

Home & Real Estate

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HAROLD BUBIL

LETTER FROM HOME



Overcoming mediocre design

So Andres Duany thinks we're getting bad architecture in downtown Sarasota.

Unfortunately, this is not news.

We've been getting bad buildings ever since some nondescript condominium high-rises went up in the 1960s and '70s. And they just keep coming — witness The Metropolitan, a to-be-built high-rise with architecture than can be described as mediocre, at best.

Duany thinks a design code is the way to get better architecture downtown, while local architects object.

Codes create "architectural mediocrity," local architect Jack West was quoted as saying recently. But even without a code, we have stale high-rises because most developers won't take chances. For every Beau Ciel, there are two Tower Residences at The Ritz-Carlton, a building whose interior elegance is negated by its boring exterior.

Someone who knows a thing or two about cutting-edge high-rises was in town recently to speak at the reception following the Thoroughly Modern tour. Bernardo Fort-Brescia, principal of the Miami firm Arquitectonica, says the key to progressive design is not good codes, but good clients.

"Actually, architects largely depend on the owners' commitment to a special architecture," said Fort-Brescia. "Some developers are more informed than others about the current thinking in the profession. We need to give the credit to developers who are willing to move forward with new ideas."

PLEASE SEE LETTER ON 8G



UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA PHOTOS / DAVID BLANKENSHIP

University of Florida computer engineering associate professor Sumi Helal stands next to Matilda, a mannequin representing the elderly occupant of a UF-developed "smart house," which provides automatically the home assistance many people need as they age.

THE SMART HOUSE

At UF, Matilda the mannequin is helping seniors stay at home, independently.

By LEW SIGELMAN
CORRESPONDENT

GAINESVILLE — Meet Matilda. She doesn't realize it — after all, she's a full-size mannequin — but she's helping frail and forgetful seniors remain in their homes long after living on their own becomes difficult.

With her curly blonde wig and grannie glasses, Matilda is playing the role of an 85-year-old widow who, like most aging seniors, avoids at all costs giving up her freedom and moving into an assisted-living facility, a nursing home or, perhaps worst of all possible scenarios, in with her adult children.

She is part of a "Smart Home" demonstration project on the University of Florida campus here that melds the latest in computer and sensor technology in an effort to help the growing legion of seniors live alone longer as well as lower the cost of health care.

Matilda "lives" in a 550-square-foot "house" that takes up more than half the fourth floor computer lab in UF's computer science engineering building. It has a fully furnished living room, kitchen, bedroom and bath.

In June, she will move to a real and much larger 2,500-square-foot home in the on-campus Oak Hammock retirement community. But for now, the "mock-up" is doing just fine.

As is Matilda. Because built into her cozy but complete living environment is a mind-boggling array of experimental assistive living devices, ranging from sensors that track an elderly person's whereabouts in the house to a microwave oven that automatically recognizes entrees and determines how long to cook them.

Connected to a computer network, these and other devices keep tabs on each other and —

PLEASE SEE MATILDA ON 6G



The house, which consists of a fully furnished living room, kitchen, bedroom and bathroom in a UF computer laboratory, melds the latest computer and sensor technology to provide a host of assistive devices for the home's occupant.



COURTESY / ARQUITECTONICA

The Miami firm Arquitectonica has designed these high-rise buildings — Mist, top, and Blue — for that city's skyline.

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Cold drinks aren't served only in the kitchen anymore. But in today's homes, a cumbersome refrigerator just doesn't look right. Filling the need for a stylish refrigeration solution is Marvel Industries. Its Custom Series offers styling that would satisfy an interior designer and dual-zone refrigeration for wine and beverage storage as well as additional freezer space. The Custom Series combines two separate models stacked one atop the other. Information: marvelindustries.com.



COURTESY PHOTO / MARVEL

CREATIVE ENVIRONMENTS / By Rosemary Sadez Friedmann

Nifty ideas that may come in handy

Sometimes it's helpful to have a list of things that might come handy someday. Hopefully, some of these ideas will do just that.

Ever try to slip sheer draperies over a curtain rod, only to get frustrated with all the snags? Try putting a plastic baggie over the end of the rod, cutting a hold in the bottom. Slip the hemmed drapery onto the baggie and slip it all across the rod. This should make the curtain slide easier and without snags along the way.

Are there silk plants that need cleaning? Try placing them in a paper bag with coarse salt. Shake the bag for a minute or so, then remove the plant. The dust and dirt should disappear.

Is there a water stain on that wood table? Salt to the rescue again. Mix together a little salt and olive oil to make a paste. Rub the paste gently on the water spot, then let it sit for about an hour. Wipe off gently and the water spot should be gone — at least, it will be less visible.

