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EDUCATION

'Smart Home' an eye-opener for students

Technology guru Doug Fiske has this spanking new high-tech home under construction at Smith Mountain Lake and he's sharing some of his technique with students and contractors

By Gene Marrano

It's little wonder that Doug Fiske would have the very latest smart technology in the 10,500 square foot home under construction at Water's Edge, the Smith Mountain Lake golf/residential community in Franklin County. Fiske developed some of that technology with his company On-Q.

After selling that firm he continues to work as company president for its new owner, the French conglomerate Legrand, which has also reeled in other similar companies under its umbrella.

Fiske and his wife, Polly, are incorporating the newest in wireless, remote, internet, lighting and sound technology into their retirement home, which they will move to full time when Doug Fiske retires in seven years and they relocate from Pennsylvania. In the mean time the home and a boathouse are wedged into a half-acre lot between neighbors on a cul-de-sac.

Their estate—which looks smaller from the street—will be an expensive and high tech vacation getaway until then. Part of their motivation to move here is the proximity to his aging mother.

Recently several vanloads of students from Virginia Tech

traveled to Water's Edge and the Fiske home site, which is under roof but won't be completed until late 2008.

They came from VT's architectural, interior design and construction technology programs to learn how design changes could accommodate some of the Fiske's passion for high-tech—like the sunken home theater and professional karaoke system to be installed for some of the large family get-togethers they enjoy.

"The Fiske home will show us what the future can look like," says student Travis

Rookstool, architecture major and a member of the school's Solar Home Decathlon team. "It's nice to have such a great resource so close [by]."

Wireless internet routers and high-tech fire sprinkler systems, both mounted in the ceilings throughout the house, are just the tip of the iceberg and gave the Tech students some food for thought.

'Rocky Top'

During a presentation that included comments from Bob Fetzter, president of Building

Specialists Inc. and Highlands Group Architecture president Doug Goins, Fiske showed off programmable front doors that can play downloadable tones when they are opened or a doorbell is rung. If your dinner guest went to school at the University of Tennessee, the door can be programmed to play "Rocky Top"... or like an oversized answering machine it can be programmed to tell visitors to come around back to the boathouse if there's no answer when they ring the bell.

Wireless intercoms in every room will be voice-activated and an entertainment system can be zoned separately for each living space, drawing from satellite, terrestrial radio or a CD jukebox. The visitors from Tech, widely conversant with wireless technology, took it all in. "I believe its important for students to extend their learning experience beyond the classroom," says Fiske, a Clemson graduate himself.

His high tech home is not only a learning experience for students but also for builders like Bob Fetzter and BSIVA. He calls it a "team build project." "That is the significant difference in this," says Fetzter of all the gadgets—not to mention the smallish lot that will hold a decidedly large house.

Building Specialists and Highlands Group Architecture (both based in Roanoke) worked with Fiske for about six months before the first shovel of dirt was turned in February on what one BSIVA spokesperson estimated was perhaps a \$3 million project. Some 240 electrical circuits inside and outside helped give this estate project a new wrinkle or two.

"We have actually learned a lot from [Fiske]," says Fetzter of what he called "a very outstand-



Doug Fiske (right) discusses the high-tech home project with Virginia Tech students

ing design.” Polly Fikse’s family has been in the building business for several generations so both husband and wife are discerning clients.

Goins, a Virginia Tech graduate himself, relocated back to the Roanoke Valley after a stint in Atlanta and has been a well-known high end architect for almost two decades, with estate homes and sporting clubs a specialty. Goins has also created projects at the Greenbrier resort in West Virginia.

Adaptation

He showed these Hokies a thing or two about adapting a large house to a neighborhood, making it look “like its been there forever. Try not to let the house overpower the site,” was his advice.

On one temporary plywood wall detailed maps were tacked up, evidence of a view-shed analysis that Highlands Group used as they tracked sun exposure and lake/mountain views from the lot.

That information was considered when deciding where to position the structure, where large picture windows should be placed, etc. 87 sheets of drawings for every facet of the house illustrate how closely Goins worked with Fikse and Building

learned a lot about architecture,” says Goins of Fikse.

“It’s really going to help us down the road to be able to suggest these products,” added Fetzer of the high-tech appeal. Some have not made it to the U.S. market yet but are widely used in Europe.

Sound Decision of Roanoke, an On-Q/Legrand dealer, and Shively Electric are combining forces to install technology in the Fikse home, like programmable lighting scenarios that can be activated remotely via the internet, say from a BlackBerry on the way home.

“He can even have the sauna running,” adds Brad Basham, residential service manager for Shively. Each system in the home will interface. “You can tie everything together. It’s a learning opportunity for us,” says Basham.



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Virginia Tech students discuss the Fikse’s home project at Smith

Specialists.

Remote control

Heat and air conditioning can be turned on as the family makes its way to Smith Mountain Lake. Closed circuit cameras and security lighting will be installed as well. Expect to see some of these features in lower-scale homes if they haven’t been used already.

“Technology filters down very quickly,” says Dwayne Martin of Sound Decision. Everything at the Fikse home will be tied into a network and much of it can be controlled by portable control panels—like customized “lighting scenes” for the kitchen, driveway or other spaces. That includes setting the brightness levels—some lamps may be lit at 70 percent, others at 30 percent.

Residential lighting in the United States “really hasn’t

evolved,” Fikse told students and others gathered for his show-and-tell. That’s something he’s trying to change with Legrand, working out of Western Pennsylvania until he retires. Fikse touted the “complete flexibility in terms of how you set these [devices] up,” and says that it all remains user-friendly, even to older folks.

Senior building construction student Andrew Chester stood just feet away as Fikse showed off his toys. “I think there’s a lot of good applications for it,” says Chester of the technology he witnessed on the field trip from Blacksburg. “It’s definitely the way the future is going.”

Chester says Virginia Tech’s construction program stays on the cutting edge in its curriculum. The controls he witnessed—wireless and otherwise—were “an integral part of the building. It has to be designed that way as well.” Working with a closely-knit design/build team like the one put together by Building Specialists for the Fikse project is a professional goal.

Chester sounds like a quick study: “That gives you a lot more options to do creative things like this—when you’re part of a team.”

(Gene Marrano is a Roanoke-based freelance writer.)



The Fikse home at Smith Mountain Lake

Gene Marrano

Specialists on the project. “We have learned a lot about the current technology ... and he’s

Sound Decision and Shively were part of the subcontracting team assembled by Building