

Home remedies

The director of MIT's House_n housing research consortium says tomorrow's homes will be designed by consumers and will actively help people stay healthy.

What does the “underscore n” signify in House_n? It's a symbol that is used to mean the nth degree or the nth power. It represents an infinite variable that is open to experimentation, investigation, and exploration. It indicates that we're not going to be limited by preconceived notions of what a house should be.

What's your view of home automation? We don't see home automation systems as very useful or promising until they begin to respond to the activities of people. An automated lighting system, for example, should be able to determine whether someone who hasn't moved in a while is taking a nap, reading a book, or watching television and “decide” how to adjust the lights.

What do you mean when you say you want to let individuals become house designers? We've been studying the use of “mass customization” in home building. This approach enables home buyers to use design engines created by architects to fashion unique, sophisticated solutions that reflect their needs and values. Customized integrated building components then are produced that can be quickly installed, replaced, and upgraded. In the controlled environment of a factory, components can be embedded with technologies, such as sensors and lighting, and connected to a building “chassis.”

Why have health care technologies been one of the most active areas of your center's research? Many of the health problems we face—obesity, diabetes, congestive heart failure—are about behavior. A big part of our research focuses on developing home-based technologies that can help people live better, healthier lives. A recent master's thesis project used sensor data and algorithms to pick the right time and place to give people reminders to take their medications. Another project, developed primarily for children, used movement and television-use sensors to create a persuasive remote control—complete with games that encouraged people to be less sedentary.

What part of the U.S. housing market will see these changes first? Keep an eye on new condominiums in city centers. AARP-sponsored research shows there's been a strong and continuing increase in the percentage of baby boomers who want to move back to city living. The result is that newer condos in downtown Boston, for example, are going for about \$1,000 per square foot. This places a premium on customized, adaptable, technology-enabled housing.

What impact will these trends have on real estate marketing? There'll be much more emphasis on selling the lifestyle and the experience rather than selling the house. Look for branded housing to emerge. Part of the reason it hasn't appeared yet is that housing has been local, and there are no nationally recognized brands as there are with almost every other kind of product. You're beginning to see branding in Scandinavia, where Ikea is branding a line of houses. I expect that you'll see branded housing here soon. In the future, a local developer could partner with a branded entity. Developers would be able to focus on what they're especially good at—acquisitions, permits, and land speculation—and let the branded lifestyle company handle the design and marketing. —B.G. Yovovich

For more on Larson and his work, visit www.kentlarsen.com.