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ELEMENTS

ELEVATORS ON THE RISE

The utilitarian device is getting a makeover, complete with themes and high-tech control panels; it's 'like Disneyland'

BY NANCY MATSUMOTO

THERE ARE A NUMBER of conversation pieces in Jeff and Karen Armour's 10,000-square-foot French-country-style home in Orange County, Calif. It has a man cave with a golf simulator and a glass conservatory with heated floors. But the highlight is the couple's elevator—a \$55,000 homage to Karen's coal-miner grandfather.

Clad in repurposed barn wood, pipe metal and wire mesh, the elevator is decorated to resemble one that might be found in a mine shaft.

On display is a photo of Karen's grandfather and his mining crew, his framed mining certificate, a lunch pail his wife packed for him every day and a carbide light from his miner's helmet.

Some items are held up by nails that once pinned down his mine's coal-car rails, and a sign on a wall reads: "Danger: Blast Warning!"

For her 3½-year-old grandson, riding the elevator "is like Disneyland," says Ms. Armour, an interior decorator whose husband Jeff is a real-estate investor.

In high-end homes, elevators are going beyond their utilitarian purpose as insurance against accident and old age. Some are design statements; others have themes.

They come lined with granite, wood paneling or wall paper. There are high-tech control panels, custom lighting schemes for art and glass panels to show off a home's views.

"If you asked 10 years ago, I would say people were putting in elevators mainly for accessibility," says Chris Harris of A+ Elevators and Lifts in Salt Lake City. "Today 90% are status symbols."

Installing a basic elevator starts in the mid-\$20,000 range, and the prices go up from there, says Dave Russo, president of Access Elevator, a residential-elevator company in Farmingdale, N.Y.

Elevators also are growing in popularity as the population ages. "We're



Clockwise from left: Jim Doyle; Greg Evans; Andrew Williams



GOING UP The elevator in Jeff and Karen Armour's California home, above left, is a \$55,000 homage to Karen's coal-miner grandfather; a \$125,000 glass elevator in Utah, top right, has mountain views; a \$1 million-plus glass elevator, above right.

in the second year of baby boomers retiring, so how many (potential buyers) are you taking out of the mix if you don't have an elevator?" says Mike Burke of Irvine, Calif.-based McKinley Elevator.

Planning a custom elevator can involve an architect, an interior designer, a general contractor, an engineer, a lighting specialist and artisan-level subcontractors.

Glass-door elevators open up additional design possibilities because passengers can see the shaft's walls as they travel up and down.

Mr. Burke of McKinley Elevator recalls a client who decked out his elevator cab to resemble a submarine.

"He put little round windows in, had a [shaft wall] mural painted so you see fish and mermaids going by and piped in the sound of bubbles," he recalls.

Many clients want elevators that maximize views, like the San Francisco client of Toronto's UT Elevator who wanted his glass elevator to show off vistas of the Golden Gate Bridge. That elevator is under construction.

Andrew Williams, a general contractor in California's Orange County, was the point person on a team that built a \$1 million-plus cylindrical glass elevator with views of the beach, part of an 11,000-square-foot, midcentury-modern

home in Dana Point, Calif.

Included in that price was a \$500,000 spiral glass stairway that wraps around the elevator (allowing people standing on it to watch the elevator move) and the services of what Williams calls "an all-star team" of design and engineering professionals.

The team won Elevator World magazine's 2014 residential project of the year award.

That elevator is "really is a centerpiece for the architecture," says Mr. Williams, noting that every piece of it, including the control board and accessories concealed inside a stainless steel shroud, was a one-off, custom-designed prototype.

WHAT TYPE OF ELEVATOR TO CHOOSE?

- Most residential elevators use a hydraulic system fitted with a piston that moves inside a cylinder, powered by an oil pump. These require a base unit under the shaft. **Price:** Two- and three-stop hydraulic elevators start at \$20,000-\$25,000.

- The MRL (Machine-Room-Less) elevator is run by a motor at the top of the shaft. It doesn't require added space under the shaft to house the machinery. The newest type of MRL elevator is the "gearless traction motor," which employs a more compact motor for a smoother ride. **Price:** The gearless traction MRL starts at about \$30,000.

- For those who don't want to have to hide a piston or counterweights there is the winding drum elevator, which has a machine mounted at the top that lifts ropes attached to each corner of the elevator. **Price:** To get its lower weight capacity up to that of a hydraulic, starting price would be about the same, \$20,000-\$25,000.

- Another system is the pneumatic vacuum elevator, which includes its own shaft and relies on a pump box and suction to power it. **Price:** A two-stop model starts at \$50,000. Since this model isn't yet addressed in the elevator code, not all parts of the country will issue permits for them.

SAFETY-CODE REQUIREMENTS

The most important thing to do when planning a residential elevator, experts say, is to hire an installer certified by the American Society of Mechanical Engineers. ASME's safety code requires:

- An analog telephone in the elevator for emergency use
- Elevators that won't operate with an open door or gate
- An emergency stopping device
- Capacity plate posted in elevator indicating maximum load capacity
- Door-clearance specifications that prevent a child from slipping between the elevator and the outer door.