



SAN ANTONIO

# TAKING FLIGHT

San Antonio architect Tobin Smith looked to the sky to make the most out of a penthouse site.

By Helen Thompson  
Photography by Mark Menjivar

“There is nothing more important than how the house sits on its site,” says Tobin Smith. But when the San Antonio-based architect visited a client’s recently purchased penthouse on the 20th floor of a downtown San Antonio high-rise, the site was basically thin air and clouds. “It made me want to launch a paper airplane from the balcony,” he says. The image stayed with the architect as he pondered how to bestow excitement and purpose on the concrete hulk in the sky.

“Her condo was an unfinished shell,” he says. “Perimeter walls, windows, entry doors and plumbing locations were already locked in.” In high-rise homes, the task of creating an awareness of different zones in the residence usually defaults to furniture and rug placement to define purpose and function. CONTINUED...

**HIGH STYLE** From top: Interiors of the 20th-floor penthouse are by Michael Morrison of John-William Interiors, whose selections of curvaceous furniture in a neutral palette don’t distract from architect Tobin Smith’s dramatic pleated ceilings; colorful artwork adds a vibrant touch to the space.



...CONTINUED But not in this case: Smith's imagination had taken flight. "I was intrigued by how we could manipulate this predefined space 20 stories above the earth to create an understanding of its geographic location and elevation." The basics were the same for many houses of similar size (4,900 square feet)—the client asked for three bedrooms, three baths and a living-dining-kitchen area. The only option available to establish a meaningful connection between the penthouse and its ethereal site was one that's often ignored—the ceiling. And that's where the concept of the paper airplane returned. "I decided to use the paper airplane as a metaphor for the design," Smith says.

The public space in his client's penthouse occupies one side of the building, a U-shape that would deftly accommodate the architect's idea. Starting at corners on either side of the front door, Smith designed two rising, folded ceilings, each with seven pleats (think: folds on a paper airplane) that fan out toward the aluminum-framed windows, projecting the interior experience outward while referencing the rhythm of the existing building skin. Practically speaking, the folded ceilings define the two main areas in the main public space as one rises over the living zone and the other ascends above the family zone, with dining occupying the space in between.



**IN THE DETAILS** From top: Pops of color enliven the serene master bedroom; Tobin Smith specified a rare Blue Louise granite for the kitchen island—it's built like a table with a base of rift-sawn white oak that matches the rest of the custom cabinetry by Truax Construction; a view of the open-concept living and dining area.



The effect is dazzling as well as functional. "The pleats direct the view to the outside," says the architect about the 180-degree view that includes many of the city's landmarks—Trinity University, the San Antonio Zoo, the Witte Museum, Brackenridge Park, the airport, the downtown skyline and Alamo Heights. The delight doesn't stop there. As sun and shadow work their way through the home, the crisp pleats catch the light. "There are times when the ceiling looks like a sculpture," observes Smith. "It's this floating thing overhead, and you can't help but stare at it." Here, 20 stories up, the owner is connected to the sky, the sun and its shadows, and the view. "She got it all," says Smith, whose novel idea demonstrates the beauty of how a house can occupy its high-flying site. [tobinmitharchitect.com](http://tobinmitharchitect.com) ■