



REBUILDING AN ICON

OAKLAND HILLS HONORS ITS LEGACY WHILE BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

BY SUSAN THWING

For more than a century, the clubhouse at Oakland Hills Country Club in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, stood overlooking one of the most celebrated golf courses in the world. Its stately Georgian Revival architecture, long white façade, broad porches, and classical columns were as much a part of the club's identity as the championship golf played beyond its doors.

Then, in February 2022, it was gone. A devastating fire destroyed the historic clubhouse, leaving Oakland Hills with a loss that extended far beyond a building. The clubhouse held generations of club history, championship memories, and the traditions of a course that has hosted some of golf's most important events.

Rebuilding it was never going to mean simply replacing 110,000 square feet of space. It meant reconstructing an icon. For Clark Construction Company, selected as construction manager for the project, that responsibility was apparent from the beginning. The new clubhouse would need to feel unmistakably like Oakland Hills while meeting the structural, technological, operational, and life-safety requirements of a modern building. And it would have to be constructed in the



After a catastrophic fire, the rebuilt Oakland Hills Country Club clubhouse in Bloomfield Hills restores its familiar white façade, classical proportions, and commanding presence that have long defined the club's identity. Behind its traditional appearance is an entirely modern 110,000-square-foot complex built with structural steel, concrete systems, and high-performance building technology.

Photo credit: James Haefner
<https://www.jameshaefner.com>

middle of an active country club and championship golf course that would remain open throughout construction.

The resulting project required more than 350,000 labor hours and an extraordinary level of coordination among Oakland Hills, Neumann/Smith Architecture, Clark Construction, and a network of primarily Michigan-based contractors, tradespeople, and suppliers. The completed facility combines the club's familiar classical proportions and architectural character with structural steel, concrete systems, metal framing,

and high-performance building systems designed to carry Oakland Hills well into its second century.

For the team at Clark Construction, however, the numbers tell only part of the story. "This is going to be the most important project of my entire career," said Matt Lamberti, Project Superintendent. When Clark ultimately received the project, he recalled a sense of disbelief followed quickly by the realization of what lay ahead. "It's real, but you can't really believe it's real," he said. "And then the shock almost sets in, and it's like, wow. There's a lot of work ahead of us."

Andy Richter, Senior Project Manager for Clark Construction Company, joined the project after the initial selection process but immediately understood what it represented. "It's obviously an honor to be a part of it," Richter said. "It's a big deal, and everybody's pumped up to be a part of something like that. ... It might be a career job. You won't have anything else like that, ever."

History on a Modern Skeleton

Perhaps the central construction challenge can be found in a contradiction: The new Oakland Hills clubhouse needed to look and feel historic without being constructed like a historic building. The original clubhouse was a balloon-framed wood structure. Its successor is fundamentally different, built with structural steel, concrete systems, and metal stud framing. Yet the finished building preserves the proportions, elevations, signature rooflines, and columns associated with Oakland Hills Country Club while reintroducing architectural elements such as clerestories and exposed trusses.

"We basically did a commercial building skeleton," Lamberti explained. "Structural steel, cast-in-place concrete decks, metal framing. ... So you're taking a heavy commercial interior, and you're

trying to put very high-end historical trim and detailed work on top of it. That was a challenge."

Getting those details right required both modern construction technology and decidedly old-school expertise. Renderings could show what the building was intended to look like, but recreating the depth, profiles, and relationships of traditional architectural details demanded a different level of understanding. Clark and its trade partners drew on craftspeople with decades of field experience, including veteran carpenters nearing retirement whose knowledge proved invaluable in determining how traditional details could be realistically recreated.

Some of those tradespeople brought roughly 40 years of field experience to the conversations. They weren't simply building trim; they were helping determine how to make something new feel as though it belonged to a building with more than a century of history.

Mockups became a critical tool. Before many elements were installed, complete assemblies were constructed and evaluated. Those mockups weren't limited to visual questions such as profiles and proportions. The team examined the entire wall assembly behind the finished surface, including fire ratings and other contemporary requirements. "We'd build the whole system to make sure the modern elements would still fit with the look that they wanted on the outside," Richter said.

That approach proved particularly important in the building's wood façade. The project incorporates a ventilated rainscreen system with integrated fire blocking behind extensive wood siding. The assembly allows the clubhouse to retain the warmth and architectural character associated with wood construction while meeting modern life-safety standards.

