

A smiling couple, a man and a woman, are shown from the chest up. They are both wearing light blue sweaters. The man is holding a large, plain brown cardboard box in front of him. The woman has her hand on the man's shoulder. They are both looking directly at the camera with pleasant expressions. The background is a simple, bright indoor setting with a white wall and a hint of a green plant on the left.

Real Estate

YOUR HOME | YOUR LIFE

Make Your
**Dream
Home**
a Reality

Tips and advice on:

- Home technology
- 'Green' construction
- City vs. country life
- Choosing an agent
and more!

New Home Technology

TODAY'S HOMES ARE MORE CONNECTED THAN EVER

As Americans continue to find new ways to utilize technology at home for work and play, homeowners are placing more priority on their home's ability to support their tech-savvy lifestyle.

Whether you're building a new home, buying, or just renovating your current abode, here are some worthwhile considerations for creating a tech-friendly environment.

HOME NETWORKING

When building or renovating a home, consider your computer network ahead of time. Knowing what types of Internet and television services are available in your area — or services

that may be available soon — will allow you to incorporate your home networking needs into the construction process.

Install Ethernet wiring and coaxial cables before hanging the drywall to avoid unattractive cable bundles running along your floors; place corresponding wall jacks in designated areas for televisions and computers to reduce the amount of exposed wiring. If renovating, look for opportunities to install hidden network lines and routers.

When looking

at existing homes, let your real estate agent know if this is an important feature to you.

A strong wireless signal throughout the house will increase the effectiveness of laptops, tablets and smartphones. Ask your builder to install inconspicuous Wi-Fi antennas in strategic locations. This will also give you the option of using a Wi-Fi enabled printer, allowing capable devices to print from anywhere in the home.

WALL MOUNTS

Flat screen televisions offer a great viewing experience in a sleek package. Create a low-profile presence by installing wall mounts.

In new homes, tell your builder where televisions will be mounted, in case adjustments or reinforcements need to be considered when placing wall studs. Also, plan ahead for surround-sound systems, which can be installed inside of walls.

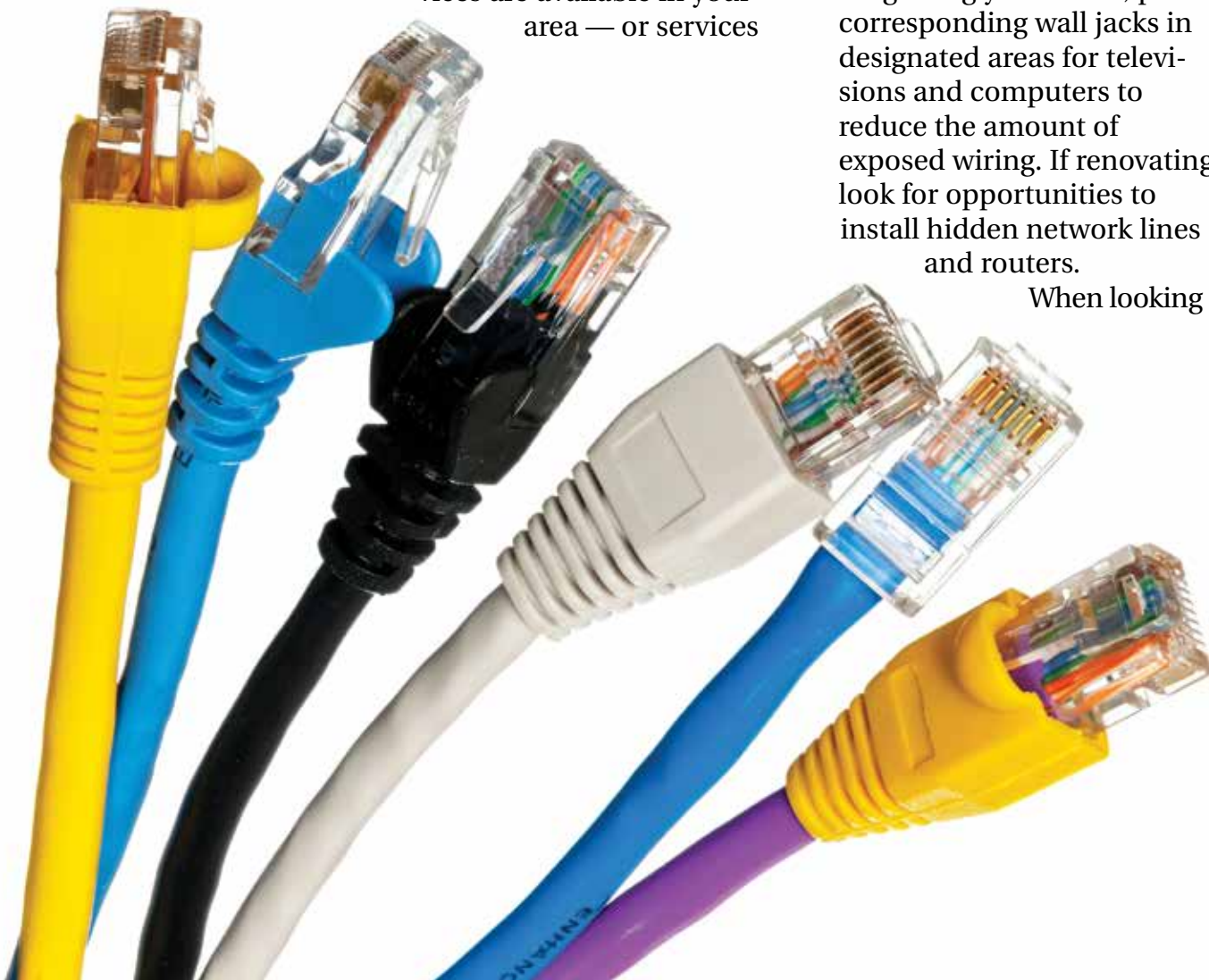
For existing homes, use a stud-finder tool to locate wall studs. If the wall studs are not ideally located, do your

