



CRAFTSMANSHIP AT ITS BEST

By Angela Rabke
Photography by Dror Baldinger and Mark Menjivar

While everyone takes seriously the task of remodeling their homes, architects take the process to an entirely new level. The combination of professional knowledge, personal preference, budget and family opinions can make for complicated calculus, but San Antonio-based architect Craig McMahon's former residence is a testament to the magic that can happen with patience, talent and a skilled relative or two.

After moving to San Antonio from Santa Monica in 1999, Craig and his wife Molly (an interior designer) were eager to settle in a home that replicated the seamless indoor/outdoor vibe that they had grown accustomed to in California. When they discovered a split-level mid-century ranch house among the tree-lined streets of the Alamo Heights neighborhood, they were hooked. "We were inspired by the mature landscape and we really loved the neighborhood, so we jumped when the home became available. We began renovations as soon as we moved in," Craig shared. The remodel took place in phases, and last-

ed a total of six years. The family, including their three young kids, lived in the home the entire time, but the duo was not intimidated by the task at hand. "We had already worked together on three or four homes, so this came very naturally for us," he said.

The home won several awards, but the journey was long. "We began outside because it was really important to us to engage the outdoors more," said Craig. "We wanted the mature oaks and landscaping to feel integrated with the interiors, so we focused on porches, courtyards and the area around the pool." The family added a screened porch, including an outdoor fireplace for the rare chilly night. Cor-Ten Steel, stucco



and Douglas fir replaced the original shingle siding, transforming every side of the structure, but it was especially important to this architect to maintain the integrity of the original home. “We did not want to tear down the home, even though it’s popular to demolish them in this area. Our goal was to salvage and modernize it.” The split-level home is divided into three levels, so the pair worked one room at a time, level by level. Bedrooms were a big priority, and the pair opened up the master suite, adding a porch to fully connect the room to the trees outdoors, and addressing the rest of the bedrooms as they camped in the kitchen. He laughingly shared the story of the time that

the neighborhood police showed up in the middle of the night, thinking that the family sleeping in the kitchen were squatters. In addition to rehabbing the existing bedrooms, Craig envisioned a cozy treehouse-like copula that would create balance between the different levels of the home while providing an additional light-filled bedroom among the tree branches that would eventually be occupied by their young son. The original house was very compartmentalized, as were many houses that were built during the era, so the family methodically began opening up rooms and removing walls from between spaces. The original 2,400-square-foot home, built in 1958, grew to its

current 3,400 square feet over the course of the entire remodel, and includes five bedrooms and four baths.

“We were working towards a great room concept that would improve and modernize the house, and allow us to live outside as much as inside.” Still inspired by their California roots, Craig sought out Douglas fir as a dominant material. Douglas fir is commonly used in California, but it was a challenge to find it in San Antonio. Determined, he was able to find materials in salvage yards and work with mills to create the warm paneling that is featured throughout the house. The fireplace, a centerpiece of the Great Room, is paneled with the mate-

rial on four sides, and the kitchen combines fir with concrete countertops, Natural Steel backsplashes and a steel framework that were created by Craig and his brother Cavan of Half Inch of Water Studios. “My brother is a great craftsman, so everything in the house is handcrafted. We wanted the entire structure to feel like a piece of well-built furniture,” he shared. He envisioned the steel framework for the kitchen cabinetry that was prefabricated and entirely removable, and commissioned his brother for the job. “He built this massive piece and delivered it, and we realized we couldn’t get it through the door,” he laughs. “So, we cut it into pieces in the yard, and



re-welded it in the kitchen.” His brother also helped create the concrete countertops that are part of the kitchen. “As an architect, I enjoy using my own home as an experiment to see what will or will not work in my clients’ homes,” he added.

The family married their spirit of experimentation with their desire to maintain the spirit of the house, and kept the smaller bathrooms that are punctuated by subway tiles and the same hand-poured concrete countertops found in the kitchen. Craig experimented with using stucco in the shower area as an alternative to tile: a challenge to execute but a beautiful outcome.

Eventually, their older kids moved on and a one-day showing by a realtor friend brought an equally intrigued client

one Saturday who shortly after moved in as the couple moved out to a new project just down the street. “I was happy that we could turn this house around and show people that you don’t need to tear these homes down. You can get higher vaulted ceilings and you can create a modern home on a budget.” Indeed, this home proves that everything old can be made new again, and that the great outdoors can be beautifully integrated with interior spaces in Texas’ steamy climate. ♦

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