



## Home is where the robots are



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**More and more new homes are being fitted out with smart technology that can make life easier, safer and sometimes simply a whole lot more fun. Here's how you can get in on the action.**

The most pressing considerations when your parents were buying their first home are somewhat different to those of young homeowners today. While proximity to local schools and size of garden will never fall off the agenda, the modern buyer is probably more likely to be asking an estate agent about internet speeds and USB plug sockets than cavity walls and carpeting.

Newly built homes are increasingly being created with today's way of high-tech living factored into their very walls, and Will Hopkins, managing director of smart home installation specialist Your Smart Home, says that if you really want to ensure your new property is braced for the smart tech revolution, you should be asking your builder about cabling infrastructure. The buzzword, he says, is "future-ready".

As we're still in the early stages of this new era, you can't expect every constructor to bend over backwards. But, luckily, most houses can be retrofitted to make use of the latest tech.

### Joining the revolution

By far the most popular and easiest way to join in is to assemble a simple system that can be controlled by Amazon's Alexa, Google's Assistant or Apple's Siri. These platforms are mostly centred around wifi-connected speakers that let you ask questions and issue commands.

Some of the devices that use this technology start from around £50, and they really come into their own when you have other connected devices, such as smart lightbulbs (from about £15) or smart thermostats, which start at around £70, and allow you to use your voice to adjust the heating.

Additionally, you can set up routines – chains of events that follow a single spoken command. With the right gadgets and the right set-up, a command such as "I am going upstairs to watch a movie" could result in a sequence like this:

1. Lights dim downstairs
2. Music switches off downstairs
3. Lights come on upstairs
4. TV switches on
5. Portable electric popcorn maker starts heating up

Alongside these are smart locks that know when you're approaching your home because of the smartphone in your pocket; smart video surveillance, which sends images to your phone; and connected kitchen appliances, such as fridges that let you order food supplies.

Philips Hue, meanwhile, offers a range of smart lighting products. "You're able to connect the lighting and drive it all off your phone," says Hopkins, and you can also integrate it into a wider ecosystem and control it with Siri, Alexa or Google Assistant.

### **The next step: artificial intelligence**

If all of the above is phase one – and around five million UK households are already thought to be onside – then phase two is the dawn of artificial intelligence (AI). Tech will allow homes to become more 'aware' of who is in the house and what their needs are.

During a Google talk on connected homes in 2018, one of the company's leading authorities on smart homes pondered just how much AI might one day rely on predictive analysis to be at its most effective. To be truly effective, say the experts, an AI system needs to 'know' you and second-guess what you want. It might understand, for example, that 10-year-old Molly is about to leave for school without a coat – and, knowing that it is going to rain today, audibly suggests taking a coat as she approaches the front door. The ultimate tech dream for many, of course, is to have a robot take care of this and physically hand Molly her coat.

### **Where are we now?**

For several years, start-ups have been promising game-changing robots that would become personal friends/assistants around the home. None have really delivered on this – meaning the race to put robots in the home is definitely still on. Recently announced was a device named temi, which looks a little like an iPad on wheels, and can plot its own route around the house, track faces, function as your smart home hub and more. It's currently available to pre-order for \$1,499 (currently around £1,140) and the makers say that it ticks all the AI boxes as it can "recognise you, know your preferences and is constantly learning to optimise itself to your liking".

**“Until you actually live with it, you don't realise how much it helps you, and you'll really notice it's not there when you stay in someone else's house”**

Will Hopkins, managing director, Your Smart Home

Interestingly, the company's founder says he created temi after seeing his grandmother struggle with a smartphone; he's certainly not the first to recognise how smart homes and devices can help provide care for the elderly. Even a basic Amazon Echo can be programmed to text a relative if the owner needs urgent help, while Amazon's Echo Show allows users to check in on loved ones via video – great if you're concerned about elderly relatives, for example.

And more robots designed for the elderly are coming – ElliQ (on sale from summer at \$1,499) has been imbued with a cheerful personality and is designed to provide companionship; Samsung, meanwhile, is working on something it calls its Bot Care programme, which is based around a robot that can measure people's blood pressure, remind them when to take their medication and alert carers when there's an emergency.

### **Companionship for children, too**

Developed in China, the iPal is a friendly-looking robot with a screen in its chest that has been designed to both educate and serve as a pal for children. It's not yet available in the UK, but is set to cost \$2,499 when it goes on sale in the US. Childcare robots of the future could also spot health issues and injuries, as well as potential dangers.

Until that day arrives, if you just want to keep an eye on the little ones, there are numerous devices on the market that let you see – and communicate with – people in another room. Hive View, for example, costs around £179 and is smart-home compatible.

As homes get ever more intelligent, AI will increasingly play a part – and it won't just be indoors. Already Bosch has a robot lawn mower that uses artificial intelligence to better understand the area it is cutting. The German company recently said that all of its products would utilise some form of artificial intelligence by the middle of the next decade, and if not then they would have been developed with AI assistance.

Of course, the big question before you start spending large amounts of money on the latest smart home gadgets is: "Will I really use them, or is it all just a flash in the pan?"

Hopkins, whose company fits out homes with smart tech for people with budgets of at least £5,000 (though £20,000 plus is more common), says that the proof is in the testing. "Try it," he says. "Until you actually live with it, you don't realise how much it helps you, and you'll really notice it's not there when you stay in someone else's house or at a hotel."

**By Mike Peake**

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