

Texas Architect







Balcones House

by Al York, AIA

Project Balcones House, Austin

Client Elizabeth Alford & Michael Young

Architect Pollen Architecture & Design

Design team Elizabeth Alford, Assoc. AIA; Michael Young; Dason Whitsett, AIA; John Algood; Lucy Begg; Parker Williams

Contractor Pollen Architecture & Design

Consultants Structures (structural); EEA (mechanical); Studio Balcones (landscape)

Photographers Patrick Wong; Whit Preston; Casey Dunn; Lars Frazer; Bill Salens

On the edge of the escarpment that formed eons ago along the Mount Bonnell fault, at a point just north of the channel carved by the Colorado River, the effects of wind and rain have eroded the elevated Glen Rose Formation, leaving a dense-packed cohort of small hills with steep valleys. Over millennia rugged mountain juniper and live oak trees, whose roots cling to the shallow soil that collects between limestone outcroppings, have overgrown the undulating terrain. This is the leading edge of the unique landform known as the Texas Hill Country.

These hills are the most dramatic peaks in Austin and, following WWII, developers looked upon this unique landscape and envisioned a host of home sites strung out along a winding path named Balcones Drive. From the beginning, the dramatic sites attracted an adventurous breed of Austinite, many of whom commissioned contemporary designs for their time. Today, among a variety of revivalist-styled homes there are still many fine examples of late mid-century residential modernism.

Within this setting, the architect and artist team of Elizabeth Alford and Michael Young and their Austin firm Pollen Architecture and Design have created a home for the designers' young family that ties itself and the family tightly to the dramatic landscape.

After living on the site in the original house for several years, and making initial attempts to design a renovation/addition that would suit their needs and budget, the couple eventually decided to build anew. In doing so, they kept only the foundation of the original house, the limestone retaining wall that supported it on the hillside, and a stone fireplace that was in a master bedroom wing.

In keeping with the modernist architecture that initially took root in this landscape, the new home calls to mind the Connecticut houses of Marcel Breuer in the juxtaposition of rugged local stone with crisp rectangular geometries. By manipulating the relationship between interior and

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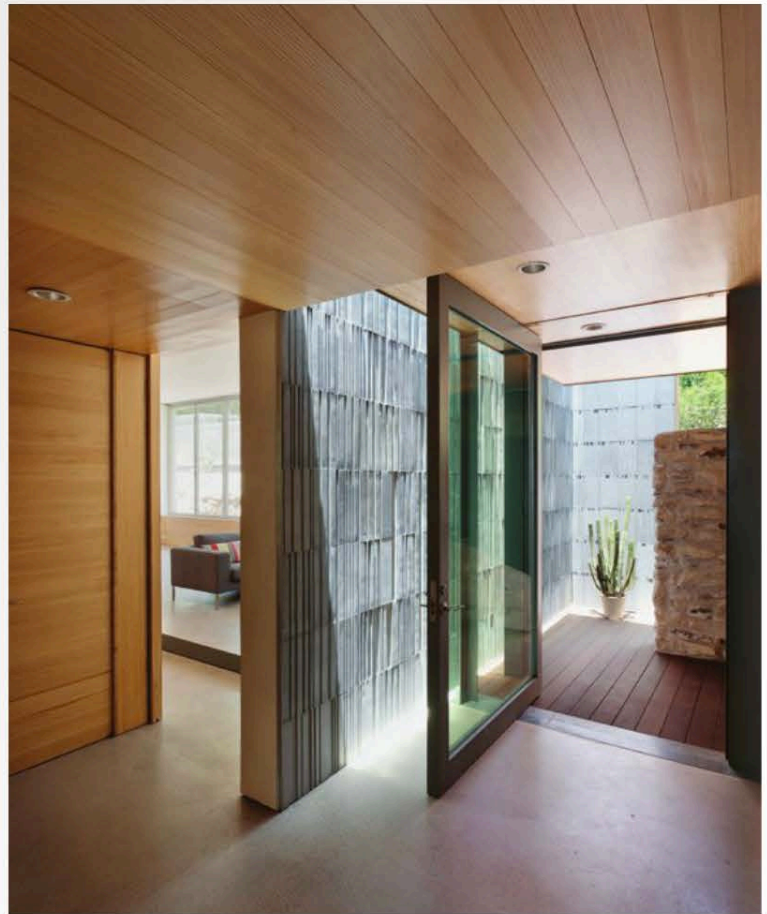
exterior, and employing a keen sense for materiality, the designing duo has created a residence that provides diverse opportunities to be fascinated by the charms of this unique location.

