



LONG LEAF PINE and CINDER

By Angela Rabke Photography by Dror Baldinger

It's probably safe to say that most home buyers would run away from a tired, old, abandoned house riddled with fire damage. But for San Antonio architect Cotton Estes and her husband Mike Long, a builder and craftsman, this Dignowity Hill home was perfect.





“People were probably frightened of it, but it was exactly what we were looking for,” she said. “It was in its raw form and nothing had been done to change it. Nothing had been added on; all of the original windows were aligned. And,” she added, “we could afford it.”

The home is a straight gable, early American craftsman-style house, built in 1912. Estes described the structure as “intuitive,” a rare example of an untouched residential structure built to respond to the surrounding environment. The front door runs on a perfect axis with a native Texas Sabal palm tree, visible through the perfectly aligned back door. “The home has great alignment, and has a neat shotgun effect,” shared Cotton. “It’s sort of like a double width shotgun house.”

The couple began the renovation, simplifying the floorplan further and carefully preserving all the materials throughout the

process for re-use. It was important to maintain a connection to the outdoors, a thread that existed already, but that Cotton was able to strengthen. The entire home is built with long leaf pine, a durable, fragrant and treasured building material. “We harvested everything, went through all of it, and used it throughout the house,” said Cotton. “It’s the most important material, and everything else was chosen to galvanize that choice.”

“We really focused on the pine, and kept everything else very subdued,” she adds. “And I think being able to look at the quality of light after we were able to make the change with the skylights was also a delightful surprise.”

Ever-changing light fills the living space, a result of skylights that were added later in the design process. “Because of the fire, we needed to replace the entire roof. When it was removed, you could really see the light coming through trees on the walls. We fell in love with that dappled lighting and wanted to pre-



serve it.” The light from those windows illuminates the whole volume, allowing the shadows from surrounding trees to move across a 17’ high wall. “It’s definitely the most impactful change that we made,” says Cotton. The skylights serve another practical purpose, as they open during warm seasons, allowing half of the home to be passively cooled with a large fan.

The home is modestly sized, something that the couple has embraced. Initially, friends and colleagues felt they should add another bath to the two-bedroom, one-bath home. “We’ve been surprised by how comfortable we are in a smaller house,” shared Cotton. “Mike noticed you can vacuum the entire house without changing outlets,” she laughed. Space is divided in half along the axis connecting the front and back door, with two bedrooms, a bath and a foyer on one side, and a vaulted, open space on the other. Every painted surface is covered in Benjamin Moore’s Cloud Cover,) one of Cotton’s favorite shades of white for many projects. Everything else in the home reflects its natural patina, and as a result, the entire space feels exceptionally honest and open. The interior is straightforward — almost coastal — certainly influenced by their coastal upbringings in Rhode Island and Maine. Yet, the intimate details tell the history of the house. An antique saw salvaged from the house hangs on the entry wall and sets the tone as you enter the house — a reminder of both Mike’s profession as a carpenter and the history of the home. On the mantel rests an 18-pound cannon ball that was unearthed in the backyard. “We are within shooting distance of the Alamo, and like to think it’s the ‘Come and Take It’ cannonball,” laughed Cotton.

The pair designed, and then built, much of their own furniture from the harvested pine. The dining table, coffee table, kitchen island and other details were constructed with care from the existing materials salvaged from the house. Cotton personally did the masonry/brickwork for the fireplace. “The chimney had collapsed and was pulling on that side of the house. We had to take it down brick by brick and use the exterior brick to construct the hearth.” Each D’Hanis brick was sorted and cleaned before being precisely aligned in a stacked pattern — a contemporary reinterpretation of a welcoming fireplace. “They have a real patina from the original mortar,” said Cotton.

There’s not a detail in the home that doesn’t carry the couple’s fingerprints. The airy kitchen’s concrete countertops were hand cast by the pair. A metalworker neighbor and friend helped with the hardware and brackets in the kitchen.

The renovated home demonstrates how, with thoughtfulness and meticulous detail, a small and forgotten structure can be transformed into a lasting treasure. ♦

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