

BUILDER SNAPSHOT

Clairmont empowers the client

Custom builder offers tours of home at each stage of the process

By Leslie Mann
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Pat Franz compares the current economic climate to the Jewish bereavement custom of sitting shiva. "It's a tough time," he says. "We want to stay home, relax and surround ourselves with family and friends."

His clients' houses, says the Hinsdale-based home builder, reflect this. "Low-maintenance, secure, efficient houses with open floor plans," is what Franz's clients request, he says. "They want to come home to comforts like steam showers and home theaters, but don't want to have to have engineering degrees to use them."

Franz says he named his company Clairmont Ltd. because British names lend an air of trust. Dozens of houses with the Clairmont name now dot the Chicago suburbs.

Today, Clairmont's business includes three sectors: remodeling, custom and semi-custom houses.

The latter includes the 10-lot St. Andrews Estates in Crete, where base prices for ranch and two-story plans range from \$280,000 to \$400,000. These are selling to couples with older children and to empty-nesters who want to stay close to their south suburban roots, says Franz.

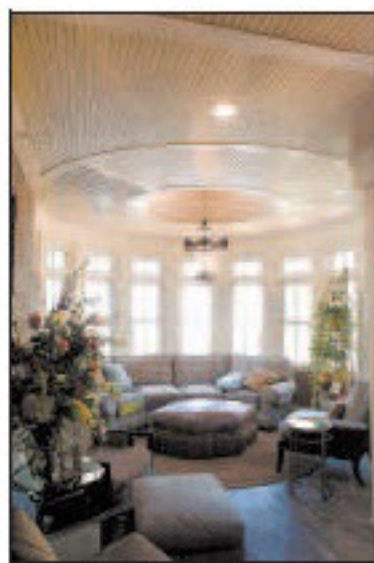
Clairmont builds custom houses on lots owned by clients or on lots from its inventory. Currently, the builder has two lots in downtown Downers Grove. Clients for Clairmont's custom houses, which have price tags in the \$1.3 million-and-up range, are typically two-career families with hectic lives, says Franz. "They want their houses to pamper them," says Franz. Lot location is all-important, he adds. "They want to be close to the train, airports and killer schools."

Clairmont's remodeling projects include room additions, basement finishing, kitchen and bathroom re-dos and making older homes more energy-efficient.

Franz is a National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) Certified Green Professional and says "building green" is a goal for each of his projects. This includes green-building practices such as recycling construction waste.



Pat Franz, head of custom home builder Clairmont Ltd., learned the home-building trades by helping his father renovate apartment buildings. COREY R. MINKANIC/PHOTOS FOR THE TRIBUNE



Clairmont recently added this sunroom to a Hinsdale home.

"Every house is a tight shell, so we use products like cellulose or spray-foam insulation," says Franz. "We caulk the heck out of every conceivable opening with caulk that stretches as the house expands and contracts." Only tradespeople who keep up on green building make the Clairmont team, says Franz.

The Clairmont staff includes a trim carpenter who knows how to

create a three-layered, coffered ceiling, says Franz. Like most custom builders, Franz prizes his trim carpenter like a restaurateur prizes his pastry chef, whose kitchen skills must match, at least, his presentation skills.

Clairmont clients get to know Trish Wojcik, who is vice president officially, but the "queen mom" unofficially, she says. "The clients call me anytime with questions," says Wojcik.

To keep the client informed of the house's progress, the Clairmont team schedules tours at each stage. "We empower them with information," says Wojcik. "And, we understand that not every client is used to thinking in 3D. So we make their changes along the way when they can actually walk through the house."

Builder-client communication is especially vital during remodeling, says Franz. "It's like doing open-heart surgery when the patient is awake," he says. "You never know what you will find when you open up those walls. It's my job to explain how much each change will cost."

Franz became a home builder after "doing his yuppie thing," he jokes, working as a mortgage banker and real estate investment analyst after collecting degrees in

accounting and finance.

Growing up in Evergreen Park, where classmates remember him as the band's trombone player, Franz learned from his father's investment club. "They taught me how to take money from one project and put it into the next," says Franz. "I learned there's no such thing as an armchair investor. You have to get out there and do it."

Franz learned the home-building trades by helping his father renovate apartment buildings. When he built his first house in Monee, Franz says he quizzed his mentor, a now-retired builder, liberally.

From his home office, Franz juggles home building with raising three sons. To unwind, he races his sailboat, peruses old-car shows and reads biographies of business leaders. "We all face thresholds," he says. "I find it interesting to see why one guy prevails and one guy doesn't."

Asked what differentiates a Clairmont house from a competitor's house, Franz says, "Ours doesn't need work. It has a zero punch list because we correct the problems before the client moves in instead of afterward." That, says Franz, helps put the "ta-da" in the "ta-da" moment when he hands over the keys.