



SPECIAL REPORT

GET SMART

A 'smart' home that thrives on automation and interconnectivity is within reach thanks to some game-changing innovations, writes Harvey Grennan.

The idea of a smart home – one where you can control and coordinate various electronic appliances through a single interface – isn't new, but it has never really taken hold. However, with increasing consumer demand and technology giants Apple, Google and Samsung entering the fray, that's all about to change.

The concept of home automation, commonly called C-Bus (referring to a specific system made by Clipsal), has been around for two decades and yet the potential market has barely been tapped. A 2013 Clipsal survey of several hundred renovators and home builders revealed only half were aware of home automation and just one in five of those

considered it appealing. While they liked the convenience and simplicity, many said it "looks expensive".

Another reason home automation has not taken off is the fact that it has been complex and confusing. There has been no basic format; instead, every system and every button has had to be individually programmed. >

A glance around any home shows many systems, from entertainment to heating, that could be efficiently automated and coordinated via a master control.

HOME AUTOMATION: WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT COULD DO FOR YOUR LIFESTYLE

Home automation essentially refers to a series of touchscreens or multiple switch plates installed throughout the home that are programmed to operate your electrical systems, thermostats and gadgets the way you want. They are interlinked so that a master touchscreen or smart mobile device can control every function in every part of the home.

You can switch any individual appliance on or off; program what happens according to the time of day, the day of the week, the month, a temperature, a light level or even another device; or you can create a 'scene' combining several different appliances in one operation. Or all of the above. (For more on scenes, see main story.) The cost of the system grows as you add more functions you wish to control. This can extend to lighting, security, airconditioning, audio and video systems, motorised blinds, curtains, pool/spa pump, keyless entry, irrigation, water features... anything electrical, in fact. The smart appliances themselves, of course, are an extra cost.

By remote control via a smartphone, tablet or laptop, you could turn on the airconditioner on your way home from work or check a webcam from your London hotel room to see whether the children are doing their homework back home. In the event that a security alarm in the house is activated, the system can email a warning to you and turn on all the lights as a deterrent.

A home-automation system can also help you save energy, and therefore money, through intelligent control of lighting, airconditioning and other systems, while providing the desired levels of comfort and convenience.

