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TEXAS  
 HEART  
 OF GOLD  
 AND PINE

By Addie Broyles  
 Photos by Brent Humphreys

Project: Balcones House  
 Architect: Pollen Architecture & Design  
 Location: Austin, Texas

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An architectural designer and an artist harnessed the collective power of their design firm to remake a dilapidated mid-century gem into a hillside perch for their family.

Native Texans and married designers Elizabeth Alford and Michael Young came home to roost ten years ago, when they ditched big-city life in New York for a ranch house in Austin. The home, originally built by architect Jonathan Bowman in 1957, sits in a landscape of limestone cliffs in the Balcones fault zone, the geographical boundary between the prairie lands that extend all the way to the Gulf of Mexico and the rolling, agriculture-rich Hill Country.

"We intended to remodel," says Alford, who owns the firm Pollen Architecture & Design with Young and their business partner, architect Dason Whitsett. As soon as they started drawing up plans, they realized that it would be too costly to complete a restoration and, Alford admits, "not that satisfying" to work solely within the existing structure. So they stripped it down to the footprint and rebuilt, shaping a family home that would reflect both the hypermodern lives they left in New York City and the deep-rooted cultural heritage that comes with growing up in Texas.

Though little remains of the old structure besides the limestone foundations and fireplace column beside the outdoor patio, the surviving open-air stair tower hints at the house's unusual past. From the carport below, visitors travel underneath the main volume of the house, then enter the stair tower and exit one floor up, with views down the hill, across a tree canopy, and over a lush ravine. Alford and Young added 1,000 square feet and, most importantly, linked the interior and exterior worlds through their choice of local materials, like the aggregate speckled ▶



With a nod to the natural skew of the cliffs nearby, the roof creases inward on the edges, with folds called crickets (opposite page). The design is twofold: The lower roof utilizes a number of super-integrated gutters and the upper roof collects rainwater. A striated concrete wall designed by Pollen Architecture & Design (above) contrasts with the rough limestone rock of the home's existing stair column. An abstract painting by Michael Young complements the glow of the dining room's pine walls (left). A collapsible silicone lampshade by Swedish designers Form Us With Love for Muuto hangs above a Macek Furniture Company table.

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“ONE OF OUR  
DEFINITIONS  
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WELL BUILT.”

— MICHAEL YOUNG

Dieter Rams's modular 620 Chair Programme, from the 1960s, takes center stage in the Alford-Young family's living room. The set is accompanied by Artemide's classic

Tolomeo floor lamp and a Portofino Bergère chair that was designed by Rodolfo Dordoni for Minotti. The rolling glass doors running the length of the room are from Fleetwood.

throughout the concrete floors that was dredged from the bottom of the Trinity River and the East Texas yellow pine that covers much of the walls, doors, ceilings, and floors. The traditional material was brought up to date with quarter-sawn boards that were cut to expose a pattern of fine horizontal lines from the floor to the ceiling.

In contrast to all the wood, Alford and Young chose a supple skim-coated plaster for several prominent walls. “I love how it receives light and looks like a tactile material instead of paint,” Alford says. The wall at the top of the limestone stair tower is perhaps the most adventurous in terms of texture: Using custom molds, Alford and Young made dozens of concrete tiles with a thick, raised vertical relief pattern that emphasizes the sun coming in from a slot skylight above, while transitioning from the rough rock of the original stair tower to the seamless walls of the new house.

“We're very interested in where stuff comes from,” says Young, a visual artist who frequently incorporates sand and soil into his art, as seen in the large-scale piece that hangs in the dining area. Young describes them as “a family of makers,” where each member—including 13-year-old James and 11-year-old Clara—has allotted space. Command central is the family room's work table, where James's unfinished blimp sits next to a scroll of Greek symbols that Clara painted with watercolors. On the other side of the wall, Young and Alford's office is lined with Homasote fiberboard on which he can post sketches.

