



HOOP *Dreams*

By Murray Benjamin Photography by Paul Bardagjy

As any architect will attest, truly outstanding houses often begin with a single big idea — a must-have feature, a must-see vista or a pivotal architectural challenge — around which the design coalesces. The owners of this new Austin home had several wish-list items that fit that bill, including capturing a view, minimizing the building's impact on the neighborhood and combining modernist aesthetics with the comfort and function of a family home. But the hinge point of this remarkable house came from another, much humbler imperative: they needed a great place to shoot some hoops.





“We have three boys, and they love basketball,” says the homeowner. Why the usual backboard in the driveway wouldn’t do the trick, he says, comes down to Austin’s climate. “People think the weather’s perfect here,” he says. “But in the winter, it’s too cold; three of us have horrible allergies in the springtime; and in the summer it’s 105 degrees outside.” When the couple approached architect Jay Corder, they said they wanted an indoor sport court.

The couple had more than that in mind for their new home, of course. What sealed the deal for them was the common ground they found with their architect — a connection that went deeper than aesthetics. “Jay said, ‘I’m about your age and your stage of life. I know what you want — a beautiful, contemporary house that’s livable and useful,’” the homeowner explains.

In this case, that meant a house that would serve equally

well in a variety of roles: family home, professional office, entertainment platform, gym and private resort. Corder says his challenge was to deliver all that in a package that would reflect the owners’ understated taste and maintain a low profile in their new neighborhood, which has strict design guidelines. The way to enclose the volume necessary for an indoor basketball court without upsetting these other goals, Corder quickly decided, was to go underground — literally. “I told [the owners], ‘find a lot with some slope, and we’ll bury it,’” he says.

Presented with a suitable site — a three-acre lot that descends to a winding stream with elevated views over an oak and cedar woodland — Corder set to work. After several extended site visits, he settled on the approach of using the project’s central technical challenge — “a forty-foot hole in the ground,” as he puts it — to develop a language of forms and materials unique to this house.

The massive retaining walls that would be required to enclose a large underground space inspired the board-formed concrete that defines other important elements in the structure and landscape. The remaining palette of materials — mahogany ceilings, trim and window frames; stucco walls; and gunmetal-finish steel accents — evolved as a natural response to the first. “We needed counterpoints to the concrete, to create a good tension,” Corder says.

Along with the sport court, which is fully below grade, half of the main house’s living spaces are also dug into the site, occupying a sunny walk-out lower level. One of the two garages follows suit. Recessed into the hillside above the house and topped with a sod roof, the detached building is completely invisible to passersby.

“It’s a very quiet house from the street,” says Corder. His site design furthers that effect by revealing the building slowly, in a carefully staged sequence that begins with a gently

curved driveway to a dedicated guest parking area. Board-formed concrete landscape walls loosely enclose an entry courtyard and a broad walkway leads to the formal entrance.

Low concrete walls also define a separate family parking area, where the two garages face each other across a paved motor court. Here, Corder included a separate, more casual entry sequence: a covered walkway from the garage to a separate vestibule with a coat closet and half bath. The arrangement, Corder explains, allows the family to move from the car to kitchen, “without having to walk past the washer and dryer.”

For guests and family alike, entering the house proper cues the visual equivalent of a symphony’s opening chords. The interior spreads out on a north-south axis, opening toward a tree-top level westerly view. Corder lined the building’s eastern side — opposite the view — with support functions, utilities and storage spaces.

The core of the house is a great room that combines entry,



kitchen, dining and living functions in a single, unbroken space whose generous horizontal span is matched in proportion by a thirteen-foot high ceiling. The stately effect is reinforced by a simple, rich material palette. Concrete, mahogany and lacquered wood are deployed in discrete, monolithic forms that seem stacked in place.

A glass-railed balcony spans the length of the great room with a lift-slide door that bridges the space and, at 13 feet tall and 45 feet wide, is the largest residential installation the door manufacturer has ever completed, Corder says. For the family, the novelty of that expansive glass wall simply disappearing hasn't yet worn off.

Flanking the great room at the north is a master suite with a deliberately compact bedroom, a private sitting room and a spa-like bath that opens onto a private terrace. At the south is a small formal dining area and a fully soundproofed private office.

If this sounds more like a loft apartment than a suburban abode, that was the intent. But this house functions equally well as the home of a boisterously active family. The materials and furnishings, such as the polished concrete tile floors, are



as tough as they are elegant, ensuring that their three boys under the age of 10 can rove about freely.

That is, when their parents can lure them upstairs, which is any kid's dream come true. Connected via a minimalist concrete stair tower lighted by a tall slot window, a left turn at the foot of the stair leads first to a game room with a pool table, then to the three-bedroom children's suite (two of the bedrooms connect by a hidden door between their closets). Beyond the bedrooms is a music room fitted out with instruments, recording equipment, sound-deadening curtains and a red studio light that signals when recording is in progress.

At the opposite side of the stair are a family room and a private guest suite.

While maximizing natural light and access to the outdoors, the spatial organization also reflects a consideration of family dynamics. Although he placed the children's quarters at a deliberate remove from their parents, Corder located the stair as a central circulation core, putting the adults within a few steps of the kids from either the kitchen or master suite.

Also centrally accessible is a well-equipped exercise room with a spa tub for after-workout soaks. A glass wall in the exercise room overlooks the sport court, allowing the parents to get in their own daily reps while keeping an eye the kids and their friends.

Most often, the action centers on the sport court. "We use it every day for basketball, volleyball, floor hockey, soccer ... or the kids will turn off the lights and play laser tag. It's just a great space," says the homeowner. And when they're honing their jumpshots and slapshots, he adds, "they're not on iPads and Xboxes."

While it may not register with the boys yet, the room is also a beautifully realized piece of architecture. The high concrete walls are imprinted with the wood grain of the forms they were cast in and dotted with the grid pattern of the form ties used in the process. The court is brightly daylit by six ground-level skylights. Open to the blue sky above, it feels worlds apart, yet also intimately connected with the rest of the house.

That is only fitting, given the sport court's key role in the evolution of the overall design. Once Corder had solved that problem, the rest of the design flowed rather easily. "Jay's first floor plan was probably 95 percent there," the homeowner says, "so he pretty much nailed it on the first try. And there weren't a lot of construction-related changes. The final product is pretty close to the original 3D rendering."

Most important for the people who live here, the final product functions brilliantly. The couple agree, "We use every square inch of space. We wanted to live in a work of art, and that's exactly what it is, but it's incredibly comfortable and livable for a family. It feels like home." ♦

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