



BUILDING STONE

A personal connection to stone design

With an appreciation for natural stone, designer Darwin Harrison carefully chose regional limestone in diverse sizes and textures to create a unique and comfortable home for him and his partner in Austin, TX



When building his own home in Austin, TX, designer Darwin Harrison turned to unique pieces of regional stone to create an authentic design.

Photos by Paul Bardagjy, except where noted



Darwin Harrison grew up and studied architecture in West Texas. His passion and appreciation for all things design-related has resulted in a career path that has taken many turns and varied pathways. He is a graduate of Texas Tech University College of Architecture and went on to the graduate program at University of Texas School of Architecture. Early in his career, he was an instructor at Texas Tech University College of Architecture and a field representative for Holzman Moss Bottino Architecture in New York

City. Harrison went on to establish his own firm, Darwin Harrison Design, in Austin, TX, working as a freelance designer, photographer and writer.

Recently Harrison designed his own home, where he lives with his partner. Inspired by innovative designs and the landscape around him, the designer passionately visited local quarries and thought outside the box to create their dream home. Overall the design intent was to use a varied palette where each material was expressed in a compelling and authentic manner, yet was part of a cohe-

sive whole when considered in totality.

Stone World had the opportunity to delve deeper into Harrison's thoughts behind the design and stone selection process. Here's what he had to say:

SW: What was the inspiration for the residential design?

Harrison: This is a tough first question. There are so many, too numerous to mention them all and some are larger scale and others smaller in scale. There are a few key ones though.



"The use of rhythms and interior courtyards, along with the elegant detailing and a complex palette of diverse materials, showed me how all these varied items work in concert to create something greater than the sum of its varied parts and materials," said Harrison.

The shape of the main stone facade is the classic gable shape that a child might sketch when asked to draw a house. I am drawn to iconic shapes that present a clear illustration of the spaces contained within. A very different example is the perfect glass cube of the breakfast room.

Years ago, just after graduating from architecture school, I was enthralled when I visited the Cistercian Monastery in Irving, TX, by Gary Cunningham. Seeing that project showed me the beauty and presence possible with big blocks of natural stone. It was also a great learning

experience to work with Holzman Moss Bottino Architecture (HMBA) [of New York, NY] and see their clever and unique use of stone in so many of their projects and how you have to work out a lot of details for it all to work like you envision.

I am inspired by designs that convey a sense of realness, a quality named and explained in the writings of Michael Benedikt. Realness is defined in several ways, including having an assertive presence, a tactile and clear expression of materials – where things exhibit their true innate character and composition

without artifice – and the result conveys a significance to inhabitants, as well as viewers from afar. In my work, I strive to always use materials that exhibit this quality. Another example besides stone is the rammed earth used at the studio and outdoor spaces. It is a material literally pulled from the ground and shaped into a functional space.

Another illustration of realness and a major source of inspiration for many years is the Kimbell Museum in Fort Worth, TX, by Louis Kahn. The subtle and subdued serenity, yet powerful presence at



The designer explained that he wanted a wall that offered a lot of privacy and presence so the height was set at 7 feet, 4 inches tall, but he also did not want it to feel too enclosed and confining so the blocks were staggered with the open slits to feel less solid — creating some amazing strips of sunlight at times.

the same time, is astounding. The use of rhythms and interior courtyards, along with the elegant detailing and a complex palette of diverse materials, showed me how all these varied items work in concert to create something greater than the sum of its varied parts and materials.

SW: Did you know from the start that you wanted to use natural stone in the design? If so, why?

Harrison: A very big YES. I have always been drawn to materials that have a strong presence and natural inherent qualities that are clearly evident — materials that look good, but just as importantly, feel good and age well. Natural stone — especially in larger block form and highly textured, or simply unique in coloration — always capture my attention. From the outset, this project was an opportunity

to use some of my favorite materials, and stone was high on that list from day one.

SW: What specific stone did you select for the design? Who supplied it?

Harrison: There were two primary suppliers for the bulk of stone. One was TexaStone Quarries in Garden City, TX. They supplied the large roughback blocks that were cut to specified sizes and used on the front facade and the backside of this same wall, which is the living room. The same stone was also cut into large blocks with amazing shifting, bending, corduroy-like lines that resulted from the cutting process. I was told by Quade Weaver at TexaStone Quarries that this is from a Fantini blade from Italy. They are quite large and thick blocks — each one by itself is a work of art.

TexaStone was also the supplier of the various ‘scrap’ pieces used around the exterior for landscape elements.

Secondly, AJ Brauer in Jarrell, TX — a division of Materials Marketing in Austin, TX — supplied the additional stone. I have used stone from Brauer in the past for the same reason as TexaStone Quarries — they have amazing options and the ability to supply large-scale blocks, as well as thicker in width. I used what they call a Strawberry block, also a roughback stone that is simply called that because some pieces have a more pitted rougher face. This block was dry-stacked at a freestanding curving screen wall along the driveway. The main reason this stone was used at this location was due to the fact I wanted a single-block-wide wall, but I wanted the engaging texture on both sides of the wall as it is very prominent along the driveway but also from inside



From the start, Harrison planned to use stone for his new home for its strong presence and natural inherent qualities.

the house on the courtyard side. So, you get the amazing effect on two distinctly different areas. I also needed the right thickness to be self-supporting. The stone from Brauer came out of the ground in 12- to 16-inch overall widths, so that size was perfectly suited to my desired configuration. The curve is a response to the driveway, but also a way to make the wall stronger laterally and be able to be only one stone wide.

