

# Toymaker changes dollhouse walls

*Continued from 1E*

a magazine of a dollhouse that was clearly manufactured wrong," Jacobson says. "The walls that were supposed to be on the interior were on the exterior. I thought it had been assembled by a child and I thought that was a cool idea. When I read the article, I realized it was a mistake."

This mistake, however, became Jacobson's genius: a dollhouse with interchangeable walls where children would be able to craft their own interiors and exteriors.

ArtHouse, 14 inches tall, 14 inches deep and 26 inches wide, contains two rooms with 10 magnetically attached walls and a removable roof for convenient access. The \$195 retail price includes decorating kits — complete with stickers — that transform the ArtHouse into either a country cottage or a fire station.

Jacobson began to line up suppliers in Colorado and other areas of the country. By January, the initial ArtHouse had been assembled in Jacobson's garage;

he subsequently made his first sale to a dollhouse shop that had seen the invention at a minor toy convention.

The real beginning of the business took root when Jacobson traveled to New York City in February to attend Toy Fair, the biggest trade show in the toy industry. Jacobson's exhibition of ArtHouse at Toy Fair attracted the attention of independent toy retailers as well as the interest of three prominent galleries, including the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C. All three museums had seen ArtHouse and wanted to include the toy as a feature in their gift collections.

This spring, Jacobson doesn't have to travel to New York to exhibit ArtHouse to interested retailers. Instead, he's attending the American Specialty Toy Retailers Association annual trade show at the Omni Interlocken Resort in Broomfield that began Thursday and runs through Sunday.

Jacobson now distributes ArtHouse to 20 independent toy

stores across the country, including seven retailers in the Denver-metro area. Mrs. Toad's Toys, an independent toy retailer that carries ArtHouse, is just down the street from the Storyboard Toys garage.

"We saw their display at the Toy Fair in New York City and were interested," says Julie Litt, owner of the Longmont store. "I like the concept of allowing kids to use their creativity to customize something. I think one of the benefits of (the ArtHouse) is that kids can use different tools to help them design: watercolors, pencils, stickers ... they can be as creative as they want."

As testament to its success, Litt's 8-year-old son, who literally lives among toys, has already taken a liking to the store's display model.

"My son did draw some pictures for the one we have on display, and he was pretty excited about it," Litt says.

Most children who have had access to the toy are able to entertain themselves for hours, Jacobson says.

"I was watching kids at a pre-

school play with (ArtHouse), and they were setting it up to be a cottage in one room and a firehouse in another," Jacobson says. "It's a really good toy for kids playing together because it is so flexible."

ArtHouse also can be modeled according to historic and/or cultural themes. To promote its use as an educational tool, Storyboard Toys carries two different décor kits for ArtHouse: a set that transforms ArtHouse into a traditional Japanese home and one that makes the toy a Viking longhouse.

Each \$18 décor kit contains a 40-plus page workbook of pre-designed walls, blank self-coloring walls, paper dolls, and lessons in art and social studies specific to the theme of the set. A third kit, available by July, will allow children to make ArtHouse into a horse barn, complete with a workbook that features horse anatomy, horse tackle and general equine trivia.

"You can give (children) any situation and it encourages them to think of how people live," Jacobson says.