

KRAUSE RESIDENCE

Jay Corder Architect: Jay Corder
Photography: ©Paul Bardagjy, ©Tre Dunham

As any architect will attest, truly outstanding houses often begin with a single big idea around which the design coalesces. The owners of this new Austin, Texas, house had several wish-list items that might have fit that bill: capturing a view, minimizing the building's impact on the neighborhood, and combining modernist aesthetics with the comfort and function of a family home. But the hinge point of this remarkable house came from another, much humbler imperative: They needed a great place to shoot some hoops.

"We have three boys, and they love basketball," says owner Ben (to protect their privacy, we'll call the owners Alicia and Ben, not their real names). Why the usual backboard in the driveway wouldn't do the trick, he says, comes down to Austin's climate. "People think the weather's perfect here," Ben says. "But in the winter it's too cold; three of us have horrible allergies in the springtime; and in the summer it's 105 degrees outside." When the couple approached architect Jay Corder, Ben says, "we knew we wanted an indoor sport court."

The couple had more than that in mind for their new home, of course, especially Ben, who as a child loved attending open-house tours with his father. "A once-in-a-lifetime home-build has always been on my bucket list," he says. "Jay had a spec design out there on the web," a contemporary house that was cool without being cold. "I remember thinking, 'That's what I want.'"



What sealed the deal for both Alicia and John was the common ground they found with their architect, a connection that went deeper than aesthetics. “Jay said, ‘I’m about your age and at your stage of life,’” Ben says. “I know what you want—a beautiful, contemporary house that’s livable and useful.”

In this case, that meant a house that would serve equally well in a variety of roles: family home, professional office, entertainment platform, gym, and private resort. Corder says his challenge was to deliver all that in a package that would reflect the owners’ understated taste and maintain a low profile in their new neighborhood, which has strict design guidelines. The way to enclose the volume necessary for an indoor basketball court without upsetting these other goals, Corder quickly decided, was to go underground—literally. “I told [the owners], ‘find a lot with some slope, and we’ll bury it,’” he says.

Presented with a suitable site—a three-acre lot that descends to a winding stream, with elevated views over an oak and cedar woodland—Corder set to work. The massive retaining walls that would be required to enclose a large underground space inspired the board-formed concrete that defines other important elements in the structure and landscape. The remaining palette of materials—mahogany ceilings, trim, and window frames; stucco walls; and gunmetal-finish steel accents—evolved as a natural response to the first to create “counterpoints to the concrete,” Corder says.

Along with the sport court, which is fully below grade, half of the main house’s living spaces are also dug into the site, occupying a sunny walk-out lower level. “It’s a very quiet house from the street,” says Corder. His site design furthers that effect by revealing the building slowly, in a carefully staged sequence that begins with a gently curved driveway to a dedicated guest parking area.

The interior spreads out on a north-south axis, opening toward a tree-top level westerly view.

Corder lined the building’s eastern side—opposite the view—with support functions, utilities, and storage



spaces, strategically filtering out the neighboring houses and reinforcing the sense of splendid isolation. A band of clerestory windows above this “service spine” opens to the eastern sky, balancing the daylight inside while preserving the sense of remove from the outside world.

The core of the house is a great room that combines entry, kitchen, dining, and living functions in a single, unbroken space whose generous horizontal span is matched in proportion by a thirteen-foot-high ceiling. The stately effect is reinforced by a simple, rich material palette and deftly composed spatial geometry. Concrete, mahogany, and lacquered wood are deployed in discrete, monolithic forms that seem stacked in place.

“IT IS MY LIFE’S WORK BOTH PERSONALLY AND PROFESSIONALLY TO BRING YOUR VISION TO A REALITY WITH EFFICIENCY, JOY, AND ADVOCACY THROUGH ATTENTION TO DETAIL.

- JAY CORDER



Flanking the great room at the north is a master suite with a deliberately compact bedroom, a private sitting room, and a spa-like bath that opens onto a private terrace. At the south is a small formal dining area and—well-hidden and fully soundproofed—Ben’s private office.

The lower level connects via a minimalist concrete stair tower lit by a tall slot window. A left turn at the foot of the stairs leads first to a game room with a pool table, then to the three-bedroom children’s suite (two of the bedrooms connected by a hidden door between their closets). Beyond the bedrooms is a music room fitted out with instruments, recording equipment, sound-deadening curtains, and a red studio light that signals when recording is in progress.

Other accessible features make the house something of a private resort, including a well-equipped exercise room with a spa tub for after-workout soaks. A glass wall in the exercise room overlooks the sport court, allowing the parents to get in their own daily reps while keeping an eye on the kids and their friends. Alicia competes in triathlons, Ben says, “so the outdoor pool is shaped with half an Olympic-length lane, for training.” Often as not, however, the action centers on the sport court. “We use it every day,” Ben says, “for basketball, volleyball, floor hockey, soccer... or the kids will turn off the lights and play laser tag.”

Located beneath a grassy lawn between the garages and house, the court is brightly daylight by six ground-level skylights. Rimmed by fortress-like walls and open to the blue sky above, it feels like a world apart, yet also intimately connected with the rest of the house.

That is only fitting, given the sport court’s key role in the evolution of the overall design. Once Corder had solved that key problem, the rest of the design flowed rather easily, propelled by its own internal logic and guided by the twin pole stars of elegance and utility. “Jay’s first floor plan was probably 95 percent there,” Ben says, “so he pretty much nailed it on the first try.”

Most important for the people who live here, the final product functions brilliantly. “We use every square inch of space,” Ben says. “We wanted to live in a work of art, and that’s exactly what it is, but it’s incredibly comfortable and livable for a family. It feels like home.”