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INTERNATIONAL TRENDS

Open the mobile phone application offered by a French real estate agency and point your phone at a building along the Champs-Élysées or some other street in Paris. Within seconds, you will see the property's value per square meter, superimposed over a live image of the building streamed through the phone's camera.

Energy scoreboards



There will soon be new options for consumers who want to save money by using energy more efficiently. Companies are coming up with dozens of computer-based devices that monitor electricity costs, outlet by outlet, inside a home. Intel has created a prototype for a home energy monitor that gathers information beamed to it from the appliances plugged into wall sockets, according to Joe Jensen, general manager of Intel's embedded-computing division in Chandler, Ariz.

This sleek touch screen can hang on the kitchen wall or sit on a countertop. It can show, for example, which appliances are on and what they are costing to operate, he said. The panel communicates wirelessly with the outlets, turning appliances off or on when instructed, or suggesting ways to change energy use in the house, he said. The Intel display is meant to entertain as well as instruct, Jensen said.

Family members may use its built-in camera to leave video messages for one another. Intel won't be offering the home monitors directly to consumers. It is working with manufacturers that will use its designs and its processors to run their devices, Jensen said. A high-end version could cost consumers \$400 or more, he said, but the company is working with a high-volume manufacturer on a cheaper version. He said some of the cost might eventually be underwritten by utilities that could charge a small monthly fee for the unit, as part of campaigns to conserve energy.

Tenrehte Technologies, a company based near Rochester, has developed an alternative device, called the Picowatt, that lets people use their smartphones or laptop computers, for example, to control lighting and appliances like air-conditioners. The Picowatt, which plugs into an ordinary wall outlet, is small, slightly larger than a cell phone charger. But it can communicate with the Wi-Fi router on a home network just as laptops do, said Jennifer Indovina, chief executive of Tenrehte. Plug an audio system, for example, into the Picowatt, then plug the Picowatt into a wall outlet, and it will calculate information on energy use and beam it to the router, she said. Once a Picowatt is plugged in, "it pulls the voltage to turn itself on and look for the router," Indovina said. This process should be automatic, but because so many routers are on the market, she said, the Picowatt comes with a USB thumb drive and a CD to use as a backup during installation to help routers identify its signals. Manufacturers are also making appliances that might someday be adapted to communicate directly with utilities or with smart meters when they are installed.

Anne Eisenberg
NYT News Service

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