

A Woman's Touch

By TALIRA BANKS · Advertising Staff Writer



In 1978, when few women were venturing into men's business territory, Carol Ann Zinn was breaking ground on her first spec home in Chapel Hill. Nearly 20 years later, the construction industry is still a male-dominated field, and Zinn is still designing and building homes.

Known in Chapel Hill and Durham as a leading arbiter of style and quality construction, as well as a hard-driving business woman, Zinn, in recent years has joined forces with her sons Adam and Omar in Zinn Design Build. While Carol Ann continues to oversee operations, Adam and Omar now manage the business. Carol Ann primarily focuses her creativity on design and marketing. Tamara Barrett, a Colorado native with associate degrees in art and architectural engineering, provides design assistance to Zinn's work.

"Why do so many houses look alike?" Zinn asked recently. "I think it's possible to bring some pizzazz and individuality to homes in all price ranges and all styles, and I take that as my mission. A little imagination goes a long way." In the late seventies Zinn was known for introducing arched windows to the area, as well as for raising main level ceiling heights to nine and 10 feet and for her open and airy family room/nook, kitchen areas. Her homes from 19 years ago still look current.

These days Zinn's elegant details still stand out. Stairways often feature Zinn-designed newel posts, made either locally or in San Francisco. (see photo at far left) Zinn-designed porch columns grace the front entries of many of her homes. Fireplace mantels in Zinn homes are made locally from unique Zinn designs. Light fixtures are imported from other regions of the country and add distinction to Zinn's homes. Her flair for design with tile is evident in a number of homes currently on the market. (see photo left)

"I lived in the San Francisco area for a few years in the early '90s, and I was impressed with the creative use of ceramic tile and stone," Zinn said.

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"Even simple and inexpensive bathroom tile can be patterned in a distinctive way to create a special touch."

In upper-end homes, Zinn has begun using stainless steel in kitchens, both for backsplash and countertop (see photo pg. 1). "We are fortunate to have some superb subcontractors working with us," Zinn said. "That's part of the reason our details are so strong."

"I think a woman's perspective is a real plus for a designer-builder," Zinn states. "First of all, our organization focuses on clear communication with clients and subcontractors. This is half the job. A good project becomes a great project when the communication is there.

"And then there's no substitute for the intuitive part of design, my knowing what my clients want when sometimes they can't yet express it. On the other hand, some clients come very prepared, with scrapbooks and magazine clippings collected over many years. And it's my job to translate the verbal communication and the non-verbal into a living space that works for them, both visually and functionally," Zinn said.

Zinn Design Build currently has 10 houses under construction in Chapel Hill. They are priced from \$237,000 to \$475,000. Each home has elegant features that set it apart from what's typical, yet each is priced sensibly and with a strong practical orientation for human living.

Another hat that Zinn wears is that of real estate developer. She has been creating neighborhoods in and around Chapel Hill and Durham since 1976. At that time she was the founder of Stony Hill School, a non-profit pottery facility near Calvander. Teaching and sculpting were her main focus. "We lived on 32 acres of land off Old Highway 86, and my sons felt isolated," Zinn recalled. "So I created a small subdivision in order to bring playmates to the area. That was the end of my life as an artist/potter and the beginning of my career as a neighborhood creator. I like to think that I just enlarged the scale of my work."

Zinn has created 8 neighborhoods, including Southridge in Chapel Hill and Montvale in

Durham. Her current project is Kent Woodlands, a 52-lot single-family neighborhood on Culbreth Road in Chapel Hill. Construction will start on homes there, which are priced from \$250,000 in a few weeks. "I'm excited about Kent Woodlands because it's heavily wooded - and we intend to preserve as many of the trees as possible - conveniently located, and relatively affordable for Chapel Hill," Zinn said. "We'll have several other quality local custom builders in there as well, and so the flavor of the neighborhood should be eclectic and warm."

For more information about Kent Woodlands or a Zinn-designed home, call Zinn Design Build at 493-0099.