

Building Doll Houses And Doll Furniture

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Building Doll Houses And Doll Furniture

Well built and tastefully appointed hand made doll houses often sell for \$400 or more, especially if they are to scale, realistic looking, well-decorated and nicely furnished. Materials used to build and furnish high quality doll houses are not necessarily expensive. The real expenses is in the apparent hours of labor and high degree expertise required for their construction.

However, many "expert" doll house craftsmen have no more training or background than a normal wood-workers or wood hobbyists. If you have ever built a model airplane or car, you can probably produce doll houses that will command a good prices. All it takes is a little attention to detail, practice and a few tricks of the trade.

Basically, building doll houses involves selecting and cutting out (according to plans) 1/8" to 1/4" paneling for walls, a little stronger plywood for the bottom floor, and thin paneling

with a simulated overlay for the roof.

Cut out the required windows, doors and spaces for stairways. For efficiency, you will probably cut out several parts from the same basic plan at a time.

Check these parts often to make sure they fit properly. Most walls and floors should be decorated before they are permanently installed or you may not be able to get them to apply the desired coatings or linings.

Although you will develop your own procedures, it's wise to follow the plan instructions explicitly for the first few models. Remember that although you can substitute materials freely, some substitutions may require different applications from the plans, so be careful!

If you want to try one without a plan (a commercial plan is recommended, at least for the first effort), you'll need a sheet of plywood (or plain 3/8" paneling), some ice cream sticks or tongue depressors, glue, nails (brads), a few pins and screw eyes, a coping or jig saw, plus other normal shop tools. Get wallpaper and linoleum (or contact shelf paper) remnants from the hardware store and fabric scraps from an upholstery shop or yard goods store.

Much of the fun building doll houses is the ingenious and often, unique methods craftsmen come up with to create really amazing effects for doors, windows, roofs, outside and inside decor. Your total material cost could be as low as \$200 including furniture. Of course, the cost can be much higher with veneer walls, silk rugs and fancy furnishings.

Doll house patterns are available from many sources - your

public library probably has several books on the subject; discount book sellers offer a wide selection of books, plans and suggestions.

Decorations and furnishings can also be obtained from a variety of sources (several are listed under BUSINESS SOURCES). Subscribe to one or more trade magazines to learn and stay abreast of additional sources for materials, building and marketing techniques.

The first "trick" is to build your doll houses to the scale of the furniture that you intend to use! This is much easier (and smarter) than building one haphazardly or to a standard for which the furniture is hard to get or even unavailable.

This would mean trying to cut little pieces of furniture down or enlarge them to fit a non-standard scale doll house.

Unless you are equipped to build doll house furniture from scratch to the described scale, stay with the standard scales!

To find the scale of the furniture, measure the height of a table and compare that a similar table in your own home.

If the doll house table is 2-1/2" tall and it equates to yours that is 30 inches (2-1/2 feet), that's a one inch to one foot (or twelve to one) scale.

An inch or difference ON YOUR TABLE is not bad. The same procedure works on your house scale. If your doorway opening is 32 by 80 inches (2-2/3 by 6-1/2 feet), then the same size opening in the doll house would be 2-2/3 by 6-1/2 inches. The one foot equals one inch is a widely accepted scale.

You can use any scale you want, however, even metric.

A good tip for furniture is to buy imported doll house furniture

cheap and refinish it even though it's new (SMC has a nice selection of inexpensive "imported furniture" see BUSINESS SOURCES). Buy a \$1.30 chair, and sand and give it a coat of good polyurethane to make it into a \$6.95 (retail) chair instead of the suggested retail of \$3.95.

Much imported doll house furniture is mass produced by children or untrained workers. It is poorly sanded and lightly coated with varnish or other inexpensive finish (even shoe polish!). Their materials and tools are often poor quality and the finishes usually look and feel rough. Their wood, however, is usually excellent (good wood is cheap overseas).

With some fine sandpaper and steel wool, smooth the finish until looks and feels hand crafted. If the stain and finish is really bad, remove it with BIX (at your hardware store), re-stain and refinish it.

This process needn't take long, especially if you do several at once. Give your wooden furniture one or more coats of quality varnish, polyurethane or liquid resin. Spray is fine a dust free area (some overseas furniture makers spray out in the open with cars going by).

Check the upholstery for fit and quality. Replace if it doesn't look nice or go with your "decor" or treat it. Trim loose threads and glue any loose corners. A few moments with piece of doll house furniture can triple it's value. It can also make the difference between a \$40 and a \$400 doll house!

Market your doll houses wholesale through craft shops (usually on consignment), toy or department stores, and/or do your own advertising and sell from your "factory."

If you retail, two things will help immensely: a catalog and a nice display. Take good (professional quality) color pictures of each of your creations from several angles. Use professional backgrounds and lighting to present them in their best possible light.

