



Mandalay House

Architect: Elizabeth Haynes
Photography: ©Dror Baldinger

It may be obvious that every house exists in a particular place, but every house also exists at a particular time. While a house typically stays in the same place it does not stay in the same time. It is a dynamic living thing that evolves as the people who inhabit it change and as the needs placed upon it transform. This change is what elevates a house into a home.





The home located in Olmos Park began its life in 1957 as a rambling mid-century ranch-style house. Although its limestone walls and low-sloped gable roofs were commonly seen in residential construction at the time its layout was quite unique. Respected San Antonio architect Stanford Busby shaped the plan like a lowercase letter “y” in order to nestle it in between several existing groupings of heritage oak trees on the site. From the street the house is quite unassuming. Rather than make a loud architectural statement it acts as a subtle background for the site’s oak trees. There is no grand front entry; instead a visitor to the house first travels through an open porte-cochere and into parking court that encircles a cluster of oak trees. The main entrance to the house is located off this rear court meaning the “front” door is actually placed on the backside of the house facing away from the street.

For all its idiosyncrasies the design of the house was born out of a rational response to the unique opportunities presented by its specific site. This approach served the owners well and the floor plan proved to be adaptable. In the decades that followed subsequent owners made changes to the design; appliances and fixtures were updated, wall surfaces were covered with stained wood paneling or patterned wallpaper and one of the wings was extended to add an additional bedroom and office.

Although each of these interventions were relatively minor, they conspired to make the house’s interior quite dark. But the “bones” of the house were good: it was extremely constructed and even incorporated a suspended concrete slab foundation more typically seen in larger commercial buildings. It was also very well maintained by the families who lived there and so when it was purchased in 2015 few remedial repairs were required. That said some updates were certainly in order.



For one, the new owner was interested in creating a much more contemporary feel for the house's interior. Together with the architect a design for the house was developed that was clearly more contemporary but still remained respectful to the original spirit of the house. There was an overall effort to "open up" individual rooms so the entire house acted as a more contiguous whole. This strategy allowed some of the odd angled spaces resulting from the house's geometry to be resolved in more elegant ways.

A palette of clean but warm materials was chosen to create an interior that felt both new and inviting. The wallpaper and wood paneling was all removed and replaced with lighter painted walls while the dark floor tile that ran throughout the original home was replaced with a light travertine. A 1/2" reveal tied together the wood door base trim and doorframes to further make the house feel like a consistent whole.



The main living area of the house was opened up to the backyard with large ten-foot-wide sliding doors centered on a particularly impressive cluster of oaks. Opposite this opening is a pass-through fireplace that connects the living room to the dining room. This fireplace was clad on both sides by dark steel panels. Overhead structural roof beams were clad in walnut to tie-in with the custom walnut cabinets located throughout the house.

The most substantive changes to the house were made to the kitchen. Originally designed as an enclosed servant space it was redesigned so that it now opens up to is and is a contiguous part of the main living space. Built around an eat-in island that provides space for casual dining, walnut cabinets and light marble countertops create a composition that is both contemporary and inviting.

One of the bedrooms that had been added during the previous expansion was incorporated into an expanded master suite. The master bath now features a freestanding tub and a steam shower.





The enlarged closet now includes a large window that looks into an enclosed courtyard, giving what is often a dark, utilitarian space a remarkably open and airy feel. Both bathroom and closet feature radiant heated floors.

The original layout of the house created an interior where every room had windows to the outside; the only exception being the powder room. The architect made up for this by adding an accent wall of shimmering glazed tile. Illuminated by a hidden cove light, this feature provides the space with a dynamic light despite having no window.

A slate of cutting-edge home automation technology is also fully integrated into the house. The lighting, temperature, sound and security systems are all controlled by a central system that can be adjusted remotely. Speakers are integrated into and hidden in the ceiling while light fixtures and air registers in the public areas of the house are all flush-mounted and lack trim. This creates a ceiling that is much cleaner than it would be otherwise.

On the house's exterior, painted vertical wood siding was replaced with stained horizontal bamboo planks that related better to the existing exterior limestone. $\frac{1}{2}$ " steel angle corner details relate to the $\frac{1}{2}$ " reveals found throughout the interior. Ornamental iron columns were replaced with simple steel tubes that relate to the gate at the porte-cochere. The orientation of the house's rear-facing front door was retained but the original arched doorway was replaced with a more contemporary walnut slat door with a steel and glass inlay. The house retains its traditional cedar shingle roof whose durability was illustrated when it survived a recent hailstorm unscathed.

Despite the fact that significant alterations were made to the house, the clarity that defines its character is consistent with the original design intent. The house may have evolved as it was inhabited by different families and used in different ways but through it all it has remained a welcoming and secure place. What is more it is a house that still feels like a home. **Q**

