

# A HISTORIC KIT HOUSE GETS RE-FIT FOR TODAY

By MAURI ELBEL | Photography by DROR BALDINGER

From their charming front porch tucked back from Alamo Heights's Argyle Avenue, Elizabeth and Madison Marceau have hosted a sit-down dinner for 60, a handful of showers for friends and witnessed their daughters, now 3 and 1, go from making first milestones to zooming around on riding toys. In the evenings, they sit comfortably beneath the shaded space, relaxing together while listening to music or having drinks with friends. Undeniably the favorite addition of their remodeled home — a 1930's-era original Sears and Roebuck kit house — the Marceau's front porch plays out like a happy scene extracted from the long lost days of yesteryear.

**T**heir Sears and Roebuck design is one of three similar era craftsman houses sitting side by side on the prestigious avenue, one of the first streets completed in Alamo Heights during the late 1800's. Kit houses, American's first mass-produced prefab homes, offered people the opportunity to pick out a design straight from the catalogue that fit their tastes and budget and receive a complete ensemble of ready-to-assemble materials ranging from the roofing and flooring to the cabinetry and countertops.

When Elizabeth and Madison Marceau were in the process of moving back to San Antonio, Madison stumbled on the house which was in desperate need of work. Although their remodel budget was limited, the home's deep historical ties and close proximity to an area significant to both of them — Elizabeth grew up about 600 feet away and the two got married at The Argyle — was enough to seal the deal. They also loved the idea of living near San Antonio's burgeoning downtown scene and admired the physical attributes of the property beginning with its modest 2,000-square-foot size.





“Once I saw our home for the first time I really liked the size, the larger lot and the historical nature of the home,” says Madison. “We wanted to stay away from the 4,000-square-foot type homes and still try to stay relatively small, but knew we would have children at some point in the near future so we needed a couple of extra rooms to grow into. The interior was a little rough, but I knew I was going to rebuild the house anyway so I just needed to make sure I liked the shell, the lot and the shell’s placement on the lot.”

Over the past half century, several exterior modifications had altered the look of the home, which resulted in a loss of the original character and charm that was still intact with the two other neighboring kit homes. The previous renovations, combined with the fact that the house had been vacant for an extended period, called for serious updates to all living spaces and building systems so the couple turned to a skilled family friend for help — Craig McMahon of Craig McMahon Architects.

The couple wanted to update the home in a way that would serve them as they started a family without breaking the bank. Some original design elements were still intact so McMahon focused the design on reclaiming the look of the original California craftsman bungalow-style home, adding an expanded master suite and reorganizing living spaces to create a more open, modern layout. After the couple found an original Sears and Roebuck plan online similar to their home’s layout, McMahon’s design team engaged that original intent to make the home what it is today.



The original covered front porch had been lost, or enclosed, and it was difficult to determine the original layout of the front of the house due to extensive changes over the years. The original Sears and Roebuck plan had been modified with a changed street-side roofline, the original wood lapped siding had been covered with stucco and it had lost 30’s-era detailing. The design concept centered around rebuilding the front porch, which had changed with a new roofline added in the 70’s or 80’s, to offer a better indoor/outdoor experience and improve the curb appeal.

Now, like the Marceau’s, McMahon’s favorite part of the remodel is the traditional covered entry porch with

detailing reminiscent of the 1930’s.

“It connects and re-engages all of these Sears and Roebuck homes,” McMahon says. “It really brings the street together and gives off this 1930’s-era family atmosphere.”

Typical of floor plans of the era, the home featured small enclosed rooms with doorways and infilled porches which required a serious effort to restore and improve. Utility systems were in need of updating and the house lacked insulation. To bring the home up to date, the renovation incorporated insulated low e-aluminum clad doors and windows, open cell spray foam insulation with upgraded HVAC systems for improved energy performance and a new On-Demand water heating system.

Hidden under the homes modified exterior were the original deep painted wood overhangs and wood detailing, which were



A modest 500-square-foot master suite was added in a similar architectural scale, complete with a low sloping roof and large overhangs as well as a shared master porch that connects to the new family room, expanding the home's entertainment capability. An open two-car carport with storage was also added, which now functions as a pavilion to provide a greater connection with the backyard.

Any windows that could be salvaged were kept while existing windows in the front of the house were taken down to the ground and swapped out for a more cost-effective French door system which results in a greater connection to the outdoors. Original longleaf pine floors were refinished rather than replaced and details and nuances were salvaged and enhanced wherever possible.

"We were working on a very tight budget so we had to find the most cost effective ways to do things and we were trying to salvage what we could where we could," says McMahon.

Even after the additions, the three bedroom, two bathroom, 2,600-square-foot home remains compact, but it lives much larger than it did before thanks to the open, flowing layout and enhanced indoor-outdoor experience. McMahon says he was most surprised by the old home's solid layout and structure.

"The most interesting thing was this house had something to work with — it had a true craftsman character that had been hidden," says McMahon. "I had never run across a home with such good bones to work with. And it was really simple to open up the spaces, which was helpful to the budget. The existing bedrooms and bathrooms and scale were all fine so we didn't have to work too hard at any of that."

Inside, revamped interiors remain timeless and fresh thanks to designer Kate Kingman's classic selections such as Carrera marble, chrome fixtures and dark finished floors. But her signature touches add a bit of glitz and fun with selections like the patterned wall paper in the dining room and playful pillows that pop against more neutral upholsteries.

"This was a very special project for me," says Kingman. "The young couple is the third generation that I have helped and I have known them since they were born, and they were preparing for their first child while working on the remodel. I helped them with their home in Dallas and we used everything from that project and purchased some new items to complete the home along with some family heirlooms, too." ❖

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carefully reconstructed to remain reminiscent of the nearly 100-year-old California craftsman style. To modernize existing spaces, McMahon's main focus was to transform the kitchen into an open, flowing central space while preserving original cabinetry details.

"We wanted to open up the kitchen and make it a central feature of the home which was a simple change that completely opened up the home from front to back and filled it with light," says McMahon. "It was very closed up, but now the kitchen is the heart of the home."