

# THE ARTISTS' WAY

By Canan Yetmen

Photos by Dror Baldinger

The small button pinned to the wall front door says, "Art is a Family Value." A gift from the architect, it sums up the experience that is the Laman residence. When two artists join forces for life, the everyday becomes art, curated but not controlled; joyful, inquisitive, both living and livable. Like all good family values, art is a touchstone and beacon.

At Texas State University, where Jene taught interior design and Jean taught a storied textiles course (among others), the Lamans have earned the lifelong affection of their students and coworkers. Their long time home on a brushy lot on the edge of San Marcos was home to their diverse collection of their own work and that of friends, mixed in with cherished finds and acquisitions. An eclectic mix of contemporary and antique — sometimes in the same piece — in the deft hands of these two creatives makes for a visual feast for which the architecture becomes an enveloping vessel. Less container and more organism, the spaces flow and seem to expand and contract, inhale and exhale as one journeys through, pausing to catch moments of delight one wouldn't think possible in everyday life.

But more studio, display and living space was needed, and moving was not an option, so an addition to the ranch house was in order. Their research into materials — via work, travel and discussions with other artists — informed their vision for a design. "In our artwork, we often push a material to its limits. We are always looking for new materials to investigate," Jene said. This spirit imbues the entire space and provided the impetus of the architects' work. The Lamans knew architect Andrew Nance AIA — one half of the A.GRUPPO partnership — from his time teaching Interior Design at Texas State. Together with his partner Thad Reeves AIA, he embarked on a two-year process of collaboration and discovery with the Lamans, who had not worked with an architect before but were eager for the experience. "We were aware of the talents an architect can offer: a knowledge of sources, a talent of working with craftsmen, a knowledge of structural systems and engineering, a willingness to take risks and trying something new or different, a good listener, working within a budget, patience and deadline restraints," Jene said. "Of course, architects can do more, but these traits were important to us."



*We embraced the courtyard idea by shifting the addition away from the existing home creating a small courtyard spaces between them. We also purposefully framed views of trees and the exterior with openings wherever possible. – Andrew Nance*



The Lamans relax in the courtyard of their home, which is unlike any other in the San Marcos area.

The Lamans, naturally, came prepared. “We handed them a pile of pages we had torn from magazines over the years of things we liked,” Jene said with a laugh. And from there the journey started. Nance agrees the magazine clippings were the departure point for the process. “We spent hours going through each image and discussing what it was they found interesting in the images. Along the way, we began to identify which things were ‘novel’ but maybe not relevant, and which items would likely need to be integral to the proposed design.”

The established outdoor rooms and existing trees meant that the addition would have to be placed at the street side of the house, creating a new front entry and redefining the house’s face. “This site has a real natural beauty – it’s easy to forget the Lamans have neighbors on each side because it’s densely wooded,” Nance said. “They had developed this wonderful attitude about working with the trees, almost as sculptural elements around the house contained within courtyards, or surrounded by fields of jasmine. We embraced the courtyard idea by shifting the addition away from the existing home creating a small courtyard spaces between them. We also purposefully framed views of trees and the exterior with openings wherever possible.”

With a canopy of live oaks and cedar elms, a gently curved driveway that disappeared behind the house, the new forms appear as sculpture nestled unobtrusively in the landscape. Reeves said creating the two forms split apart as the signifier for the addition and the new entry for the house allows the design to emphasize the negative space between, a theme that sets the tone for the remainder of the journey. Transparency, solid, translucency, light and form play together. A massive nine-foot pivot door framed by the glass entry opens to a small atrium space that connects to two towers – a studio to the right, gallery space to the left. By definition, these spaces need both uninterrupted wall surfaces and abundant indirect natural light, so openings are oriented away from the entry, toward the east, the existing house and to the sky above. A second-floor library is a



Shadows play throughout the afternoon on the couple’s eclectic collection of art, inspiring ideas from the artistic pair.

place to relax, meditate, listen to music, read and visit with small groups friends. What Jene calls the “tree house” view expands this connector space to grasp hold of the outdoors, flanked by the solid surfaces, creating simultaneous sense of both shelter and prospect.