In many respects, the details dictated the construction rather than simply

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serving as its finishing touches. Richter said the team had to understand exact window placements, trim locations, clearances, and the way individual components would intersect before proceeding with broader construction. "The details were almost the thing that we looked at before we started planning the mass construction effort," he said. "You need to see the details before you can fully plan what you're doing."

Craftsmanship by the Mile

The scale of the detail is difficult to appreciate until it is measured not in feet, but in miles. The completed clubhouse contains approximately seven miles of exterior wood siding, five miles of exterior trim, and 15 miles of interior trim. Nearly every visible component was custom-designed or fabricated, including millwork, cabinetry, lockers, bars, interior and exterior doors, and trim profiles cut using unique knife patterns.

Custom carpet was sourced internationally, while stone was quarried in Pennsylvania. To maintain consistency throughout a project involving multiple carpentry contractors, all used the same lumber supplier.

Many decisions had to be finalized as much as a year before installation because of fabrication and procurement lead times. That placed an enormous premium on early decision-making among Clark Construction, Neumann/Smith, Oakland Hills, and the specialty contractors.

The Clark team also deliberately divided finish packages to avoid concentrating too much specialized work with any single contractor.

"We never wanted to put too much on one person's plate," Lamberti said. That strategy helped with procurement and tracking because no one contractor became responsible for an overwhelming number of one-of-a-kind components.

The result is a building in which craftsmanship changes character from room to room. Lamberti points to the men's locker room, with its exposed structural steel trusses, expansive proportions, and lighter-stained white oak cabinetry and lockers. Other spaces, including the clubhouse's Hagen and Hogan lounges, move in a completely different direction, with darker wood paneling, wood floors, and acoustical plaster ceilings. There is no single detail that defines the building because virtually every room has its own architectural vocabulary.

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That diversity created another less visible challenge: acoustics. Extensive hardwood floors, wood paneling, and other hard surfaces can create beautiful rooms but challenging sound environments. Approximately 6,500 square feet of acoustical plaster was incorporated into the project, with a dedicated acoustician helping model and balance sound performance in dining, gathering, and event spaces. The finished spaces may appear effortless. Achieving that effect was anything but.

Building in the Middle of Championship Golf

If recreating Oakland Hills' architectural character was one major challenge, simply figuring out how to build it was another. "The golf course was always open. They hosted every event," Lamberti said.

And the construction footprint extended well beyond the clubhouse itself. Clark built a new greens and grounds facility,



The clubhouse's sweeping staircase, paneled walls, and carefully integrated historical displays reflect the effort to make the new building feel rooted in Oakland Hills' past. Signature architectural proportions and detailing were preserved even as the building itself was reconstructed with modern structural systems.

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developed new delivery and valet areas, worked on parking, and renovated the driving range. Lamberti estimates the project touched almost every portion of the property except the 18 holes themselves. During construction, Oakland Hills even hosted the U.S. Junior Amateur, requiring construction activities to shut down for a week.

"The amount of communication that had to take place between our team and the owner ... it was probably the most logistically challenging job I've ever had," Lamberti said. Detailed phasing and logistics plans became essential. Major site activities were compressed into limited spring and fall windows to work around the club's seasonal demands. Member access and safety had to be maintained, while construction schedules continually accommodated club activities.

Member engagement was equally important. Tours were conducted as often as three times a week during portions of construction, allowing members to see progress and remain connected to the rebuilding of their clubhouse. The approach allowed Oakland Hills to maintain its event schedule and member experience while a massive construction operation proceeded around it.

That level of stakeholder involvement was also an important part of the project's quality-control process. Richter said representatives of the owner and design team were on site constantly — sometimes every other day — walking the project. Clark brought trade foremen into those conversations so questions could be addressed directly by the people doing the work.

The team also traveled to suppliers' fabrication shops with design and ownership representatives to review components before they reached the site. The objective was straightforward: find discrepancies early, make adjustments, and keep everyone aligned.

Engineering Below the Surface

Some of the project's most significant construction achievements are now largely invisible.

A 350-foot-long, 15-foot-tall earth-retention system was constructed



Exposed structural trusses and finely crafted wood lockers give the men's locker room a distinctive character while illustrating one of the project's central challenges: integrating contemporary commercial construction with highly detailed, historically inspired finishes.

