



A GLASS HOUSE

in the Hill Country

By MAURI ELBEL Photography by DROR BALDINGER



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People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. But bring in an architect with a passion for open design and a fearless dedication to perfection, and the result is a home that intimately connects those standing inside to the spectacular natural beauty that exists outside.

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Such is the case with Jim Gewinner's AIA award-winning contemporary glass and native limestone home built on a 10-acre track of land just five miles outside of Fredericksburg. Perched weightlessly on the land, the modern, mostly-glass house rewards with stunning panoramas of the surrounding Hill Country land.

When it came time for the architect to retire, this home represented his last project and an opportunity to design something special for he and his wife. While a departure from his professional career spent designing commercial structures for the oil and gas industry at the Houston firm he founded, Energy Architecture, their modest 2,100-square-foot home does exactly what Gewinner intended: It maximizes on the rolling Hill Country views while maintaining a minimal presence on the site.

"There were two fundamental elements involved when designing this home and the evolution of the project was based on these two needs," explains Gewinner. "The first aspect was that my wife and I love open spaces — I know that is the fashion du jour but we have always been that way. And two, we wanted a modest sized home of roughly 2,000-square-feet that would suit our needs of two bedrooms and two bathrooms."

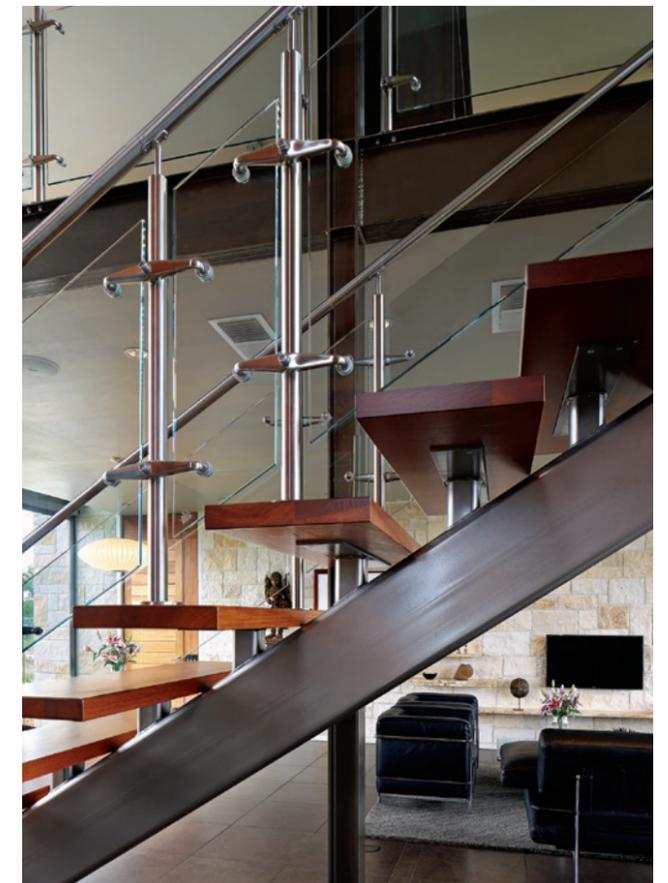
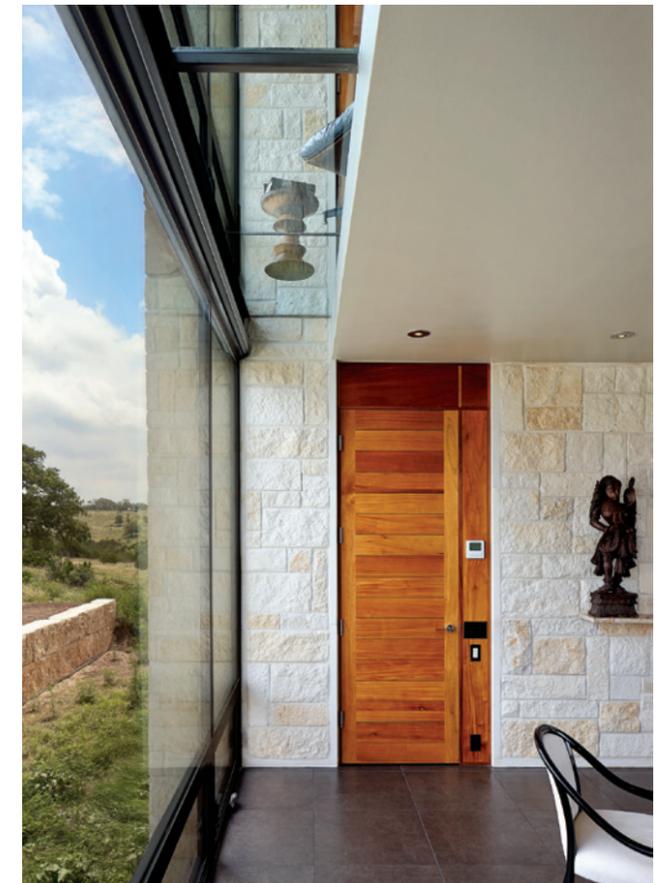
With a clean page to work from, Gewinner knew he would have the opportunity to stretch the design without worrying about what it would mean in the future.



