

Car Elevators Are The Latest In Luxury -- Just Ask Mitt Romney.



This story appears in the June 25, 2012 Investment Guide issue of Forbes Magazine.

In March presidential candidate Mitt Romney found himself in the kind of awkward situation reserved for One-Percenters: Blueprints for the renovation of his [\\$12 million La Jolla beach house](#) were leaked to the press and spread across the Web. Nothing in the plans—not the 3,600-square-foot basement addition or outdoor shower—caught gawking readers’ imaginations like the split-level garage, with the latest piece of must-have residential exotica: a car elevator. The former Massachusetts governor, worth \$230 million [by FORBES’ estimate](#), has attracted criticism for this opulent amenity, but he is by no means the first high-end homeowner to install an auto lift.

“It may not be a common home feature, but its popularity is growing rapidly,” claims Brad Davies, owner of [American Custom Lifts](#), an Escondido, Calif. company that manufactures the [PhantomPark](#), Romney’s elevator of choice.

American Custom Lifts has installed PhantomParks in the modern-day palaces of billionaires and A-list celebrities. (Although in Romney’s case, “everything is on hold right now, and he’s waiting until after the elections,” notes Davies. Romney’s team confirms this.)

A basic PhantomPark model costs \$42,000 plus installation, which typically adds \$13,000 (Romney’s version is reported to cost \$55,000). Customized models—for example, where the top level is designed to blend into its surroundings—can cost much more.



[Video: A Car Elevator That Brings You To The Apartment Door](#)



Garages To Make Auto Enthusiasts Swoon

BrennanForbes Staff

Photos: Homes With Outrageous Outdoor Amenities

Like all things designed for the rich and famous in real estate, Davies and his team typically sign nondisclosure agreements to protect clients' identities. He will say that projects have included grass-covered lifts for boat storage sunken into backyards, multiple lifts to haul catering trucks to an underground 50,000-square-foot ballroom, even lifts hidden under swimming pools that emerge while water drains down the sides of the pool perimeter as a car comes level with the patio.

"We've done one for an NBA player that wasn't even for a car ... it was for his billiards table to come up into the family room when he wanted to shoot pool," chuckles Davies.

Davies installed his first subterranean lift in Aspen, Colo. in 2002 and has watched the orders steadily increase, most via word of mouth.

"My friend had one in Newport Beach ... and I saw it and thought it would be perfect to keep my cars protected," explains Jose "Pancho" Leon, the builder and owner of a \$5.7 million estate called Chateau Suenos, in Calabasas, Calif. Situated in the tony, gated development The Oaks (where the Kardashians and Justin Bieber own neighboring homes), the 9,211-square-foot château-inspired estate offers a split-level garage equipped with two PhantomPark hydraulic lifts that store autos below ground, safe from playing children as well as the auto-eroding effects of SoCal's warm weather. Leon, who lives full-time in a different custom-built home, currently stores his '56 Thunderbird and Nissan GT-R in the subterranean space.

Despite its celebrity history—the home was rented by pop star Britney Spears for two years following her painfully public 2008 meltdown—and posh amenities that include a fountain-bedecked interior courtyard and wine cellar, Leon's real estate agent, Jeffery Biebuyck, emphasizes that the garage is one of Chateau Suenos' biggest enticements. "Every single person who has toured this home has had a car collection," Biebuyck, a director at Ewing & Associates Sotheby's International Realty, says.

In general, however, upscale garage additions recoup a modest 52% of their cost, according to the Remodeling Cost vs. Value Report. Realtors say the benefits of an auto elevator are manifested in a less financially tangible form: marketing. It's a "wow factor" that garners attention and sets an estate apart from its local competition.

“I’ve had situations where it’s the perfect house for a buyer but not a perfect garage and a sale doesn’t get made,” explains [Billy Rose](#), president of The Agency, a luxury real estate firm in Los Angeles.

Even so, a handful of homes sporting lifts have languished on the market recently, suffering multiple price chops. The reason: Such garages typically appeal to a limited pool of buyers, namely car collectors.

“I don’t think my garage adds much value to my home, because the car virus maybe infects only 5 out of 100 males,” chuckles [David Houston](#), an L.A. restaurateur and sports car collector. Houston, who produced the short-lived Car Show TV series, transformed a 2,500-square-foot basement in his Malibu home into a garage with lifts and a car turntable.

A collector is also behind the massive multistory garage tucked inside the gated entrance of the [Sierra Star compound](#) in Lake Tahoe’s Incline Village. Tom Gonzales, the cofounder of software company Commerce One, spent nearly five years renovating his lakefront estate, which includes a subterranean “collector’s garage” that houses his 1,000 autos and motorcycles. Tucked below a 2,500-square-foot guest house, the bilevel garage sprawls over an astounding 12,000 square feet and cost roughly \$6 million to construct. It has an oversize hydraulic lift—technically, an aircraft transporter—capable of carting an RV or three cars to the surface. It costs an estimated \$25 in electricity bills each time it’s operated.

Gonzales has been trying, so far in vain, to sell the estate, which debuted on the market at \$65 million in 2007. He is now asking \$49.9 million, but buyers can also purchase it in sections, broken down as five separate land parcels. “We have had people look specifically just at the garage parcel,” says Kerry Donovan, a vice president at [Chase International](#), a Lake Tahoe realty firm. She believes the ultimate buyer will be someone with a collecting passion to rival Gonzales’.

If the West Coast seems like the hub for homes with car elevators, it is—or has been. Architect Annabelle Selldorf has now designed Manhattan’s first condo building with auto elevators. Thirteen units at [200 Eleventh Avenue](#) come with their own “en-suite sky garage.” Owners enter the building’s garage and load their ride onto the elevator, which identifies the car via a scan tag and then whisks it upward in under 60 seconds. They then park outside of their apartment’s front door. In a city where privacy commands top dollar, the flashy feature has helped secure buyers (including Nicole Kidman) for all but one of the units—and construction finished earlier this year.

Leonard Steinberg, the [Prudential Douglas Elliman broker](#) for the building, believes the car elevator has been successful because “the reality is this is an item with great practical use, and people attach great value to it.” He estimates residents save an average of three hours each week carting their cars and belongings straight to their doorstep rather than unloading onto carts and having their vehicles parked in public lots.

Another developer adapting the car elevator to high-rise living is Gil Dezer. Miami-based Dezer Properties has teamed up with German carmaker spinoff Porsche Design to craft a 57-story, 132-unit condo building—the Porsche Design Tower—in Sunny Isles Beach, Fla.

Though construction doesn't commence until mid-2013 (with plans to finish mid-2016), the blueprints map out a 600-feet-per-minute elevator that will identify your car, which is loaded ignition-off via turntable, and deliver it to its assigned spot (every unit has two) outside your apartment door. Dezer hails from an automotive-loving family—his father just opened a Miami museum to showcase his thousand-car-and-motorcycle collection, and Dezer Properties owns high-end auto retailer Manhattan Motorcars in New York City—so naturally he also insisted upon glass partitions between parking spots and units so that “if you want to see your car from the living room, you can.”

Who knows? Maybe Dezer and his fellow car elevator fans are on to something. But U.S. presidential candidates may want to keep their enthusiasm under wraps.