AJ debate

Smart home technology: giving the building user complete control

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Photographs Anthony Coleman

GIRA and the AJ brought together four experts to share their experiences of working with smart home KNX technology.

The conversation took place in Dukelease's award-winning Artisan development on Goodge Street, designed by Rolfe Judd, which all our panelists have worked on. Between them, our experts have broad experience of specifying, installing, designing and understanding the latest tech. Here are their top tips for getting the best out of it.

Muir Baxter, international account manager, GIRA
Smart home technology is the control of lighting, heating, cooling, curtains, blinds and security to ultimately provide convenience and a level of intelligence to complement the lifestyle of the owner or occupant of a property.

Within this, KNX technology is an open protocol, or industry standard 'language', which means we can deliver more technology in a user-friendly way. KNX is a collaboration of nearly 400 manufacturers, all producing compatible technology, so customers can connect more devices and gain greater control of a building.

The key benefit to KNX technology is about giving complete control of the building to the owner, through a single smart system. Previously, smart home technology was about the delivery and provision of entertainment. Now that shift has moved to be more in line with the European mindset of 'mission-critical' everyday control.

KNX technology stretches into many areas: electrical, mechanical, security, efficiency and design. I would urge all architects to consider smart home technology at the earliest opportunity. It's the ultimate future-proofing technology because one of the core principles is that devices are backwards compatible. This means devices GIRA launches today can be used in any KNX installation, which could be up to 25 years old. My top tip for getting the most out of KNX smart home technology is: keep it simple and focus on the 'mission-critical' controls.

The panel

- Muir Baxter, international account manager, GIRA
- Katherine Neathercoat, head of interiors, Rolfe Judd
- Richard Sagar, managing director, Sagar Smart Homes
- Ian Williams-Slaven, senior development manager, Dukelease

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The demand for 'smart home' properties in this market has increased. And with that, there has been an increase in expectations of how the product should look and function.

Originally, smart home technology was a collection of independent systems that didn't communicate with each other. There would be a collection of terminals on the wall at different locations, which aesthetically wasn't great. And from a user interface perspective there wasn't a single terminal.

Now KNX and the single-platform technology has integrated all those systems, streamlining the visual appeal in the process. It's given us one simple interface our purchasers can work with. The flexibility of the technology has really been an advantage in this marketplace.

We install a fully integrated smart home infrastructure – heating, lighting, AV – as standard. We try to ensure that this base infrastructure is flexible enough for customers to embrace it as far they want. Smart home technology adds value on a number of levels. From our perspective it's about market expectation.

In terms of understanding the technology I think it's been a learning curve for the whole industry. The majority of the architects we work with know the technology and understand it to a certain level. That process of familiarity is increasing day on day. As the technology price point becomes more competitive we'll see it rolled out over other developments.

At Dukelease, we think about using this technology on day one, at inception stage. Here in our latest development, Artisan, we've seamlessly integrated it with great success.

Katherine Neathercoat, head of interiors, Rolfe Judd
Using KNX has been a straightforward process for us, which is key. We design a lot at this end of the market and customers expect to have these sorts of products in the apartments they're looking at. My advice is to get an expert, like Richard Sagar, on board as early as possible. This should be at space planning stage.

We focus on how end-users are going to use the space and how they want to live. It's about things like putting in an 'all off' lights button by the front door for when you leave the house. It's about trying to pre-empt how someone is going to live and use the space.

There are lots of possibilities with this technology: there's an opportunity for scene-setting with the lighting, bringing atmosphere to the space to create an absolute wow factor. And we're not just talking about light switches; it's about the music you want to hear in that space, it's about the temperature of the rooms. The technology allows us to be much more energy-efficient. The look of technology has also come on leaps and bounds over the last five to 10 years – the end plates are now very sleek and seamless.

Future-proofing is something we think about a lot through the design process. Because the technology moves on so quickly we often make provision for a retrofit of systems. This means an end-user is able to come in and choose their level of specification – some people want something quite simple whereas others want a far more sophisticated and intelligent system.

My main tip would really be to enable someone to add the level of sophistication they want. Allow enough space for things like server stacks, cupboards and AV cupboards – they're a big part of the design process. It's about thinking carefully about the end-user experience, right at the start.

Richard Sagar, managing director, Sagar Smart Homes
The key benefits of KNX technology come on a number of levels. There's the aesthetic point of view. As you can see in this apartment at Artisan, we've got single controls in each room to control all different elements of the project: lighting, heating, air conditioning, etc.

Then there's the usability factor. It's intuitive and can be adapted; the system is completely programmable to suit end-user requirements, and offers real flexibility for the building's life cycle.

'We've got single controls in each room to control all different elements of the project'

From an architect's point of view it's important to engage with a specialist installer early on in the project. If you can work with somebody who you trust and with whom you share a vision then they can bring so much to the project, whether it's aesthetics or technology.

Architects' understanding of the technology varies. Some really want to understand the detail, to build a comprehensive knowledge of the technology in the projects. Others are keen to put the ball in our court, and focus on the creative side. I think that the key way for architects to understand the technology is to work with people who they trust, who can believe in the project and their vision. Quite often we ask architects to step outside their comfort zone and then we can really help them get the most out of a project.

Consumer awareness of smart home technology has skyrocketed. Previously it was a mark of luxury to have a standout AV system in your home. Now the direction is towards more user-friendly and integrated technology that is functional and adds value to the day-to-day lives of the customer.

It's always important to have the technology conversations early in the design process, and that people focus on working together to deliver the systems – by having ongoing conversations, sharing ideas and concepts and being involved in real collaboration.

Smart home technology is a fundamental part of architecture. Every day customers are going to turn the light on; play their music. So it's critical that there's a fluid and well delivered system behind that.