

# Home elevators aren't just for the very rich anymore

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THE JOURNAL NEWS

*(Original publication: February 1, 2007)*

Rudy De Paoli took a ribbing from friends, family and even his wife when he talked about installing an elevator in the new home he was building.

Two years later, his wife, who suffers from joint pain, prefers the elevator to the stairs. Plus, his friends and grandchildren get a kick out of it. "Everybody was laughing, now everybody rides it," De Paoli said.

Like those in De Paoli's circle, most people probably conjure up images of uniformed butlers and mansions when they think of home elevators. But there's a whole new class of elevator owners emerging today who have never set foot on a yacht.

"It used to be a custom, fancy-schmancy thing to get, but now everybody can have them," said David Nyborg of Tri-State Elevator Co. of Pelham, the company that installed De Paoli's elevator.

Tri-State, a family-owned business started by Nyborg's grandfather in 1936, didn't even sell home elevators until eight years ago. Today, the company performs about 50 installations a year, which accounts for about 20 percent of business.

Elevator installers, manufacturers and experts in the industry say the market is expanding for several reasons:

- Baby boomers are thinking about their futures - which might include decreased mobility - when they build their dream homes.
- Seniors who bought their homes 30 years ago find it cheaper to install an elevator than to move.
- Middle-aged people are inviting their parents to move in, but want to spare them trips up and down the stairs.
- Scarce land combined with high home prices in thriving areas like the Lower Hudson Valley mean newly constructed homes and townhouses often are three or even four stories high.



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From left, Dave and Chip Nyborg, owners of Tri-State Elevator Co. in Pelham, stand in one of their models. Rudy De Paoli of Hopewell Junction stands inside the elevator that he had built for his new home.

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Plus, in an era when home improvement means spending thousands on granite countertops, wine cellars and commercial-class ranges and refrigerators, an elevator is becoming the latest trend.

"First, it was the Sub-Zero. Then it was the Viking stove. Now it's an elevator. A home elevator is the new toy to have," said Mike Ciofalo, manager of Heights Elevator Corp. in Yorktown Heights.

The average cost of a home elevator is about \$25,000, which is what De Paoli paid for the model in his Hopewell Junction home.

"I was a little skeptical about whether it would be a real tremendous cost," he said. "Once I found out how much it cost, I knew I would do it."

De Paoli, a 65-year-old former phone company worker, said the elevator adds more useful value to his \$450,000 home than other bells and whistles he could have chosen.

"Rather than put cathedral ceilings in - which serve no function other than someone comes in and says, 'Wow' - I said, 'You can keep your wow.' I'd rather put in an elevator we can ride the rest of our lives," he said.

Accountant JoAnn Brace of Somers is in the middle of a whole-house renovation that includes an elevator to a new suite for her mother over the garage.

"She's older, she's very mobile, she's very active, but with it being on the second story, we thought it wouldn't be a bad idea to put in an elevator now," Brace said.

The 4-by-5-foot elevator will connect the mudroom to her mom's suite.

"We made sure it was large enough so that if she ever did need a wheelchair, it would fit," Brace said.

The accountant said she might even use the elevator herself when a knee injury acts up. She said she believes the purchase will pay off if she ever sells her home.

"It definitely will add value to the house because it allows it to be flexible. It could be used by someone with a handicap or an older person," Brace said.

Wes Jones, chairman of the accessibility-residential committee of the National Association of Elevator Contractors, said there are about 500 companies that install home elevators - more than double the number 10 years ago.

Most are still going into high-value homes, where they are offered as an amenity like a swimming pool, but Jones predicts the market will continue to expand as the population ages.

"In eight to 10 years, it may not be an add-on option. Sixty to 70 percent of new houses may have them, just because we're living longer and we'll need equipment like that to get us around the house," he said.

Mike Berk, founder of Alift in Cortlandt Manor, said that while his business in residential elevators is growing 25 percent a year, it's not the first choice he recommends.

The company also installs stair lifts that cost from \$2,500 to \$8,000 and don't require changing the home.

"That's what we would push for first," he said. "Before you consider an elevator, you should keep it simple and start with a stair lift."

But elevators aren't only about function, they are also about style, said Chip Nyborg, brother of David and president of Tri-State Elevator. Since the company's clients include a couple of billionaires as well as parents of children who use wheelchairs, he sells elevators lined with simple laminate as well as luxurious units with fine-wood moldings.

Some elevators resemble closet doors, albeit with a little lighted button beside them. Others are meant to stand out.

"Some people want it to blend in so you don't know it's there and some people want it to say, 'Hey, I've got an elevator,'" Nyborg said.

Steve Melman, director of economic services for the National Association of Home Builders, said demand for elevators increased from 2 percent to 8 percent from 2001 to 2004, according to surveys of home buyers.

"As baby boomers age, the elevator might be much more appealing," he said.

Builder Eric Abraham, owner of Comstock Development Inc. in Briarcliff Manor, said he's been installing elevators in new homes for two years, including the Elmcroft Estates now under construction in Mamaroneck.

"We realized there was a market and to differentiate ourselves, we started going for residential elevators," he said.

Any home worth more than \$2 million will automatically get an elevator, he said.

"For our company, a high-end custom home builder, it's a standard thing in our homes," Abraham said.

Martin Ginsburg, founder and principal of GDC Homes of Valhalla, said his company is offering elevators as a \$50,000 option on townhomes costing between \$650,000 and \$1 million at the Harbors in Haverstraw, which is now under construction.

GDC installed elevators in all 52 single-family homes in its Kensington Woods development to appeal to older adults.

The city of New Rochelle had asked GDC to market the community to seniors to ease the burden on schools. The homes, worth more than \$1 million, also had other senior-friendly features, like ground-floor master suites.

"The elevators made it a feature for older people, and that was a substantial part of our market," he said. "There are a number of buyers who would not have bought if we didn't have the elevator."

Paul Kirwin, a retired lawyer who moved into Kensington Woods three years ago, said he's not ready to give up the stairs for everyday use. He rides the elevator when he needs to bring something heavy to the basement or when a guest with luggage stays in a second-floor bedroom.

"Right now, it's a novelty, but someday I might need it," he said. "You don't want to think you'll have to use it, but if it comes to that, it's there."

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