



"I like the interaction between imaginative and physical play," says Butler (with kids in San Francisco). "I like to make a dreamy spot."

Child's Play

Barbara Butler's fun rooms build on kids' fantasies

When Barbara Butler first showed up for a construction job at singer Bobby McFerrin's San Francisco home in the late 1980s, she expected to renovate the house, not her career. But her Inner Child stirred when the singer's wife, Debbie, suggested building a playhouse for the couple's two children. "This is the job that really got us started," recalls Butler, who at the time was so poor, she'd "park a block away because I didn't want them to see our old truck."

Butler isn't playing hide-and-seek with her truck anymore. Customers eagerly pay \$10,000 to \$75,000 for her storybook castles and elaborate spaceships. Satisfied clients include Kevin Kline and Phoebe Cates's two scamps, and a tower built by Butler is used in Robin Williams's upcoming fantasy *Bicentennial Man*. Cates calls Butler "not just a builder for hire, she's an artist," while Debbie McFerrin says Butler's work "looks like it comes from an indigenous tribe that doesn't really exist."

Coming from a tribe of her own, Butler, 42, was the sixth of eight children growing up in Watertown, N.Y., where dad Jim, now 81, was an insurance executive and mom Betty, 79, ran a nursery school. Early lobs such as waitressing didn't satisfy, so Butler, a graduate of the State University of New York College at Cortland, dabbled in painting and construction, eventually making custom furniture—her first piece, a table, sold for \$2. Now her husband of two years, Jeff Beal, 44, helps build her projects. They have no children, but Butler says her clients are "big kids." They certainly have money to play with. "When someone says, I feel like it's a Matisse in my yard," she laughs, "that's so much better coming from someone who actually owns a Matisse."