Photo credit: James Haefner
<https://www.jameshaefner.com>

adjacent to active play areas, stabilizing the site while allowing work to proceed near tees and practice greens. The buried structure effectively separated two worlds operating simultaneously: a major construction project and an active championship golf course.

A substantial underground stormwater detention system was installed across multiple areas of the site, using extensive piping and subsurface storage to manage stormwater volumes. The project added multiple underground tunnel systems as well. A cast-in-place concrete cart tunnel connects the clubhouse with the driving range, while a precast service tunnel system supports behind-the-scenes circulation and club operations.

Members and guests may rarely think about those systems, and that is largely the point. The infrastructure supports the experience without intruding on it. Above and below ground, construction sequencing had to account for the same central fact: Oakland Hills remained Oakland Hills throughout the project. Golf continued. Members continued using the property. Events continued. Construction fit around the institution rather than the institution fitting around construction.

Everybody Brought Their "A Game"

On a project of this scale and complexity, collaboration was essential. What Richter remembers most clearly is how the Oakland Hills team came together to keep the project moving forward. "Every job has problems," he said. "But the one thing about this project I think that's different is that everybody's kind

of on the same page. ... Everybody brought their "A game." Everybody wanted this thing to be perfect."

When challenges emerged, Richter said the owner, design team, and trade partners responded collectively. "It was all hands on deck," he said. "Everybody did their best to keep things moving forward and come up with the right solution quickly."

That collaboration became one of the project's defining achievements. The construction effort totaled more than 350,000 labor hours, drawing primarily on Michigan-based contractors and suppliers. It was an enormous mobilization of local construction expertise for a facility that will eventually be viewed by audiences far beyond Michigan.

For Lamberti, who has worked in construction for about 20 years, the degree of commitment was unusual. "The collaborative effort from all of the trades to work together to make sure that this job was successful is something I have not seen before," he said.

That became especially apparent as the project entered its final push. Contractors brought solutions rather than simply identifying problems. They increased manpower, worked extended hours and weekends, and remained focused on the common goal. "It kind of gives you chills now, thinking about how much people cared," Lamberti said, "because you don't really get that level of care on a normal project."

Richter similarly credits the trade partners with carrying the project through its most demanding stages, calling them



Rich wood paneling, hardwood floors, and custom millwork create an intimate, traditional atmosphere in one of the clubhouse gathering spaces. Nearly every visible element throughout the building was custom-designed or fabricated, contributing to 15 miles of interior trim installed on the project.

Photo credit: James Haefner <https://www.jameshaefner.com>

among the project's "shining stars" and saying they were instrumental in bringing the work across the finish line at the expected quality.

Over time, individual companies began functioning almost like a single construction community. Tradespeople knew counterparts from other companies by name and understood how their work affected the work of others. Clark held lunches to bring crews together and reinforce that sense of mutual respect. That culture mattered on a project where one poorly coordinated detail could ripple through a series of custom finishes.

"There are a million ways to stub your toe," Richter recalled Clark's president telling the team.

Yet the project moved to completion without a major stumble. "There are a lot of ways this could have gone sideways, and it didn't," he said. "It went very smoothly."

Two Years from Dirt to Doors Open

The speed of the transformation is another part of the achievement. "Two years prior to opening the doors, it was a dirt pile," Lamberti said. In that period, the team delivered a 110,000-square-foot, highly customized clubhouse while simultaneously executing major site, infrastructure, and support-facility improvements across an operating championship golf property. It was completed on time and on budget, according to the Clark team.

For Lamberti, fulfilling that commitment carries particular weight because of the visibility of the project and the expectations surrounding it. "To finish the project on time, on budget, and deliver a promise that was made two years prior, I think it speaks for itself," he said. "You can't just build a 110,000-square-foot, high-end, custom clubhouse that's going to be looked at by the entire world

without ... nailing it on every aspect and firing on all cylinders."

The project also provided lessons the Clark team expects to carry forward. For Lamberti, one was learning to approach challenges with solutions already in hand rather than presenting them simply as problems. For Richter, it reinforced the importance of resolving fine details far earlier than might be typical on another commercial project. At Oakland Hills, finish details couldn't wait until the finish stage; they influenced everything that came before them. For the entire team, the project also provided an unusual opportunity to coordinate a level of finish craftsmanship rarely encountered in commercial construction.

"It's not very often that as a commercial construction manager, you get to install finely detailed wood trim and paneling and high-end finishes like that," Lamberti said. Coordinating the people and pieces



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