The collaboration between architects and clients is evident at every level. Light as a design element was a special concern, one the Lamans said the architects were well prepared to address. Windows are placed to capture the desired quality of light, and large expanses of polycarbonate gently diffuse the light making it flattering to skin tones. “We especially appreciated this light effect,” Jene said. In addition, this wonderful light is a continuing surprise as one moves through the spaces. Design gestures solve a problem, create smart efficiencies and, often, just create small moments of joy, like the carefully thought-out hand rail along the light filled stairs, carved into the wall and pleasant to the hand, illuminated at night with an LED strip for added attention.



Hidden doors reveal magical, light-filled nooks, and books seem to float on overhead shelves. Turn a corner and enjoy the sliver of a vista overlooking the room, and the space now seen entirely differently. Treasures from near and far spark conversation and stories and, before you know it, a new outlook on the world. Enjoy a whimsical arrangement of big-mouthed small fish heads from a shop in Fredericksburg, a stuffed penguin under a glass dome (discovered in Luling, no less), side table from Restoration Hardware, its glass top replaced with a leather-bound book. Paintings, drawings, books, ceramics and trinkets adorn every surface. All are arranged to tell a story, spark a memory, conjure thoughts about how it makes perfect sense that items from the nearby outlet mall reside cheek-by-jowl with fine art and sculptures. But always there is the light that accompanies the Lamans throughout the day. "The shadows created by the changing light is breathtaking and has inspired both of us in our creative work," Jene said. "One shadow each afternoon has been particularly mesmerizing, we can watch it change shapes over a period of an hour."

Both artistic and inventive, clever even, the house has work to do, not as scared showroom space, but as story teller and awakener. The gallery wall conceals a Murphy Bed for when family comes to visit – beds and accommodations are made throughout the house – and the walls of a small bath are lined with "cartoons" – working drawings on brown paper that provide specifications for stained glass windows in an undetermined church. Jean and Jene picked these up in San Antonio for mere pennies, but Jene recalls it was late in the sale day, and most of the drawings left were apostolic and saintly feet. Never mind; they are beautiful and, to be sure, not every bathroom tells stories like this.

Moving through the glass bridge that connects the addition to the original reminds once again of the beauty of the site and its outdoor spaces. It's a small journey in the mind that prepares for the next part of the adventure. The bedroom's floor-to-ceiling glass hovers slightly above the walled Zen garden outside. The new master bath – large and serene – overlooks a spare, walled courtyard from its free-standing tub. A dismantled wardrobe's ornate carved door provides the entry to the walk-in closet, a nod to Narnia's gateway, Jene said. A tiny stuffed Aslan stands watch on a shelf opposite. Spot him, make the connection, and the delight soars a little more.

Outside, outdoor rooms that break up the large site and were intended to keep deer at bay – Zen-like spaces, tiered decks, a secluded citrus grove, and bocce ball court – provide more variety and choice. The glass-lined bridge between the addition and the original house straddles a gully in the site and runoff during very heavy rains creates a stream of water underneath. These connections to the outdoors reconnect to the site, its nod to naturalization via inconspicuous intervention. Everything appears perfectly inevitable, nothing contrived or controlled either inside or out.



◀ The second-floor library offers a place to relax, read, meditate and draw inspiration.

▼ The home's bold, contemporary lines draw the eye to the next hidden surprise.

The couple says their favorite moments in the house are the mornings, afternoons and night-times. Daily calendars placed throughout the house, create the need to move through the entire space every day to change the date. The process is part inspection, part curation – things are tweaked or adjusted and it's apparent that it's an ongoing labor of love and devotion to art as a way of life, day-to-day, moment-to-moment. For the architects, that devotion was a professional dream come true. "I think it's a real privilege to be able to have such amazing clients that can take what we created together and continually improve upon it. It shows that one of the main ideas about making a container for art worked out," Nance said. "The collaboration [with the Lamans] has made something really special that would not work the same if any part of the team or equation were had been removed or altered in the slightest."

