



Rebuilding After The Flood

By Dan R. Goddard Photography by Dror Baldinger

A raging storm roiled down the Blanco River on Memorial Day weekend in 2015, dropping more than a foot of rain, sending a 40-foot wall of water cascading through the Wimberley area, destroying 350 homes and claiming 13 lives in the worst flash flood to hit Central Texas in a generation. The Texas Hill Country, where Wimberley is located, is known as “Flash Flood Alley” because it leads North America as the most flash-flood prone region. Many foundation slabs remain as a reminder of the destruction.

But people are rebuilding, though on higher ground, and with extreme flood-preparedness in mind.

“Prior to the Memorial Day flood of 2015, this 10-acre property was a retreat from the Central Texas heat. The previous house sat on the banks of the Blanco River for more than 30 years,” Pax Chagnon, AIA, of San Marcos-based Chagnon Architecture PLLC says. “In addition to taking on water during the flood, a large tree moving down the river struck the house causing catastrophic damage.” Flood waters covered all 10 acres. Downed cypress trees lined the banks of the river, their bark stripped away by the water. On the side of the property furthest from the river, the flood water line was visible on the wire fence.

After the flood, the owners decided to demolish the damaged house, abandon the existing site and find a new building site a safe distance from the river, on higher ground. The new house is located 300-feet further away from the river and

the lower floor level is about 10-feet higher than the original house. By being so far away, the river view has been lost. However, there are views of the rocky, tree-covered bluff rising above the opposite river bank.

“I was commissioned to design a new river house that had to be safely away from the river. Even if you can’t see the river, you know it’s there,” Chagnon says. “Though the river is out of sight, the house is designed to address the river.” Large exterior and interior living rooms have views of the bluff. Inside, reclaimed cypress wood wall paneling relates to the ancient trees that still line the banks, green glass tile references the clear river water, and vein cut limestone tile relates to the limestone bluff. The cypress wood — used for wall paneling and doors — is called “sinker cypress” and is harvested from cypress trees that have been downed in rivers and lakes.

The new 3,400-square-foot house has five bedrooms and five baths. A large great room, media room and master suite are on the lower level, while the upper level contains three bedroom suites, each with a private bathroom. On the river side of the house a 12-foot-deep covered porch stretches the length of the house and overlooks the pool and limestone bluff beyond. An outdoor living room is connected to the great room by a 12-foot-wide sliding glass door. Opposite the glass door is a large Rumford fireplace, a focal point for both indoor and outdoor living spaces.

“We provided both architectural and interior design services for this project,” Chagnon says. “I previously taught Residential Design Studio and Design Graphics courses at Texas State University’s Interior Design Program. As an architect, I believe residential architecture should relate to the site and have design consistency inside and out. Therefore, I believe a home’s interior, exterior and landscape design must be considered throughout the design process in order for it to be successful.”

To address the possibility of future flooding, the lower level



exterior walls are constructed of insulation formed concrete intended to provide a solid foundation for the upper floor. Behind the drywall and stone veneer is six inches of steel reinforced concrete with two inches of foam insulation on each side. The wall steel reinforcing is tied to the foundation steel reinforcing. The intent of this construction is to provide a flood-resistant structure to support the upper level of the house, sturdy enough to be used as a last resort refuge from potential flood waters. The exterior materials of the house relate to the rural Hill Country vernacular: corrugated weathered steel siding, sandstone, cedar porch beams and columns, stucco and a Galvalume metal roof.

“The Wimberley Retreat is a vacation rental property, focused on the river. Its relationship to the river is the reason the house exists,” Chagnon says. “On one side of the coin, the river offers views and recreation; on the other, the potential for future floods must be respected and prepared for.” ♦

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