

Carol Ann Zinn celebrates 30 years as a developer



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Carol Ann Zinn has built a reputation for developing and building fine homes in and around Chapel Hill.

Tending to details

BY JULIAN SERENO
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Real estate development – taking raw land and making it into a community – is an art, according to Carol Ann Zinn.

She should know. She has been practicing the art of real estate development in Chapel Hill for 30 years.

As a woman developer, she's still a rarity. When she started out, she was the only one in the area.

"Early on, in 1978, there were some who thought it was odd that I was doing what I was doing," she said. "I got lots of support in Chapel Hill. A home is a woman's domain. Designing and building houses felt natural to me. People in this community respected that. Subcontractors were like teachers. I had to ask a lot of questions."

Zinn began her professional life in a more

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Carol Ann Zinn

traditional medium – pottery. Her career in real estate began in 1976. At that time, she lived on 32 acres just north of Calvander.

"I was an artist potter at the time," she said. "My sons were unhappy; they had no one to play with."

So she subdivided the property into eight parcels and sold several lots.

Thus was born the Stony Hill development. Her sons liked having neighbors to play with, and she discovered that she liked real estate development.

"With the profit, I bought more land," she said. "Twelve acres off Ray Road in Carrboro."

She gave up pottery and dove into real estate development.

"I was drawn to it," she said. "It felt natural. Designing and building and developing felt rewarding."

Zinn grew up in an entrepreneurial environment. Her dad started his own clothing business in New York City's garment district in 1948.

In 1979, she embarked on a major commercial project – the Courtyard, on West Franklin Street in Chapel Hill.

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“I was a novice, and this was a major development,” she said.

“It was part new, part remodeled,” said Jerry Sparrow, now retired from Sparrow and Sons Plumbing and Heating in Carrboro. “There was a milk distributor there, with a dairy bar in front; quite a popular place in its day. That was made into Pyewacket restaurant. The buildings on the left side were built on site.

“It was a big and relatively complicated project. It was a fun project for me, and everyone was proud of the results.”

The Courtyard became a major renovation on the west part of Franklin Street.

Zinn developed other projects, growing some with each – Mount Carmel Spring, off Mount Carmel Church Road; Southbridge, 125 lots off Culbreth Road; Montvale, in Durham; Fairfield, in Durham; Larkspur; Glenmere; Greenwood Point; and Montclair. Aydan Court, a town home and condo development east of Meadowmont, is going through approval.

The newest development is Claremont, north of Homestead Road between Calvander and Chapel Hill High School.

“Claremont is my sons’ development: Adam and Omar,” she said. “Zinn Design Build is a family business.”

Zinn said the details that make houses beautiful are not necessarily expensive but are often small expenses that add beauty and grace far beyond their cost.

“I travel, and it informs my work,” she said. “I take lots of photographs. In northern California the way they do trim moldings is different.”

She likes window treatments from Sweden. English cabinets. Subway tile. Glass tile. Marble mosaics. San Francis-

co-style newel posts.

She always keeps in mind the field of vision of a houses’ inhabitants.

“What do you look at? What do you see?” she asks.

“All the little touches go toward making the whole very warm, very rich.”

“She really is on the cutting edge of design,” said Erika Buchholtz of Prudential Carolinas Realty and former president of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Board of Realtors. “She is absolutely passionate about creating well-designed homes and neighborhoods.

“She took a photograph of an entryway of some type of dwelling in France. She was completely struck with how two columns made the entrance, with this gate. She made that the entryway to one of her developments, Montclair. It’s not the typical way these things tend to be.”

Zinn does not believe that the national downturn in real estate bodes ill for this area, pointing out that Chapel Hill remains one of the strongest real estate markets in the country.

“This is the time in real estate when the smart people are going to succeed,” she said. “We are not a big builder – 25 houses a year.”

Sparrow speaks highly of Zinn.

“We worked together for a long time,” he said. “She’s a very honest businessperson. She’s loyal. She is demanding, but she demands performance and quality. She’s a good friend. She’s very innovative in her thinking, with a flair for design. She’s a visionary of sorts.”

Buchholtz sings Zinn’s praise as well.

“I feel very fortunate to work with Carol Ann,” she said. “She is a real dynamo. She and her sons have created one of the most successful and respected home building businesses in our marketplace.”

The secret is simple, Zinn said; “I love my work.”