

VIEW FROM THE TOP

# A family rebuilds their Westlake Highlands home to take advantage of its stellar vista

By Laurel Miller

**Perched near the summit of The High Road** in Westlake Highlands, Jeannie and Hunt Cairns' original 1971 two-story ranch house had a great location, but its views were largely obstructed due to its layout. Desiring an upgrade but not wanting to move, the couple hired architect Dianne Kett of DK Studio to design a new 3,651-square-foot contemporary home with natural light and scenery in mind.

An accounting manager at Austin-based national advertising agency GSD&M, Jeannie purchased the original woodsy property, situated on just under an acre of mostly flat land, in 2003. She met Hunt in 2013, and a year later, Hunt—a financial professional who was living downtown—moved in. The couple had numerous discussions on how best to update the deteriorating 3,067-square-foot property; Jeannie was concerned a major renovation would lead to a “Frankenstein house.” Luckily, a bid from local builder David Bratton of Watermark Homes led the couple to realize it would be less costly to just rebuild instead.

In early 2017, the couple consulted Kett, a long-time friend of Jeannie's who specialized in



**The back of the house has a dazzling view of Mount Bonnell.**

residential and small commercial design. “She knows we like very clean, simple lines, nothing fussy, so we let her take the reins,” she says. Adds Kett, “You really need to understand how people want to live in their house to provide them with a design that fully supports them. Here, it was also about those incredible views; as you move through the house, there’s always a window capturing something—oak trees, sky, or great vistas.”

Austin interior designer Helen Hagan of Helen Hagan Interiors did the fluid, minimalist-modern interior in a charcoal, cream, and neutral palette with brass accents and easy-to-maintain polished concrete floors. The effect is a soothing, Zen-like ambiance that Hunt says visitors find “comfortable despite the stark lines.”

The Cairns family—which includes a teenage daughter, two dogs, two cats, and two hermit crabs—moved into their rebuilt house a year to the day after construction began. The new high-ceilinged home has a spacious second-story deck, a master bath with a “spa-sized steam shower,” a pool with a view and a screened porch, and expanded garage space, part of which acts as Hunt’s music studio. “I can’t describe the privilege of the location here,” he says. “The back of the house faces east, so there’s a view of Mount Bonnell, and the morning light is amazing.”

Community is important to the family. Jeannie is an accomplished cook, and the couple loves to entertain, something Kett incorporated into the design. “The floor plan has a very easy circulation flow, allowing for large dinner parties, a spacious pantry, a marble-slab island with bar seating, and use of indoor/outdoor spaces,” says the architect.

Hunt prefers to host gatherings on the screened-in porch, where a 16-foot glass telescoping door separates it from living room. The porch is anchored by a stunning 12-foot wood farm table just steps from the pool and hot tub. “It’s a great place to eat a casual lunch or dinner in your bathing suit,” Hunt says.

Near the pool, raised concrete garden beds are also situated to escape the scorching midday heat, while an 8-foot fence (much of it hidden due to the ridge) keeps deer out and protects the dogs from coyotes. This time of year, the beds are bursting with herbs and plants like butterfly bush, planted to attract beneficial insects. But it’s the front yard that’s undergone the most dramatic landscaping transformation: A fence and decades’ worth of shrubbery were removed to open the space and highlight the towering live oaks, and the custom glass-and-steel front door has been crafted to bring the outdoors in. “Even when we travel, it’s nice to come back here,” Jeannie says. “There are not many hotels that are more comfortable or peaceful than our home. 🏡



Opposite page: Jeannie and Hunt Cairns stand on their second-story deck above the screened porch. This page, from top: Interior designer Helen Hagan chose a charcoal, cream, and neutral palette throughout the home, including in the screened porch; the kitchen area has a spacious pantry and a marble-slab island with bar seating.