

Passenger Elevators Invade Suburban Homes

By Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan

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Rhonda Fine's morning ritual generally goes like this: Get out of bed, throw on sweats and wake up the dog for a walk. Pretty standard stuff except for one more step: She pushes a button in her third-floor bedroom for an elevator to take them to the ground floor.

Some house-hunters insist on gourmet kitchens, others on antique moldings or sprawling backyards. Now comes a new, even more ostentatious status symbol for the condo, townhouse and suburban home: the passenger elevator.

This isn't just for the very old or the very rich. Nor is it just for those in very big homes: Elevator vendors say even some people in two-story homes are buying them.

Part of the interest results from the introduction of a smaller, less-expensive model that is much more practical for a single-family home. Called a pneumatic vacuum elevator, it was developed two years ago specifically for the residential market. A basic two-story or three-story pneumatic version will cost \$20,000 to \$28,000, including installation. Standard lifts run from \$15,000 to \$100,000.

Both the pneumatic variety and their more-expensive counterparts are increasingly enticing a variety of homeowners, from people who are too lazy to lug the laundry or the kids' sports equipment up the stairs, to those who think the addition is a smart investment that will increase the value of their property.



This **pneumatic vacuum elevator** uses suction to lift passengers.

Then there are aging baby boomers whose interests run to both fashion and convenience: Elevators are cool contraptions -- and it would be nice not to have to take those stairs when they get a little older. Other buyers are retirees who view them as a practical way to stay in their multistory homes.

When Ms. Fine noticed her 13-year-old dog, Max, was having trouble climbing stairs last year, she decided to purchase a Miami townhouse with an elevator just for him. "My children are 17 and 19 -- they can climb the stairs," says Ms. Fine, vice president of a home-design firm. But, "Max is part of my family and he sleeps upstairs with me."

The increase in sales of residential elevators is outpacing sales for apartment and office buildings at some companies, though sales overall are far smaller. In the past three years, Otis Elevator Co., one of the biggest elevator-makers in the U.S., has seen sales for individual homes or condos jump about 12% to 15% a year, compared with 3% to 5% a

year for office and apartment buildings.

"Elevators used to be a very high-end thing," says David Russo, vice president of Farmingdale, N.Y., elevator retailer Access Elevator Ltd., which has seen residential elevator sales grow 25% a year in the last five years. "But now they're more of a swimming pool-type of item."

The pneumatic lifts usually fit only one or two people and can be installed more quickly and inexpensively than regular elevators because they don't require a shaft or a control room to house hydraulic machinery. They also take up less space.

The contraption basically consists of a tall, see-through tube, an enclosed cab, and an 11-inch pump box at the top. It moves up and down using the force of suction. "We've had a lot of yuppie customers who just think it's cool," says Dawn O'Connor of Daytona Elevator in New Smyrna Beach, Fla., which has installed about two a month since it began selling pneumatic elevators last year.

The old-fashioned variety can be considerably more expensive. Otis, for example, sells elevators with marble or oak paneling that can cost as much as \$100,000. Installation, including building a shaft, can set you back an additional \$20,000 to \$30,000. Also you have to hire an architect to draw up plans for installation. Then, once the elevator is



installed, you may have to get a permit for it, depending on where you live, which could cost an additional \$200 to \$1,000. In municipalities that have elevator inspectors, an inspection is required, too, which could tack on a few hundred dollars more.

Despite the expense, the National Association of Home Builders has noticed a growing interest in elevators in its yearly survey of homeowners, especially those with expensive homes. Last year, 25% of those surveyed who had homes valued at over \$1 million listed elevators as "desirable" or "essential." In 2001, only 8% of owners in an equivalent category said an elevator was a must or a want, says Gopal Ahluwalia, staff vice president for research.



In fact developers, sensing an expanding market, are starting to put more in newly constructed homes in the first place. Waupaca Elevator Co., of Appleton, Wis., says 80% to 85% of its growth in single-family home elevator sales are to builders who are putting them in new homes. Some developers are building single-family homes with elevators as a way to maximize square footage on smaller plots of land. KB Home, for example, is currently building a set of four-story townhouses in Playa Vista, Calif., that come with elevators that extend from the garage to the fourth floor. Tom Di Prima, president of KB Home's greater Los Angeles division, says the idea is to make multistory homes attractive to a wider net of homebuyers. "Some people are not going to look at it if they don't want to climb three sets of stairs every day -- even young people," he says.

Having an elevator in the home can bring hassles as well as convenience, starting of course with those who fear getting stuck in an elevator. If you are in the elevator and no one else is home, who is going to hear the emergency buzzer?

"Cellphones could work but you'd have to have your cell phone with you and you probably wouldn't be carrying it around at home," says Dan Quigley, director of marketing and business development for Otis in North and South America. He suggests installing a phone in the elevator, which could cost \$50 to \$200, and having an emergency contact handy.

Even the smallest versions of regular hydraulic elevators, which fit two to three people, will take up an average of 22 to 25 square feet of space on each floor. Hydraulic elevator mechanisms also require a pit that is at least six-inches deep beneath the elevator and, sometimes, a space about the size of a small closet for machinery.



Pneumatic elevators are 37 inches in diameter and don't require a pit or a separate machine box. The current versions have doors that are about 20-inches wide, however, making it too small for a wheelchair to pass through. Pneumatic Vacuum Elevators LLC, a Miami maker of these new elevators, is planning to introduce a larger version in October. Because the pneumatic elevators are so new, the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, which writes safety codes for elevators in single-family homes hasn't included it in its code yet. The organization says the elevators aren't illegal -- they are currently looking into writing new code that will address them.

Still, some elevator owners say the lifts have some perks that they hadn't counted on. Ms. Fine finds the lift awfully welcoming at the end of a long day of wearing three-inch heels.

Evelyn Thompson recently installed an elevator in her two-story, single-family home in Port Orange, Fla., after her 84-year-old husband began having problems climbing the stairs after a series of back surgeries. Now she uses it regularly to transport laundry and cleaning supplies and to tote luggage upstairs when visitors arrive.

Besides, she adds: "My grandchildren think it's the next best thing to Disney World."

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