



Nestled in the heart of a multi-generational South Texas family ranch is a compound made up of several homes, each constructed during a different era, and each serving the different branches of a large but intimate family in its own unique way. Big Tree Camp is the most recent addition to this family of homes, a contemporary icon among the mix, which includes an 1800's farmhouse, a 1920's bungalow and a 1960's ranch home with an addition designed by architectural firm Ford, Powell & Carson. Architect Tobin Smith drew inspiration from the site, as well as a bit of local architecture just apart from the ranch.



# AT **BIG TREE** CAMP

By **ANGELA RABKE** | Photography by **MARK MENJIVAR**

“**W**e were inspired by an 1886 ruin in the nearby town of Belmont,” Smith shares. “Four generations of this family have depended on this structure to mark the final turn to the ranch. It was, and is, a reference point.” The Belmont ruin served as a literal and figurative direction for Big Tree Camp, named for a giant oak tree that stands slightly removed from the linear oak mott that embraces the home.

In Texas, when it comes to a building's exterior, it's often tempting to default to limestone, but when imagining materials for this project, the same rust-colored, iron-rich sandstone (quarried in nearby Luling) used in the landmark ruin immediately came to mind. “On the ranch, you see elements of this material in porches and fireplaces. The ruts in the roads are also reddish.” Using this material, Smith developed a plan that took the walls of the ruin's box-like structure and unfolded them to create a jogging, shield-like façade on the north side of the home, which serves as a wind break during the winter

months. This sturdy façade, almost reminiscent of low-slung barrack structures at the nearby Missions, allows peeks of a lightweight, modern structure as you approach. “The opposing façade is lighter in nature and provides a contrast to the heavier masonry wall. In many ways, the project was about creating this wall as a sort of shield, and tucking a modern structure behind it.” Smith explains.

The idea behind the airy and open structure was a family camp. The homeowners' primary home in Washington D.C. is beautiful and historic, but comes with limited interface with nature. The windows are painted shut, air conditioning and heating are constantly regulated, and the proximity to the city dulls their exposure to nature. “A second home is an opportunity to live differently from your normal existence. We really wanted to maximize that potential,” says Smith. “What is the antithesis of the Washington D.C. experience? A house that breathes.”



And breathe it does: even when every door and window is closed, 45% of Big Tree Camp is an open air experience with the potential for the entire home to become a screened in porch. While there is, technically, a main entrance, each space in the home allows the opportunity to step outdoors, including bathrooms that include outdoor showers. In keeping with the idea of a camp experience, the three spaces that are designated for children and guests are treated as their own separate cabins, connected by a walkway that unifies each unit of the building, and combines the open-air experience with shelter from the elements and wildlife. Being a South Texas ranch house, the “other” front door of the home offers direct access to ranch vehicles and to a well-equipped fishing, hunting and gear room — a conduit to the many activities that happen outside of the home.

The house in many ways serves as an edge between a native grass pasture and a wooded oak mott. Living spaces borrow from the view by incorporating sweeping expanses of glass, essentially creating an environment where nature serves as the wall art. The details of the home are well executed and luxurious, but the approach is straightforward and borrows directly from the ranch environment, with the goal of bringing the homeowners and their guests closer to the nature



that surrounds them. "This house is all about maximizing the sensory experience..." says Smith, "...meaning that walking to breakfast or to dinner you are feeling the air, smelling the rain, showering under the stars and becoming integrated into the nature surrounding you. Ultimately, the house should be a tuning device: at every opportunity you are forced to encounter the outdoors; you are constantly being forced to notice. You become more aware of the lunar cycle, of when the sun rises and sets, which you may not pay attention to in your day to day life. And you can operate the house like a tool,



and calibrate it with cranks and ropes much like you do with a boat when sailing to maximize operation.”

Like every well-done project, this one was a team effort. Smith lauds Truax Construction, the contractors for the project, for the rural pragmatism they brought. “The builders camped on the site during construction, and as a result, they really ended up with an intimate knowledge of that landscape,” he said. One particularly innovative solution that came from their camping experience was the use of large bean cans (from their campfire meals) to create the housing for the in-slab lights — a fun example of how the camp experience affected details in the home.

The history of this special place and the construction camp experience reaffirm the concept that makes Big Tree Camp exceptional — that a simple but comfortable shelter can truly serve to bring its inhabitants closer to the land around them, rather than isolating them from it. ❖

**ARCHITECT** Tobin Smith Architect  
210.326.6646 | [TobinSmithArchitect.com](http://TobinSmithArchitect.com)

**BUILDER** Truax Construction, Inc.  
830.980.3399 | [TruaxConstructionInc.com](http://TruaxConstructionInc.com)