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A PHOENIX RISES IN PIPER GLEN



A burned-out hulk gets reborn when a south Charlotte couple work with the builder to redo it for raising their six children.



PHOTOS BY DIEDRA LAIRD - dlaird@charlotteobserver.com

BEFORE & AFTER: The Berens family poses for Mike Berens' mother, Barbara Berens, after the home's completion. Photos at top show the grand salon (then and now); at center above is the burned-out staircase.

BY CELESTE SMITH
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Here's what happened when a door squashed a construction power cord on a spacious home under way in Piper Glen:

The house burned down. The buyer bolted. Poachers stole copper from the roof.

But today, two years later, a new house has taken its place.

While the 10,400-square-foot home is hardly downscale, the new owners did take a more pragmatic approach to redesigning the home.

In a south Charlotte neighborhood where larger, upscale houses push past the million-dollar mark, the Berens family didn't pick this home and location based on status. Practical choices ruled instead.

Luxuries such as an elevator and the opulent roof were out.

And they did something few families today even contemplate. They had their six children double up, two to a bedroom.

The spacious basement and separate areas for a study and children's play room give the kids, ranging in age from 2 to 14, places to spread out and host friends. A five-minute walk to the neighborhood pool sealed the deal.

After the fire, the home didn't exactly scream curb appeal, with its main foyer staircase burned out and the landscaping scorched. But Melissa Berens saw the chance for "a warm family house," she said. "That's what probably sold me."



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Jim Benham (center), 59, owner of Benham Builders of Charlotte, relaxes with sons and coworkers Jimmy (left), 21, project manager, and Matthew, 24, who does marketing, in the back yard of the new home.

A TALE OF STARTING OVER: A PHOENIX RISES IN PIPER GLEN

RENOVATION

■ from IH

Fire after fire

Jim Benham spotted the orange sky while driving down Rea Road, minutes after getting the late-night call. The custom home builder's largest project to date was in flames. "We're dead," he thought.

That September 2006 blaze drew close scrutiny from investigators and the media. It was similar to a string of more than 20 intentionally set fires at large homes in Mecklenburg and Union counties, and across the state line in South Carolina's Lancaster County.

Those fires, dating to 2000, happened during wee hours, and in pricey, empty homes still under construction, just like this one.

But fire investigators soon determined that it wasn't an arsonist but a power cord - squashed in the front door by construction workers - that triggered the fast-moving fire.

The sprawling home, its 8-foot doors, 16-foot ceilings and \$100,000 worth of cabinets set just days before, were now all ashes. Hand demolition would be needed to preserve the foundation walls before

starting over. (Benham's insurance covered the bulk of the loss.)

The original buyer - a mother with a son - backed out after he called to tell her about the blaze.

Others took advantage of the situation. Not long after the fire, Benham said he got another phone call from a neighbor, this time about thieves hauling away copper from the roof by truck.

'Upbeat about starting over'

Meanwhile, Melissa Berens, a busy mom, and husband Mike Berens, who works for a bank, were hunting for a new home.

While building their last home in nearby Rea Woods, the Berenses discovered that their fourth child was on the way. They were already outgrowing the home, and eventually they would have two more children. Their oldest of six will head for high school this fall. Along with their children's age differences comes the need for different types of spaces. The little girls like to play dress-up, for example, while the oldest son enjoys writing fiction.

Learning about the home through her Realtor, Melissa Berens saw promise in the

burned-out hulk.

Their children wouldn't have to change schools. One of her daughters, a competitive gymnast, could stay with her same gym and schedule. The local library was within walking distance.

The Berenses weren't spooked by the home's history.

"It was a fluky thing," Melissa said. Plus, "Jim was so upbeat about starting over" - and building a home for a big family, at that.

Since both Berenses have engineering backgrounds, they liked tailoring a home to their needs and focusing on details, such as Melissa's idea to build lockers out of bead board near the kitchen, where the kids can keep books and backpacks and have no excuse for clutter.

Scaled-down details

The family made more changes to convert some of the home's lavish touches to more down-to-earth details. Instead of that copper roof, there are regular asphalt shingles. The original plan called for a "morning room" with a coffee maker and juice bar off the master bedroom; now it's a small craft space with counters and shelves.

They nixed a third laundry room and instead built a large

pantry with an extra refrigerator.

A powder room on the main level replaced another luxury item. "There's no way I'm living in a house with an elevator," Berens said.

Most of the family dining is done in the kid-friendly kitchen, with a large island where everyone can sit, and a microwave drawer low enough for the smaller family members to operate.

Off the kitchen is the "command center" - a desk, wall shelves serving as mom's in-

Purchasing a home under construction - and you want a lot of changes?

To get the family home of their dreams, the Berens family and Jim Benham of Benham Builders (www.benham-builders.com) kept in constant contact through e-mails, phone calls and weekly walk-throughs of the property every Friday to make sure the design matched expectations, according to Benham. But not every builder may be willing to tweak a home's layout once construction gets under way. Here are some things to look out for if you're trying to pick a builder open to change:

- Pick a builder skilled in renovations, and not just in building new homes. Benham said he learned how to change floor plans of existing buildings while running a company in Washington, D.C., that renovated and repaired commercial buildings. "You have to like renovations, and be good at renovations," he said. "A lot of builders are afraid of changes...It causes them to delay the process while they rethink it."
- Get it in writing. M/I Homes, which builds homes in the Charlotte market that range from about \$180,000 to about \$500,000, has a policy for buyers who commit early in the process: for a \$2,500 fee, the builder will modify its floor plan to the buyer's specifications. If the buyer wants more changes after the first draft, there's a \$500 fee. "If they want to move a structural wall or enlarge their home and change it around, we'll do that," said Vincent Furnari, vice president of sales and marketing for the Charlotte division of M/I Homes.
- Be an organized buyer. Benham said his client kept a Microsoft Excel worksheet to keep track of changes and requests.
- Ask early. Furnari said it's easier to make changes in the early framing stage of construction, but once you add wiring and plumbing, your options begin to drop off. "When you add Sheetrock, almost everything drops off, except for maybe cabinets," he said.
- Do your research: Buyers should talk to a builder's past clients and become familiar with their product and their ability to make changes. "They're going to be married to that builder," said Benham, "for a year or more."

box for school papers to sign, and a nearby homework room with a long counter and stools. Next to that are the six bead board lockers, each with its own decorative knob with the first initial of each child.

They kept plenty from the original: the main-floor library, with its wood cabinets and paneling; the mahogany doors throughout; and the spacious basement housing a big-screen theater room, a fitness space and guest room.

With all of that space to enjoy, the Berenses felt strongly that their four girls and two boys didn't need individual bedrooms. So Lydia, 2, and Helena, 4, share space, as do Ceceilia, 8, and Michaela, 14; and

boys Noah, 10, and Roman, 14. Each bedroom has its own bathroom with two sinks.

Melissa Berens calls it the family's "phoenix house" that rose from the ashes. It felt like home as soon as they moved in. Shortly after settling in this spring, the five older children each invited four friends over for sleepovers. Mom and dad, on the screened-in porch off the family room, couldn't tell that there were 20 kids in the house.

The house could become the neighborhood hangout for her children's friends, and that's fine with Melissa Berens.

"I always wanted to be the house that they go to."

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