

Dallas woman's computer dream

'Smart house' makes the livin' easy

Associated Press

DALLAS — When Portia Isaacson wants a glass of water in the middle of the night, instead of groping for a light switch, the lights look for her.

If the temperature control system for her swimming pool is out of whack, her pool calls for its own servicing. A computer tells her videotape recorder to tape her favorite television programs.

Isaacson's white stucco home is a \$2 million "smart house" that sees, talks, feels and listens via a computer software brain that she and co-workers designed.

The house, she says, is an ambitious experiment in technology that goes beyond the standard household appliances and conveniences now available for most homes.

"I became impatient for this type of home, so when I came into a bit of money, I just built it," said Isaacson, 43, a computer scientist and co-founder of Future Computing Inc.

"What we've really built here is a kind of laboratory to experiment with what is the best way to do certain things," she said.

Through the sale of her personal computer marketing research firm, Future Computing, to McGraw-Hill publishing company, Isaacson was able to assemble her super high-tech home.

Inside are at least 11 computers, 22 television screens and eight miles of snaking hidden wire that links them all together.

The lighting system automatically senses a person's movements throughout the home and illuminates his or her path. The lights also are a security system, surprising intruders with their automatic brightening, she said.

If the computer can't correct a failed automatic temperature control system for the pool, it calls a swimming pool firm and uses its synthesized voice to ask for servicing, said Don Bynum, president of Isaacson's new firm, Intellysis Corp.

Eventually the computer also will be able to issue a security code for the serviceman that will be working on the system, eliminating the need for someone to be at the home to receive him, Bynum said.

"I thought by now you could go out and buy what I have built here. But you can't," Isaacson said. The individual components all exist, she said, but there's nothing to make them work together.

At least until now.

Isaacson has launched her privately held company to market the software and interfacing — hardware that connects computer components — she designed.

The company will sell its products to home builders and other businesses already putting intelligent systems in the home, instead of selling directly to the consumer, she said.

Currently, the firm is participating in a project sponsored by the National Association of Home Builders to streamline the technology of the "smart house" system.

In the meantime, Isaacson is living in what one electronics magazine calls an electronic engineer's dream house.

The phones are custom-built with six lines — three normal phone lines and two that literally put at her fin-

gertips a variety of functions, including opening doors, changing television channels or switching on one of a multitude of entertainment components in the house. The sixth line currently is not in use.

An entry way wall that had been earmarked for a large painting now is filled with enough high-tech equipment to stock a few houses — 19 electronic components, including four speakers, three televisions, a compact disk player, stereo equipment and other components.

The equipment is set in a custom-designed frame of anodized metal ringed by recessed lights, blending with the home's decor of granite countertops and sleek furniture.

"I've been real irritated at the way technology looks in the home," Isaacson said. "The state of the art normally is to have a TV and a VCR and wires hanging out."

"You can have lots of technology and have it look like approaching art or sculpture in the home," she said. "Not only is it not offensive, it's a design centerpiece."

Fire didn't finish rare book dealer's business

Associated Press

AUSTIN — John Jenkins' hands trembled as he looked at the contents of an envelope handed to him as he stood among hundreds of thousands of blackened books at his rare book and publishing business.

A moment later his wife, Maureen, wearing a face mask for protection against smoke, walked into a charred storage area and Jenkins asked, "Did you see this?"

"What is this?" she asked.

"It's a sales commission," he said.

In the envelope was a check to Jenkins for \$100,000.

"Are you serious?" Mrs. Jenkins asked.

"That's going to clean our books," Jenkins said.

"God, I can't believe it," his wife said.

"Is there someone up there looking over us?" Jenkins asked.

"I don't know," Mrs. Jenkins answered, "but let me go see if I can put it in the bank."

Jenkins and his wife were "walking out the door" to eat Christmas Eve dinner with some friends when he got a call that fire was shooting out of his Quonset hut-type building off Interstate 35 South.

"Six o'clock is when all the clocks went out. The fire department was here before 6:15, and I was here about 6:30," Jenkins said in an interview in his smoke-damaged office.

According to fire officials, the blaze started when an extension cord to a space heater overheated.

"The fire department, to whom I owe an undying debt of gratitude,

"No matter how much money I am willing to spend, I'd never be able to get more than 3,000 or 4,000 of them (the books) back...."

— John Jenkins, book dealer.

"The smoke permeated everything," he said. "It got inside the drawers in our filing cabinets, in between the sheets of paper in the manila folders in the filing cabinets."

Smoke even seeped into two walk-in vaults through electrical ducts.

Jenkins estimates he had 1.5 million items — volumes, manuscripts, pamphlets — and that 500,000 were destroyed. Another 500,000 were ruined "beyond the feasibility of restoration" and about 500,000 were salvageable, he said.

The building and about 20 percent of the book loss were covered by insurance, and the damage was in "the millions of dollars," he said.

What he had, Jenkins claims, was a book stock on every state and "maybe 500 other fields" that were

"I'm going to go from being a big shot to a little shot."

— John Jenkins.

all 1.5 million of these items, eventually would have wound up in a research library somewhere, where they would be available for use for the next 2,000 years.

Jenkins' 15,000-volume Texana collection "is gone in terms of the general stock."

"No matter how much money I am willing to spend, I'd never be able to get more than 3,000 or 4,000 of them back, because they will never be on the market again," he said.

But all the rare Texana was either in the vault or at Jenkins' home, where he is working on a special Texas Sesquicentennial catalog. Items worth \$200 were placed in the vaults, he said.

"I'm going to go from being a big shot to a little shot," Jenkins said. "But I don't want to poor-mouth myself completely, because all of the unique and extremely rare things were saved, so I still have the largest stock of rare Texana (in the vaults)."

Jenkins plans to move 200 tons of books to a rented warehouse, and estimated that he will spend "in excess of \$1 million" over perhaps 20 years cleaning soot-covered books.

"There's still several millions of dollars worth of books in the vault," he said. "It's the cream from everything else. It's the part that I would have wanted to save, so I was very lucky."

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