

For Koreans, technology is not limited to pocket-size gadgets, but is being incorporated into their homes.



Latest gadgets, clockwise from top left: LG Mega MP3 amplifier, Samsung Mega-pixel HDD (hard disk) phone, LG Conversions LCD television KN-17LZ21C, and LG MP3 player MF-FE500.  
Courtesy of LG and Samsung Electronics

By Ines Cho  
Staff Writer

Science-fiction films depicting the imagined lives of people in the future have always fascinated us. We haven't yet reached the stage of living with robots for hire, as in "I, Robot" (2004), but we can already get some help from a small robot that silently roams the house cleaning the floor.

We're pretty close to cloning pets, although definitely not ready to be replaced by our own clone to complicate our life, as in "The Sixth Day" (2000), or to recycle our memories to live another life in the distant future, as in "Vanilla Sky" (2001).

But South Korean technology clearly has reached the level where, as in a scene from "Total Recall" (1990), people can return to their homes to see computer control panels unfold on the living room wall. And the cool "stretch" phone sported by Keanu Reeves' character Neo in "The Matrix" (2003) is here to stay.

A few months ago, Kook Seung-yong, a computer technician, decided to combine his mobile phone and PDA (personal digital assistant) into one device. After extensive research, he chose a Hewlett-Packard RW-6001 because it was the model that satisfied his criteria.

"I was looking for a full-function PDA that comes with a phone, not the other way around," he says. "With this, I can get Internet access, a phone book, memo pads and a digital camera, as well as a phone." It cost him more than 700,000 won (\$684), but he's been thoroughly happy with it.

At least for now, he is not considering Samsung's new line of mobile phones, SCH-S250, equipped with a digital camera that enables users to take extremely sharp 500-megapixel images.

Looking like a "Matrix" phone, it produces photographs with true colors, can connect to a television, and has futuristic commands like a text-to-speech function, in which text messages can be heard by voice.

If there is an ultimate pocket gadget, technology experts say, it will be one unified machine that combines multimedia, information and entertainment functions all together: a PDA, mobile phone, MP3 player, digital camera, traffic navigator, and TV in one device that's small, easy to use and cost-effective.

With the recent launch of digital multimedia broadcasting, or DMB TV, on mobile phones and other lifestyle-oriented products, such as one that combines a camcorder, digital camera and voice recorder in a package the size of a credit card, the future of technology is already here. It is not limited to small pocket gadgets, however; it also functions in the dai-

ly lives of tech-savvy Koreans.

Kweon Hae-sun, a 30-something housewife, says digital technology has become an integral part of her life since she, her husband and two sons, ages 10 and 5, moved last September into an apartment at LG Xi Apartments in Jukjeon, Gyeonggi province, which contains an electronic home network system.

Actual use of such a system may be somewhat limited for full-time housewives like herself, who stay home most of the time, she says, but a setting mode like "Out" can be extremely useful, especially for those who spend more time away from home. When an occupant leaves the premises, the system automatically watches over the home. Sensors operate lights and home appliances, and the visual images of visitors are stored and sent to the resident's computer or mobile phone.

Ms. Kweon particularly likes the apartment's extremely tight security system. Each visitor to the apartment complex is stopped and checked by guards in dark uniforms, who could pass for armed military officers. In the beginning, she said she was a bit overwhelmed by the intimidating appearance and stern attitude of the guards, since no one could enter without a thorough check at the gate, which is electronically monitored and recorded around the clock.

"But, after finding out what they could do for us, it's been a big relief. And nothing can replace the safe feeling of being at home," she says. "The guards even take care of deliveries of pizza and Chinese takeout as there are

thieves who disguise themselves as delivery persons or acquaintances. If you're not invited, you cannot get in, period."

Ms. Kweon's daily activities are typical of a housewife with a husband and young children: She spends a lot of time with her five-year-old son, shops for groceries and takes care of bills.