homework before mounting directly to drywall. If you're not confident in this endeavor, get a professional to install the wall mounts for you. The price of installation will be far less than replacing a television that just crashed to the floor, taking a huge chunk of your wall with it.

SMART HOME SECURITY

Gone are the days of trusting someone to check your mail or housesit while you're vacationing in Cozumel. Consider wireless cameras that can record directly to your computer, or a remote server.

With the right setup, you can access security cameras from anywhere in the world, using the Internet or smartphone apps. Furthermore, homeowners today can utilize apps and/or Internet access to control their home's thermostat, lighting and other features to make the house appear occupied while they're lounging on a beach hundreds of miles away.



Building or Buying?

A LOOK AT OPTIONS FOR FINDING YOUR DREAM HOME

Are you the kind of person who knows exactly what they want in a home, or are you open to falling in love with a home that you might have never imagined?

Owning a home is one of the largest investment considerations in the lives of Americans today. Once you've decided that you're ready to own a home, the next step is determining whether to build your dream home or find your dreams in an existing home.

BUILDING YOUR DREAM HOME

The decision to build your new home may stem from the desire to live in a new or developing community, or from the allure of customizing your dream home to specifications that fit your lifestyle.

Whether your goal is to build a home with a higher resale value or living in your new home for many years to come, the building process is a big commitment.

How involved will you be in the building process? An established developer or contractor will oversee most of the build, while giving you the ability to customize various aspects of the home such as interior layouts, appliances and finishing touches like flooring, countertops and fixtures.

You may also have the option to choose certain exterior features as well. The downside may be that, while contractors have their own work force and access to discount prices on materials, you are generally subject to the costs quoted by the builder, with little room to negotiate.

Choosing a reputable builder is an important step. Try talking to other new homeowners in the area to discuss their experiences.

If you want more control of the process, you may choose to contract the work yourself.

Having at least a general knowledge of home building is crucial, as you will need to line up various work crews to perform parts of the project.

FINDING YOUR DREAM HOME

While avoiding the ordeals that can come with building a home, purchasing an existing home may not be a pain-free process either. One consideration will be whether you are looking for a home that is ready to move into, or one that may need some alterations to suit your needs.

If you're not comfortable with overseeing a renovation project, or if you have a limited income, let your real estate agent know that you're only interested in homes that are move-in ready.

Depending on your desired location, you may have to look at many homes in order to find just the right fit. The likelihood of finding a home that suits you perfectly may be slim, so it helps to keep an open mind and only set defined preferences on the features that are most important to you.

In some cases, the owner may be willing to make alterations to secure the sale. It pays to have a reputable Realtor who can help negotiate these terms for you.

You can also look for homes that have the framework to support your dreams if you're willing to put in some work after the sale. Again, whether you choose to use a contractor or do the work yourself, some knowledge of home building processes and advice from professionals will ensure that you don't get in over your head.



