



RIVERFRONT RETREAT

By MAURI ELBEL | Photography by DROR BALDINGER

When Meg and Michael Smith, both lawyers living in Alaska at the time, were searching for a place to spend their post-retirement years, they found the perfect spot on 16 picturesque acres fringing the peaceful Blanco River just outside of Wimberley.

Michael had nostalgic ties to Wimberley, where he vacationed almost annually with his family as a child. But Meg, a New Orleans native, took a bit more convincing before she knew she wanted to make the quaint Hill Country town their permanent home. However, the sprawling riverfront property immediately drew them both in — and they recognized the potential it had to not only serve as an idyllic spot when it was just the two of them, but also as a spacious retreat when their growing family came to visit.

“I have five siblings, we have four children and we are currently expecting our seventh grandchild so we wanted to have a place where the whole family could come out and stay comfortably,” says Meg.

An existing four-bedroom farmhouse, built in 1999 by Grady Burnette Builders, sat close to the river on a downward-sloping site. But because it was located in a floodplain, new construction needed to take place higher up on the site. They contacted award-winning Clayton & Little Architects to come up with





the design and they hired Burnette to expand on the project he started nearly 15 years earlier.

“They contacted me and said that they wanted to build more of a family compound with more structures to accommodate their extended family when they came to visit,” says Grady Burnette, owner/founder of Grady Burnette Builders.

The Smiths wanted to incorporate features that the original structure lacked as well as add in custom-tailored spaces to suit their own interests — everything from the more practical spaces like a garage and additional bedrooms and bathrooms to his and her offices, a workout room and a library.

“They realized they needed a lot of square footage so we ended up designing several structures — one main building and three small connecting cabins,” says Emily Little of Clayton & Little Architects about the additions that exude a Hill Country style similar to the original home yet have their own individual character.

The existing house was approximately 3,600 square feet, but they gained an additional 9,200 square feet of space with the new structures, nearly half of which consists of non air-conditioned outdoor spaces like decks, screened porches and covered patios. Altogether, the houses and cabins comprise seven bedrooms, nine full bathrooms and three half-bathrooms, providing plenty of space for visiting family to stay comfortably.

“We went through several iterations of what we wanted,” says Michael who played an active role in the design process. “We split it into two main pieces so it isn’t so overwhelming and looks like it fits in with the original house.”

Little says one of her favorite features is the bunkhouse — a spacious, high-ceiling room lined with bunk beds for the grandchildren that’s nestled between two cabins tucked into

the hillside which each feature standard bedrooms. From the outside, the two cabins and bunkhouse look like three separate structures, but an interior stairway connects the bunkhouse to the cabins so children can find their parents if needed during the night without going outside. The bunkhouse entryway is held up by a totem pole designed by R.L. Blair, a renowned sculptor who created some of the original wood carvings at Disneyland®, with carvings that feature meaningful milestones in the Smiths’ lives.

The new design reveals custom spaces that make the house a perfect fit for the couple and an inviting place for their family to visit. Inside the new main house, there’s a workout room complete with a spa-like bathroom for Meg. Michael, an avid reader, enjoys his library flanked by wooden shelves lined with books that sits between his and her offices.

“That library was so much fun because not only did it have a beautiful ceiling and application but it also features a large hole in the floor with a railing around it that connects it to the floor below,” says Burnette of the design that features a sky light that illuminates the lower level — an expansive room with a kitchen, living and dining area large enough to accommodate the entire family.

The individual houses and cabins hone a relaxed Hill Country aesthetic with unique elements that combine to create a casual, unpretentious space that is as welcoming as it is warm. Rather than hire an interior designer, the Smiths selected all of the interior finishes and furnishings themselves, scouring local antique stores and collaborating with their daughter, Sharidan Lippold, who is gifted with an eye for design.

“We are simple people so we wanted something simple, not



grandiose,” says Meg. “Even though it is a big property, we wanted something livable that we wouldn’t have to worry about messing up.”

The existing structure is a pier and beam, two-story farmhouse featuring a wraparound porch while the new structures are slab on grade and strive to blend in with the original architecture without trying to match it.

“There was an effort to change it up somewhat, yet all the structures complement each other quite well,” says Burnette.

The main house has a more elegant look featuring white wood siding and formal Victorian detailing while the cabins are more rustic — one is board and batten siding stained red while the other two feature rough sandstone exterior walls complemented by a horizontal stained wood siding. Various engineered wood floors are used throughout the different structures, spanning eucalyptus, acacia and red oak. Porches and beams are crafted out of local cedar, decorative woodwork is primarily cherry, cabinets are painted poplar and a bedroom in one of the cabins is clad in reclaimed wood salvaged from an old barn. Corbels outside of their new office windows were brought back from New Orleans, paying homage to Meg’s hometown while decorative teak doors leading into the audio visual room were originally found in India.

Brenda Barger Landscape Design, based in Austin, was instrumental in arranging the inviting outdoor spaces defined by the houses where the family can gather to cook or relax. Because the new construction had to be dug into the hillside, there was a significant amount of limestone excavated from the site, almost all of which Michael says Barger used in the landscaping to form courtyard spaces and line parking areas.

While the entire project was finished in November 2014 in time for the Smiths to celebrate Thanksgiving with their large family, when everyone returned for a Memorial Day gathering, the weekend resulted in an emergency evacuation. The Memorial Day floods of 2015 that devastated the Wimberley area also caused significant damage to the Smiths’ property — the original home, already seven feet off the ground, had 12 feet of water inside. Despite the devastation caused by the recent disaster, the Smiths — like many others affected by the floods — remain resilient in their decision to stay and rebuild.

“Wimberley is a great town — it is a nice little place to be,” says Michael. “The river itself is a beautiful place. We lost almost a hundred trees but it is still gorgeous. The kids all love coming here and I hate leaving. So that, to me, makes it a pretty special place.”

“We have moved around a lot,” Meg adds. “But this is the first time we have built something completely from scratch. We made it our own. Even now with the older house, we are getting to rebuild it our way. We finally have a place that has something each of us want.”

Since the newly-built structures suffered less damage, the Smiths have lived there while the remodel of their primary home by the river takes place, expected to be finished this fall. Meg admits she still gets nervous when she hears a thunderstorm rolling in, and she keeps a bag packed and ready just in case. But, she points out, her parents went through the same thing, losing everything after Hurricane Katrina.

“This is just a beautiful place out here,” she says of their property. “And we can always rebuild.” ❖



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