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The \$3-million paradox: Think a new ultra-luxurious home is packed with every high-tech gadget you can imagine? You might be surprised

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What kind of cool technology do you get when your home costs \$3 million?

Lots, but less than you might think.

That's the paradox of the \$3-million model house built by Cambridge Homes in the high-end Bellagio subdivision in Northville. With a house that sports the best of everything -- walls, doors and coffered ceilings of gleaming walnut-stained wood; two-story inlaid marble foyers with soaring staircases and hand-hewn bannisters; and the address carved in limestone above the door -- you'd expect to see the best that home tech has to offer.

But all you'll get is a taste. The house does sport hints of some modern home electronic conveniences: one nifty home theater and the wiring to support much more.

Still, the sobering reality is that even at the \$3-million level, this home had less technology than you'd see on some current episodes of "This Old House."

That's not hard to believe when you consider the overall tech price tag. The cost of every last bit of electronics that went into the home, minus a phone system that had yet to be installed during



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Open house

What: Open house at the \$3-million model home in the Bellagio subdivision, where homes range from about \$1 million to \$10 million.

Where: 47795 Bellagio Drive, Northville. Take Beck Road just north of 8 Mile Road; turn left into the subdivision and bear left to reach the model home.

the open house, was \$28,300.

That's one-fifth of what the landscaping cost for the 0.9-acre lot, and a tenth of the price of the Rolls-Royce parked out front to provide ambience for the open house.

When: Today, noon-6 p.m. Chefs from Northville's Little Italy restaurant will be guest cooking in the kitchen from noon-4 p.m.

So who says the rich can have it all?

Fitting the budget

"It's a balancing act for us, where we want to put our money," says Cambridge sales and marketing manager Matthew Hatz. "Those gadgets are neat, but that's for the unlimited budget."

Part of the struggle in fitting the 11,000-plus-square-foot house into a paltry multimillion-dollar budget was the goal of the builders: to create a new subdivision in the suburbs that had the look and feel of Palmer Woods or the Fisher Mansion in Detroit.

The houses cluster around a 4-acre central park featuring a limestone gazebo, gardens and walking paths. Iron gates guard the entrance, flanked by old-fashioned lamp posts.

The look meant lots of expensive old-world details for the model house -- stone and wood and leaded glass and custom murals -- and not a lot of budget for high-tech additions that might detract from the home's feel.

"We thought that was more important than light switches," Hatz says.

So what gadgets do you get if you have \$3 million in pocket change to plunk down on this model?

You get a home theater in the basement, where your children will disappear for days at a time. It features a 100-inch, front-projection-style, HDTV-ready television -- one of the smallest HDTV-ready front-projection televisions available to Avio, the Troy-based company that handled the house's electronics -- surround-sound speakers sitting on the floor and a curtained niche for the DVD player, VCR, satellite controller and stereo equipment.

The room's floor is divided into three descending levels, making room for two comfy leather couches in lieu of theater seats. The item with the biggest wow factor: an illuminated touch-pad remote control the size of a hardcover book, which

controlled not just the sound, the screen and the media components, but also the lights, adjusting them to different schemes for movies, sports or parties.

Not bad, but consider this: the television cost \$7,500. The remote control? \$2,900.

Don't think of it as spending three grand for a remote, Avio owner Dave Darnett suggests. Think of it as spending three grand to get rid of all those other remotes you never learned how to use anyway.

"Each time you add additional boxes, each one adds its own remote, its own plethora of buttons," he says. "I say if you can read plain English, you can operate this 6-foot-high wall of electronic equipment. If I have to train you how to use the remote, we haven't done our job."

Controls for sound, lights

The rest of the house's technology is downright pedestrian for a home this expensive. Buttons on the walls of most major rooms control in-room flush-mounted speakers, allowing home owners to switch among two CD players (for when your children have different musical tastes) and the radio.

Wiring allows for future computer networks and a phone system, which, when installed, will add full business-like capabilities to each handset: voice mail, intercom, music on hold, the ability to transfer calls and other features.

Some wired outlets, however, were oddly positioned -- no phone or network jacks outside for working on the ostentatious stone back porch on nice days, but jacks above the hand-painted replica of a stove in a child's room upstairs. Even basic niceties that could have remained unobtrusive, like coordinated controls for the lighting throughout the house, were missing.

Instead, confusing lines of switches marched across the walls in some rooms.

Hatz says that some of the remote-controlled and coordinated-control light switches were too contemporary-looking, large and monochromatic for the decor. Darnett says that his company often has trouble convincing builders to put in more advanced lighting or wiring into model homes, where the cost doesn't equate to dramatic, visible gadgets.

"Our best installations are the stuff you don't see," he says. "In

a home that size, it would be a crime to have to walk through the whole house to turn the lights off."

Darnett points out that the company did run at least four extra sets of wire into the attic, ready to be pulled down into any room when the model's eventual owners decide they want better connections.

To be sure, the builders had to make choices about where to spend their money on a model home in a development where houses are expected to cost \$1 million to \$10 million, and the house is full of lovely details.

And the technology installed does give a flavor of what's possible.

But it is rather discouraging to find out that even when your budget's in the millions, your home tech still may not be state of the art.

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