City vs. Country

DECIDING BETWEEN RURAL AND URBAN ISN'T EASY

Do the lights and sounds of a bustling metropolis invigorate your senses? Or, do you long for the peace and tranquility of a quiet, rural setting?

There are advantages and disadvantages when deciding between the allure of the city and the charm of country living. Here are some things to consider:

LIFESTYLE CHOICES

Many considerations can make life in a big city or suburb appealing. Business is abundant, offering quick access to products, services and employment. Public transportation options make residents less dependent on their own vehicles, often times foregoing the expense altogether. Medical care facilities abound, providing access to large hospitals, emergency clinics and specialized doctors.

Lastly, city dwellers can enjoy many recreational opportunities such as clubs, restaurants, gyms and organized sports groups.

That's not to say that residents in country settings are missing out. Rural communities typically have many of the same goods and services as urban areas, but they may not be as plentiful or as close to home.

Rural consumers can often rely on nearby cities for products not found in their community. They place less importance on having a variety of choices — instead, valuing the idea of doing business with their friends and neighbors.

HOUSING AND COST OF LIVING

Urban home owning opportunities are typically found in planned housing developments and condominiums.

Although many homes are similar in build and appearance, homeowners often customize their living space with luxury options. Furthermore, being closer to work and retailers may mean that urban residents have fewer commuting expenses.

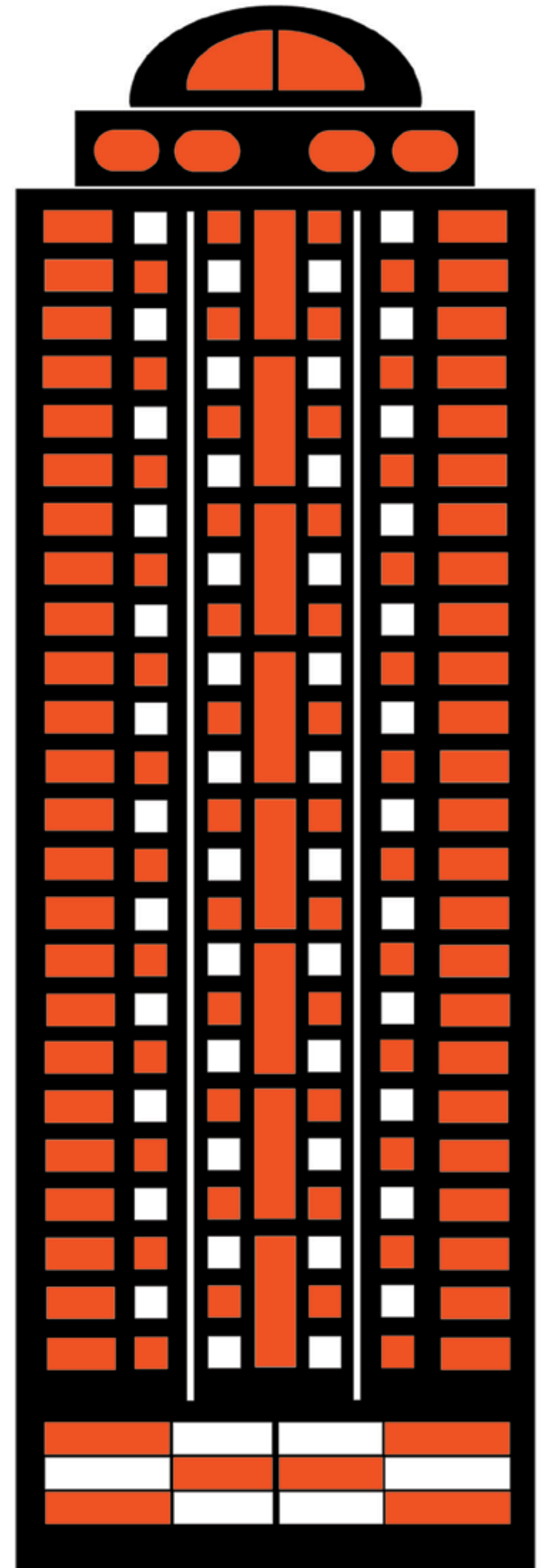
Rural buyers generally have more control of their property due to less regulation, and fewer taxes may allow builders to put more money into their home. Lower population densities also offer the opportunity to buy larger tracts of land at more affordable prices. Oftentimes, rural homeowners can reduce the tax burden of large properties by utilizing agricultural tax exemptions.