Upon approach, the house does not present any of the conventions that normally signal entrance. The simple wood-clad masses hang over the edge of the retained limestone wall or dramatically protrude beyond to shelter a carport. On closer look, a line of pavers set into the gravel court provides the subtle clue that entry is through the shadowy breach in the rugged stone wall beneath the overhanging volume. There is a sense of uncertainty ascending the stairs set within the wall. It is only at the first landing that the play of light and shadow across the textured concrete shingles flanking the entrance reveals the destination and transforms apprehension into delight.

On arrival, the interior presents a collection of geometric spaces tautly clad in a rare, straight-grained yellow pine from Young's native East Texas. The living room/library lies beyond a dining area that also functions as the entry foyer. This gathering place is fully glazed on the south wall and fashioned as a rectangular volume projecting beyond the stone plinth below. As it hovers above the gravel court, its open end captures the view into the canopy of live oaks whose year-round leaves shield the residents from the nearby neighbors and help create an atmosphere of detachment from the world that buzzes by on Balcones Drive below. That sense of detachment is reinforced by the glass slits that flank the volume at its intersection with the east-west mass forming the main body of the house. A single step down from the dining zone further heightens the sense of detachment and reinforces the idea of separation that characterizes this tree-house-like space.

The more private realms of the residence offer a distinctly different experience of the landscape. Sleeping rooms are arranged off of a large central space that functions as both den and studio. In contrast to the living room, which hovers above the earth and looks out into the treetops, this space opens to the north and the rising hillside. The window wall that runs the full length of the space reveals an intimate view of limestone outcroppings softened by a colorful cascade of native flora. The effect is a sense of connection to the earth, a feeling that is amplified by the choice to depress the room slightly below grade.

Sheltering this private wing of the residence is an asymmetrical, inverted-vee roof that channels rainwater to a collection cistern located in



Previous spread *Smart planning, a tight envelope, rainwater collection, on-site solar power generation, and a material palette with no off-gassing helped earn this hillside residence a 5-star rating from the rigorous Austin Energy Green Building Program.*

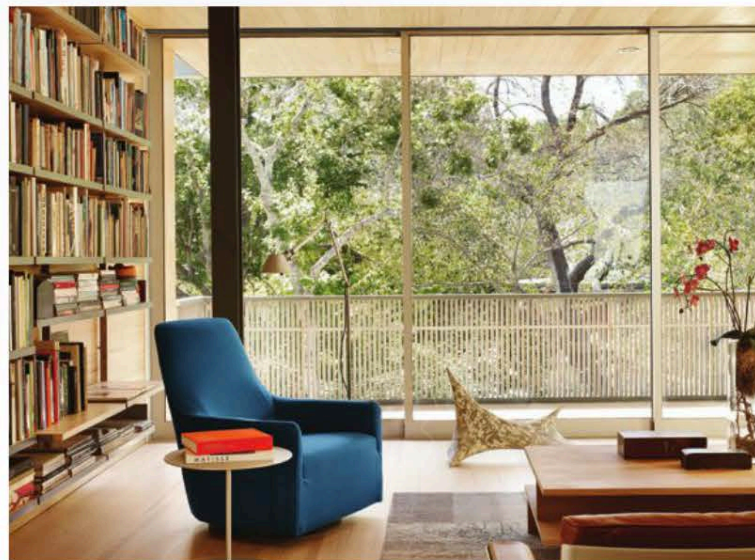
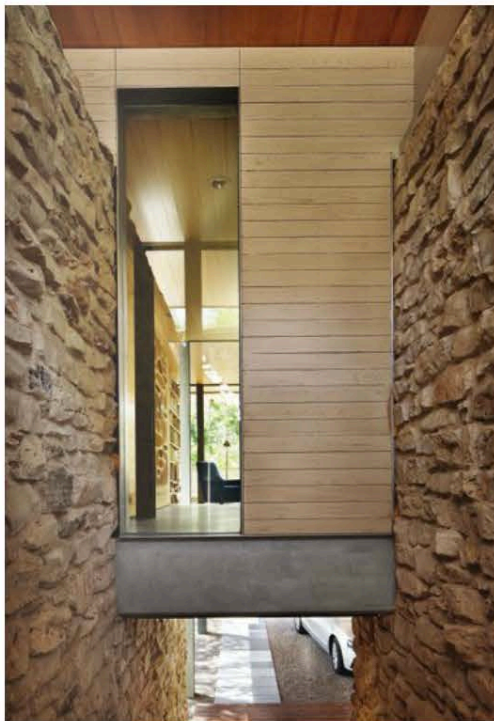
Above *Custom cast ribbed concrete shingles announce entry with a dramatic play of shade and shadow.*