In addition to building with local materials and a rainwater conservation system, the sustainable side of the pair's practice comes out in the home's lighting system. The home's new windows have low-energy, insulated glass that reduces solar heat gain. South- and west-facing window banks feature carefully fitted awnings that shade the rooms during the heat of the day. Strategic clerestory windows reflect natural light onto the family room ceiling from an outside shelf—created by a junction of the butterfly roof—which brightens the space even more. In the bathrooms, the architects designed powder-coated steel tube skylights capped with insulated glass that transmit a few small beams of the bright Texas sun without amplifying the heat. The placement of the windows had as much to do with sun angles as important views on the site, Young says. “This is not a huge house. The outdoors is an extension of the home.”

Vintage furniture hits the sweet spot between aesthetics and responsible consumerism. (“One of our definitions of *sustainable*,” says Young, “is that it's well built.”) The modular Dieter Rams 620 Chair Programme, which dates to the 1960s, occupies prime real estate in the living room. Sporadic bursts of color—a safety-orange Kvadrat rug in the family room, grassy green tile from Bisazza in the master bathroom, and a lighter, celery green for the custom kitchen cabinets—complement the warmth of the pine walls. And many of the beds, desks, drawers, shelves, and cabinets are built-ins designed specifically for the house. One notable ▶



FOCUS



The family room (opposite) is situated at the apex of the house, with picturesque views that extend up the meticulously landscaped north slope. The concrete floor sits just low enough that the main elements of the scene—the succulent garden and large limestone ledges—are at eye level. A bank of NanaWall folding windows breaks up the fourth wall. The gutters (right) run off a scupper into a box of gravel, which drains into a 5,000-gallon underground tank, providing enough irrigation to sustain a vegetable garden and other native plants. James works on his balsa-wood blimp in the family workspace (below), illuminated by a Kelvin LED Table Lamp from Flos; his bedroom furniture (left) was custom designed by Hatch Workshop.

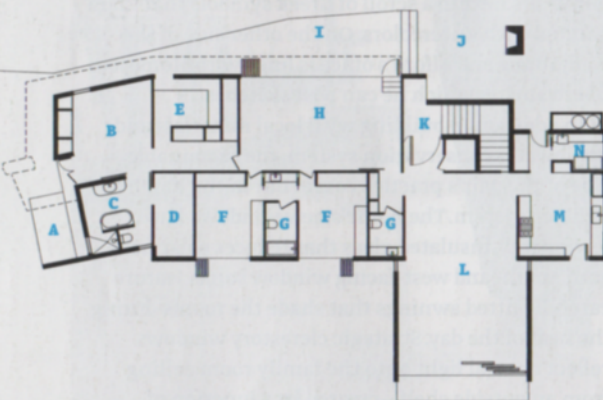


# Texas Two-Step

*IN AUSTIN, MID-CENTURY HOMES BUILT IN THE WAKE OF WORLD WAR II JOIN MORE TRADITIONAL VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE.*

Homeowner and architectural designer Elizabeth Alford explains that rapid post-World War II population growth caused Austin homebuilders to address materiality and place in a more direct way. Though modest, many of the Texas capital's homes were built with local resources, such as limestone and native hardwood, and made strong connections to the outdoors with the help of large windows, covered porches, and patios. "People were interested in technology and the future," she says, but ties to farm life were still strong.

According to Alford, mid-century houses are a "small but appreciated minority" in Austin—head into Hill Country to spot the strictly vernacular dogtrot-style homes—but she's not kidding when she says that the best example of regional architecture in central Texas might just be the famed Louie Mueller Barbecue in Taylor, about 30 minutes outside of Austin. Nothing screams "sense of place" like the smoke-stained pine that lines the walls and the quilt-like brickwork on the front of the otherwise unassuming building.



Balcones House Floor Plan

- A Master Patio
- B Master Bedroom
- C Master Bathroom
- D Master Closet
- E Office
- F Bedroom
- G Bathroom
- H Family Room
- I Succulent Garden
- J Outdoor Living Area
- K Entry
- L Living Room
- M Kitchen
- N Utility

exception is an heirloom chest of drawers that, as Alford family legend has it, was buried during the Civil War to protect the silverware from pillagers.

It isn't always easy for the couple to be architects as well as inhabitants. "You make mistakes," Alford says. "You can take bigger risks than with clients." They notice the smallest flaws that they are just itching to fix, but at some point (especially when the kids are begging to install a basketball hoop on wheels), you have to stop working and start living. ■