



THE LIVE OAK HERITAGE

By Dan R. Goddard Photography by Tre Dunham

The magnificent oak tree occupied most of a property in a small, gated community in Wimberley. Beautiful, yes, but the trunk, branches and canopy were so massive and sprawling, the possibility of building a house around the tree posed a dilemma for the homeowners and architect Neel Morton.

The lot was big enough for the oak, or a house, but not both.

The homeowners were two executives who had been living and working out of Houston. Tired of the bustling city, they sought a quiet Hill Country retreat. They wanted a relaxing, nurturing environment with a clear connection to the surrounding landscape, which the heritage live oak obviously could provide.

“They could have lived anywhere,” Morton says. “But they chose the Hill Country and Wimberley in particular because of its size, relaxed pace and proximity to Austin and San Antonio. They chose to live in this small community to be more engaged, yet they still wanted the feel of being on a larger property.”

However, the giant oak tree made the lot unbuildable without removing the tree. So, the homeowners opted for a simple, albeit costly, solution. They bought the adjacent lot to provide enough room to build while saving the tree.

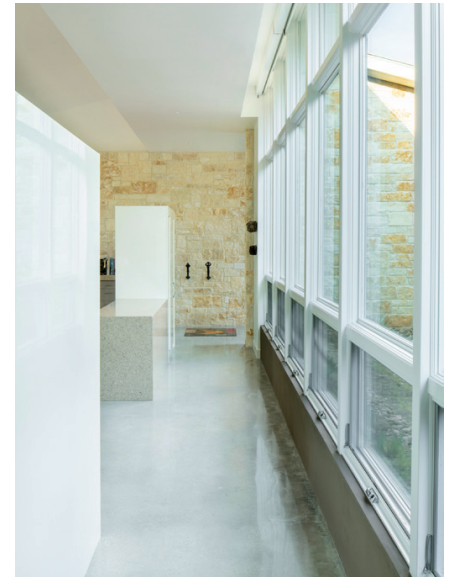
“The easy, much less expensive thing would have been to cut the tree down and build the house on a single lot,” Morton says. “Their commitment to saving the tree won me over immediately; I knew these were the kind of people we want to work with. We were able to generate a design that is very responsive to the tree, making its presence an integral part of the interior as well as the exterior of the house.”

Careful consideration was given to the orientation and layout of the 3,280-square-foot home to work around the existing oak tree and allow for ample daylight and unobstructed views without sacrificing efficiency or comfort. The large oak, occupying the higher end of site, led to challenges in providing proper drainage without disturbing the tree. As a solution, a portion of the home was buried below grade and waterproofed ICF (insulating concrete forms) were used to create a retaining wall, maintaining the natural look of the oak tree courtyard.

Despite the site’s special problems, Morton says Grady Burnette Builders were up to the challenge.

“Grady was the perfect choice for a project like this,” Morton says. “Grady grew up in the Wimberley area and understands what makes this area so desirable. He also prefers building architect-designed projects.”

The home’s ideal east-west axis permits large spans of glazing on the north and south facades without sacrificing unnecessary heat gain. The resultant energy-efficient home is clad in low maintenance materials that continue into the interior, acting in concert with large windows and a stacking glass door system to extend outdoor living. Overhangs and orientation passively protect the interior from the Texas sun while allowing indirect light to naturally light the home during the day.





Sustainable design was important to both the homeowners and the architect. On the exterior, stone, stucco, fiber cement panels and yellow cedar siding were selected for durability and low maintenance. LED lighting, low-flow plumbing fixtures, on-demand water heaters and energy-efficient appliances were used. Low-E glazing with thermally broken frames complement the high R-value of the spray foam insulation used in the wall and roof assemblies.

"As architects, we believe we have the social responsibility of demonstrating the use of sustainable materials and strategies," Morton says. "By doing so, we help create holistically

healthy environments that also result in energy and resource conservation. Our clients shared these views, supporting this effort at every opportunity."

Operable windows were specified for ventilation, and polished concrete floors were selected for their durability. A standing seam metal roof with metal fascia and a rain catchment system provides irrigation to the minimal landscaping, and drought-tolerant and deer-resistant species of native plants and grasses were selected to bring the landscape back to near natural conditions.

But protecting privacy while opening up the house to the natural surroundings presented significant challenges for a property located in a small subdivision. "Although surrounded by nearby neighbors, windows were carefully located to enhance the Hill Country feel and create a sense of privacy while maximizing daylighting and views," Morton says. "A prime example of this is a living room corner window that was carefully sized and located to provide a pristine view to a distant hill and ridge while screening existing homes on the hillside."

To the south, the large oak fills the landscape. To the north, a wooded area and hillside vista place the viewer deep in the Hill Country. The home embodies all that is desired from the Hill Country — beautiful views, warm sunlight and serene surroundings. ♦

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