

home truths

a new year is a time to reflect, a chance to take stock of where we've been and where we're going. These past 12 months have been brutal for homeowners, with the housing market softening to long-unseen lows. We know our property values will likely bounce back, but in times like this, it's important to remember that our homes are more than just assets in our financial portfolios.

J. Walker Smith has spent decades tracking the elusive definitions of home. President of Yankelovich, a trend forecasting firm, Smith gets paid big bucks by businesses to predict what consumers will want—and he's an expert in the way Americans have historically thought about their houses. For example, he encapsulated the booming '80s as a time when many homeowners viewed their residences as showplaces for their possessions, while he noted the '90s were an era where widespread economic woes led to "cocooning" and "nesting"—retreating inside our homes to be alone and give ourselves the pampering we weren't getting elsewhere.

What's he seeing now? Despite the sense of anxiety created by the war in Iraq, terrorism, and waves of corporate and political scandals, Smith feels Americans remain optimistic. While we await better days, we're "hiving"—using our homes as safe bases while seeking connection with the outside world. We're creating physical places in and around our houses where we can spend time with family, friends, and neighbors, including "great rooms, media rooms, and porches," as well as tapping into social networking Web sites to reach out virtually.

In the future, people will increasingly yearn for substance in



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their domestic life. Smith believes that substance will continue to be rooted in connections with others, but enriched with what he dubs "interactive experiences"—customized, one-of-a-kind exchanges facilitated through the use of technologies not yet invented. Although Smith admits he's not sure how this'll play out, it's safe to say Web sites like YouTube and MySpace point to what will come: New ways to bring a global gang of friends into our living spaces on demand, instantly, and in multiple audio and visual dimensions. "The next frontier will be creating and delivering these experiences," says Smith. The ensuing effect? A conflation of home and community, as the two become more entwined and synonymous than ever before. —Julie Taraska