OPPORTUNITIES

Employment and education opportunities can vary between urban and rural communities.

While city dwellers have the opportunity to work in a variety of nearby industries, many country residents work in specialized fields with salaries that offset the cost of a longer commute.

Students in urban environments may have exposure to more educational opportunities, but rural school districts may have lower student-to-teacher ratios. It all depends on which city and which country area you're considering.



'Green' Options for Homes

WHETHER BUILDING, MOVING OR RENOVATING, HOMOWNERS CONSIDER THE PLANET

Regardless of your beliefs about global warming and climate change, making your new home eco-friendly makes sense financially — and it may be easier than you think. Whether your motivation is to save money or save the planet, homeowners today have many options for “going green.”

BUILD IT GREEN

One way to build an Earth-friendly home starts with the construction process itself.

Advanced framing techniques, for example, take less time to construct, increase energy efficiency and reduce your lumber costs by up to 30 percent.

Other green solutions include wool insulation, which regulates home temperature better than other insulation types and is more fire resistant. Energy efficient appliances cost less to operate, offsetting their higher upfront costs, and locating the water heater near the highest point of use will reduce pipeline energy loss.

Utilizing alternative materials such as plastic lumber and engineered wood is a great way to conserve natural resources. Look for a builder who can use reclaimed or excess materials from other jobs and who will also post a jobsite recycling plan to reduce wasted materials.

RENEWABLE ENERGY SYSTEMS

Upfront costs of solar and wind power features may seem formidable, but renewable energy systems provide long-term savings while conserving finite natural resources.

Solar irradiation levels vary across the U.S., but homeowners everywhere can supplement a significant portion of their electrical needs by utilizing solar panels on their

home's roof space. The cost of solar panels, per watt, has continued to decrease in recent years, as well as installation costs. Furthermore, the energy produced by these panels can offset their initial production costs in as little as one to four years.

The National Renewable Energy Laboratory claims that land-based wind farms alone could potentially supply America's energy needs 10 times over. Unfortunately, residential applications aren't as reliable yet.

Many factors determine how much energy a residential turbine can produce. Experts advise homeowners to research a specific site's potential for producing significant wind energy. If you live in an area with consistent wind patterns, the rewards of installing a wind turbine could far outweigh the initial investment.

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

When considering ways to make your home eco-friendly, don't forget to look outdoors. Solar ovens harness the sun's energy to cook outside, while solar lighting features keep driveways and sidewalks lit at night.

Families can have fun working together to grow their own produce and herbs in organic gardens. A quick Internet search can provide plans for “feeding” your garden year-round with kitchen compost.

In addition, rainwater collection systems capture and store water, which can be used to keep lawns and gardens beautiful, without adding to the utility bill.



Real Estate Investing

THREE WAYS INVESTORS MAKE MONEY BUYING PROPERTIES

Real estate has long been considered a stable investment opportunity. As the economic thunderclouds begin to part, hopefully making way for sunny days again, many folks are willing to give real estate investment a chance. Here are some viable ways to make money in real estate.

FLIPPING HOUSES

You don't have to possess Herculean strength to flip a house. Contrary to notions derived from reality television, flipping properties can require very little capital and a relatively low amount of work.

Stated simply, real estate flipping is the process of finding a motivated home seller, negotiating and signing a contract to buy the property for significantly less than market value, and then selling the contract to another buyer (who is typically interested in improving the property) for more than you initially negotiated.

By having a network of potential buyers already established, house flippers often sell the property quickly without having much — if any — of their own money tied into the transaction.

The key is having that network of buyers lined up ahead of time to minimize the risk and time involved with the transaction.

REHABBING HOUSES

Okay, now we're talking about the projects you've seen on television. House rehabbing is pretty straightforward.

Much like house flipping, investors are looking for houses that they can negotiate to buy for less than market value. However, in this case, they also intend to make improvements to the property in order to sell it for considerably more than they have invested in it.

Some knowledge of home repair is helpful. Many investors choose to hire someone else to do the work, while others do much of it themselves. Either way, you'll need to know how to identify issues and estimate repair costs, since this will be factored into a profitable sale price.

Successful house rehabbers can often make sizable profits without a lot of risk, provided they can sell the property before they must make any payments on the mortgage. Good project estimation and speedy repair skills are key.

