

How smart does your bed have to be, before you are afraid to go to sleep at night?

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In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all life presents itself as an immense accumulation of "spectacles". Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation.

Guy Debord, "The Society of the Spectacle" © 1967

Back in the kitchen he fished in his various pockets for a dime, and, with it, started up the coffeepot. Sniffing the — to him — very unusual smell, he again consulted his watch, saw that fifteen minutes had passed; he therefore vigorously strode to the apt door, turned the knob and pulled on the release bolt.

The door refused to open. It said, "Five cents, please."

He searched his pockets. No more coins; nothing. "I'll pay you tomorrow," he told the door. Again he tried the knob. Again it remained locked tight. "What I pay you," he informed it, "is in the nature of a gratuity; I don't have to pay you."

"I think otherwise," the door said, "Look in the purchase contract you signed when you bought this conapt."

In his desk drawer he found the contract, since signing it he had found it necessary to refer to the document many times. Sure enough; payment to this door for opening and shutting constituted a mandatory fee - not a tip.

"You discover I'm right," the door said. It sounded smug.

From the drawer beside the sink Joe Chip got a stainless steel knife; with it he began systematically to unscrew the bolt assembly of his apt's money-gulping door.

"I'll sue you," the door said as the first screw fell out.

Joe Chip said, "I've never been sued by a door. But I guess I can live through it."

Philip K. Dick, "Ubik" © 1969

Why would anyone want to live in an intelligent house? What would be the forces that would compel a designer or an architect to create such a thing? How would it be marketed? What sorts of problems does such a house solve? What sorts of problems does it create? Could you describe such a house? Do you believe that such a house is possible now or in the near future? Is it likely that such a house, once built, purchased, and moved into, would perform as advertised? What sorts of unforeseen problems are likely to emerge? What kinds of alterations to the house will designers be able to make to correct these emergent problems? Who will pay for these alterations? If you are a designer, isn't a world full of problems more lucrative than a world without problems?

How is an intelligent house different from an intelligently designed house? Given a choice, which would you rather live in? How about a basically stupid house, but one that is quite pleasant if you live in it intelligently? Do smart houses prevent you from watching dumb TV? Do smart houses take part in the action of TV shows, by say, adding lighting and special

effects? If you don't have children but would like some, do smart houses add the patter of little feet to the background? Does the patter get louder as the children grow up?

How smart does the bed in your house have to be before you are afraid to go to sleep at night? Which is smarter: awnings over the windows to keep out the sun or a massive interactive, cybernetic cooling system that attempts to keep the temperature of the house within one degree of optimal? If you were an engineer fresh out of college with a major in electrical engineering, which would you, prefer to design? Would you put warning labels on the windows telling the occupants not to open them because it would mess up the temperature feedback loop? Do you consider the dam on the river that generates the electricity for the computer, which runs the cooling system as part of the house? Is the family dog considered an occupant of the house?

When you return to the house in which you grew up, do you want it to look the same or different? Are you willing to make allowances for your parent's changing tastes? Would a smart house alter its looks when you arrive and then change back again when you left? Would you believe somebody who told you that on a linear scale, with a toaster at one end and a two year-old baby at the other, that Artificial Intelligence is about one breadcrumb away from the toaster?

Do you believe that with enough speed and enough memory and enough 20 year-old programmers that computers can have emotions? Do you believe that when water is heating on the stove the water is running a program calculating an equation that tells it when to start boiling? In a smart, ever watchful house, does the water ever boil?

Do houses evolve? Do smart houses evolve? In the house in which you currently live, is there a membrane (a wall) between the kitchen and the dining room? Was there one in your parent's house? In your grandparents house? In your artist's girl or boyfriend's house (loft)? Which design is smarter? Does your cappuccino-maker always make perfect cappuccinos? How much time does it take? Does your neighborhood cafe make perfect cappuccinos? If you had the time where would you prefer to have your cappuccino? Is your neighborhood cafe run by a computer? Would it be better if it was? Where did you meet your wife (husband, lover)?

How do burglar alarms work? Can they distinguish between a burglar and say a squirrel that got lost and found its way into the kitchen? Can you tell who is a burglar when you walk down the street? What if you were given a burglar profile by the police (or by your mother), could you then tell who is a burglar? If you could program your burglar alarm to recognize the burglar profile, would you need to lock your door? Does an intelligent house need a door at all? Would it make sense to ask if an intelligent house would rather have a mouth than a door?

