



When Kim Clifford and Lee Blanton were pondering the perfect spot to retire, they knew the area they wanted to leave before they knew the place they wanted to go.

FROM HOUSTON to the Hill Country

A couple's contemporary home is up on a hill and away from it all.

By Mauri Elbel | Photography by James Bruce Photography

The couple, who worked as a lawyer and engineer for Shell Oil Company until retirement, survived two hurricanes together in Houston. They evacuated before Hurricane Rita but got caught in the historical gridlock, which turned what would have been a 3-hour commute to seek shelter with family in New Braunfels into a 17-hour bumper-to-bumper nightmare. Vowing not to do that again, the two opted to stay put when Hurricane Ike hit three years later, boarding up their 1950's contemporary glass home that backed up to a branch of Houston's Buffalo Bayou and hunkering down to endure the storm. Surveying the damage that surrounded afterward, they decided

that they didn't have it in them to evacuate nor ride out another storm when the next one hit. After mentally crossing off a list of potential places to retire, they set their sights on the serene, undulating landscape of the Texas Hill Country.

"It was really the hurricanes in Houston that drove us to the Hill Country," says Clifford. "We had always enjoyed coming to Austin — the weather isn't as humid as Houston, we loved the warmth, the sunshine and the terrain. It is very quiet and you get these expansive views — I think we found the best of both worlds out here."

But the move didn't happen overnight. Rather, the couple's story is testament to the old adage "good things come to those who wait" that was years in the making. It all began six years



before they planned to retire when they stumbled on a 2.8-acre property in 2009, which wasn't for sale.

"It wasn't even a lot our realtor had shown us," says Clifford. "But Lee wandered off. He found this lot up on the hill with 270 degrees of unobstructed views and nice trees with a big open spot we could build on. Our realtor said it wasn't for sale, but we were successful in getting this spectacular lot."

Tucked between Bee Caves and Dripping Springs in an unincorporated area of Travis County, the property represented a perfect compromise between Clifford's desire to be located within a subdivision and Blanton's preference for wide open spaces. Because there were no deadlines requiring them to build on the land by a set date, time was on their side and Blanton began mocking up a rough floorplan while they began their search for an architect. Through a mutual connection, they were introduced to Travis Albrecht, AIA, a senior architect at Gensler, a global architecture and design firm. Since the couple wanted to hire an Austin-based architect and weren't in a hurry to build, the partnership proved to be a mutually beneficial one — Albrecht, who worked as a full-time commercial architect, could design the house as his schedule permitted while Clifford and Blanton could take their time contemplating exactly what they envisioned their forever home to be.

From the beginning, they knew they wanted a house with a lot of glass that took advantage of the views from every room. Rooted in its place, the couple's sprawling contemporary home, designed by Albrecht and built by Olson Defendorf Custom Homes, keeps the natural beauty of the site at the forefront of the design. Whether cooking, dining or simply relaxing in the main living space, the home frames a postcard-worthy view of the zero-level pool and the rolling green hills that spill out just beyond. A folding wall of glass can open up the entire space from the living room to the kitchen, providing an open-air experience while you are still indoors — a design concept the homeowners now appreciate from the moment they walk inside.

"The first thing that goes through my mind when we go through the front door is 'wow this is a killer house,'" says Blanton. "Secondly, when you come in and get over the shock of what a killer house this is, you don't feel like you've gone inside. It is almost like you are still outside. In this house, you don't have to go outside to enjoy the views — you can enjoy them from every room."

Because the couple had the luxury of languishing in the design phase, it gave them the time to contemplate the way they wanted to live throughout their retirement years. As a result, the home expanded and evolved with their visions. In



addition to bedrooms and main living spaces, the 6,081-square-foot home features his and her media rooms, a large office, exercise room and sleeping loft, 3-car garage, and a wood shop and auto shop where Blanton pursues his hobbies.

"People always come here and say this home is way too big for the two of us, but our budget has downsized us for our entire lives, and I didn't want to downsize this," says Blanton. "Taking four years to design a home is a luxury most people don't have and most architects won't tolerate, but by doing this, we were able to pay a lot more attention to detail and get things the way they should be."

"The main public wing, with glass walls on three sides, is probably one of the most successful parts of the design," says Albrecht. "It's a move that brings in ample natural light and creates a lofty calming feel — it's more like a pavilion than an enclosed room."

"From the get go, they talked about how much they loved light and windows," adds Albrecht. "Being mindful of that, I wanted the house to be very open feeling, not just in the plan, but how it looked out toward the site. It wasn't that every room had to have the killer view out. It was that every room had to have the right view suited to its use."

For example, the home's main public space housing the kitchen, living and dining areas is oriented toward uninterrupted Hill Country views. But step back into the bedroom wing, and the view looks out to a cluster of oak trees on the property for a calmer, more private feel. In the auto shop, Al-



brecht placed the windows up high so that when Blanton is down on the ground working on cars, he could look up and enjoy the big blue Hill Country sky above.

"The way we arranged the house was successful, too," Albrecht says. "The house is arranged into three wings — two that house the more private and secluded functions of the house such as garage/auto shop, exercise room, entertainment rooms, bedrooms and office, and the third situated in the middle that is all about the entry and gathering together."

Crafted with a palette of regional materials, the home reflects the spirit of the Hill Country. Clear stained cypress forms the eaves of the exterior roof soffits, tying the outside into the interiors where wooden ceilings expand above the voluminous space. Outside, gray and blue Lueders limestone, cool white stucco and clean lines are mixed with brown stack bond brick and gabled forms to provide warmth and balance to an otherwise modern design.

"All of these details and moments are why Kim and Lee feel like they are still outside," says Albrecht. "There is not only glass all around you, as opposed to one single window oriented at a specific view, but a

continuity of materials between inside and out that becomes apparent as you move throughout the house."

To ease the difficulty of having an architect in Austin and clients in Houston, Blanton, an engineer and self-proclaimed frustrated aspiring architect, taught himself to use Revit, the same software Albrecht worked in. For most of the construction phase, Blanton stayed on site daily because the modern design was not an easy one to execute and the building process was complex.

"This house doesn't look like anybody else's house, which is a credit to Travis that he's not stuck in the box of what everyone else's house looks like," says Blanton. "He created something very unique and it is personalized to us, but on the other hand, it was not easy to build. A lot of times the builder said 'I'll have to think about how we are going to do that.'"

But the couple ultimately ended up with a home they couldn't be more pleased with. Throughout the house, the spaces are crafted to accommodate the people who live in them. The auto



shop and stand-alone wood shop are central to Blanton's hobbies and passions. The ample use of glass speaks to Clifford's desire to live in a home filled with sunlight. Even on cloudy, gray days, she says they rarely turn on the lights — even in the closets, which don't extend all the way to the ceiling in order to allow natural light to funnel in. The hallways function more like galleries to display their impressive art collection than pathways leading from one space to the next. Since Clifford loves cooking, she wanted to be able to enjoy the views while in the kitchen so she had Albrecht design the stove top and sink into the island so she'd never have to cook facing the wall.

When Hurricane Harvey hit Houston and pummeled the rest of the Texas Coast earlier this year, Clifford and Blanton could finally breathe a sigh of relief from their stunning contemporary home built high on a hill and away from it all.

"Living up on this hill, we feel like we are far from all the troubles of the world," says Clifford. "We have our own little sanctuary up here. It is tranquil; it is so nice and quiet. It is very relaxing when it's just us, and it's a great house for entertaining when we open up the doors to the outside." ♦

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