"It was very specific," says Gewinner. "It wasn't done with anyone else in mind or for resale — it was purely what we wanted to do. It is a huge luxury to be able to do that without thinking about other repercussions or influences."

The couple has always loved the idea of transparency and gravitated toward the modern aesthetic decades before it was on trend, he says. Their desire for an open floor plan, with a degree of separation for the guest bedroom, that exposes exterior





views from every space in the home was the basis for the design — a modest, minimalist structure that allows the natural environment to translate through large expanses of glass.

The project began with finding the perfect property. Because the couple wanted a spectacular view and a house that would utilize expanses of glass toward that view, the property search had to take these considerations into mind. For three quarters of a year, the couple looked at more than 80 properties searching for a site that provided the natural settings compatible with a north/south orientation in order to avoid facing the harsh Texas sun that blazes from the east and west. While property hunting was a good excuse to get out of the city and enjoy the wide open spaces afforded by the Hill Country together, the search proved more difficult than anticipated.

“We got a bit discouraged on occasion,” he recalls. “There was always one thing or another that wasn’t quite right, whether



says he built an “old school” wooden model of the home and site which revealed conditions that couldn’t be detected from the computer renderings.

“I was very glad I did that because I made about four adjustments based on what the wooden model was telling me that the computer wasn’t,” he says.

But building a home with this precision on a hilly site in the Hill Country isn’t easy. Out of necessity, Gewinner did the general contracting himself, spending nearly every single day on the site for 17 months. As the designer, the general contractor and, occasionally, acting as a subcontractor, Gewinner wore numerous hats in order to build his house the right way.

“This type of house isn’t normal for the Hill Country so I did the general contracting out of necessity,” he says. “There were elements of the construction that needed to be pretty precise such as the handrails, carriage garage doors, etc., so I put this work under my own personal efforts. This level of involvement is fairly intense, but I wanted to do it right, and fortunately since I was retired, I had the time.”

While Gewinner calls his home low-frill, there is a high level of quality evidenced throughout the design. He selected high-end finishes ranging from the Calcutta Gold marble countertops and tiles to the Sub-Zero® refrigerator and Wolf® range and oven. Tastefully selected furnishings like the Eames kitchen chair and living room sofa and table from B&B Italia provide artful punctuations to the home’s minimalist decor.

But mostly, it is the feeling that the couple is rewarded with that speaks to the design’s success. Gewinner says he feels lucky to be able to wake up and go through the entire day surrounded by stunning views of the outdoors.

“With this much glass, you can’t be in the house and not be aware of the site,” he says. “The house turned out as I hoped it would. And that is a big statement. My wife and I both feel very fortunate to live here and are equally proud to share it with our family and friends. We have a wine cooler for a reason.” ❖

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the property was too expensive, wasn’t the right orientation or lacked the character of the Texas Hill Country. I just couldn’t find the right combination until we came to this one. And it was immediate to me. I fell in love with the site when I first saw it.”

Viewing the home now, transparency is the most defining aesthetic whether the beautiful natural setting is seen from within the house or through the house. The emphasis therefore becomes the natural setting and not the house. The selected 10-acre site provided a natural element of privacy, giving Gewinner the ability to utilize glass as the defining material. The architect also capitalized on the sloping terrain by elevating the house slightly — the elevated house, along with the raised walkway and patio that stretch from it, is what gives the house a sense of weightlessness.

“The use of the limestone core going continuously to the ground provided the sense of the house being anchored, with the remaining linear walls and columns giving a lightness below that matched the lightness of the house above,” he says.

The minimalist floor plan and restraint in use of materials distills the functionality of the house to its simple basics, he says. Additional approaches Gewinner says he took during the design phase include: placing the more utilitarian functions within a core, utilizing sun studies to determine roof overhangs, and incorporating numerous green elements ranging from triple LowE glass with thermal break mullions and radiant roof design to LED lighting and a 5 zone HVAC system. The entire site was returned to the natural grasses that existed on the property, with only a small area being landscaped with low water consumption yuccas and agaves.

Another process which proved invaluable in the design’s success was going back to early academic training. Gewinner