



TERRELL HILLS Transformation

By Mauri Elbel Photography by Alexis Coulter

The recent remodel of a 1947-built home nestled in the City of Terrell Hills serves as a stunning, light-filled example of what can be achieved when an architect chooses to embrace what already exists rather than replace it with something new.





Designed as a direct response to the multitude of “McMansions” being constructed in the tony suburb of San Antonio, Lyndsay Thorn, architect and principle of The Thorn Group LLC, which includes Lyndsay Thorn Homes, strived to preserve the original character of this long, linear, single-story brick home while adapting it to suit the lifestyle of its new owners both now and into the future. Over recent years, the architect has watched as numerous older homes have been demolished in the area due to lack of imagination or the draw of profit. But, he says, from the first moment he saw this home, built in 1947 and barely touched since, he envisioned a different approach.

“A lot of times we can rework what we have rather than trying to build something new,” says Thorn, who first viewed the property in early 2015. “It was clear that this residence was in a great position to present a different way of looking at modern living within an existing structure.”

With its unique corner location, natural topography of the site and sound structure, Thorn recognized an opportunity to breathe new life back into the home, a featured project on this year’s AIA San Antonio Homes Tour. The architect’s thoughtful design not only placed the 70-year-old home firmly in the 21st century, but it embodies a timelessness that will serve its new owners for years to come. Fortunately, the homeowners — two doctors



with a young child — were of the same mindset and on board with Thorn’s design approach that sought to draw on and sensibly modernize the home’s existing vernacular. Although retaining certain elements of the existing architecture is pertinent to preserving a home’s original character, it isn’t always the most affordable option.

“When we have an opportunity to work with a client that understands the nature of re-adaptive use on a home and can see and appreciate a home’s initial quality and character, it makes our lives, as architects, a lot easier,” Thorn says. “And that was one of the most wonderful things about these clients. Money is always an issue but it wasn’t the overriding concern. They wanted to do the right thing for the right reasons for this house.”

The renovation focused primarily on bringing the living, kitchen and dining areas up to date, revamping the master suite, and adding two additional bedrooms, bathrooms and a shared living area. In the kitchen, Thorn selected a floor with a design and pattern reminiscent of the 1940’s period with a modern arrangement of two-tone colors in a checkerboard pattern. Rather than following the latest design trends, Thorn honed in on a design that would best serve this particular family, avid chefs who enjoy cooking daily. For example, veering away from the typical kitchen island, Thorn was able to make use of every

inch of space around the range, from the open upper shelves to the custom-built beverage station, while incorporating a center table and chairs more practical for the young family.

“It opened up the whole area rather than having the traditional island that everyone has,” Thorn says. “We made the kitchen very unique and functional for the way the family entertains and lives every day.”

The existing ceilings and large overhangs restricted the amount of sunlight that came into the main areas of the home. Thorn removed and raised the center part of the roof to create a two-story atrium space with a second mezzanine level family area to bring in natural light from the east and the west, adding dimension and brightness.

“Previously, it was very dark, but creating that two-story atrium allows the light to filter and bounce around inside that home,” says Thorn. “The quality of light is just fantastic and it actually provided a vertical appeal that the home really needed.”

Throughout the home, existing windows and doors were replaced with new Low-E insulated units, and the front and rear garden entrances now feature custom-designed, low-profile steel doors.

“The home was originally designed with an open screen back porch,” recalls Thorn. “But we extended the wood floor of the interior into this space, removed the old standard windows and put in a new 25-foot-long wrapped butt joint glazed window that places you sitting within the canopy of the 150-year-old oak tree. The view of the backyard from this elevated level brings an experience to the room like no other.”

A library was also added to this room providing a unique third family area to the home. In the backyard, an existing damaged pool was removed and replaced with an inviting gathering space surrounding a fireplace, which is protected and shaded by a multi-level steel shade structure featuring an opaque plexi glass roof. The existing master suite was reimagined to retain the existing character and flow while accommodating the desire for a cantilevered shower and soaking tub. Overall, the remodel shows what can be achieved when architecture embraces what existed in the past with a design built to withstand the future.

“The remodel gave the home a whole new lease on life,” says Thorn. “It will take this home from now for generations to come — it will be a great family home for decades.” ♦

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