home-theater equipment was just the first step toward the house that is now his labor of love. Mr. Newhauser was intrigued by the idea of hooking up his computer to the projector in his living room so he could sit on the sofa and hold videoconferences with his sons in San Francisco. Before long, he was committed to wiring together as many features as possible and eliminating the need for separate switches, boxes, buttons and remotes.

That demands professional help: Even the most tech-savvy gadget collectors are hiring experts to help them wire custom homes. "They're getting help because it's just too bloody complicated," says Russ Herschelmann, a custom installer in Napa, Calif., and a director of the custom electronic design trade group. "You can do all the research and still sit there with 18 remotes."

Mr. Newhauser chose Mr. Vitrofsky; together, the two chose a touch-screen interactive control system by Crestron Electronics Inc. of Rockleigh, N.J., to link together the house's 19 temperature zones, 16 music zones, 12 security cameras, two media rooms, several thousand DVDs and CDs—and, because of the possibility of hurricanes in the area, 52 storm shutters. The system will be operated through a network of eight touch-screen panels, each about the size of a cigar box, scattered throughout the house.

"We've simplified the interface to all these different technologies," says Mr. Newhauser. "You can go around to each room and set all your thermostats — or you can activate one system. One of the concerns is making the home more livable... As you put more technology in the home, it doesn't necessarily make it easier to use. Who wants a half-dozen remotes lying around the livingroom coffee table?"

Creating Combinations

Mr. Newhauser says the resulting system is intuitive: For instance, to dim the lights, you press the light-bulb icon on a panel and choose from several settings listed on a drop-down menu. Or

press the music icon and work through options that might include "Rick's Favorites," "Classical" or "Rock." The panel also has room for preset scenarios like "Morning," "Evening," "Sleep" or "Away" that combine music, temperature and lighting — as well as an interface for creating new combinations.

"If you get a lighting sequence that you like, you set it and, bada-bing, you can press a button and go there again," Mr. Vitrofsky says.

Mr. Newhauser also will have the ability to log on to the system from a laptop so he can watch the security cameras in real time while he is on vacation. He can also call into the system from his mobile phone while he is on his way home and turn on the "Welcome" setting. That combination of music, temperature and lighting hasn't been set yet, but Mr. Newhauser muses that it may include the lilting sounds of Enya when he opens the front door.

Mr. Newhauser's wife, Susan, ranked the sound system as tops on her wish list of electronic home improvements and came up with the idea of dividing the house into a number of different music zones. But she wasn't nearly as excited about the home-theater equipment, which she wanted "hidden away," Mr. Newhauser says. While many electronics aficionados display their DVD players, subwoofers and amplifiers with a care usually reserved for fine art, the Newhausers' equipment will be built into the walls and enclosed.

The Lighting Puzzle

One friend's lighting system had a two- or three-second delay, leading to a comic mess: Guests left in the dark would conclude that they hadn't pressed the lights icon on the touch screen hard enough and press it again, unwittingly shutting off the lights again before the system even went on. (Mr. Newhauser is installing regular light switches in his guest bedrooms.)

Given the relentless pace of technology and the slower pace of home renovation, Mr. Vitrofsky says the electronic industry will

probably have gone through three generations of technology from the time the job was begun in 1997 until it is finished in the fall. Mindful of the dangers, he and Mr. Newhauser plan to wait until the last minute to choose the specific LCD displays and high-definition video equipment.

Still, even such caution won't keep the technology from quickly becoming outdated. To make upgrading as easy as possible, Mr. Vitrofsky is encasing the system's four to five miles of low-voltage cable in conduit, clearly labeling them, and creating blueprints that can be consulted in the future. The house is divided into four pods; the wires are fed into the attic and into four corresponding digital "head-end stations," which are then connected to each other by data wire.

Mr. Newhauser has heard horror stories of what can happen if such precautions aren't taken. One acquaintance's installer went out of business, leaving no records behind but sticking the client with an attic snarled with miles of unmarked wire.

Mr. Newhauser is determined that no such disaster will prevent him from keeping up with the technological Joneses. "There will always be new DVD players, better amplifiers, faster computers," he says. "We've built the house so we can pull out the component pieces and replace them as the technology gets better and less expensive."

"There is no question that the integration of computers, TV, music and phone systems is going to happen," says Mr. Newhauser. "It's going to be sort of like 'The Jetsons.'"