

HIDDEN HOMESTEAD

By Mauri Elbel
Photography by Andrea Calo

Christina Canales drove past the hidden gem property her family now calls home for five years, hunting for lots listed for sale or rumored to be going on the market soon.

“I liked the seclusion of this neighborhood,” she says of the area surrounding the nearly two-acre parcel she and her husband purchased in Sunset Valley; the less-than-800-population town nestled in South Austin. “You feel like you are in the country but you have access to the city just at the end of the road.”

When I meet Christina and Jose Canales and their two children, an animated five-year-old daughter and wide-eyed seven-month-old son, it feels as if we are far away from Austin although my odometer tells me we’re less than a mile from the highway. Located along a creek and bordered by parks and city-owned land, there are no neighbors in sight from their slice of rural paradise just a stone’s throw from Austin’s bustle. The couple, a graphic designer and an interior designer, like to think of their land as a one-in-a-million find.

“You just can’t help but feel at peace out here,” Christina tells me inside of their studio, a two-story white stucco box designed by Arbib Hughey Design and built by 360 Degree Construction that’s tucked into the trees and treads lightly on the serene landscape.



Wrapped entirely in white stucco, the studio doubles as a guest house and work space for their business, Canales & Co, and represents the first in a series of buildings to be constructed to create their forever homestead. Eventually, the 1950’s house where they currently reside will be torn down. In its place will be a series of volumes Arbib Hughey designed to complement the studio, which will hug the existing pool and a new courtyard, fully accommodating the Canales’ work-at-home lifestyle.

Before embarking on the residential portion of the project, the couple wanted to move forward with a studio space where they could work at home while enjoying a degree of separation from where they live. But because the city of Sunset Valley required a site plan for the entire property, it forced everyone into thinking beyond the studio. The design-minded couple says they’ve always been drawn to the clean, minimalist look of modern design, but they also have





a strong appreciation of Spanish architecture influenced mainly by cultural ties.

“We have a lot of family in New Mexico, and we have always been drawn to both Spanish architecture and modern architecture,” says Christina. “Sometimes modern feels a little too sterile to us, and we felt like the Spanish twist was something that was relevant to our family and our tastes.”

Ed Hughey says the concept was simple and straight-forward: to build a white cube in a green space. But pondering how to carve the cube and balance modern design with Spanish influences while taking into consideration everything from solar orientation to building restrictions yielded a simple yet rich result.

“We wanted to mix their love for modern architecture with traditional Spanish architecture by introducing arched openings, paned windows, white stucco, and by arranging each of the volumes in a way that feels organic and developed over a longer period of time,” says Hughey. “It was a very collaborative project, which allowed us to create



something specific and unique to Jose and Christina.”

Coming up with a program that would suit what the clients wanted didn’t come without its challenges. Creek floodplain and watershed protection restrictions drove the program of the office and the future main house in terms of both placement and size. In addition, Sunset Valley building codes restrict the size of conditioned secondary buildings to 1,000 square feet with a 600-square-foot maximum footprint. The only solution, says Hughey, was to go up.

But even with a modest 600-square-foot footprint, the two-story building would have

exceeded the size restrictions with 1,200 square feet of conditioned space. Arbib Hughey remedied the obstacle by incorporating an unconditioned outdoor vestibule that acts as both entry porch and stairwell, creating a transitional indoor/outdoor space that’s typical of Spanish architecture. The studio’s windows work in concert with one another, some acting as signifiers to visitors with others maintaining a visual connection to the future house. The design of the building also acts as a



self-shading device preventing harsh sun from coming into the studio even during the hottest summer days while allowing soft light and constant outdoor views to filter inside without a need for window treatments.

“Ed and Ben took a lot of things into consideration that we wouldn’t have thought of,” says Jose. “They really listened to us and came up with a design solution that worked way better

than what I envisioned. There are lots of little moments. But there are lots of reasons why those moments are there and they turned into really nice design features.”

Upstairs, workstations are custom built by Philip Morley Furniture to fit the space while the downstairs area features a cozy living, kitchen and bathroom space for visiting family. Walls wrapped in Douglas Fir provide intimate warmth while generous mullioned windows with wood frames painted black reference a modernized version of the paned windows of Spanish architecture. A corner window carved into the kitchen connects the interiors to the site — a move repeated with the second floor oculus and south patio. An arched entry in the façade adds visual interest to the simple box, while a concrete tile wall at the stairwell serves as an accent feature and wayfinding tool for visitors.

Crafted with a palette of simple materials — stucco, polished concrete floors downstairs, oak floors upstairs, brick floors at the entry and warm woods — the design leaves room for custom touches and details throughout the intimate living quarters downstairs and light-filled treehouse-like space upstairs.

“There is a sense of coolness, protection and privacy you get from the outside,” Hughey says. “But there are a couple of unique surprises you don’t see until you are in the space.”

For the Canales family, the studio is everything they wanted and beyond what they envisioned — just like the serene and secluded spot it sits on.

“I just don’t know that we’d find this anywhere else,” says Jose. “Fox and deer come through here all the time and we see owls in the fall and summer. But all we have to do is go to the end of the road and we are at Central Market. We are finally comfortable saying this is home for life and investing into making this our home for life.” ♦

ARCHITECT Arbib Hughey Design
512-362-8878 | www.arbibhughey.com