Right *A narrow glazed slit accentuates the geometry of the tautly clad volumes.*





This page clockwise from top *The new composition of crisp geometries sits above the rough stone wall retained from an earlier structure. The elevated living room looks out into the surrounding tree canopy. The crisply detailed construction is juxtaposed against rugged masonry.*

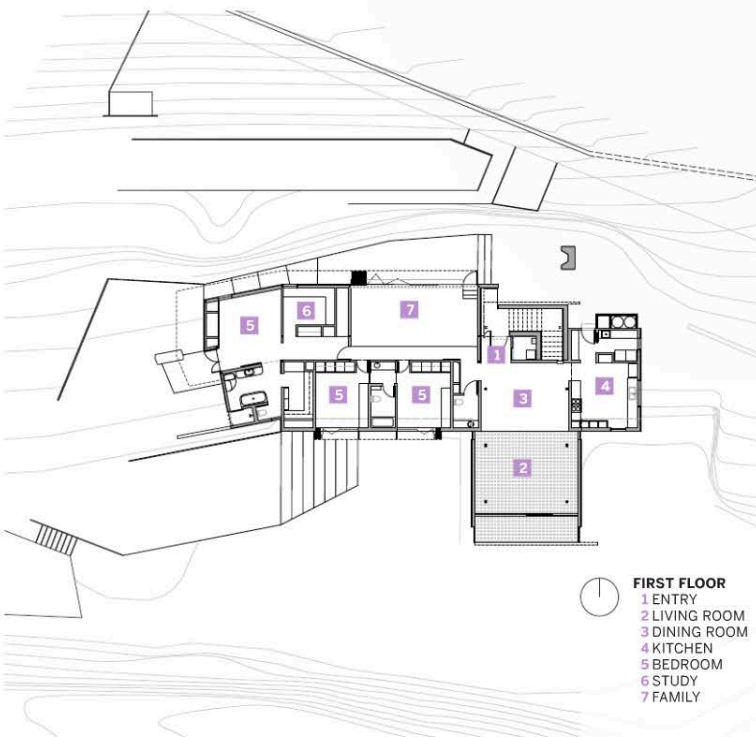




Resources LUMBER: US Lumber Brokers; SAPS PINE/EXTERIOR SIDING: Delta Millworks; BUILDING INSULATION: Icynene; VAPOR RETARDERS: Grace; MEMBRANE ROOFING: IB Roof Systems; WOOD DOORS: Juniper Carpentry; METAL WINDOWS: Fleetwood Windows & Doors (Grand Openings), NanaWall, Gerkin Windows & Doors; GLASS: Cardinal Glass Industries (Anchor Ventana Glass); PLASTIC GLAZING: Polygal; DOOR HARDWARE: FSB; CABINET HARDWARE: Sugatsune America; GRANT SLIDING DOOR TRACK: Hettich; TERRAZZO: ModernCrete Concrete Design & Polishing



This spread clockwise from upper left *Stone outcroppings and draping vegetation along the uphill side of the house. The central space of the family wing opens fully to the rear terrace. The clerestory window balances the lighting and eliminates glare from the large north window. A straight-grained yellow pine from East Texas warms the interior palette. The most minimal of elements, a hearth and table, combine to create an irresistible place to gather.*



FIRST FLOOR
 1 ENTRY
 2 LIVING ROOM
 3 DINING ROOM
 4 KITCHEN
 5 BEDROOM
 6 STUDY
 7 FAMILY

the storage building to the west. On the interior, the inverted form imparts an impression of being “below,” which contributes to the overall sense of grounded-ness. The clerestory that allows this ceiling to hover slightly above the enclosing southern partition balances the natural light to cleverly eliminate what would otherwise have been a strong glare through the fully glazed north wall. It also creates the perception that space flows smoothly across the glazed boundary, successfully merging the interior and exterior environments.

Fittingly for a residence so integrated into its site, the most revealing room of this house isn’t even in the house. A limestone chimney retained from the original structure and augmented by a handsomely board-formed concrete fireplace defines the heart of the residence, an outdoor dining and gathering room equally accessible from the kitchen, the den, or from the entrance stair. The disembodied hearth stands as a focal point and gathers around it family, friends, and real conversation. Sheltered by the rising hillside, yet open to the sky, this space — in Alford’s words — “has generated the most unexpected change” in their lifestyle, drawing them together by drawing them into the landscape.

Al York, AIA, is a principal of McKinney York Architects in Austin.