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Harwood International CEO Gabriel Barbier-Mueller forges ahead with Sunnyvale luxury homes

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People think Gabriel Barbier-Mueller is crazy for recently breaking ground on St. James Park, an ultra-luxury home project in Sunnyvale, in the midst of a housing slump.

He shrugs it off. He's been viewed as nuts on and off for 30 years.

Barbier-Mueller, a rich native Swiss, came to Dallas in 1979 to practice his English and work for Henry S. Miller Co. The next year, he persuaded French investors to convert the decaying Interstate Trinity warehouse building on Market Street into one of the first office buildings in Dallas' West End Historical District.

In 1981, he thought the downtrodden area between Maple Avenue and Harry Hines Boulevard was ripe for transformation. He bought the corner of Pearl Street at North Harwood, which feeds into the Dallas North Tollway, and persuaded Rolex to build its Dallas headquarters on it.

"The chairman was the visionary who built the Rolex brand," Barbier-Mueller says. "He liked the 25,000 cars driving by every day. It's home-going traffic for affluent areas of North Dallas and the Park Cities. So it was a building billboard."

Six months after he started construction on the Rolex, developers followed his lead and announced plans to build the Crescent.

Now he sees Sunnyvale as "a better-valued Southlake in the east ... a bit of a Pleasantville," with relatively little unsold housing inventory and almost none in the ultra end.

He's formed a new company, Harwood Luxury Homes.

But there are doubters.

To give builders a better view of what Barbier-Mueller has in mind for St. James Park, Harwood is building the first three homes, priced at \$1 million to \$2 million.

"Instead of having to use generic vendors, we're using our buying power of Azure [Harwood's Uptown condo tower] to deliver more of a home for less money," Barbier-Mueller says.

It's not clear how many homes Harwood will build and how many will be built by others. So far, it has sold two of its 49 lots and has seven more under contract.

One target is doctors wanting to be fairly close to Baylor Hospital in East Dallas, he says.

"The people buying are nesters who say, 'I don't want my child growing up in front of a Nintendo. I want my child to be able to touch a tree, walk to a public school on a 100-acre campus,'" Barbier-Mueller says. "Health is important, too. There's a hospital opening in six months, complete with an emergency room."

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