



Photo by Ollie Brock

Carol Ann Zinn, whose construction credits include The Courtyard office-shopping complex on West Franklin Street, was a sculptor when she decided to become a house builder in the mid 1970s

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CHAPEL HILL – Carol Ann Zinn has designed and built about 200 homes in the Carrboro-Chapel Hill area. And not one was made of adobe.

Not bad for a potter.

Zinn has no formal training in house building. She has never taken as much as a single architecture class and her college majors were English and art history.

In fact, before she started building houses in the mid 1970s, Zinn's biggest claim to fame was what she did with clay. She was the founder of Stony Hill School, where she taught pottery to adults and children.

"I brought my potter's wheel to many an Apple Chill Fair in the early 1970s and did demonstrations and sold my wares," Zinn said.

The school was destroyed by fire in 1978.

Zinn, 53, became one of the area's best-known designer/builders before she left Chapel Hill for San Francisco in 1991. After 5 years on the West coast, Zinn, now in a partnership with her two sons, is back in Chapel Hill

picking up where she left off.

After years of casual conversations, Zinn and her sons started talking seriously about founding a family business. Last year, Zinn started traveling cross-country to visit sons Omar, 27, and Adam, 30, laying plans for Zinn Design/Build, the new company the threesome began last October.

Already, the new company has four homes under construction, and has plans to develop a new 50-home neighborhood off Culbreth Road.

Zinn's interest in house-building came about when she and her ex-husband had a home built on the highest point of their property overlooking Hogan's Lake. (Now a development known as Stony Hill).

"I used to go there and just watch the job," she said. "I was really fascinated."

Zinn said she wanted to know "what was behind the skin of a house, and there it was right before my eyes and I was drawn to it."

A self-proclaimed three-dimensional thinker, Zinn said the transition from clay sculpting to house-building wasn't difficult.

Picking up where she left off

Innovative builder returns to Chapel Hill and makes construction a family affair

"I had been sculpting with clay, and I was used to seeing everything three-dimensionally," she said.

In addition to sculpting, Zinn had built a few small brick kilns that she said helped her understand structure.

"Building a house isn't rocket science," Zinn said. "It's been done for thousands of years. The technology has changed very little."

After sub-dividing Stony Hill, Zinn decided to try her first house as a "me test."

She explained to her subcontractors that it would be slow going.

"This is my first house," she told them. "I'm going to ask a lot of questions. It's going to be a little slower. If that bothers you, let's not work together. So I learned by doing."

With a patient carpenter who "liked to teach," Zinn's knowledge base increased quickly.

"I'm a very curious person," she said. "I'm not shy about asking questions. The danger comes in when you think you know something and you don't," she said.

Zinn said she likes things to be

done right so she only hires "experts who are as fussy about their work as I am. I'm not very tolerant when something is not done correctly. I don't like to cut corners."

Although she's best known as a house designer, Zinn also designed The Courtyard, a popular office-retail complex on West Franklin Street.

Fascinated with the San Francisco area and with her sons adults, Zinn decided to give the West Coast a try.

"I had worked very, very hard for 13 years, and I guess I just needed a change," she said.

Real estate agent Anne Cole worked for Zinn for two years from 1985 to 1987. Cole said Zinn is one of the area's top designer/builders.

Cole said Zinn's use of natural light in her designs was ahead of its time, including her specialty of putting windows in stairwell walls.

"I think her innovative designs and creativity are far ahead of most of the other builders and designers around," Cole said. "I'm excited about working with

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Carol Ann again and look forward to the new designs generated by her San Francisco sojourn.”

In the Bay Area, Zinn primarily did custom additions and remodeling in the \$200,000 to \$400,000 bracket, what she calls the “high-end” range.

The area’s lack of affordable housing is “really disturbing,” Zinn said, yet she sees no solution to the problem.

With one-quarter to three-quarter acre lots costing between \$50,000 and \$80,000 in Chapel Hill, Zinn said she’s not able to build affordable homes.

Zinn’s Culbreth Road neighborhood will start at \$220,000 and go to more than \$300,000 for single-family homes, she said.

“I’m very interested in doing some housing that’s not in this climbing price range, but it’s hard to find land to match my desire for affordable housing,” Zinn said.

“I’m extremely sympathetic of the need for affordable housing. I’m looking for lots that are under \$50,000. It’s not easy to find.”

An native of Lynbrook, a community on Long Island, N.Y., Zinn was inspired by her parents, who operated a women’s raincoat factory in Manhattan’s garment district.

Zinn said her mother, Florence Ganz, “was ahead of her time in her exercise of personal power in business. She was a high performer, and she didn’t know how to do it any other way.”

While she’s also a high performer, Zinn said, she can also be “very mellow, very laid back and very relaxed.”

She enjoys hiking, gardening, and yoga.

“I love to be in nature,” she said. “I like being outdoors... I think I have a lot of energy and a lot of skill. I want to live my life to the fullest.”

Living in Chapel Hill was also a plus, Zinn said. When she started building, there were not many women in the profession.

“At the time it was highly unusual to be a woman in construction,” she said. “I was optimistic and naïve. If I had done this in another town this might not have jelled. I think Chapel Hill is very supportive of efforts toward personal growth and very non-discriminating in that way.”

Zinn said being a woman in construction also has distinct advantages.

“This might be interpreted as a sexist remark, but I think women are excellent communicators and much of contracting is commu-

nicating.”

Clients, subcontractors, and suppliers are just some of the people a general contractor must deal with, she said. “Communication is extremely important.”

To get good at house-building, Zinn said she just “plodded through.”

“I just ask a lot of questions, and I find people who know, and I pay them to consult with me,” she said.

Zinn does admit, however, that building a house includes “thousands of details.”

When the plumber and the heating contractor want to share the same interior wall space, Zinn said, it’s up to her to settle the problem.