

Building Scene

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Marilyn Fitchett editor/953-2102

Thursday, April 16, 1992 \$4.25

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Smart homes

New concepts make houses safer, more energy efficient

By Allison Ashlon
special writer

HOMES ARE more than an attractive way to shelter us from the outside world. Smart homes are safe, toxin-free and energy efficient. Small improvements around the house can make your home all three.

A Smart House is featured at this spring's Homesrama Spring 1992 at the Meadows at Oakland Farms Subdivision, Gunn Road west of Rochester Road in Oakland Township, May 7-25. The house was built by Wake-Pratt Construction Co.

Many safety projects are easy for the do-it-yourselfer, contractors can help with bigger projects.

Fire safety should top every homeowner's checklist. Install smoke detectors and fire extinguishers (especially in the kitchen), and inspect them regularly.

According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, there should be at least one smoke detector on every floor. Detectors should not be installed within six inches of where walls and ceilings meet or near heating and cooling ducts.

Electrical currents also pose a hazard, particularly in the kitchen and bathroom, where appliances can get wet. Ground fault interrupters installed in plugs will cut off the electricity if the appliance gets wet.

Avoid potential accidents by removing throw rugs and small pieces of furniture that are easy to trip over. Stairways should be well-lit; put anti-slip strips in bathtubs and showers.

ENVIRONMENTAL TOXINS are an invisible but very real hazard to your home. Dizziness, as well as persistent sinus and respiratory ailments, are a clue that your home may be emitting a toxic element.

Causes include poor ventilation, excess moisture, poor water, formaldehyde, lead paint, asbestos, pesticides, radon and toxic waste. Newly discovered threats include electromagnetic fields emitted from household appliances.

Most environmental threats can be dealt with, however, especially if you contact someone qualified to treat environmental hazards.

Asbestos, for instance, is not harmful if it's undamaged. If, however, you think there's a problem, don't try to remove it by vacuuming, breaking, sawing or drilling materials containing asbestos.

Adequate ventilation is important for keeping the air fresh in the house and dissipating excess moisture, which can damage the house itself, as well as your family's health. An exhaust-fan system and a humidistat usually solve the problem.

Formaldehyde is a problem that usually affects houses built since the '60s. It's usually found in particle board subflooring and insulation. There are sealants available to reduce formaldehyde emissions.

LEAD PAINT is usually found in houses built before the '40s. Cracked or peeling paint should be covered by wallpaper or drywall or completely stripped by a professional. Cancer-causing radon is enough of a problem, says Money magazine, to

warrant testing any house you are considering buying. Treating a radon problem can be as simple as caulking cracks in the basement or as complex as installing a subslab ventilation system.

Money recommends having any house fully inspected by a qualified appraiser for toxic threats before purchasing.

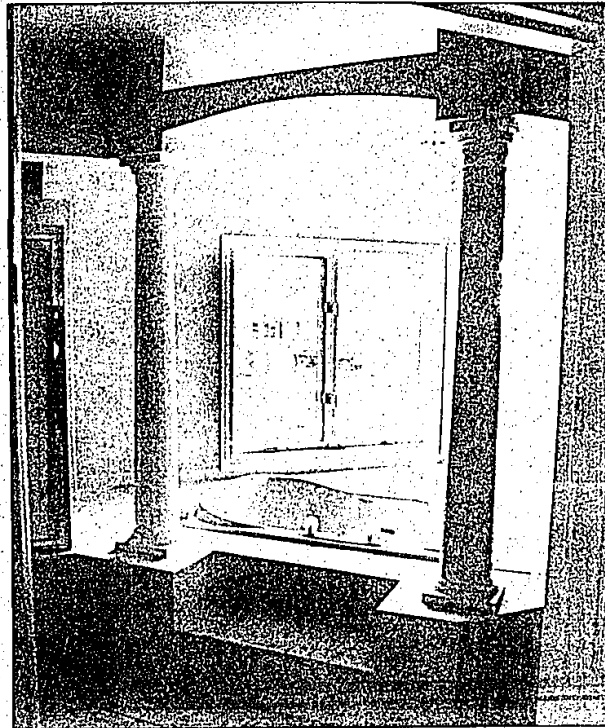
Does your utility bill make you scream each month? It could be time to give the house a tune-up. Not only does an energy-efficient house save money for its owner, but it's also in tune with environment.

Start by conserving water. Install low-flow shower heads and low-flush toilets (an investment of less than \$200 that can save as much as \$75 a year on water and sewer bills, according to Consumer Reports). Repair any leaking faucets.

A blanket around your hot-water heater conserves energy. Also experiment with lowering the water heater setting; a drop of 20 degrees means an 18 percent saving of energy.

Bolster insufficient insulation. Examine windows, a major source of heat loss. Double-glazed windows are particularly effective. Adding storm windows offers further protection; shutters also help retain heat.

THE WINDOW treatments that enhance your decor also are energy efficient. Shades and drapes should be fitted to reduce air flow.



This is the master bath in the Smart House at Homesrama 1992. Wake-Pratt Construction Co. built the energy efficient home.

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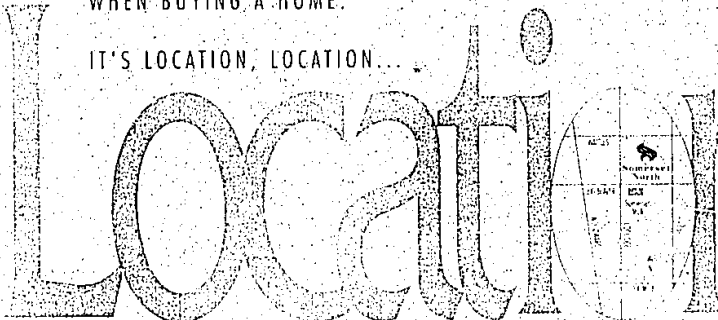
photo by BETH BINGER

Industry tours

Architects Sunday on April 26 will feature tours of Industry nightclub, 13 S. Saginaw, Pontiac, designed by the architectural firm Victor Siroki & Associates of Birmingham and built by contractor Gates Construction. The nightclub is a former 1920s' movie house. Tours led by members of the architecture and contracting team will be offered 1-4 p.m. The event is sponsored by the Detroit chapter of the American Institute of Architects and the architecture and contracting firms.

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