

Movin' on up

Interest in residential elevators is reaching new heights among home buyers and owners who want an alternative to stairs.

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Penny Shank stands in the elevator off the third-floor sitting room of her home in Newport, KY.

It's a matter of ups and downs.

As the ages of baby boomers rise, making them reluctant to buy a house that requires them to navigate stairs, the price of elevators has dropped, making them an affordable amenity - or at least a not-so-outrageous luxury.

The result: Interest in residential elevators is reaching new heights, home builders and elevator dealers say.

"The first few houses we did that had them, people came in and said, 'An elevator? What are you doing that for?' " Cincinnati construction company owner Jim Cutter says.

"People are entertaining the idea everywhere," he says.

"I see it becoming more common every day. And I see people mentioning it - even on houses where you

wouldn't think they would need one."

Jay and Linda Buchert traded a five-bedroom, 6,000-square-foot home on 2 acres in the suburbs for a one-bedroom, four-story house with a postage-stamp-size lot on an urban hillside.

Still, the Bucherts might have dismissed the idea of spending their retirement years in a house with 45 stairs as impractical. Except for one thing - an elevator.

The Bucherts' new home in Newport, Ohio, features a wood-paneled 3-by-4 1/2-foot elevator. It allows the Bucherts and their guests to zip up and down four levels of their house.

Industry wide statistics on residential elevators are readily available, but many dealers and home builders agree the market is growing beyond people with disabilities. Homeowners are installing them for convenience and for the future.

"It's another way the baby boom generation has changed building trends," says Marc Gockenbach, branch manager for Access of Cincinnati, an elevator dealer.

Five years ago, Gockenbach sold three or four residential elevators a year. Now he installs 25 to 30 a year. Dave Hand saw so much potential in residential elevators that in February he started a company, Custom Home Elevator & Lift, in Cincinnati to capitalize on the niche.

"For \$20,000, you're going to be able to shape the floor plan any way you wish and have access to as many floors as you want," Hand says.

About 80 percent of the residential elevators he installs are in new homes, but some homeowners do add elevators as part of remodeling.

Adding elevators to an existing home tends to be more complicated because you need to make room for an elevator shaft, which must be 6 to 8 inches wider than the elevator cab.

"It's not impossible to do in an existing home," Gockenbach says. It's just a matter of how much interior space a homeowner is willing to lose.