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Futuristic 'House With a Brain' Not Too Far Off

Someday in the not too distant future, a youthful generation will smile in amusement when we describe how once we turned on the kitchen light with a finger or pulled open the living room drapes by hand.

That's because they will be accomplishing such tasks with voice commands. They will open and close doors, turn the airconditioning on and off, monitor a security system, dim the lights, dial the phone and turn on the TV simply by talking to their built-in home computer system.

What's being called "the house with a brain" may be only five to 10 years off, according to Andy Allocco. Allocco is a nuclear engineer, computer hobbyist and home builder in Miami, and he's installed such a system in his own house. The idea began as an expensive toy. But one day he demonstrated it to someone who said, "That would be great for a (quadriplegic)."

Andy hadn't thought of that. But yes, a quadriplegic could regain considerable control of his environment. The builder was so intrigued that he joined the Florida Paraplegic Association to learn how such systems could be of even greater help to the disabled.

At this point, of course, the price tag is a serious consideration. Andy installed his system in an existing home for $50,000. He will incorporate one in a new home he's building, and he thinks that will reduce the cost.

"But according to the Florida Paraplegic Association," he noted, "it costs about $60,000 a year to provide intensive care for a quad. And this system is new. The price will come down."

We're going to be hearing a lot more about high-tech homes. The May issue of *Popular Science* includes an article on the subject which, incidentally, mentions Andy. And the more affordable the technology becomes, the more we'll see it in action. Andy thinks the price may drop fairly quickly.

"I remember when the first calculators sold for $200," he said. "Now you buy them for $3 in the supermarket. Five or 10 years is a very short time in computer history."

Even today, however, the cost per person would be less if several disabled people lived in the same facility or in adjoining apartments. The system works for a family of four if properly "trained" to recognize particular words.

For example, a person might say, "kitchen." The computer would reply, "What do you wish me to do to the kitchen light?" The human would order, "Dim it" or "Turn it on." The system's success hinges on accurate speech. It would be user friendly only to the people living in the house.

Andy thinks the possibilities are limitless. A system can monitor electrical consumption throughout a home and give the owner a printout detailing it. A person who can't recall when he last visited the dentist or doctor can ask for and receive a copy of his complete medical history.

"You tell me what you want it to do, I can do it," Andy said. "Each day, I add more to the system. In time, it will be like buying a refrigerator. You buy what you want and plug it in."

His next house probably will include a robot as a mobile information center. He also foresees lots of business applications. For more information, you can reach him in Miami at 667-0003.

But it's the applications for the disabled that I find thrilling. There must be millions of partially or totally disabled people who would be overjoyed to talk their way around their home or business. Add to that the people who love and can afford expensive toys and you have the beginnings of a market, which has not escaped Andy Allocco's notice.

The speed of high-tech development is both dizzying and exciting. One wonders what else future generations will find amusing about the way we lived our lives in 1985. 'Heck, I used a slide rule in college," Andy said. "To them, that will seem very old-fashioned."