

## Going Up? Elevators Are Now Centers Of Fun and Ads

Down With Claustrophobia;  
See the Sights, Watch  
Your Favorite Cartoons

By MICHAEL J. MCCARTHY

NEW YORK—Something has been going on in the elevators at Le Parker Meridien hotel. Children have been plopping down on the floor, riding up and down—and up again. “People have been missing their floors,” says one of the bellhops, Arega Endifru.

The hotel management couldn't be happier. Months ago they brought in a San Francisco designer, Colum McCartan, with this directive: “Make the elevators a less self-conscious experience.” In elevator No. 1, Popeye cartoons now play on a large screen above the doors. In another, it's Tom & Jerry antics, and, in another, Charlie Chaplin shorts.

The people who run everything from hotels and office buildings to the Sears Tower and the Washington Monument have decided elevator riders shouldn't have to be bored and ill at ease in a little box with wall-to-wall strangers. After all, few daily routines are more awkward than the elevator ride. After the stampee in, there's the reaching around strangers to find and press one's floor button. The trip typically is characterized by deadly silence, fidgeting, averted glances, staring at shoes, studying the ceiling.

The cramped cubicle of tedium and tension has inspired a list of “50 Fun Things to Do in an Elevator,” circulating around the Internet. No. 1: Make race-car noises when anyone gets on or off. No. 4: Whistle the first seven notes of “It's a Small World” over and over. No. 20: Meow occasionally.

Architects and interior designers are searching hard for something to offer besides the old notices of passenger maximums, weight capacity and inspection certificates. Little TV screens illuminate hundreds of elevators, many flashing headlines and commercials, and there's a budding attempt to make elevators less dull and claustrophobic.

In Chicago, the Sears Tower has added Sinatra's “My Kind of Town” and video-screen diversions to amuse passengers on the ear-popping ride to the Skydeck. The renovation at the nation's tallest building won a “modernization” prize from Elevator World magazine, the main voice of the “vertical transportation industry.” The express up the 103 stories to

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*Continued From First Page*  
the Skydeck takes every bit of 70 seconds, eons in elevator time. A spokesman for the skyscraper says, “Everybody's kind of relieved to have something to look at.”

### Muzak Chimes In

It's been decades since elevators began piping in music to distract people from the unsettling creaking of older models. Muzak, the father of elevator music, was invented by Brig. Gen. George Owen Squier. In 1922, according to Joseph Lanza's book “Elevator Music,” he helped form a company called Wired Radio Inc. “Seeking a catchier name,” the book says, “he played word games with music and Kodak.” And thus Muzak was born.

Audio in elevators is tricky. The Parker Meridien decided to mute the soundtracks on the cartoons and Little Tramp movies until around 11 a.m. “I sensed people were irritated early in the morning,” says Steven Pipes, general manager. A few comment cards have complained about the “childish” elevators, but lots of people, necks craned, are otherwise glued to the screens. The Parker Meridien has turned down requests to put ads on its elevator screens, says Mr. Pipes. “It is obnoxious to have people cornered and forced to watch ads.”

See-through elevators, offering a look at building innards, are also in vogue. The Washington Monument reopened in February with a souped-up elevator that

has windows that electronically change from opaque (ride up) to clear (ride down) so passengers can view the interior of the sky-high obelisk, decorated with commemorative stones donated from around the globe.

At the Chambers Hotel, which opened in New York last year, designers attempted a distinctive, roomier feel by installing two transparent sidewalls in the elevator. Now riders rush past the inner workings of the raw elevator shaft—exposed metal girders, piping, cables, fat industrial bolts and sheer, concrete walls. The cabins were also made extra-tall, at nine feet.

Over the years, the vertical-transportation industry has done many studies of rider impatience. Most people will wait patiently for 50 to 60 seconds for an elevator in a residential building, but in an office tower, standers-by get antsy if the wait approaches 25 seconds.

Otis Elevator Co., the largest maker of these contraptions, has experimented with the little TVs but thinks a quick, uneventful ride is what people mostly want. And it carefully adjusts the ride, to meet cultural expectations. In its New York elevator “profile,” for instance, cabins leap to life from the starting line, going from zero to full speed in four to 4.5 seconds.

“In a high-rise in New York, they want to feel the acceleration,” says Ray Moncini, president of Otis North America, which is owned by United Technologies Corp. But in Japan, he says, many people like a smoother ride, with nearly

imperceptible motion. So Otis slows the takeoff speed there.

### Elevator Media

While people may rush to get off and on, those who work in high-rises spend many hours in elevators each year. And now at least two companies are trying to elbow their way into elevators with flat-screen monitors beaming news and advertising.

One of the players in the emerging but still small “elevator media” market is Captivate Network Inc. of Westford, Mass. Since late 1998, Captivate has installed elevator screens in more than 375 buildings and 4,000 elevators. At first, Captivate gave them out free, but this year it began charging \$7,500 to install each screen, with a monthly fee of about \$100.

On Captivate screens, advertisers pay a fee for product appearances. Building owners get a cut of the ad revenue. News comes from outfits including CNN, the Weather Channel, the New York Times and The Wall Street Journal. In January, TrizecHahn Corp., the large office-property company, wrote off its \$11 million investment in Captivate Network, one of many assets it reappraised at the time. But a TrizecHahn spokesman says the elevator TVs remain an amenity its tenants like.

Back at Otis, whose name is emblazoned on elevators the world over, Mr. Moncini says he thinks the novelty of the elevator TV wears off. “After a while, people don't even look at them anymore,” he says. “The elevator ride is a mindless experience.”