



# SAVING THE TREE

By Dan R. Goddard | Photography by Brian Mihealsick

*Architect J.C. Schmeil of Merzbau Design Collective liked the Bouldin Creek location just off South Congress Avenue where a duplex had once sat on a corner lot dominated by an old, leaning live oak with a gigantic trunk and sprawling canopy. But he thought it would be a tricky project. The original client had already worked with two architects by the time Schmeil came on board, and her initial plan for the property had been to design and build a modern bed and breakfast until the neighborhood group opposed it.*

*Instead, Schmeil focused on designing a main house and a separate “Accessory Dwelling Unit” (ADU) that could be rented out on a short-term basis, although he still had to contend with significant design constraints on the property — especially how to accommodate the big, old live oak smack in the middle of the lot.*



**W**ith the duplex demolished, Schmeil had to figure out how to use the original foundation. “The duplex’s foundation was very close to the tree — much closer than current development code allows,” Schmeil says. “But we were able to use the existing foundation, adding onto it in areas, for the new main house.” The L-shaped design and placement of the back house accommodates the live oak’s Critical Root Zone, or Root Protection Zone, defined by the tree’s dripline, by cantilevering a portion of the slab. “We also jogged a wall of the main house — and the roof above — to skirt the massive trunk of the tree,” Schmeil says.

The two buildings now share the corner lot under the shade of the giant live oak. Built for entertaining, the low-slung main house extends its outdoor living space toward South Congress

Avenue; a translucent white polycarbonate site fence provides privacy for the pool and patio. White stucco contrasts with wood-clad niches that reveal entrances to the house, and windows frame views of the trees and manicured landscape. In a neighborhood like Bouldin Creek, where there’s an established tree canopy, Schmeil likes to take advantage of the “borrowed landscape” when it comes to window placement.

“In the bedrooms and bathrooms, we placed windows high on the wall to ensure privacy, but allow views of the sky and the neighborhood treetops,” Schmeil says. “The media room has a large window that looks directly out onto the tree between the main house and back house. Where rooms look into the courtyard between the two houses, we really opened up the walls with large expanses of glass, in order to showcase the green curtain and the live oak.”

“The main house and the back house (ADU) have very dif-

ferent personalities,” Schmeil says. “The main house looks toward the action on South Congress, just a block away. It’s much more open and really embraces its potential for entertaining. We also designed the house to accommodate a future pool. The back house has a different feel — much more private and introverted. It’s used as a space for guests, and we wanted it to feel like a European boutique hotel, but it also can be a self-contained, full-time residence.”

The inward-looking back house, separated from its sibling by a jasmine-cloaked fence, exhibits a formal quality in its gabled metal roof. An open kitchen/dining/living area and master suite comprise the main floor. Upstairs, a European-style guest suite nestles beneath the pitched roof, with views of the urban forest and access to a sunny roof deck.

“We were aiming for an understated quality, so that the landscape could really be a feature of the design,” says Sch-

meil of the material palette, with white stucco, grey metal roofing and warm wood accents shared by both houses.

“The houses are also pretty ‘green’ in terms of technology and performance, but most of that is hidden,” Schmeil adds. “They both have ducted mini-split air conditioning, tankless water heaters, high performance windows, foam insulation and metal roofing.”

Miars Construction completed the project to specification on a relatively tight budget. But shortly after completion of the project, the first client got an “offer she couldn’t refuse” and the current owner, Kenny Tomlin, purchased the property.

Tomlin had the pool installed after he moved in and enlisted Design Ecology/Design Aquatics for landscaping, completing the vision. “The pool is three feet from the back sliding door with a fire feature stretching across the entire backside of the pool,” Tomlin says. “More than functional, the pool is an ar-



tistic extension of the internal living space.” The north wall of the living room, facing the pool and South Congress, has an 18-foot-wide, multi-sliding glass door that opens the living space up to the pool and patio. And, of course, there’s the tree. “The oak tree is estimated to be 250 years old and provides an incredible canopy to the property,” Tomlin says. “The oak provides shade over the outdoor kitchen and also is home for a number of friendly squirrels.”

The architecture is a clean, modern design and the landscaping adds color and softness to the property. Tomlin says, “The goal was an urban oasis. A mile from the middle of downtown, but it feels more remote.” ♦

**ARCHITECT** Merzbau Design Collective  
512-636-5900 | [www.merzbau.com](http://www.merzbau.com)

**BUILDER** Miars Construction  
512-284-9722 | [www.miardsconstruction.com](http://www.miardsconstruction.com)

**LANDSCAPE & POOL** Design Ecology/Design Aquatics  
512-914-0388 | [www.designecologyaustin.com](http://www.designecologyaustin.com)



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