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GRAND GEORGIE AWARD 2013
BEST CUSTOM HOME BUILDER IN B.C.



Clay Construction Inc



CLAY CONSTRUCT

by Susan M Boyce

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Larry Clay is no stranger to change and innovation. In fact, you could say that over the years they've become genuinely fond of each other.

It's been a decade since Larry and change began their courtship when Larry chose to leave the security of a 17-year teaching career and pursue his passion for residential construction.

He's quick to admit, it's been a bumpy ride at times. Like all new businesses, Clay Construction Inc had to prove itself in a highly competitive field. But driven by Larry's intense focus on quality and unwavering commitment to following through on each and every promise he made, word began to spread and the company prospered.

Larry became known a strong advocate and pioneer in the field of whole-house home automation systems, he built dozens of elegant spec homes across the Lower Mainland, and he developed a solid reputation for honesty, integrity, and reliability.

Then, in 2008, Larry found himself staring down the economic black hole of the looming recession. "I knew I'd come to another crossroads because financially, spec homes simply weren't viable any longer," he says. His tone is matter-of-fact and unassuming with not a trace of the drama that's typically synonymous with this global meltdown. "So I made a conscious decision to become excellent at building high-end, custom homes." And with that choice, Clay Construction moved to a whole new level.



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COVER FEATURE





Accountable and Transparent

Decision made, Larry found himself once again looking for ways to differentiate Clay Construction in an ever-more demanding and sophisticated marketplace. He tackled the challenge of market analysis with his characteristic determination and thoroughness, and in no time he'd identified an undeveloped niche that was a perfect fit with his skills and business philosophy.

"Let's face it, the first and foremost concern most people have is budget: how to create a realistic budget, not going over budget, and managing the budget during construction," he explains. "For me, the excitement of a project's success comes in large part from implementing the correct business systems so a client not only knows exactly where they're at financially throughout the actual construction but long before we even break ground."

It was the convergence of his natural affinity seeing logical progressions, past expertise in technology, and years of teaching math. It took time and patience, but after many trial runs the result was spectacular: a user-friendly, computerized business system that's totally transparent and keeps the homeowner firmly in the driver's seat.

Eyes sparkling with enthusiasm, Larry flips open his laptop to give a demonstration. A typical Clay Construction proposal appears onscreen. There's an elegant leanness to the visual design of the interface. But beneath the headings and sub-categories, the "engine" is a robust structure able to instantaneously and automatically crunch raw data and transform it into a concise, yet ultimately fluid project overview including up-to-the-minute budget.

“This is the only program I know of that can accurately calculate the cost to get to various stages like foundations, framing, or lock-up as well as work from the other direction to establish how far a certain amount will get us,” Larry says. “It’s like a springboard to manage expectations.”

Even more importantly, it virtually eliminates the nightmare of cost overruns. “If the budget comes in at \$700,000 and the client says they’ve only got \$650,000, we’re able to make informed, collaboratively decisions about where to cut back before we begin.” With just a few keystrokes, Larry demonstrates how clients can see the way modifications, even small ones — perhaps reducing the number of landscape cedars by five percent or increasing the height of their basement ceiling from the standard eight feet to nine — impact their bottom line.

“And because the client sees everything I do — every quote, invoice, piece of correspondence or contract, even how much I make — it’s completely transparent which keeps me accountable. If I’ve said framing will be \$31,500 and it suddenly comes in at \$35,000, I’d better have a good reason why.”



Digital Dynamics

Harnessing the power and efficiencies of computerization seem to come naturally to Larry. He's meticulous about digital documentation and says he's often taken thousands of photos before the drywall goes on. By the time a job is complete the number of images would have been inconceivable to a generation that relied on film.

The resulting library of images and video clips are organized by room, topic, and date to give a detailed insight into each home's inner workings. He also provides links to most suppliers and sub-trades used on the job, government agencies and related industry associations, plus scanned copies of all permits and inspections.

As a bonus, he says the system has allowed him to become 100 percent mobile. "I no longer need an office for meeting with clients, because I can do everything onsite or in a nearby coffee shop — which is much more convenient for the client!"



Today and For the Future

Clay Construction currently has six projects underway including an innovative pair of homes in Kerrisdale built in partnership with KFA Homes.

The short description: take a single, 50-foot wide lot and subdividing into two 25-foot lots, each now home to a 2,000-square-foot single-family dwelling. The longer version is a story of inspired design that meets Vancouver's mandate for thoughtfully managed densification.

Priced at less than \$2 million each, a figure almost unheard of in this venerable Vancouver neighbourhood where even a teardown frequently comes with a price tag of \$3 million or more, these homes are showcases of creative design. One is über modern boasting industrial loft features like floating tread staircase with steel and glass balustrade, angular kitchen, and totally minimalist ambiance. The other feels like a reinterpretation of the classic French country manor: antique white kitchen cabinetry, cozy living room, coved ceilings with concealed rope lights, and even a sunny, 300-square-foot “attic office” which Larry says he thinks has “so much more charm and character than a basement.”

Now waiting final city building approval is a custom home he says is the most challenging the company has ever taken on — an R2000 residence for a client with allergies so severe, they are life-threatening. “Everything — every fastener, every glue, every proposed cabinetry or insulation material — is meticulously analyzed and researched against information on Material Safety Data Sheets. Then, before we can begin construction, we place a small piece of the material in her current home to make sure she doesn’t have a reaction, because if it’s the wrong product, it could kill her.”



Further complicating the project is the client's almost impossibly tight budget. "To make this work, we had to make compromises about size and finishings," Larry admits. His voice takes on the firm ring of a man with a deep-rooted and unshakable commitment. "Yes, there were builders who weren't willing to take on this project. But this lady has a need. She's hurting and someone has to build her home. I believe I have an ethical and moral responsibility to help, because I'm able to. In the end it will be a modest house, but it will be hers."

Looking Ahead

"The thrill of running my own construction company is definitely a dream come true," Larry says. "Yes, I've had to learn things and get over some humps, but I love what I do, I love who I am, and I love knowing my business is a leader in the industry. Since the recession, we've enjoyed a 100 percent customer satisfaction rate — an achievement I could never have attained without the collaboration of a very loyal, very talented group of sub-trades and other creative partners."

Looking to the future, Larry says that while he'd feel a sense of satisfaction growing the company to a point of having 20 projects per year underway, the core foundation of his corporate philosophy — make each and every client feel as if they are the company's number one priority — will always come ahead of growth. "I believe that if you work hard every day and stay faithful to your beliefs and ethics today, success will come tomorrow."

Larry and Clay Construction Inc are found online at www.clayconstruction.ca.

