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Smart & Stylish

The Mount Kisco residence of a home-integration extraordinaire showcases how fabulous a home truly can be when you use a little intelligence.

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Photography by Alec
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The house's traditional facade belies its high-tech interior.

Sitting on the deck of Robert and Kimberly Ainley's fully remodeled 6,000-square-foot, 1930 farmhouse in Mount Kisco, you take in the peaceful landscape—three spring-fed ponds, two waterfalls, 13 acres of hills and terraced gardens. The songs of birds and the fluttering trees that surround the sprawling lawn mingle with the sounds of soothing jazz. You can't believe how lovely it is—and you can't, for the life of you, find the source of the music.

That's because the two flower-filled planters that grace the corners of the deck clandestinely hide the speakers. Clever, yes. And that's just one of many cutting-edge high-tech elements in this full-fledged smart house, created to showcase the capabilities of Robert Ainley's Bedford Hills-based business, Robert Allen Multimedia.

The four-bedroom home is aptly named Meeting House, not only because it's located on Meeting House Road, next to the turn-of-the-20th-century Croton Valley Friends Meeting

House. The renovation of Meeting House was truly a meeting of minds: the blending of an old property with the latest in home automation, a seamless mesh of serenity and connectivity, and a collaboration between Robert, who has been integrating smart technology and customized entertainment systems into clients' homes since 1990, and Kimberly, his wife of one year, whose passion is design and decoration.

When we found this property, we wanted it to be a place where you could wake up, look out, and say, 'Ahhhh...,'" Kimberly says. "We didn't want the technology to be too in-your-face."

Which it isn't—but it's there. Rather than being overloaded with gadgets and buttons that only the most serious technophile could decode, Meeting House instead is an elegant, tasteful, and comfortable home, wired to make life easier and more efficient for its occupants and full of opportunities for them to sit back and enjoy its offerings.

The house's automated climate control features a built-in astronomical clock so it can be set to adjust to the sunrise and sunset or the time of year. Its lighting and security systems can be accessed by computer on or off the premises. "You can activate the camera from, say, the master bath to see who's at the front gate, and then you can talk to them on the intercom," Robert explains. "And you can turn up the heat, turn on the lights, and check the grounds from any computer wherever you are." And if you happen to be in Taipei, then so be it.



Kimberly and Robert Ainley relax in rocking chairs on their front porch.

As for entertainment, the family room on the first floor is equipped with digital surround sound; a 50-inch, high-definition plasma television monitor; and a high-end movie server that enables the creation of a personalized digital library of films. "You can also load your photos and look at them on your TV," Robert says. Similarly, a music server stores selections from CDs, iPods, and other sources, allowing different music to be played in different rooms. The second floor bonus room, which the couple added, also is wired for surround sound.

Along with the planter speakers (another pair of which can be found up the hill by the swimming pool), there are other surprises. The speakers in the master bedroom suite are nowhere to be seen; they are, in fact, 12-by-16-inch panels designed to look like drywall and mounted invisibly in the ceiling. And in another bedroom, a high-definition television masquerades as a decorative mirror until it's switched on.

"In a showcase like this, you have a real-use environment," Kimberly says. "You can bring people in and let them see how things work." To demonstrate options, Robert installed various types of access panels in different rooms. In the kitchen is a 5-by-7-inch touch-screen wall panel on which, with the tap of a finger, you can set any of three thermostats, control the floodlights at the front and back of the house and up the path to the pool, and turn music on

and off in chosen locations. “We designed the graphic user interface, but that can be customized,” says Robert, whose clients have included celebrities he declines to name.

In the upstairs playroom, there’s a more basic 10-button keypad. “You probably don’t need to pay a few thousand dollars for a touch panel in a playroom when a \$500 keypad will do,” Robert says. “Budget is a critical issue. You could spend \$10,000 for a 15-inch touch pad that doubles as a television and gives you Internet access. You could call up a recipe on it instead of grabbing a cookbook. But the smaller touch pads give you 95 percent of the functionality of the larger ones at a fraction of the price.”

