

LIVING

## Panic suites: security for the super-rich

Wealthy homeowners are taking no chances. As well as fitting the latest security tech, many won't even look at a house if the floorplans have been posted online

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It isn't as easy as it looks, being rich. Once money worries dissipate, safety concerns take over. That's why the wealthy are going to ever greater lengths to protect themselves from career criminals out to burgle their homes.

“At an insurance seminar I went to recently, they said that glossy magazines like Hello! were the most subscribed-to magazines in UK prisons — and I don't think it's because they can't get hold of the Love Island gossip,” says Simon Giddins, managing director of Blackstone Consultancy, a private intelligence and security firm that stakes out potential threats around the homes of high-net-worth individuals. A former military man who left to work for Falklands veteran Tim Spicer, he offers a preliminary consultation with his team from £1,500. For that fee, he'll scout the perimeter of your property for sight lines into the home, check for break-in weak spots and run a “digital scrape” to see how much information a burglar can glean about your home through online searches and social media.

These security concerns are behind a recent mass exodus of prime properties from the open market, says Tim Macpherson, head of London residential at the Mayfair office of Carter Jonas estate agency. He estimates 40% of his homes are “off-market” because high-net-worth buyers often veto any property that’s ever been listed on online portals such as Rightmove or Zoopla, so key access points can’t be discovered on floorplans.



78% of burglars use Facebook, Twitter or Foursquare to find out if the house is empty

“Vendors are often extremely conscious of property photography,” Macpherson says. “It’s common for the super-rich to have a Picasso or a Francis Bacon on display. It’s almost like a sweet shop for sophisticated thieves.”

### **Watch what you post**

Social media is the newest weapon in a burglar’s arsenal. A study by the doorbell specialist Friedland found almost 78% of burglars use Facebook, Twitter or Foursquare to find out if the house is empty. Another survey, by the interiors firm Hillarys, shows one in 12 British homeowners have reported a burglary after they posted about a holiday on social media. Announcing your absence online also invalidates many home insurance policies, so victims can’t claim compensation.

The home security start-up Boundary, which makes sensors (from £26) and intruder alarms (a central smart hub starts from £223), advises holidaymakers to resist the urge to post their beach snaps until they get home. Robin Knox, its chief executive, says: “Astoundingly, many burglaries are committed by someone the victim knows, so a potential thief could be a Facebook

friend.” For those still planning a trip away, Knox recommends installing a timer to turn lights on and off, and fitting external doors and windows with deadlocks.



A survey of more than 1,000 UK homeowners by the entry door specialist Pirnar found that 38% of households had installed security gadgets

### **Smart moves**

While buyers and sellers are retreating from the virtual world, homeowners are investing in smart tech to deter invaders. A survey of more than 1,000 UK homeowners by the entry door specialist Pirnar found that 38% of households had installed security gadgets, with three-quarters of them citing security concerns as the reason. The remaining 25% said they intended to invest in it in the next six months.

Smartphone-connected cameras were the most popular choice, found in 38% of the homes surveyed, closely followed by video doorbells. Keys are obsolete in one in six of those surveyed, with homeowners switching to keypads, apps and fobs instead. At the high end, biometric retina and fingerprint scanners are commonplace, say prime property specialists.

### **An extra pair of eyes**

Wealthy homeowners are spending as much as £60,000 a year employing housekeepers and security guards to watch over properties that might only be occupied for a few months a year. “This is frankly de rigueur in London,” says Marcus Bradbury-Ross, who specialised in valuing properties over £10m before he co-founded the London Resolution buying agency.

However, smart tech is now so advanced that it is replacing backroom staff. Bold & Reeves, a property management company based in Mayfair, has developed a cutting-edge monitoring service that can detect minute changes in air quality, water pressure and noise levels. It can even alert absent homeowners to the presence of legionella bacteria and take a pH reading of the swimming pool. It took about three months to develop and is being rolled out to some 50 of the firm's properties. "I predict there will come a point when this will become so normal that insurers will say, 'if you have this sort of monitoring system in place, then your premium will go down,'" says the managing director, Bill Shipton.

### **It's a jungle out there**

Though cybercrime is currently in the limelight, kidnappings are still a threat, particularly for the children of wealthy individuals. Surprisingly, plants can come to the rescue. "Intelligent landscaping", as it's known in the security trade, can protect rural homes where large grounds render technological solutions impractical.

Giddins says: "Think of your home like an onion, and approach each layer one by one to deter, impede and detect intruders." Ditches can stop people driving in, while fences, trees and shrubbery can interrupt a line of sight into the property — and pack a thorny punch. He recommends blackthorn as a plant that looks attractive but is capable of roughing up an unwelcome visitor.

### **No entry**

The next layer of the onion is the entrance. Armoured doors have sold well in Kensington and Chelsea, with many companies cropping up to service this need around the royal borough. One, Pirnar, makes custom front doors with fingerprint scanners, facial recognition and laminated glass that holds together if shattered. Andrew Osurkovas, a sales manager at Pirnar, says "investing in doors that have this type of technology built into a more subtle design is a better option" than having more noticeable tech such as cameras or video doorbells outside, which advertises the wealth of the owner.

Modern homes with floor-to-ceiling windows may offer breathtaking views from the inside, but they also give outsiders an eyeful of your possessions and security arrangements. Switchable or privacy glass is the solution, turning from transparent to opaque at the touch of a button.

### **Safe spaces**

In the most high-risk properties, entire floors have been turned into panic rooms. "Some properties will have whole sections that are hidden away behind a secret door," says Simon Garcia, director of the property consultancy Quintessentially Estates. "Someone walking around the house would have no idea that these rooms, which are set behind remotely lockable fire- and bulletproof doors, even exist." These lock-down suites are often placed between the master bedroom, dressing room and children's bedrooms, and barriers are erected before bedtime, says Bradbury-Ross. "They are more like holding cells for a short amount of time."

These rooms should be stocked with a day's worth of food and water, accessible CCTV, a separate phone line, emergency lighting as well as toilet and medical facilities. To make sure

your beloved sports car survives the siege, you can now lock it down in a custom-built metal cage — cheekily referred to as “Lambo cages” in the trade.

While the boys in blue are negotiating traffic, it’s up to duplicate security features to confuse burglars. “Often our clients have two safes — one ‘duress safe’ for their £10,000 diamond necklace and a real one for their £100,000 necklace. It’s about distraction and fast rewards, to get the intruder out of your property as quickly as possible.”

If this distraction technique is out of your price bracket, there is sure to be a more affordable solution coming soon. Now premium home security has conquered the mansions and penthouses, it’s infiltrating Islington’s Georgian terraces. “We are increasingly dealing with more middle-class people,” Giddins says. “As our higher-net-worth clients get more savvy, the threat is being displaced to middle-class households, to people who holiday well and have two kids in prep school. They don’t consider themselves wealthy, but they are also at risk.”