

SHEDS

Housing Works

BACKYARD SHEDS traditionally house lawn mowers and garbage cans. But in the insane California real-estate market, where many families can't afford to buy bigger homes, gussied-up sheds are housing something else; people. At The Shed Shop, in Fremont, sales of "room-addition alternatives" have tripled in the last five years. Instead of spending big bucks and living with months of sawdust for a traditional addition, homeowners hire the firm, or rivals like Tuff Shed, to build customized wooden, shingled backyard structures. Sizes range from 4 feet by 8 feet to 12 feet by 16 feet for an average price of \$3,100; construction takes just a day or two. Customers then



GIMME SHELTER: Souped-up sheds are the latest home improvement

hire contractors (or do it themselves) to add insulation, dry-wall, carpeting and electricity. Some buyers opt for air conditioning, vaulted ceilings and

skylights—but most building codes restrict plumbing. Linda Rugg, of Albany, spent \$13,000 on her husband's shed-office. "It feels very much like a little cottage," she says.

Like Rugg, most customers use the sheds for home offices, art studios or hobby areas, but some space-starved families are using them as spare bedrooms or guest rooms. Even though building codes often prohibit spending the night out there, lots of people do it anyway, says Albany planning manager David Dowswell. Who'd have thought sheds could be so chic?

—DANIEL MCGINN

PHONES Call for Chaos?

Nov. 24 shall henceforth be known as WNP Day. That's the deadline, seven years in the making, for carriers like Verizon and T-Mobile to conform with the FCC's longstanding "wireless number portability" directive. It will allow America's 145 million mobile-phone owners to keep their numbers when switching cell-phone companies.

But not all parties involved may get what they bargained for. Consumers seeking greener call-rate pastures are likely to find sales staffs overwhelmed with questions about the policy. They could also encounter high charges for switching, as carriers try to pass on the \$1 billion they spent adapting networks. (Sprint PCS and AT&T Wireless are already adding small monthly charges to all customers.) The carriers themselves could face an avalanche of defections. One of the few models is Hong Kong:

when it allowed number portability in 1999, one in 10 phone owners started swapping services each month. The U.S. carriers now seem resigned to the new rule, with some concentrating on lobbying to prevent the FCC from also allowing customers to move numbers from mobile phones to land lines and vice versa. An ironic possible outcome: a law meant to foster competition actually drives small mobile-phone operators out of business. —BRAD STONE



SPEAK EASY: Keep your digits

the meal. How ludicrous! Since 1979, Tim and Nina Zagat (that's Za-GAT) have been publishing their best-selling bur-gundy books, compiling thousands of reviews from layman gourmets around the world. In New York alone, their annual restaurant handbook moves 650,000 copies, outselling the dictionary and the Bible. And now—thanks to online surveying and a massive database—they've ventured into new territory: nightlife, shopping, golf courses and Broadway shows. Last Wednesday they announced a business traveler's guide to wireless Internet access. And next week they'll unveil their most ambitious project yet: "A Zagat Music Guide to the 1,000 Top Albums of All Time." "Music's not my area," says Tim Zagat. "I'm learning lots of new vocabulary. Like 'burning' a CD. Our reviewers do lots of that." (Although music purists might find the guide "overly simplistic" with "hard-to-fathom rankings," most casual listeners will agree: "It's



WHAT'S LEFT? Zagat rates it all

GUIDES

Everyone's A Critic

IF THERE'S ANYTHING WE critics hate, it's letting other people make up their own minds. Maybe that's why we're so threatened by the ever-expanding Zagat empire—with its charmingly populist message that anyone who eats in a restaurant is qualified to review

the coolest thing since hi-fi.) What's next? "I only do subjects people are passionate about," Zagat says. "I wouldn't do cars. But I would do sports cars." Right now, they're working on a series of travel books, and on making city-specific versions of their popular nightlife guides. "Well, not to Kansas City," Zagat says. "That'd be a very thin book." They'll take over the world. Just not Kansas City.

—KATE STROUP