And the costs can add up. “For a few thousand dollars,” he explains, “we can install a basic audio system. But then you have jobs like this—a full smart house with all the latest technology—that press the six-figure mark.”

In addition to providing a business showroom, the Ainleys, who live in Bedford Hills, designed Meeting House with the intention of selling it, and thus have left some decisions to whoever will be living there. “It was an ongoing discussion: how much do we do now and how much do we leave for the new owners to decide,” Kimberly says. For instance, the indoor lighting could be added to the automated system, and the switches retrofitted for wireless capability. “Then you could create any logic you wanted,” Robert says. “You could set up lighting scenarios in different rooms, dim the lights 30 percent after midnight, and change the look of the place on the fly.”



A 5-by-7-inch touch-screen wall panel in the kitchen allows for climate, lighting, and sound-system control throughout the property—without intruding on the designer feel of the room.

This house is not entirely tricked out, but it has the potential to be.

“We debated how far to go. But let’s be honest,” Kimberly says of the striking property, “what’s impressive here is God’s work, not ours.”

It’s true that Meeting House is a natural treasure, where it’s not hard to imagine lazing on one of the rocking chairs that line the mahogany front porch, climbing the stone pathway to the pool and taking a dip, or gazing out the master-bedroom window to the pond and waterfall below. “That’s one of my favorite views at night,” said Robert. “The beech trees are lit up and their limbs curve into the darkness.”

But it’s also true that the house offers some of the newest advances in home technology, installed by a professional whose priorities include ease of use. “The idea is that these systems are so simple that anyone

could run them,” Robert says. “When a project is done well, there should be only a small learning curve. It should be intuitive.”

Another of Robert’s concerns is that the equipment functions properly and reliably. “You have to select components that work well in the automated world,” he expounds. “Otherwise,

instead of being easy, it's frustrating." Before purchasing the hidden speakers in the master bedroom ceiling, he waited three years until the kinks were ironed out of the technology. He also takes all available precautions, including power conditioning and surge protection. "Battery backup is important if you don't have a generator," he says, "especially because there are so many power outages around here. It ensures that systems are shut down in the correct order, and turned back on when the power comes up."

Looking ahead, Robert anticipates using more wireless systems, such as speakers that can be moved anywhere. "Wireless for the Internet is one thing," he says. "But wireless speakers are not quite there. You can still get interference. Give it a few more years."

Yet, in his industry, this pro is a firsthand witness to the rapid advancements technology offers homeowners. "The field is moving quickly," he says, looking around his house. "If you embrace it and if you learn to use it, it creates a lifestyle." And a smart one at that.

a smart start

Robert Ainley's Top Three Tips

While we haven't yet learned how to make our kitchens prepare dinner and take out the trash, smart technologies—smartly deployed—are delivering real value. Here, Robert Ainley offers his top three considerations when designing a very intelligent home.

1. Tailor technology to the specific needs of the house and its occupants. For a weekend home, for instance, having remote access can prepare for the owner's arrival. For people who work at home, ubiquitous connection to their world through both wireless and wired networks throughout the home is a top priority. Those whose schedules are always changing might want the ability to program the house to respond to "non-clock" triggers such as movement, light, or temperature.
2. Integrate appropriately, not just because it's possible. Some people get carried away with setting all sorts of lighting, window shade, and music scenarios when a few simple choices are all that's needed.
3. Think beyond entertainment. Smart technology isn't all about music and movies. Just as important as having music libraries synchronized across platforms and watching your favorite films on a giant screen are smart technologies that deliver greater security and comfort (think nanny-cams or video surveillance), help lower energy costs, save time, and, when done right, make life just a little bit easier.

Susan Hodara is a freelance journalist who lives in Mount Kisco. The house she loves is not particularly smart but swept her off her feet nonetheless.