



# AUTOMATIC FOR THE PEOPLE

by Julie Gatehouse

If you think home automation is as far-fetched as *The Jetsons' Orbit City*, look over your fence and think again. As Sunshine Coast residents seek easier lifestyles in 2009 and beyond, George and Judy are actually living next door. Julie Gatehouse discovers that the technology is right here, right now.

“Settle down, kids, we’ll be home soon.” It’s a hot summer’s night and you’re driving home with a tired, sweaty family after a school holiday runaround. As you steer on to your property, sensors trigger the lights along the driveway and the garden path. As you walk inside, the foyer lights switch on, the air-conditioning has cooled down the house, your favourite music has started playing in the dining room and the kids’ TV has come on in their bedrooms. Everyone relaxes.

These settings were already programmed into the electronic system hidden in a downstairs cupboard. You triggered them either by a remote control or mobile phone in the car, or by pressing a touchpad in the foyer wall.

Or what about this scenario: “Oh no, I forgot to lock the garage door.” You’ve just arrived at work in Brisbane, an hour’s drive from your house at Kawana. But the panic lasts less than a few seconds.

You’ve soon logged on to your home security system via the internet on your laptop at work. You either sigh with relief that all connections are, in fact, secure, or press a button to tell the garage door to lock itself because you forgot to. You briefly check the live pictures from the security camera in your backyard, just to be sure, and see that the watering system has turned itself off. Later in the day a tradesman arrives to fix the pool pump. Again, you use your laptop to let him in an unlocked gate and lock it again when he’s finished.

“We’re not far off the stage of *The Jetsons*, though we don’t have levitation yet,” says Brian Simpson of Fi Smart Homes at Noosaville. Audiovisual specialists on the Coast for eight years, Fi now attributes more than 50 per cent of its business to home automation. The company distributes a system called Clipsal C-Bus, which integrates lighting, security, sprinklers, air-conditioning and audio.

Brian says touchpad lighting is often where people start, and media rooms are the biggest recent trend. “People might just want a large plasma screen to lift out of the cupboard or a projector screen to come down in the lounge room,” he says. “We did some mini home theatre systems in a couple of unit blocks at Maroochydore. It wasn’t a truckload of money, just dressing them up to

sell. And clever spec builders are now putting in some degree of home automation.”

He adds, “Or people might want a full cinema experience, with reclining leather seats and curtains that open. It can all be done via remote control.”

Karen Voyzey of Connect Multimedia says the technology now available is so flexible and simplified “even our five-year-old daughter uses it”. She says the Sonos audio system installed in two zones of her family’s Little Mountain home turned a recent dinner party for her father’s 60th birthday into a music marathon.

“You can create your own playlist and queue up any digital music,” Karen says. “It’s completely wireless – all you need is the internet hooked up in one room. We handed

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around the remote control like a toy that night, although there was too much Kenny Rogers for me.”

Her husband Glenn, a sound engineer who has flown around the world to install studios for commercial projects such as the Athens Olympics and the soccer World Cup in Portugal, says quality systems are now affordable to average home owners on the Coast.

“Technology in the domestic market now is what we’ve been using for 10 years,” he says. “People think it will be difficult to use because they relate frustration to computers, but companies know their product design must be simple or people won’t buy it.”

Steve Robinson is regional manager of the Master Builders, an association with 1100 local members. He says the Coast’s building industry is advancing to cater for this technology trend. “The past two years, it’s really started to grab people’s imagination,” he says. “Previously home

automation was just in high-end homes, if at all. People were fearful of the unknown, and of the price. Now they’re much more open to the benefits, how it can improve day-to-day liveability and environmental sustainability, without a high cost.”

For example, mum can use a touchpad in the kitchen to measure the level of energy consumption in the house at any moment. That will tell her if the kids have left on their TVs, computers and lights while they’re downstairs having dinner.

So what money are we talking to have this stuff in your home? To put smart wiring in an average-sized home at the construction stage, which is recommended by the experts because it offers flexibility for add-ons, the cost is estimated at \$3000 to \$5000. A fairly comprehensive automation system could cost \$20,000. Retro-fitting depends entirely on the individual house. Of course, if you’re building a multimillion-dollar home, the sky is the limit.

Steve cites the capabilities of a Buderim home that won Queensland’s house of the year in the \$3 to \$5 million category of this year’s Master Builders awards. “A hinged wall is lowered and raised horizontally by the flick of a touchpad to access the lap pool. A table lifts and lowers out of the floor for Japanese-style dining, with an automatic cutout if your knees don’t fit. Massive steel louvres automatically open and close according to the weather.”

Real estate agents are noticing that home automation is of increasing interest to buyers and benefit to sellers.

Anthony Gorman of Ken Guy Maroochydore says an Alexandra Headland empty-nest couple had the foresight to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on a whiz-bang integrated system when they built their three-level home four years ago.

“Touch screens in the home control just about everything electrical, from appliances like the oven to a water feature to the temperature and window blinds,” Anthony says. “The controls aren’t hard to use once they’re set up by a professional.”

The property, which boasts an elevator and huge pool, is now for sale at more than \$4 million.

The way of the future is already here. ■

## RIGHT HERE, RIGHT WOW

Paul Bellerio didn’t know a lot about home automation when he started building his family home on the canal front at Parrearra. But he knew he wanted it. “I wanted to do something special because it’s quite a nice house,” he says of the five-bedroom, multi-level home with media room and bar, pool and pontoon.

Paul, who is a building manager with VDM Constructions Bellerio and has decades of experience in the industry, decided now was the time to make provision for this rapidly evolving technology.

“It’s very new to me but it’s becoming so popular,” he says. “We built three penthouse units at Caloundra a few years ago and the electrician organised a simple system. I was very impressed with how it controlled the lighting.”

With the help of his electrician, Paul got quotes, visited the showroom of Haymans

Electrical at Maroochydore and chose the Clipsal C-Bus integrated system.

“We’ve got three kids under nine years old who like to have lighting on to go to sleep,” Paul explains. “It’s all sensed. And when they wake up and walk a certain path the lights come on as they pass.”

The system also controls blinds, security, intercom, pay TV and DVD, the sound system, internet and more. “We just use the two touchpads or a portable touch screen that’s about the size of the DVD player in your car,” he says.

For Paul, an outlay of \$220,000 to install the system, including full cabling to allow for future technological advances, was worth it – for lifestyle, for security and for controlling power consumption.

He considered it a fair proportion of the cost, considering his house and land package is worth almost \$2 million, and “it’s a bit of a wow factor”.

## TWO TIPS FROM THE MASTER BUILDERS

- #1 If you’re building or renovating, talk to a licensed home automation expert as well as your builder about what options might suit your wants and needs. This is a specialist field.
- #2 Get in early to include home automation in your design principles and think of the future. Technology advances quickly and an extra grand for something special might be worth it, for lifestyle and resale value.