Can an intelligent house fall in love with the house next door? Can they have baby houses? Is an architect a trained "womb" for houses, or more crudely, is an architect how a house makes another house? Does an architect feel like she/he is violating fundamental forces of evolution if she/he does not include the latest new technology in the house she/he next gives birth to? Do you believe in progress? Is a suburban house of today better than a terrace house in London in 1850 which was better than a thatched country cottage in 1700 which was better than the tepees and mud huts that Columbus found in the New World? Is the house that Donald Trump lives in better than the house you live in? If you were an architect and you designed an intelligent house, would the house's own happiness matter to you? If the couple that bought the house you designed got a divorce, do you think you should be libel for damages?

Do you believe that making pancakes for you and your lover in the morning is in itself a wonderful thing? If your company asked you to design a product called "Lover's Instant Pancakes" would you? Would you do it because that's your job or because, perhaps, you think it would give you more time for lovemaking? What if they're not quite as good as made from scratch pancakes in taste? What if they don't quite fill the kitchen with the same smell? What if they contain a small, though probably not harmful, amount of preservative? If you are an architect and "Lover's Instant Pancakes" was a major success, would you build a special chute from the kitchen to the bedroom so that nobody has to leave bed to get the pancakes? Is there something special about the cold feet of a lover returning to bed? How do you know your lover loves you? What do you and your lover talk about?

How many extra hours a day are you willing to work so that you can program your entertainment center from your chair? If your house were intelligent enough to baby-sit your children would you rather go out to a concert than listen to your auto-programmed entertainment center? Are you afraid to go out of your home at night? Do you know most of your friends from work or from your other activities? Do you have other activities besides your house's entertainment center? If you had the chance of working one day less but not having an entertainment center in your house, would you take it?

Is time the only real commodity left? Why is Virtual Reality always posited in terms of space, when time is the only real commodity left?

Are you confused by the telephone? Do you believe a Virtual Mom is in your living room when you speak to your mother on the phone? Do you believe The Rolling Stones are in your bedroom when you put a CD of them on the stereo? Why are you confused about Virtual Reality? Do you believe that a mediated experience is the same or almost as good as a non-mediated experience? Do you keep track of who makes money in each and every mediated experience? Do you believe you used to be able to "Reach Out and Touch Someone (tm)" for free? Is the telephone now the best way to reach out and touch someone?

Who will program the user preferences for the intelligent house? Mom? Dad? The kids? Will the intelligent house be able to meaningfully average these preferences? Does control of the intelligent house's preferences alter the balance of power within the family? Will this make the family more or less stable? Should local, state or federal laws be able to be passed which regulate some of these preferences? What if some settings could endanger children? What if some settings are only used by criminals? What if some settings are good, but not perfect, indicators that child molesters live in the house?

If you or one of your family members was often constipated would you want your smart house to automatically blast low frequency waves out over the PA system if such waves helped? What if they were activated by a button which had to be pressed? What if you frequently forgot to press the button would you then want the waves to be automatically activated? Would you want your house to monitor your stool to determine if it should blast out low frequency waves? What if by monitoring your stool it could determine, very early, if you had cancer? Should it send that information directly to your doctor? What if your insurance rates were cheaper if it did?

What if your smart house remembered important dates like birthdays and sent cards and balloons, baked special cakes and chilled the champagne on the right days? Would you feel good if you received a card generated by your lover's house? If your otherwise always forgetful lover started remembering your birthday would you become suspicious? Would it be

possible that you would break up with your lover based on the forgetting or the remembering to program their smart house to send a birthday card?

If it turned out that you would get 25% discount on the price of your home if instead of paintings, you had to place advertisements on the wall, would you do it? How about if the advertisements were controlled by your smart house and changed depending on what you were doing during the day? In what ways do you consider a T.V. to be different from a painting? What if you could get 75% discount? If your house had the license to make McDonald hamburgers how many times a week would you have them?

When you design new things do you think you are solving a problem? When you design new things do you think that you are engaged in the dominant ritual behavior of your tribe? When you acquire things do you think you are solving some problem? When you acquire something do you think you are engaged in the ritual behavior of your tribe? If you are an artist does each one of your works of art solve a problem? If you buy works of art does each work of art purchased solve a problem? If you are an artist and were only allowed to create five works of art in your lifetime, what would they be?

Will the house of the future have plants in it (or will it be the only place plants exist)? Will the house of the future nurture the plants? Or will the house of the future have artificial plants that turn with the sun? If there are plants, will there also be bugs? Bees? Spiders? Ants? Dust Mites? Will anything in the house of the future be alive besides the humans and possibly the plants? What poisons will it use to kill the bugs?

