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Technology
Welcome to the Hothouse

After the success of heated floors, makers are pushing radiant everything

By KATE GOODLOE and ELLEN GAMERMAN
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Muhamed "Mo" Zejcirovic doesn't exactly need heated floors in his kitchen, dining room, living room, family room and all three bathrooms, given that he lives in Laguna Hills, Calif. But he considers the \$8,000 spent on radiant heating -- including a heated bathroom mirror and three heated towel racks -- "100% necessary." He's tired, the electrician says, of shuffling across his fancy marble floors in his ratty slippers because the stone was too cold for bare feet.

Earlier this fall, Mr. Zejcirovic was talking to a contractor who had installed towel warmers in a home nearby when a light bulb went off. Why stop at towels, he thought, when he could heat the rest of the home? Now, he says, the floors are a toasty 82 degrees. One casualty of the new fixtures: his slippers. "I threw them out," he says. "My wife's very happy about that."

HOTHOUSE



See a graphic of the areas of your house that can be kept warm with radiant heat.

It started with floors and towel racks. Then driveways got the hot treatment. Now, everything from windows to

recliners is starting to sizzle. New shower walls that look unremarkable on the outside are hiding special plastic tubing that can ratchet up the heat -- even as the hot water's already making the room steamy. Contractors say they're installing heated kitchen countertops to keep hands warm while cutting vegetables. There are hot mattress pads with dual controls (he can sleep at 80 degrees, while she turns up the dial to 100), heated slippers and even heated door mats (they weigh 24 pounds but melt snow on contact).

New technologies are fueling the hothouse trend. Heated windows have a transparent film that conducts electricity, warming the glass to a balmy 100 degrees so families can comfortably gaze outside together on snowy nights. "Comfort

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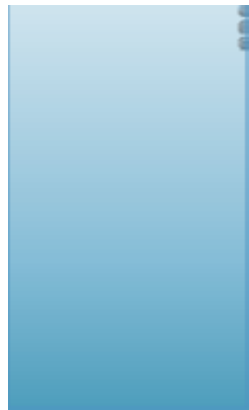
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brings you closer," read ads by Thermique, the company that makes the windows, which can be linked to the home's heating system.

Improvements in design mean heated driveways and floors can be installed by homeowners, with just a final hookup by an electrician. Watts Radiant, a manufacturer in Springfield, Mo., that sells radiant panels at Home Depot and Lowe's, recently produced a 20-minute how-to video for customers. It shows a couple embedding electrical wires into a floor and programming controls that regulate the system's heat output.

Dan Chiles, vice president for marketing at Watts Radiant, estimates 30% of the people who purchase his products are do-it-yourselfers. Once someone buys a radiant floor, they're more likely to move on to other surfaces, he says: "All of a sudden, the imagination lets go."

A decade ago, Dan Foley, an Alexandria, Va., mechanical contractor, says he figured out he could sell more heat in bathrooms by taking the radiant systems up the wall -- literally. He took the water-based tubing systems he'd been using on the floors and extended them vertically behind shower walls. Even though customers bathe in 110-degree water, Mr. Foley says temperatures of walls in extensively tiled showers can stay near 50 degrees -- "uncomfortably cold." Mr. Foley, who specializes in custom homes from \$5 million to \$50 million, says he installs preheated showers about five times a year. The feature "kind of puts you in a cocoon," he says.

The new hothouse builds on the popularity of radiantly heated flooring, which had been growing steadily for more than a decade, hitting \$2.8 billion in sales in 2004, according to the Radiant Panel Association, a trade group. Last year, growth started to level off, a likely result, says the group, of a slowdown in new construction, where radiant heating is most often installed. Initially, the systems were water-based, but in recent years, electric systems suited for smaller spaces began to take hold, using increasingly durable cables that can now withstand 250 to 300 degrees -- enabling them to be installed in asphalt driveways, which are poured at around 250 degrees.

Some of these products are a stretch for people. Tom Silva first came upon heated kitchen countertops while renovating his own kitchen in Reading, Mass. The general contractor for the TV series "This Old House" thought they would be especially nice for dinner parties, since most people wind up congregating in the kitchen (though he admits he's melted a few sticks of butter by leaving them out on the 62-degree counters overnight). But when Mr. Silva, who also runs a construction company, brings up heated counters with his customers, some don't see the point: "Not everybody takes me up on it."

While some makers promise the technology can reduce heating bills by about 30%, many are simply pitching the toastiness factor. CosySoles makes microwaveable slippers that stay warm for up to 45 minutes, promising "freedom from frozen feet forever!" Jacuzzi in January will launch a line of drawer-style towel warmers that can fit under a sink or inside a cabinet, while Toto's latest line of heated toilet seats can hit 97 degrees with the click of a remote control.

Martinson-Nicholls, an Ohio distributor of floor products, this year began manufacturing a

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line of heated floor mats. In the past two months, the company says it has received \$300,000 in orders for the mats, which can weigh 24 pounds and cost \$199. "We think people are going to get inventive with it," says Dan Ruminski, company president, adding that they're ideal for placing in front of an outside grill for winter cookouts.

When Jason Nielsen hears his neighbors crank up their snowblowers at 5 a.m. this winter, he'll turn over in bed and keep sleeping. The real-estate agent from Emigration Canyon, Utah, says he was tired of putting on three layers every time it snowed and spending two predawn hours shoveling, so he and his wife spent \$40,000 to install a heating system in 2,000 square feet of his driveway. Now they're also trying to get their bathroom and kitchen floors heated before winter hits: "We thought, 'Might as well.'"

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