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The lure of the playground



Photos by Briana Brough

Developer Carol Ann Zinn said she wanted the castle play structure in her Larkspur development to appeal to kids' imaginations.

Builders find that recreation outlets provide a powerful attraction for buyers.

BY NANCY E. OATES
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Like a Phoenix rising from the ashes – or, in this case, the cement dust – Larkspur castle reigns, serene and proud, over the noise and clutter of a construction site.

Carpenters and masons scurry around what will be a park-like setting, hustling to complete the clubhouse and pool as summer breathes down their necks. Once the recreation area is finished, children – and their parents – in the neighborhood off Weaver Dairy Extension will have a place near their homes to burn off energy and cool down from the heat of a Southern summer.

Subdivision developers have noticed how playgrounds, tennis courts, a pool and clubhouse, some open only to those who live in the neighborhood, are drawing potential homebuyers. Jeff Rupkalvis, president of the Chapel Hill Board of Realtors, said that the notion of nesting – wanting to stay home, rather than go out for food, recreation and entertainment – has fueled the demand.

“When people get home, they don’t want to have to leave,” he said.

The trend in the past 10 years, Rupkalvis said, is toward developments edged in open, public green space but with houses on small lots with little yard space.

“Developers are seeing how much homeowners like those recreation amenities,” Rupkalvis said. “They add value to neighborhoods that don’t have houses on traditional, large lots. It compensates for some of the small yards that these new neighborhoods have.”

The Ridgefield neighborhood, built in the 1960s across U.S. 15-501 from University Mall, may have been the first subdivision to offer a swimming pool. Heritage Hills, off Smith Level Road, followed about a decade later. Southern Village, Governor’s Club, Meadowmont, Lake Hogan Farms, Sunset Creek and Wexford are among the developments built in the 1990s and



Zinn said she made a point of playing on the elaborate Larkspur set.

later that included playgrounds, a pool and clubhouse, and sometimes tennis courts.

“From a Realtor’s standpoint,” Rupkalvis said, “it definitely makes a neighborhood more attractive to clients, particularly those who have children.”

Children have yet to romp over the Larkspur castle’s bouncy bridge or zip down its turquoise slide. The turrets are empty, and secret messages have not been pushed through the castle mail slot. But rest assured that Larkspur developer Carol Ann Zinn has thoroughly play-tested the castle herself.

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“I’ve done the whole thing,” Zinn said. “I didn’t have anything like that as a child. Growing up, we had to go to the local elementary school to play on playground equipment.”

Zinn has had this elaborate play structure in mind for the past 10 years, ever since she saw a small ad in a San Francisco newspaper for Barbara Butler Artist Builder. Twenty years ago, butler was a fine-arts painter who paid her bills by working with her brothers in construction, building decks, fences and hot tubs. While doing some work for Bobby “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” McFerrin in 1987, Butler was asked by McFerrin’s wife to build a backyard play structure. The idea “totally captured my imagination,” Butler said.

“I went and played on all the play structures in town and came up with a design that had carved totem poles,” Butler said. “I wanted to stain it in interesting colors, but I couldn’t find any, so I made my own stains.”

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Playground

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The structure was a success, and Butler “was totally hooked.” She switched the focus of her work to play structures and tree forts. Her business, growing through word of mouth, took off.

“I stumbled on some famous people to work for – Phoebe Cates, Kevin Kline, Robert Redford – which always helps business,” she said.

First her husband, then her brother joined the business. Five years ago her sister took over the office management, and Butler began accepting commissions for public use in developments and resorts. She recently completed one for Disney World. The majority of her business is still in residential play equipment. She estimates that in the past 17 years, she’s created about 300 play structures.

“The private ones are wild, like an \$80,000 tree house,” she said. “It’s a big investment, but you’re going to be looking at it every day for years. Why not bring the same quality to a play structure that you would for an addition to your house?”

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makes play structures and tree forts in an 8,000-square-foot woodshop near the San Francisco airport. Butler perfected a method of treating wood to come up with a “buttery” finish that is softer and less splintery for kids, she said.

Butler ships the finished product in panels, along with a big instruction booklet on how to assemble, to venues around the country. She brings an independent product tester with her from Boston as she checks each installation personally. Last month she was in Chapel Hill to give her stamp of approval to the Larkspur castle.

The project began with Zinn making a trip to San Francisco to look at Butler’s previous projects and talk about what would work for the unusual shape of the 39.5 acre Larkspur site. They completed the design phase by fax, phone and e-mail, going through five versions before finding one that would fit the space and meet the public use codes.

Zinn said she wanted something for children’s imaginations as much as for physical activity. She has watched her grandchildren and her friends play, and she said she paid attention to what they enjoy.

Such an elaborate play structure,

along with the pool, clubhouse, grassy field and swing, is unusual for a development of 86 homes, Zinn said, but she wanted to put “a little extra” in the amenity area. Larkspur was one of the first developments approved after an ordinance took effect requiring 15 percent of homes in a development to be small in an effort to create less expensive housing. Zinn made 13 small homes affordable by selling them to the land trust. The other 73 houses sell for upwards of \$400,000. All Larkspur homeowners will have access to all the recreation amenities through mandatory homeowner association dues. Zinn does not plan to sell memberships to people outside of Larkspur.

From a real estate agent’s perspective, Rupkalvis said the homeowners association fees are a negligible deterrent. “I think people are getting tired of traffic and having to go everywhere in a car,” he said. “The idea that they can grab a towel and the kids and go to a pool or playground without having to fight traffic is a welcome amenity they would gladly pay for.”

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