

Homes with elevators

In-home lifts take off as a necessary convenience - and the latest high-end 'toy'

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Jeanie and Alan Sacks wouldn't think of lugging heavy suitcases, laundry or bags of groceries up endless flights of stairs to get to their high-rise apartment in Fort Lee, N.J. They rely on an elevator.

Yet, Jeanie says she never considered asking her architect to include an elevator in the design for the two-story 4,600-square-foot oceanfront dream house the couple built in Amagansett four years ago.

Thankfully, her husband did.

Alan, a pediatric dentist in his early 60s, realized the postmodern's "upside down" design - with the living room, kitchen and master bedroom on the second floor to take advantage of the sweeping water views - would require the couple to climb more than 20 steps, several times a day, to get from the first-floor garage to the second-floor living quarters. So he insisted they add an elevator in the design, even if it meant giving up space in his master bedroom closet.

"I thought it was a ridiculous idea at first - I mean, who has an elevator in a two-story house? - but it's been one of the best decisions we've ever made," admits Jeanie, a retired women's wear fashion designer in her mid-50s. "The truth is we're aging baby boomers. It's no problem for us to take the stairs for exercise now, but you never know what the future holds. And we've found that the elevator has been a necessity when we've had elderly or wheelchair-bound visitors."

The Sacks, who spent about \$25,000 on their elevator and installation, have joined a growing number of affluent homeowners who view a residential elevator as an upscale appliance or high-end amenity.

According to a 2003-04 survey conducted by the National Association of Home Builders, 25 percent of those surveyed who had homes valued at more than \$1 million listed elevators as desirable or

essential. Overall, 8 percent of respondents deemed elevators as desirable, up from 4 percent surveyed in 2001.

"It's still a small number, but it shows the demand for elevators has doubled. And if that number were to double again, it would be a significant trend," explains Stephen Melman, director of economic services for the Washington, D.C.-based trade group.

Although New York State does not track the number of residential elevators, there's a consensus among elevator dealers and home builders that the market is growing beyond homeowners with disabilities.

"I'd say about 70 or 80 percent of our business is now the luxury market. People are future-proofing their home. The elevator is for their convenience now, but it may become a necessity later," says Wally Teich, president of All-Island Elevator Co. in Hampton Bays.

Up until 15 years ago, a residential elevator "was not one of the amenities on the radar of most people. But back then, homeowners also weren't spending \$8,000 on a Sub-Zero refrigerator," says Dave Russo, president of Access Elevator Ltd., an elevator retailer in Farmingdale.

Russo - whose business has grown by 20 percent a year in the past four years - cites a "trickle down" effect for the increased interest in elevators. More manufacturers have entered the marketplace (National Wheel-O-Vator Co. and Waupaca Elevator Co. are two of the largest), and once cumbersome, jerky systems have been replaced with higher-quality, quieter and more affordable designs, which architects are promoting to their high-end customers.

"When you're building a house that costs in the millions, putting in a \$25,000 or \$35,000 elevator is pocket change and gives a homeowner a competitive resale edge," notes Teich.

Elizabeth Naclerio, a Bridgehampton-based builder whose niche is building 8,000- to 12,000-square-foot homes in the \$4 million to \$6 million range for retiring baby boomers, says she started including elevators in her home designs about eight years ago.

"Toys sell houses, and an elevator is a functional toy," she says.

Naclerio's own 9,000-square-foot, pond-front home features a \$30,000

elevator with a raised-panel mahogany interior, recessed lights and an oak floor that matches the flooring throughout the house.

"I'm 60 and I have an 89-year-old mother who visits. I couldn't live without it now. With an elevator, you're not crippled to one level of living," she says.

Not all elevator customers are baby boomers, Russo points out. Two years ago, Access Elevator installed a four-stop elevator in the 6,000-square-foot Brookville home of Kamran Ghazvini, a 42-year-old jeweler and home builder, and his wife, Lucy, a 38-year-old homemaker.

Cachet or convenience?

The Ghazvinis admit they liked the cachet of being the first "kids" on the block to have an elevator. The cab of their \$33,000 elevator was customized with mahogany trim and raised panels, and has a granite floor and "fancy lighting."

"It's such a convenience. I can take the elevator up to the attic and load the cab up with all my Christmas ornaments and huge Tupperware storage containers," says Lucy, adding that the couple's live-in maid finds it handy when carting laundry up from the basement.