When new carpet is installed, no matter how much vacuuming is done, there might still be carpet tacks left in crevices that the vacuum can't suck up. Try running a magnet in corners and along baseboards to pick them up.

Is there a window that has been painted shut? A pizza cutter, with its serrated edge, is a great tool for cutting through the paint. It is better than a knife because it is circu-

PLEASE SEE INTERIORS ON 11G

Assisted living environments may be less than a decade away

MATILDA FROM IG

most important — the occupant. That is the reason for the electronic sensors placed discreetly on Matilda's clothing.

"What this home demonstrates is the evolution from assistive devices to assistive environments," says Sumi Helal, an associate professor in the University's Computer and Information Science and Engineering Department.

Helal also is director of technology development for the UF Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center on Technology and Successful Aging, funded most recently with a \$4.5 million grant from the National Institute for Disability, Rehabilitation and Research.

The research center was established in October 2001 to promote independence and quality of life for older people with disabilities. The core focus is on communications, home monitoring and smart technology.

The smart house project is said to be the next great leap in

technology — assisted home care, assembling what now is an assortment of individual and disconnected assistive devices into a coordinated, centralized computer network that can observe, respond and communicate with occupants, their caregivers and health providers.

Helal believes wholly integrated assistive living environments like the one being tested here are less than a decade away from moving out of the experimental stage and into the mainstream.

"The technology is there," he says. "We just have to figure out how to integrate the various parts."

The home of the not-too-distant future works on three different levels of impairments — motor, cognitive and therapeutic. Here's how it might make life easier for its aging occupants:

■ If water leaks onto the floor, someone who does not see too well might slip on it and fall. But in the smart house, a sensor alerts the resident of the danger by cell phone.

■ When the mail arrives, another sensor notifies the resident. That way, someone who suffers from arthritis or is wheel-chair bound and doesn't move around easily will have to go to the mailbox only once.

■ If someone comes to the door, sensors locate the resident and a camera beams the visitor's picture onto a TV screen in the room he or she occupies. If the resident wants to let the visitor in, she can tell the cell phone, which will transmit a code that opens the electronic latch.

■ The microwave will "read" a bar-code-like radio frequency identification (RFID) tag on the food package and set the proper cooking controls so the user doesn't have to punch in any numbers or choose a power setting.

It also will tell the resident how to handle the package and notify her when the food is ready via a video display in whichever room she happens to be in at the time.

■ The house also can keep

tabs on certain developing infirmities. For example, if the resident's gait becomes slower, which may be a sign of an impending stroke, a monitor will report the potential problem to the occupant's caregiver. If sensors don't pick up any movement at all, someone will be notified right away so they can come out and check.

■ The resident can enjoy meals with her children and grandchildren via television. "It's like they're actually right there with you," says Helal. "You can see your son and his family on the screen. You can even see their plates and what they are eating. It's almost real."

■ With voice commands, the mobile phone can be used to turn on lights, the stereo, television and open and close the curtains.

■ When the occupant moves from room-to-room, the house senses it, turns off the television monitor in the room the resident leaves, turns on the monitor in the room she enters and tunes in the proper station.

■ If the resident can't remember whether the front door is locked, he can ask the mobile phone if the house is secure. The phone will check the doors and report back by voice.

While Matilda's house is a place where Helal says "we can try our ideas so we can see how they actually play out," none of what's taking place here is pie-in-the-sky theory. Pretty much everything is straight off the shelf.

But it will take a concerted effort from policy makers, who must decide if monitoring seniors is acceptable practice or an unwarranted invasion of privacy, and retailers, who must sell products with imbedded RFID tags that can be read by the sensors, the professor says.

Mostly, though, the responsibility "will fall on the shoulders of the construction industry," which must decide to absorb the smart sensor technology into new and remodeled houses.

They'd better hurry, according to William Mann, director of the rehab engineering re-

search center and chairman of the occupational therapy department in UF's College of Health Professions.

With the oldest of the nation's 78 million baby boomers just about to reach their 60s, Mann says "a huge wave" of assistive care needs is on the horizon.

Only 10 percent of people in their 60s require assistance in their daily lives, but half of those 80 or older need outside help with what were once life's simpler tasks — bathing, dressing and remembering to take medications.

"The real problem for how we're spending health-care dollars is going to occur in 20 years," Mann says. "But many people will need assistive care before then."

His studies have shown that seniors who obtain and use the devices tend to decline more slowly than those who don't. They also cost the health care system less.

And contrary to the notion that older people don't do well with new technology, Mann says they welcome the help.

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