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(abridged)

By Kara Swisher



Barbara Butler's Napa Valley Chalets

Price: \$166,000

Comment: Beautifully constructed, creative and colorful, but this pair of kid nirvanas costs a pretty penny.

...Most playhouses can be ordered online or via phone, and they're also sold at various kids' specialty stores and furniture retailers nationwide. Typically, they require about two to three months' advance purchase, but some custom playhouse retailers can make their most basic and popular designs quickly. The ones we liked best were made of natural wood and featured the same quality as regular home construction. We looked, too, for clean but original designs and a bit of imagination.

The custom-playhouse maker we like best featured a spectacular quality of workmanship and creativity. Barbara Butler, one of the best-known play house makers, with celebrity clients including the Grateful Dead's Bob Weir and diet guru Dean Ornish, has definitive style all her own, favoring bold colors, quirky but simple designs and plenty of room for heavy duty romping. "I think parents who buy these really want their kids to have a chance to run around in a way that kids are not anymore," says Ms. Butler, who is based in South San Francisco, Calif.

Almost 20 years ago, Ms. Butler was making her living building unusual decks. She was doing one for singer Bobby McFerrin when the popularity of the song "Don't Worry, Be Happy" allowed the budget to go up, and Mr. McFerrin's wife urged Ms. Butler to get creative with their kids space. After that, she was off on a whimsical ride, creating forts, jails, castles and other unusual structures that look like no other on the market. Now she has 15 employees to design and create the playhouses.

There are common Butler elements in the designs, such as the all important secret escape hatch in all units, as well as fire poles, slides, bridges, rope nets and rock climbing walls. Things like mad-scientist panels (panels with knobs

and other things to turn and click and push), mail slots, safes, water cannons, and speaking tubes can be added to the playhouses. The houses are mostly made of redwood, stained in any of 55 unusual colors from rosy magenta to a woody green to an electric blue, and they typically have multiple levels.

Ms. Butler consults more actively clients than other playhouse makers, often not designing anything until she has visited the site of the proposed structure. Thus, she now has dozens of templates to consider, from the less expensive Cozy Cabin (\$3,300 for a small square house with a gabled roof and a faux chimney), to the three-level Cape Codder (\$12,600 with a balcony, a working flagpole, and a loft), to the Climbing Castle (\$26,530 for an octagon-shaped, tricked-out tower with 16 hand-carved fleur-de-lis shields). When a playhouse is truly customized and gigantic, prices can go much higher, like the \$166,000 Napa Valley Chalet, a pair of two-story houses that feature full electricity, insulation and plumbing and are connected by a bridge.

Ms. Butler knows such prices are steep, but she notes that smaller, less expensive houses can be just as enriching. "What really matters is the imagination of the child playing," she notes.