Although the couple has no physical limitations, Kamran found having an elevator helpful last year when his mother, who was recuperating from knee surgery, visited from Iran. As a builder, he says there's no question that he'll include an elevator in all of his custom homes, including the 8,600-square-foot chateau-style home he's building next door.

Installing an elevator in new construction is the way to go, Teich explains.

"The cost of building an elevator shaft and pit are minimal when a builder is already framing a new house and pouring the basement slab," he says, noting that it usually adds less than \$5,000 to the overall elevator cost.

He says homeowners who want to retrofit an existing home with an elevator should expect to spend an additional \$10,000 to \$20,000 in construction costs, bringing the total cost of construction and elevator

to \$40,000 to \$50,000. And to make room for the elevator, homeowners should be prepared to lose some interior space.

The size of a standard cab is 12 square feet (3 feet by 4 feet), although larger, 15-square-foot cabs are becoming more common. Space for the elevator shaft, which must be several inches wider than the cab, also must be considered.

"Putting an elevator in an existing home is a more complicated process, but it's doable," says Teich. "Some people build the shaft outside the house and pop holes in the wall so they don't lose any floor space. But you need excavating work, an architect and contractor, and permits to do it."

David Kepner, a home builder and land developer, is working on a subdivision project in Quogue for 16 single-family detached homes for adults 62 and older. The 2,200-square-foot homes are expected to cost \$800,000 to \$1 million and will feature a floor plan with a closet spacious enough to retrofit an elevator for future use.

Kepner, however, believes many people will choose to install an elevator from the start.

Teich says most in-shaft residential elevators on the market today are automatic; have a 950-pound capacity (big enough for four people or two people and a wheelchair); include up to six stops (three is the most common); and can travel up to 50 feet at an average speed of 40 feet a minute.

There's a debate over which drive system is better - Russo prefers an oil-powered "hydraulic system" because it's quieter and has an emergency lowering valve, but Teich prefers an "overhead winding drum" system because it's a self-contained unit and doesn't require a separate maintenance room.

Customizing the cab

While standard cabs come with basic melamine panels or plastic laminate finishes, homeowners can upgrade to hardwood veneers and raised or recessed panels in cherry, hickory, alder and other premium woods. The cab's handrails, lights, floor, ceiling and gates also can be customized. Even the car operating panel, phone box, and hall calls can be personalized with a homeowner's name or initials. Teich says many homeowners order a basic cab and then let their contractor

customize it on site to match the interior of the house.

Jeff Tennent, owner of Northern Lifts Elevator in Sag Harbor, installs about 30 residential elevators a year on Long Island and upstate New York. Some of his more "over-the-top" projects include installing a three-story glass elevator (to the tune of \$70,000, plus construction costs), and cabs made entirely of stainless steel with swirled finishes. He also designed an Adirondack-style cab crafted from Douglas fir logs, complete with twig mirrors.

Windows and glass panels also are gaining popularity, he says.

"It used to be that tennis courts, home theaters, and indoor and outdoor pools, and Jacuzzis were the hot items," Teich says. "Now, there's a groundswell for elevators. These days, homes are becoming more and more like hotels."

SAFETY FIRST

It's a question that Wally Teich of All-Island Elevator Co. hears from every prospective customer: "What happens if I get stuck in the elevator and can't get out? "

"The first thing a customer needs to know is how to use the elevator properly and to understand what can go wrong and how to deal with it," he says. "If someone was to get stuck, at the most it would be for a minute or two - so they shouldn't panic. "

Today's elevators come equipped with a variety of safety features. When choosing an elevator, homeowners should look for certain features:

A backup battery system that allows the elevator to operate during a power outage.

Safety interlocks on interior doors that prevent doors from opening unless the elevator is at the appropriate landing - so you can't fall down the shaft

A phone box (Teich says the elevator phone should be tied to a direct phone line, not one that operates on electricity. Otherwise, a battery backup for the phone system should be installed.)

An emergency stop button, emergency lighting and an alarm button

("One of my customers who is skittish also keeps an air horn in the elevator," he says.)

Equipment that fully complies with the American Society for Mechanical Engineers A17.1 safety code. (The National Elevator Industry Inc. reports seeing an increase in the number of child fatalities when the private resident elevator does not comply with the code.)

Dave Russo of Access Elevator Ltd. recommends installing a "key lockout feature" to restrict an elevator's usage, mainly from young children who view the elevator as a toy.

"Elevators are complex pieces of equipment that must be inspected and maintained on a regular basis," says Edward Donoghue, administrator for the National Elevator Industry Inc.

Russo recommends an inspection and service every six months to a year.

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