Do you think it is within the realm of possibility that the intelligent house can eliminate the perception of the four seasons and allow the inhabitant to have whatever season he or she wishes to have that day? Do you think it is likely that intelligent houses can eliminate day from night? Do you think it could stretch time? If the rest of your family lived in Japan, could your smart house keep your life in perfect sync with theirs? Is the architecture of time more or less important than the architecture of space? Do you count the hours and years you are alive?

What role did money play in selecting the house you currently live in? How smart is that house? How smart does your house allow you to be? If you had more money to spend on your house would it be smarter? If it was a more expensive house could you be smarter? Is it possible that your intelligence is defined exactly by the intelligence of your house? Or if not your intelligence, your savoir faire? Your coolness? Is that why you want an intelligent house?

If asked, would you say that a house is a machine, a tool, a piece of clothing, a skeletal extension, a work of art, a statement, a sculpture, an engine, an invention, a living organism, a virtual being, a respite, a cybernetic system, a vessel, a shrine, an object of veneration, a document, a discourse, a castle, a coat rack, a refuge, a nightmare, the center piece of male dominated capitalist culture, a home?

If computers were built entirely out of mechanical parts would you believe that they could be smart? Can mechanical houses be smart?

Does your son or daughter ask you for a story before he or she goes to bed at night? If your son or daughter asked you for information instead of a story what information would you give him or her? Do you want information or a story from your house? Do you believe that Dan Rather on the nightly news is giving you information or a story? If the nightly news could be

tailored for your individual taste what would be different, the information or the story? If your house needed to hear a story for it to go to sleep what story would you tell it? The Three Little Pigs? What information would you give it? Would you tell it that it is just a machine?

Is there a difference between the personal and the private? When you go to a party at a house, do you hope that there are other people there? When you go to your office, do you hope that there are other people there? Do you like to eat alone? When you go to a restaurant, do you hope that there are other people there? Do you think corporations want you to talk about the quality of their products with other people? When corporations show their products next to good looking people do you think that's fair? When you go to parties, do you hope that good looking people will be there? Do you think the photos in House & Garden Magazine should be able to be retouched?

How many people do you think the Earth can support such that they all could live in reasonable homes? Would one hundred million in North America sound about right? Did you know that that is about ten people per square mile? At the same density, do you know how many people there would be on the planet Earth? Does five hundred million seem about right? What should we do with the other nine-tenths of humanity? How much would I have to offer you to take early retirement from life? Do you think that the house you build to make you happy makes an equal or greater number of people unhappy somewhere else? What is the difference between a smart house and a happy house? In which would you rather live?

Is it reasonable to assume that homes will eventually have doors that open and close automatically like those on Star Trek? How smart would you consider a house that didn't have doors that open automatically? Is it reasonable to assume that homes will not have any paintings that are hung crooked? Can you think of a mechanism that would straighten paintings? How smart would you think a house to be if it had crooked paintings? Would the house you want to live in give you the current price of your stocks? Would it give you the current value of your paintings? Would it give you your current I.D. if it could figure it out from the stocks and paintings you have purchased? Is allowing you to work at home an altruistic gesture by corporations or a method by which they can eke out even more work from their employees? Would you still work at home if your company asked if they could monitor you so that they knew you were working and not playing with your son or daughter? When working at home would you really rather be at work with your other co-workers? If you had a video link into work would you feel like you were there? If you had a perfect tele-present robot that you could operate from work and that could take care of your son or daughter would you rather be at work? Do you think children brought up by tele-present robots would be different to children brought up by a mother or a father? If you had to hire an employee for a difficult programming task what kind of childhood background would you look for?

If making new things makes money, why would a designer not make new things? Is it possible to make money by making fewer things? By making nothing? By eliminating things? Is a designer who doesn't make new things a designer? Is he or she a Luddite? Are the highest paid architects ones that make expensive houses or inexpensive houses?

Can a house built with modern computer technology still be expected to work ten years from now? Do you currently have any ten-year-old computers in your house? Do you expect your children to live in your house? Your children's children? Your children's children's children? Will your smart house still be smart then?

Do you consider living in an intelligent, fully computerized house to be work? Will there be computerized forms you have to regularly fill out to keep it working? Will you have to perform regular maintenance on it? How does this differ from work? Do you take vacations now from your house, say to simple cabins in the woods? Will you take vacations from your smart house to, say suburban houses?

If a smart house decides that it doesn't like you, can it leave and find another employer?