SW: What were some reasons for choosing the stone you did for the project? How long did the selection process take?

Harrison: The house was actually for my partner and I. Designing and building a house for yourself was a crazy process — stressful and exciting. Many answers I've already stated, but beside these reasons, there were a few additional factors.

I did want a limestone that fit into the Austin neighborhood, but at the same time was not exactly like all the other Hill Country limestones, so I did want that coloration but with unique iconic variations. I used Brauer again, as I do love what they have to offer and they are regional so it fits the landscape of this area. For TexaStone Quarries, there was also several past connections. My partner and I both grew up in West Texas. I lived in Lubbock for many years and he is from Big Spring. He has known the Edwards family (Connie and Brenda) for years, so we loved the idea of using stone from our 'home' area and long-time friends of his as well. Added to that, my best friend is a partner at HMBA, and I have even worked for them during the time they did the Student Union building at Texas Tech University, which I know has been featured in *Stone World* in the past. I have learned a lot about stone

by being associated with HMBA and seeing their work develop over the years. I also had visited the quarry in the past so I knew the great materials TexaStone Quarries offers.

The selection process took about two to three months. My partner was included in all the decisions, but I had a vision and would show him samples and images and where materials would be used and he would offer feedback. We were on the same page as far as stone, as he appreciates the same qualities I do, and he also really liked using stone from our hometown region.

SW: Did you visit the quarry at all? If so, what were some things you were looking for?

Harrison: Yes, multiple times. I had been to both quarries for other projects so I



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knew a lot of information before going, but in each case, I was confirming selections and availability, etc. I also met with the quarry owners to discuss their individual capabilities as far as size limitations and cutting techniques, and I looked around the quarries to see color and texture variations each one offered.

At TexaStone Quarries, once I determined the layout and sizes for the final design, I made another trip and hand-picked each large uncut block to use — to cut the items to size so I could get the stones that had the most interesting cleft marks, colors and even some that had unique markings, etc. During this trip, I was also enthralled with the acres of scrap stone [pieces] that were either defects or maybe had blemishes, etc. It was at this point I inquired about acquiring a selection of the scraps that caught my eye for uses I was not even

certain about at that time. The stones were just calling to me to be used somehow. I worked with TexaStone Quarries to basically get as many scraps that would fill the last truck so as to not waste space. I was able to get 16 quite varied stones that were each very unique and ranged in size from smaller blocks to a giant solid block now used as an outdoor bench.

SW: Approximately how much stone was used for the home's design?

Harrison: TexaStone Quarries basically supplied three full 18 wheelers. There were 332 cut blocks of varied sizes and 16 of the scraps, as mentioned. The cut blocks equaled approximately 93,000 pounds — 46.5 tons.

AJ Brauer supplied 78 varied sizes of the large strawberry blocks.

SW: For what specific applications was the stone used? On average, what were the size of the pieces?

Harrison: The blocks from TexaStone Quarries were used for the exterior and interior end wall of the living room. The natural roughbacks are the primary selection for the exterior facing the street, with a smaller percentage of the smoother Fantini blade-cut stone used at the fireplace stack. On the interior, that configuration reverses with the primary wall being blade-cut blocks with a Fantini tractor-mounted chainsaw from Italy and a single row of the roughbacks at the base below a custom metal shelving unit built to coordinate with the course lines of the stone. The Fantini blade-cut interior wall was lit with a dramatic hidden linear light fixture that showcases all the corduroy-like ribs and cut lines.



The local limestone was employed for many and diverse applications throughout the residential design, including as a backdrop for an outdoor seating area.



Additionally, a large stone slab creates a stunning fountain in the backyard.

The largest blocks were 22 inches tall x 43 inches long x 6 to 8 inches thick based on the rough surface. Other blocks were exactly half that length and then there were a lot of 8-inch-high cap blocks and a custom-shaped piece to cap the peak of the gable with a single stone.

The Brauer stone was typically 24 inches tall with varied lengths between 30 inches up to 42 inches long and on average between 12 to 16 inches thick. This stone was used for a curving wall along the driveway/courtyard.

SW: The curved wall with the large textured stone blocks and slits in between is rather unique. How did that come about?

Harrison: I had seen a couple stone walls that were moderately similar in that they were dry-stack applications of large blocks. I wanted a wall that offered a lot of privacy and presence so the height was set at 7 feet, 4 inches tall, but I also did not want it to feel too enclosed and confining so the blocks were staggered with the open slits to feel less solid — creating some amazing strips of sunlight at times. It gives the wall a mixture of solidness and openness. The slits are occasionally filled with 2-inch-thick colored glass plugs from Italy to further add some interest and character. The curve, as mentioned, was both a functional response to enhance the structural integrity of a single wide stone wall,

but also a way to shape the driveway area and courtyard spaces into an interesting curved volume up against the more rectilinear shapes of the house.

SW: Did you spend much time on the jobsite during the stone installation? If so, what were some things you were looking for?

Harrison: I was the builder and superintendent and designer, on-site so I practically lived at the site during construction. I was present almost every day, and as such, I was there as all stone items were installed so our mock-up process was more an actual piece-at-a-time

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