

# OTTO HAUS

By ANGELA RABKE | Photography by MARK MENJIVAR



We are all familiar with “The Cottage District” in any given metropolitan area. These charming neighborhoods boast well-preserved Sears and Roebuck-style homes whose inhabitants are understandably protective when it comes to their neighborhoods’ architectural vibe. The quaint area where San Antonio couple Courtney and Tobin Smith discovered their architectural treasure is one such neighborhood — but the home that they purchased was a bit of an outcast.







Originally constructed in 1954 as a one-story home by architect Otto Ransleben, the structure had been compromised by a clumsy two-story 1970's addition. The property was an absolute steal, selling for the lowest cost per square foot for the area in the year that they purchased it. The neighbors were eager to see it go, as the Smiths share with grins. "As soon as the word got out that we weren't planning to tear it down, a few houses around us immediately went on the market." But the Smiths were the perfect couple to take on the task of transforming the Otto Haus. Tobin is a successful San Antonio architect, while Courtney teaches art at a nearby school. Their combined design sensibilities contributed to a home that still stands out amongst the many cottages surrounding it, but today is recognized for its quiet elegance — a tall sentry which somehow captures both past and present, not only complementing, but adding to the beauty of the area.







From the beginning, the design challenge was clear — to transform the unsuccessful addition into a compositional and functional asset, reconnect the original living room to the garden and delineate the original mass from the addition. An artist himself, Tobin viewed the design process as if he were working on a collage — the art of re-using and composing disparate scraps into a meaningful whole. “It was important to us to celebrate the spirit of the mid-century design while creating something new and fresh,” he said. Keeping in mind the collage process, the transformation included cutting, flipping, folding and layering. The 1970’s tower addition blocked eighty percent of the daylight, creating a dim and cave-like space. To address it, a D’Hanis block exterior wall

on the east end of the living room was cut open and replaced with a full width glass sliding door. This spatial “uncorking” allowed a visual release and brought the living room closer to the original architect’s intent with a connection to an exterior patio and garden. The wood beams and ceiling are all original and required sanding to remove a layer of shellac before applying tung oil.

Next, Smith designed an extension of the tower’s overhang that stitched the two disparate masses together. On a practical level, the extension provides shelter at the home’s entry point, but visually it provides unity between the two pieces. The door is a dramatic steel piece that takes its cues from the entry steps, also created with salvaged steel. Redwood siding on the original one-story section, painted

barn red at some point, was removed, flipped and re-installed virgin side out. The cheaper pine siding on the tower addition, largely rotten, was removed and replaced with stucco to articulate this vertical piece as a separate element. Finally, a salvaged aluminum shade scrim from a demolished office building of the same era was incorporated as an artistic axial entry sculpture and walkway lantern.

Indeed, from the moment you enter the gate, it is evident that Otto Haus is home to two artists who understand how to breathe life into objects that others may have dismissed. Intriguing planters were salvaged by the couple when the ceramic artist, a relative, planned to toss them; shaped as heads, the artist had experimented with using marbles for eyes. In firing the pieces, the marbles melted, giving the faces tears



— an intriguing and lifelike touch. A close friendship with another San Antonio artist and architect, Tom Fling, has resulted in several unique additions to the Smiths’ art collection, including a bright art installation that gives life to the stairway, and which Fling created by repurposing metal paint chips.

Art, much of it created by friends, adds joyful punctuation to every space in the home. While the structure is not overly large, its generous windows, modern but straightforward finishes and the arrangement of space give one the sense of being in an art gallery. Even the master bath has a sculptural quality, featuring a dramatic tub centered on the wall, Staron® countertops and a monochromatic white look.

The galley kitchen is also clean and white, with the same





Staron countertops as both of the home's bathrooms. Small but functional, it proves that a kitchen needn't be expansive, as current trends tend to dictate. Courtney is an accomplished cook and delights in creating beautiful meals for their family and friends in the streamlined space. "Our house is ship like, as is the kitchen. We inherited the galley footprint and brightened it with white counters and cabinets and openings in each direction. If we had started from scratch, we would have been inclined to make it bigger, but it turns out that it is efficient and functional and all the space I need as is."

The couple has a few things left on their punch list, like a 6.24 kilowatt solar array that they prepared for during construction. But their biggest new project will certainly add a new dimension to Otto Haus; baby boy Smith is scheduled for a summer arrival and the happy couple is already considering well-designed baby-proofing solutions in order to fully accommodate a growing child. Sliding doors will enable the parents to easily shut off certain spaces when necessary, concrete floors are easy to clean up (and roller skate friendly), the ladder for the nursery bunk is cleverly elevated

off of the floor and modern meshing up high is reminiscent of a ship's lookout. Even the swing that will grace the front yard's tree is full of design possibilities.

Most importantly, the modern space is full of love and sets an example for their growing family that even in architecture, it's important to find the beauty where others don't see it, learn from the past and act in the present to create a more beautiful future. ❖

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