She says she doesn't need to carry cash because she uses Internet banking, which she finds extremely secure, fast and cost-effective. She searches online for the best buys — be it for green onions, a package of organic rice or a gift box of dried persimmons — and has them delivered to her home or that of her husband's parents, who live in a remote village in the south of the country.

"We wives exchange information, like which store has the best soup or fruit, for example, when we chat online or offline," she says. "Korea has a wonderful delivery system now."

"I know, as a virtuous daughter-in-law, I should pay a visit to my in-laws in person with boxes of marinated beef, but with a young child it's impossible to travel for a whole day through traffic, so I decided to make good use of the delivery system, so I can send them things they cannot get in the countryside," she adds.

To keep the 5-year-old amused, Ms. Kweon says the family stays home to watch movies. And digital technology enables them to own a computerized home entertainment center with a flat-screen monitor and a projection screen.

Given the complicated technology

involved, has she ever thought about a breakdown in the system? "Not really, because there are after-service staffers who work in the complex and they are always within phone reach," she says.

She noted that she recently burned soup and wanted to get rid of the stench. She called the A/S center and was instructed to do a few things, like setting the control panel to "ventilation," shutting a few doors and opening windows on the north side of the building.

"And the odor was gone, zap! I mean, can you smell anything here now? By the way, do you find the temperature in this room warm enough for you?" she asks, sipping a cup of espresso, freshly made from a machine on the kitchen table.

Equipped with a home network system implemented by Ez-Ville, a local home network solution company, the LG Xi Apartment development has set a new standard for homes, both in terms of technology and price, since the first complex was built in Dongbuichon-dong in central Seoul in 2003. The smallest unit, 89 square meters (958 square feet), in a "first grade" apartment equipped with a home network system, if available, can cost more than 600 million won (\$545,000).

Ms. Kweon's spacious 195-square-meter apartment on the 21st floor, which overlooks a golf club from the living room, could easily cost over 2 billion or 3 billion won if it were in Seoul. With a price tag of 600 million to 700 million won, it still is expensive, however, and she says buying such an apartment

would have been virtually impossible without her parents' support.

Aside from the purchase price, all the extra technology makes it expensive to run the home, she notes. At the beginning, when she operated all the household appliances at full scale, including two refrigerators with monitors, an oven, a dishwasher, a washing machine and dryer and an automatic food waste processor, as well as computers, DVDs, and temperature controls for each room, the electricity bill was enormous.

Because each room has an Internet connection, she is also concerned about her young son's constant exposure to adult Web sites, which she says persistently pop up no matter what she does. She is also worried that her son will tell strangers the password to the entrance of her apartment building.

Ms. Kweon says she is still learning how to properly use all parts of the system. "The hardest thing is not knowing how to use all the high-tech built-in machines in the kitchen," she says. "Once you know what to do, it's really amazing what technology can do to improve your life, and 'playing' with a home network system is actually great fun."

Ms. Kweon has been the center of attention among her peers. "My friends ask me if I really live like [actress] Lee Young-ae in a TV commercial for the apartments — if I actually turn off my gas stove from my mobile phone," she says.

If the top priority for Korean homeowners now is the home network, the next step is the community network, technology experts say.

Last year, Samsung Electronics provided a three-level network system to 480 homes in Daegu. The apartment complex has a home network system with additional features: a system that can monitor playgrounds and facilities within the complex, and that can download real-time information from nearby stores, hospitals and government offices, enabling a so-called community network.

A Samsung spokesman said that while the current infrastructure represents the first generation stage, it will evolve to a higher level as the company plans to build 300,000 units with the three-tier system in Gyeonggi and Gyeongsang provinces by 2007, and 1.2 million by 2010.

The company is also planning to introduce the system across China as well as in cities around the world, including New York, Moscow, Barcelona and Almere in the Netherlands.

Perhaps 10 years from now, South Koreans will be searching via a cool hand-held gadget for such films as "Total Recall" and "Minority Report" under the category of "Classics."  
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