



FLOATING ON AIR

By Angela Rabke Photography by Thomas McConnell

If this Austin residence seems to almost float above and around the landscape, it is because it does. Situated on a scenic street that runs along the top of a ridge, the site is defined by an abundance of mature oak trees and a dramatic view of Austin's beloved 360 bridge. The design team at McKinney York Architects was challenged with creating a light filled residence that would highlight the owners' art collection, all the while protecting and preserving the surrounding oak trees.

“Trees are a big thing in Austin, and they are protected by ordinance. These Heritage Oaks are our version of Redwoods,” said Heather McKinney, Principal at McKinney York. “Austin has a city arborist, we have our own arborist, and it’s a very rigorous process. It clearly enhances the lot, and ultimately the project seems to always have been there, since such care was taken to fit it in among the trees.”

The entrance of the home is defined by a floating ribbon of concrete that forms a portal to the front door. Project Architect Will Wood imagined a series of floating elements leading to the entrance. “The lot is very deep, and the plan evolved in



a way that the entry courtyard was a little deeper than usual,” he shared. “So we used the ribbon detail to draw people to the door, and you are sort of floating on a boardwalk as you approach the door.” On a practical level, the use of elevated boardwalks and decking provides protection for the root systems of the trees. There is even a bridge linking the front bedroom to the rest of the house that was devised as a way to protect them. “The entire design really genuflects to the trees and to their root systems,” said Heather.

The entire exterior of the 3,500-square-foot home recalls aspects of Japanese design, such as the use of wood, verandas (or decks), and an intentional relationship with the natu-







ral environment. The wood used in the upper portions of the home was sourced from a local mill that specializes in Shou Sugi Ban, a Japanese technique of burning wood. Other materials were selected to juxtapose. “Both of the clients are geologists, so the stone was a natural pick for them. We wanted a local stone that had character, and selected limestone. After the home was completed, they actually found several fossils in the stone, which was thrilling,” shared Heather. The use of glass and siding are a light contrast to the stone boxes, and the roof is a thin metal surface that floats beneath the trees. Even the height of the home was defined by the trees. “We worked to fit it into the existing canopy without removing branches,” mentioned McKinney.

The interior of the home is designed as a gallery for the clients’ School of Paris paintings while taking advantage of the views. “We put a lot of thought into the display of art, and it’s always a balancing act, between the generous use of glass and having enough wall space,” said Will. The floorplan is relaxed and flowing, providing options for how one moves about the space. “Each space was designed around specific pieces of art,” added Heather. “Our clients wanted art in every room and they wanted to be able to see it in fresh ways.” The kitchen was designed to minimize immediate storage

space and maximize wall space. “We created a hidden pantry space and Butler’s closet, which allowed us to pare the kitchen down to the things they need on a daily basis, and allows them to display this art that they have a personal and direct connection to.”

An elegant bookshelf system runs the length of the hall between the front bedroom and a studio space. Glass backing replaces wood in some of the shelves, inviting light and highlighting the clients’ treasure trove of small objects and books.

The reverence for nature is also evidenced in efforts to maximize energy efficiency. “The glass walls can generate heat, and we tried to be sustainable, so we used a heat pump system instead of gas, and we included a dehumidification system so they (the homeowners) don’t have to turn on the entire system. The system allows you to not rely on air conditioning, and eliminates moisture. The team also included operable windows for cross ventilation, used high quality insulation, and benefited from the shade that the trees provide.

Overall, the residence achieves an orderly balance, highlighting both nature and art with reverence. ♦

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