



BUILDING ON *INSPIRATION*

By MAURI ELBEL Photography by CHRIS ARCHER, PAUL BARDAGJY AND ANDREA CALO

IF THERE EVER WAS AN ARCHITECT FIT FOR THE JOB, IT'S SAFE TO SAY KAREN KNIGHT FOUND HIM.

As the single mom of three teenage girls, Knight immediately fell in love with this mid century home nestled in Westlake Hills because of the potential she knew it held for her family. Designed by the late A.D. Stenger, one of Austin's most renowned design/build architects, Knight was seeking an architect who could remodel the '60s-era home while honoring its original design. After being introduced to David Webber of Webber + Studio, she discovered he actually grew up in another Stenger home just around the corner — plus Knight took it as a serendipitous sign that she, Webber and the house were all born in 1968.

"The fact that I grew up there in the same neighborhood in an A.D. Stenger home — I actually remember trick-or-treating at that house as a kid — probably helped us make the cut," admits Webber. And while this coincidence likely gave Webber the upper edge against other candidates vying for the job, it also provided him with an insider's appreciation when it came to conceptualizing the addition for Knight's Stenger-designed home.

Collaborating with Webber and interior designer Veronica Koltuniak, Knight was able to effectively double the size of the original home while preserving its original character. But taking the house from 1,500 square feet to 3,000 square feet required careful thought — Webber feared mimicking the original style with another level stacked on top of the flat roof design would have diminished Stenger's work. Instead, he had another idea.

"The great benefit of being someone who grew up in the neighborhood and also had his childhood home designed by Stenger is that I also happened to know there was an A-frame down the street about five houses away that he also designed," explains Webber. "We learned from the A-frame that combining the two styles might be a way to contrast with the original horizontal style while reinforcing the design at the same time."

While A.D. Stenger is revered as a mid century master, Webber admittedly isn't.

"We don't think of ourselves as mid century specialists, but the mid century bones of this house were so decent they really didn't deserve being changed in any way," says Webber. "The real question became: How do we double the size of the house without totally squashing the original design?"

Recognizing the historicism of the original Japanese-inspired design and being familiar with Stenger's work, Webber came up with a design that marries opposing impulses by adding a vertical, reinterpreted A-frame to the horizontal, low-slung format of the original house. While Webber was fond of the A-frame reference, his addition which features a metal roof, ample windows and a vertical stained Western red cedar screen that serves as a shading device to mitigate the harsh morning and afternoon sun remains more elegant and modern than the one that inspired him. The addition presents a well-integrated yet balanced



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approach that not only doubled the size of the house but also maximized the home's functionality, transforming the previously modest abode into a five bedroom, four bathroom home boasting flexible, multi-use spaces.

"Despite the size, this home still feels quaint," says Webber. "It's well integrated into the site. And adding the A-frame was the thing we were most excited about — that we came up with a way to add on that allowed the addition to be special but not too special. There's a yin and a yang now that balance each other out."

The A-frame, built for maximum height and flat-topped to accommodate a roof deck, makes the homeowners feel as if they are up in a treehouse most of the year and gives way to downtown Austin views from the ridge line property in late-December when the leaves fall. From the very beginning, one of Knight's main requirements was to maintain the continuous flow between the indoors and outdoors.

"I always wanted this home to be a welcoming, inviting space," Knight says. "I feel a lot of contemporary homes can be very cold. But for a very efficient, clean-lined home, this feels very warm and comfortable. Inviting and playful."

Webber actually improved upon the existing cohesion through thoughtful selections of materials that honored the home's original design. For example, epoxy-pebble flooring serves as both the main interior flooring as well as the exterior decking, blurring the line between inside and out. In the kitchen, rich walnut LEICHT cabinetry serves as a strong counterpoint to



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the walls and stairs clad in stained Western cedar. A bright tangerine Formica® countertop provides the perfect mid century punch in the kitchen representative of Stenger's signature style and reminiscent of Knight's childhood home which featured identical orange countertops.

"Growing up in a Stenger house, I knew these bright colors and oranges and reds would often show up," explains Webber. "Those countertops have gotten more attention than any other expressive detail we have done."