PROPERTY RENTAL

Though it requires more capital up front, many investors favor buying single-family homes as rental properties.

If necessary, the investor will make improvements and then rent or lease the home, creating a monthly revenue stream and a few decent tax deductions each year. Furthermore, a substantial profit can be made if the owner decides to sell the property later down the road.

Keep in mind that owning rental property makes you a landlord. You'll need a sound rental contract with your tenant, and you'll be responsible for making repairs that the tenants are not contractually obligated to administer themselves.

If you're not comfortable being a landlord, talk to your real estate agent about how to find a property management company that can do many of the day-to-day landlord tasks for a monthly fee.



Are You Ready to Buy?

SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE MAKING THE PURCHASE

Legendary comedian and satirist George Carlin once quipped, “The meaning of life is trying to find a place for your stuff.” When you’ve run out of space and need more stuff, your next step is deciding if you want to rent or own that space. But how do you know if you’re ready to buy?

WHAT CAN YOU AFFORD?

Before applying for a home loan, it’s helpful to know how much financing you may need.

Determine the features you’re looking for and browse listings in your area to get an idea about home prices. You can also contact your local appraisal entity or a real estate agent to get a history of appraisal values for any particular homes you’re interested in.

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

If you make it through the financing process and find or build a new

home without running into any complications, you’re well ahead of the curve. Ultimately though, unexpected events can wreak havoc on homeowners.

When you have a landlord, you don’t have to worry about the cost of home repairs and maintenance. Getting financed for a home loan with a payment you can afford is

great, but ask yourself if you’ll have the additional resources to address issues such as broken water lines, electrical shorts or other problems.

How much will you pay for insurance to protect your home against theft or natural disasters? Also, keep in mind that homeowners are responsible for paying taxes to various city and county entities.

You can contact your local tax office to get an estimate of the yearly taxes for an area, or a specific home. Furthermore, most utility companies

will provide the same service to help you determine a monthly utility estimate.

IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT THE HOUSE

New homeowners face many incidental expenses that may not be factored into their initial purchasing budget.

Will you need to hire a moving service? What about new furniture and appliances, or renovations to the house? Will there be activation fees for utilities or amenities such as telephone, Internet and television service? If your new home has a lawn, will you buy the equipment to manage it yourself, or pay for a lawn service?

Also, many neighborhoods may have mandatory homeowner associations with yearly dues. Talk to friends or family members about their experiences with moving into a new home. This will help you determine what other expenses you might need to plan for.

Ultimately, you need to go into the home buying process with your eyes wide open. A local real estate agent can be a great place to start if you think you’re ready to make the jump to home ownership.



The Right Professional

When searching for their new home, most buyers will choose to work with a real estate professional. Finding the right person for the job will make the process as efficient and stress-free as possible. Here are a few things to consider.

WHO DOES THE AGENT WORK FOR?

First and foremost, real estate agents have an obligation to work in the best interest of their clients.

This is important to remember when sharing confidential information such as how much money you're offering for a home, versus what you'd actually be willing to pay. If the agent is working with the seller, he or she may feel obligated to share this information with their client, effectively nullifying your strategy.

Before beginning your search, find an agent that will work for you — the buyer. This will ensure that they are trying to get the best deal for you, not the seller.

INTERVIEW SEVERAL AGENTS

A common mistake buyers make is to accept working with the first agent that greets them at an agency, or immediately using an agent recommended by someone else.

When meeting with an agent, think of it as an interview. Come prepared with questions you have about the buying process or about how they would handle potential situations.

Ask the agent if real estate is their full-time job and how long they've been in the industry. How many clients do they work with at once, and



PHOTO: MOODBOARD / YAYMICRO.COM

what is their average time for completing a sale? How accessible will they be to you, and how much of the transaction will they be involved with?

If you're not comfortable with the agent's answers, personality or communication style, thank them for their time and continue your search. If the first agent you meet seems like a good fit, let them know that you're interested in working with them, but

you'd like to talk to a few other people first. Make a point to interview at least three agents, making sure you've found the best person to work with.

The home buying process takes time, and it's a big commitment. Regardless of how knowledgeable an agent may be about the industry or a particular market, problems can arise if you can't establish a comfortable,

trusting partnership from the beginning.

CAN THE AGENT IDENTIFY WITH YOU?

Choose an agent who can think like a buyer. Having someone on your side that understands your individual situation and goals will go a long way toward getting the best deal possible.