If you can't afford to have a catalog printed, make up a scrapbook of your work to show both the quality and the variety that you produce. Add comments and prices to make it into your catalog. List various options and prices for each. For example, modifying the layout, adding a room or porch, changing the type of roof.

Next, make arrangements to display your doll houses. This can be a corner of a room in your house or shop or rented display window (check with real estate agents for windows in unoccupied stores). Pictures and advertisements are nice, but you just can't beat the real thing. The closer your doll house display is to where little girls can see them, the better!

You can sometimes arrange with local businesses to feature a display (the bank, bowling alley) for a week at a time. As a local craftsman of note, these businesses will often co-operate, especially if you're good. You get exposure; they have an added attraction for their customers at no cost.

Unless you live in a big city it would probably not pay to advertise continually in newspaper except around Christmas. Of course, if you could get the names and addresses of parents with little girls in the 3 to 10 age brackets, you could mail out brochures with pictures to their parents.

One way to obtain such a list is to offer a doll house as a prize. Contestants fill out coupons with their name and address to enter (which becomes your mailing list). Take part in community affairs to meet potential buyers. Operate a booth at the county fair, give out free balloons at the parade and come up with doll house variations that the local paper will cover (perhaps a model of a prominent local house).

Be sure to have several completed models on hand or at least ready to finish in time for Christmas. This should be your best season. Don't overlook the possibility of building (or finishing) custom doll houses.

For example, a shape something like the family home, painted and decorated to match (these would start at \$400!). With 4 or 5 different basic patterns, you could make minor adjustments to come up with quite a few totally different models.

One of your secrets is that you keep all patterns, jigs, molds and simply change outer materials to get different effects. For example, all of your roofs will be similar, but some can be finished in painted sandpaper or cut out thin panel wood for asphalt shingles and tile. You can probably imprint some wood paneling with brick design, spray it a light color, then roll it with reddish brown to look like brick. Similar designs inscribed on light wood would look like patio and walkway tile.

There is simply no end to interesting effects that can be realized from your imagination and a little experimenting. The best advice from this point is to remember that the more patience and care you take in building each doll house, the more enjoyment some little girl will receive.

If this is your motivation, you will undoubtedly be a successful doll house and doll furniture builder. Even so, keep accurate records and always try to work out procedures to enable you to produce sections of the doll houses assembly line fashion. This helps avoid mistakes, speeds construction and increase your profits.

BUSINESS SOURCES

SPECIALTY MERCHANDISE CO., 9401 De Soto Ave., Chatsworth, CA 91311, 818-998-2712. Nice selection of imported, inexpensive doll furniture, 1" : 1" scale, plus other imported merchandise. Membership required (costs about \$500, but can be paid in installments).

COLLECTOR COMMUNICATIONS CORP., 170 5th Ave., New York, NY 10010, 212/989-8700. Publishes DOLLS, bi-monthly magazine for doll collectors, plus MINIATURE COLLECTOR, magazine about furnishings and decor for doll houses.

JACQUELINE'S, Box 23464, Oakland, CA 94263-0464. Doll house plans and furnishings. 70 page color catalog - \$2.

DOLL HOUSE FACTORY OUTLET, 325 Division St., Boonton, NJ 07005,
201/335-5501. Doll houses, kits and accessories.

INTERNATIONAL DOLL MAKERS ASSOCIATION, 3364 Pine Creek Dr., San Jose, CA 95132. Association of doll makers and collectors.

HOBBY HOUSE PRESS, INC., 900 Frederick St., Cumberland, MN 21502. Publishes DOLL READER, trade magazine for doll dealers.

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN DOLL ARTISTS, 5630 Clarksville Highway, Joelton, IN 37080. Association of doll makers and collectors.

DOVER PUBLICATIONS, 31 East 2nd St., Mineloa, NY 11051. Discount books, stencils, patterns; excellent source for ideas and decor accessories. Recommend this one highly!

QUILL CORPORATION, 100 Schelster Rd., Lincolnshire, IL 60917-4700, 312/634-4800. Office supplies.

NEBS, 100 Main St., Groton, MA 04171, 800/225-6380. Office supplies.

IVEY PRINTING, Box 761, Meridan, TX 76665. Low-cost printing.. Write for price list.

ZPS, Box 581, Libertyville, IL 60048-2556. Business cards (raise print - \$11.50 per K) and letterhead stationery. Will print your copy ready logo or design, even whole card.

WALTER DRAKE & SONS, INC., 4119 Drake Bldg., Colorado Springs, CO 80940. Short run business cards, stationery, etc. Good quality but little choice of style or color. Can be difficult to deal with (they are a "short-order" mail order house).