

Going up? Home elevators are on the rise

Ann McGee loves her home. If you saw it, you would understand. Every room of the 2,800-square-foot, Mediterranean-style house in Winter Park, Florida, reflects her well-traveled life, her many friendships, her rich memories. She loves her oasis-like patio. She loves her neighbors and her community.

What she doesn't love are her stairs.

At age 73, the retired college administrator, who's had one knee replaced, found that an upstairs master was a bit of a pain literally. She considered renovating to put a bedroom downstairs, but that was too costly. Moving from her home of 15 years didn't appeal either.

When her niece showed her a magazine ad she'd clipped that featured a modern-looking, shaftless elevator powered by air pressure, McGee was intrigued. "It didn't look like any home elevator I'd ever seen," she said. "It looked like a piece of art."

Plus, the installation did not involve knocking out walls or digging under the floor into the foundation as required for traditional shaft elevators. Shaft elevators send cabins through 5-foot-by-5-foot (minimum) spaces within walls, while shaftless elevators sit in the open on finished floors. Their see-through cylinders transport passengers from floor to floor using air pressure or cables.

McGee talked to a couple elevator companies that sold pneumatic vacuum elevators, and, this past November, elevated



AT HOME WITH
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her own home with one.

"I love the look of it," she said of the tube-shaped elevator tucked in just beside the stairs in her entryway.

"I worried that it would ruin the aesthetics of my home, but it's enhanced it."

McGee selected the color of the metal, as well as the tint on the polycarbonate windows.

While she doesn't use it every time she wants to go up or downstairs, McGee, an avid traveler, definitely uses it for her luggage.

"Hips, knees, hearts, backs, lungs, in-laws, convenience," Dawn O'Connor, owner of Daytona Elevator, rattles off the reasons customers call her. Her family-owned business has been installing elevators since 1987.

To that list, Rich Eller, owner of HomeLift, a Nashville-based elevator dealer, adds those people who "flat out are not moving and have got to get upstairs."

Given the demographics, the demand for home elevators is quickly growing, and the shaftless models are the fastest-growing sector, he said. Five years ago, shaftless elevators accounted for 6 percent of Eller's

home elevator installations. Last year, that percentage more than doubled. He expects that 20 to 25 percent of home elevators will be shaftless by 2025.

"We have a population of people who want to age in place," Eller said. "More people are realizing that installing an elevator or a stair lift is a lot cheaper than moving. Builders and architects recognize this is a growing market and are designing more homes with elevators in mind."

"I love where I live and how I live," McGee said. "I wanted to buy more time in this house, and I did."

While not every home is a candidate for an elevator, if your home's stairs are becoming an issue, here's what to consider before you pack up and move.

- A solution for every budget

If creating a downstairs bedroom isn't an option, the lift industry has many ways to get you upstairs, O'Connor said. The least expensive option is a stair lift. A seat that travels straight up a flight of stairs typically costs between \$3,500 and \$4,000. If the stairway curves or takes a turn, the stair lift cost will climb to as much as \$15,000.

Pneumatic vacuum elevators cost from \$35,000 to \$60,000, depending on the size. They come in three widths: 30 inches; 37 inches, which is what McGee purchased; and 52 inches, which will accommodate a wheelchair. McGee paid \$40,000 for her elevator, which includes a fold-down seat and phone.

PVEs are among the higher-end products, Eller said, add-

ing that some shaftless lifts sell for as little as \$28,000. Construction costs to retrofit a space is additional, and they vary with the work required.

- Build it in

The best time to install an elevator is when you're building a home. But adding one later may be easier than you think. Before you give up on the idea because you don't see where you could

install an elevator, have an expert out.

"Often, people think they don't have a place to put an elevator, then we find two or three possibilities," Eller said.

- Location, location, location

When looking for the best placement, start upstairs to find

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