CABIN IN THE SKY:

Rising from the Ashes

By Angela Rabke
Photography by Will Gallagher

A few short years ago, the single worst wildfire in Texas history ripped through Bastrop County, burning tens of thousands of acres of Loblolly Pine Forest and destroying hundreds of homes. Cabin in the Sky, and the young pine trees surrounding it, is proof that beautiful things do indeed rise up from ashes.

The project, perched 25 feet in the air, is located on 40 acres of forest land in Bastrop, a quiet community known for good BBQ and beautiful parks, and located just southeast of Austin. The steel platform was originally constructed for elevated camping, and when the 2011 fire swept through the area, it was the only thing around that was left standing.

"The clients are writers and bird watchers," says architect Henry Panton, of Austin. Confident that the forest would rise up again, "We designed and constructed the cabin as a retreat where they can connect to the surrounding natural environment in an enclosed space."

The existing platform was in need of structural reinforcement, so the team spent five months enlarging existing foundations and adding additional columns. A portal frame and deck were also added to support the new cabin. "The biggest challenge was working 20-30 feet in the air on a sandy and sloping terrain," says Panton. The crew responded to the challenge by welding temporary outrigger struts to the existing deck to allow access to the structure's exterior. All of the construction materials had to be hoisted up using ropes and pulleys, or threaded up the 32" wide stairway.

The resulting structure is well worth the challenging construction process. Framed in structural steel and sheathed in Cor-Ten steel, the cabin is clad on the inside with recycled

longleaf pine. Using Cor-Ten steel, also known as weathering steel, eliminates the need for painting; as the product ages and is exposed to the elements, it develops a stable, rusted patina. A deck overlooks the growing young forest, and a simple spiral labyrinth — an extension of a stone archway over the walking path — adds texture and intrigue to the landscape below.

The architecture of the cabin includes a low camping tent-like form with nautical porthole windows, all supported by a steel pipe structure that is reminiscent of an offshore oil rig. The warm pine interior is simply furnished, providing a cozy and unusual perch for napping, writing or simply watching the forest regrow.

The forest is returning, with many trees around the Cabin in the Sky reaching heights of six to eight feet. "It will be wonderful to witness the forest once again swallow up this structure over the next 10-15 years," says Panton. ◆

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