

Developers see artwork as useful marketing tool

KATY STAFFORD
STAFF WRITER

As a young artist, Lori Esposito may not be able to afford a custom home at The Palisades, but she'll soon become a household name in the high-profile residential community.

The UNC Chapel Hill student won the Rhein Medall Prize for Community Art, and her baseball-inspired bronze sculpture will be fabricated for installation at the Lake Wylie development.

Rhein Medall Communities is one of

several local real estate developers incorporating art elements into their residential developments.

"We have public art in public spaces and civic areas, but why not in residential communities?" asks Jim Medall, president of Rhein Medall. "We are really trying to enrich the experience of living in a community."

The 1,500-acre Palisades development has five large art pieces, and more will be added as the project grows.

The display of artwork adds uniqueness to what could otherwise be cookie-cutter developments.

In Charlotte, where new housing units are popping up all over, the art adds a memorable element or "personality," Medall says.

"It touches someone to move in or to buy and say, 'Wow, this is really cool.'"

Jean Greer, vice president of public art at the Arts & Science Council, sees value in the approach. "It's a decision a developer makes to set their development apart."

Esposito's sculpture has five large elements that represent the bases and pitcher's mound of a baseball diamond. Her intention is to have them installed at random locations throughout the development to let the viewers play their own game of running the bases.

Greer says such art provides "an opportunity to have symbols that are markers of place — to help people connect different parts of a development. It's an interactive element."

Medall created the student-art prize three years ago, and Rhein Medall has since awarded about \$130,000 to winning students and their schools. The company has also spent about \$200,000 fabricating the sculptures. The cost, he says, is well worth it.

"There's money built into our budget for traditional things such as landscaping," he says. "Our thought is that we've replaced those things with the art. We're trying to make it not necessarily an additional cost; we're shifting our costs, and I do think it's worthwhile."



Grubb

Clay Grubb, president of Grubb Properties Inc., has also made incorporating art into his company's residential communities a priority, despite the cost.

"There's no question there's give and take in terms of cost," he says. "But we think the more you give, the more you'll get in return."

For example, as part of Grubb's Morrison project in SouthPark, more than 2 acres were left undeveloped where a mid-rise apartment tower could have been built. Instead, the site will eventually contain artwork to commemorate an African-American church and cemetery that once stood there. "It's a way to give back to the community," he says.

One of Grubb's best-known public art sculptures, known by many passersby as "the onion rings," was created for a very practical reason.

"It was a challenging corner to figure

out," Grubb says of the intersection of Randolph and Wendover roads, next to his Wendover Heights development.

"People didn't want to live on that corner because it was so busy."

The site was zoned for 54 units, but Grubb built back from the intersection with only 41 units. N.C. artist Thomas Sayre created the towering sculpture to represent the seedpods of magnolia trees, which were well-established at the site.

And Grandiflora, as it's officially known, won a lot of attention, says Todd Williams, vice president of planning and development at Grubb.

"People loved it and people hated it," he says. "But it made people aware of

the site, of the project. It helped sales volume. It created a sense of energy around the project."

Grubb declines to reveal the cost of the sculpture.

Greer of the ASC agrees public art in residential developments will attract certain buyers or renters. "It's a strategic marketing tool," she says. "And I think it's a good one."

For Grubb and Medall, incorporating art into their developments is also just fun. Both say they grew up with the arts playing a large role in their family lives.

"It's really one of those intangible things," Medall says. "I think we all need art and whimsy in our lives."

Staff Writer Katy Stafford can be reached at (704) 973-1149 or kstafford@bizjournals.com.



Medall



photo courtesy GRUBB PROPERTIES INC.

Ratcliffe on the Green successfully combines public art with a condo project uptown.