



# THE TREEHOUSE EFFECT

## CG&S Design-Build takes outdoor living to a new level

By JACKIE BENTON Photography by TRE DUNHAM

As the sizzle of the Central Texas summer slides into the cooler fall temperatures, football season kicks off and heralds a time for cooking out, gathering around the fire pit, or snuggling up to cheer your team to victory. Now, imagine that that outdoor living experience is in a fantastical treehouse-style setting with all the amenities, and it would be just like that secret childhood clubhouse you'd always imagined — only better.

“It was going to be the simplest project I had ever worked on, right?” laughs Marsha Topham AIA, Senior Project Architect for CG&S Design-Build of her treehouse-styled deck design. “All I had to do was put a simple roof over an existing deck — but it turned out it wasn’t quite that simple. Our clients weren’t quite empty nesters at the beginning of this project, but they could look ahead and see their lives at home were about to change. Their children were older, either in college or about

to graduate high school. It was the perfect time to turn this space they hardly used at all into an entertainment space that they could enjoy and cozy up.”

Topham immediately noticed the home’s original deck design offered no protection from the summer sun and the constant cleaning of debris during autumn meant the area was virtually unused all year. Falling leaves and the fine patina of tree pollen that coats everything from decks and patios to outdoor furnishings and appliances meant conducting a clean sweep — literally — before even thinking about putting steaks on the grill.

“It just wasn’t much fun for my clients out there,” says Topham of the home’s exposed deck area, “and I wanted to change that for them.”

While creating the new engaging space, there were important building parameters Topham had to keep in mind, including ensuring the structural foundation beams would support the new deck add-ons of an overhead roof and additional cabinetry.

“The deck is on the second floor, and there were some posts and footings down below. We wanted to use the same post locations up to the roof line and put in longer posts that would continue all the way up to the roof line,” Topham says. Topham also had the topography around the deck to consider as part of the deck design. “The area to the rear of their deck is open, with the pool off

to one side. On the other side is a neighbor whose property is very close to the deck. The homeowners wanted to keep the open feeling, but wanted to be screened for some privacy,” explains Topham.

“The homeowners wanted an outdoor TV area, where they could just hang out and watch sports, so we thought that would be a good place to put the TV,” recalls Topham. “I thought it could work as a kind of screen from the neighbor, and they could keep the open views to the back and the side.”

Topham designed cabinetry that could secure the TV when the homeowners were not outside on the deck. The cabinet doors close and lock, and the open shelving on either side of the TV provides an attractive look in either the open or closed positions.

To maintain the integrity of the home’s original design, Topham used cedar to create a warm, woodsy charm. “We wanted to tie in the new design with the cedar that was already there,” says Topham. “I couldn’t imagine switching to another material, as it fit nicely with the trees, and having the wood ceiling gave it that warm, outdoor feeling.”

As the remodeling project got underway, Topham says her



clients decided they wanted to include a fireplace with their entertainment wall. Topham was appreciative of CG&S Design-Build project manager Nathan Morris, who was able to skillfully dovetail the new request seamlessly into the project’s timeline while making the requested changes to the original design.

“We looked at different options, including a wood burning fireplace,” says Topham, “but that, as well as a traditional gas fireplace, became overly complicated for a deck area. So we put in an EcoSmart™ stainless steel firebox that uses bioethanol fuel. You literally just pour the fuel into a reservoir and light it. You don’t have to run a special gas line to it, and you don’t have to worry about shutting anything off. You don’t even have to burn all the fuel at one time. It’s very simple to use. My clients love it, because it’s a great place to entertain or just hang out.”

The result of Topham’s design is a cozy space that seems more treehouse than deck, giving the impression of floating effortlessly among the surrounding oak trees with an elegant simplicity that belies all the planning and work that went into its creation. “Sometimes, simple is really deceiving,” laughs Topham. “Sometimes, trying to make things look simple is actually more difficult.” ♦

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