Webber says one of the remodel's greatest accomplishments is its ability to pack a huge amount of programming into a relatively small space — something he attributes to Knight's desire to make each room serve multiple purposes. Some of

the more clever uses of space can be detected in the flex room which was built into the original master bedroom and now houses a Murphy bed but duals as a living space for the family which can be opened or closed-off with a sliding glass partition. To maximize the number of bedrooms Knight wanted, Webber made use of a design opportunity by transforming the previous carport into her master bedroom. Webber sunk the master so the existing steel, concrete-reinforced beams could be used as supports in the renovated structure. Now a serene retreat that sits eye-level with the pool, it has the desired ceiling height and features window seats with underneath storage running the length of the glass walls. Inside the A-frame structure, two bedrooms with 15-foot ceilings are positioned on both ends and a shared playroom sits in the center which serves as an inviting living space for Knight's daughters. A roof deck at the top looks out toward the city. Savvy uses of matching materials pop up throughout the home — for example, heavy wood cedar timber beams form the bathroom countertops as well as sitting area benches placed near the front entrance and in the living area.

Outside, existing impervious cover limits presented a few obstacles yet Webber made them work to his advantage. Knight says this is one of the things she admired most about working with the architect: Webber's ability to transform limitations into the design's biggest attributes.

"We needed a seamlessness from the inside to the outside, but because of impervious cover rules, the pool had to be pulled next to the house," explains Webber. "But this house demonstrated that those rules don't have to hinder a design — it can work with the overall architecture."

The pool, designed by Modern Design Build, is tucked right up to the house, molded in the shape of a quasi butterfly symbolic for the metamorphosis one goes through during major life changes and representative of the Japanese concept wabi-sabi which means finding beauty in the imperfect. A walkway from the back terrace continues as a stepping stone across the pool to the yard where the home's original entrance Japanese *torii* was reassembled, painted in Million Dollar Red to match the front door and spiral deck stairs, and now serves as backyard art. While mid century modern design ultimately finds its root in Japanese architecture, Webber says the fact that this home came with a *torii* on the front further inspired him to implement slight Japanese references throughout the design.

"If anything we were just trying to tap into its real heart," he



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says. But growing up in a Stenger home and having known him from an early age, Webber said he never thought of the notable architect's work in a sacrosanct way. Rather, Webber feels the addition is a better version of what Stenger always wanted it to be: an Asian-inspired, low-slung mid century modern with greater sustainability, efficiency and craftsmanship than was possible years ago.

"This home now performs better on all fronts — thermally it is more efficient, it is more energy efficient, and it is built stronger and sturdier than it was before," he says. "We brought it up to date and A.D. Stenger would have been pleased — in fact, I think even



some of the architectural details in this iteration are better versions of what he was trying to achieve and just couldn't back then."

Knight says her Austin Green Building Program Five Star Rated home is the only home in the area that uses greywater — they pay for water once but use it twice. And the home was actually re-plumbed to allow the family to eventually collect rain water on site and use it for showering and drinking. Rather than opting for a traditional geothermal system, they utilized the cooling opportunity of running loops through the concrete

at the base of the pool which provides optimal cooling with less energy consumption throughout the summer.

"I didn't realize this house would be such a science project," says Knight. "But one of the things I am most proud about is the opportunity to share knowledge with other people on the possibilities available to them to reduce monthly water and energy costs in their own projects." ❖

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ABOUT A.D. (ARTHUR DALLAS) STENGER (1920-2002)

A.D. Stenger, a renowned local builder/architect/developer left his mark in central Austin neighborhoods in the form of roughly 100 homes he designed and built from the late 1940s through the late 1990s. Stenger's signature style shines through these modern, relatively affordable, single story houses which often contained elements of "homey comfort" and one-of-a-kind flourishes like the unusual Japanese *torii* gate that graced this home's original entrance. Beginning his architectural career as a student in The University of Texas at Austin's School of Architecture, Stenger became one of the area's first design/build architects and built a slew of affordable, modern dwellings over the course of a half-century.
