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Andy and Regina Rihn lean on their other blue-clad affordable design, a 1958 AMC Rambler Super station wagon, in front of their house in Austin, Texas.

## A Lot for a Little

Regina and Andy Rihn weren't exactly modernists when they first began their frustrating, unproductive slog through the pricey Austin, Texas, real estate market. "We just liked things that were old and wood," Andy says. "That was our aesthetic." But thankfully for them, the first-time homebuyers got lucky.

"We were looking at \$100,000 homes, but they needed everything. New roofs, everything," Regina recalls. "We finally made an offer on one, but the inspector said it was the worst house he'd ever seen. It was horrible."

After the inspection debacle, Andy happened to talk to his mother in San Antonio, who told him that his childhood friend Amy Dempsey also lived in Austin and was building low-cost houses on the city's still-gritty east side. Initially, he dismissed it as "mom information."

A few days later, Regina and Andy were standing in a vacant, bottle-strewn lot, looking at house plans on the hood of Dempsey's gray Chevy truck. She explained she was hoping to build a compact, affordable house that connected with the outdoors, and they made a decision ▶



Regina and Andy Rihn open the sliding doors in the main living space when they need more ventilation, while the two dogs prefer to use their custom door to get a little fresh air.

to buy on the spot. “We’d never in a million years thought we could build a new home,” Regina says, “and we didn’t really know anything about design.”

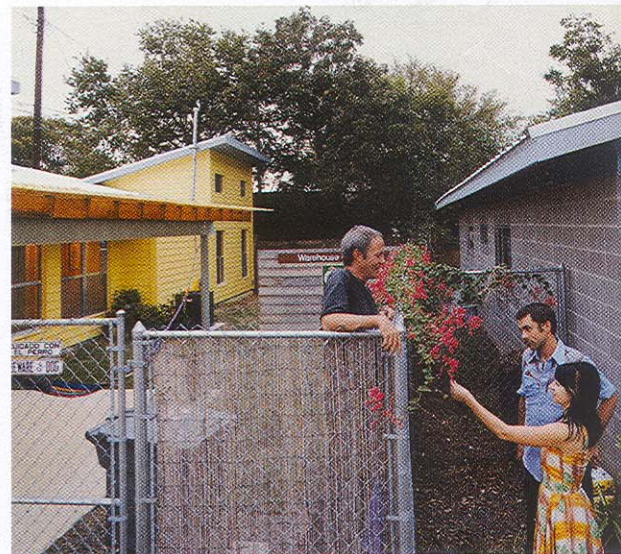
Regina, a waitress/hair stylist/clothing designer, and her handlebar-mustachioed pastry chef/musician/artist husband, had only two requests for their new home: They wanted a metal roof and a doggy door for their little mutts, Changa and Velour. “That was it as far as our input,” Regina remembers. For Dempsey, a first-time home designer and builder, they were the perfect clients—open-minded and unburdened by expectations.

Dempsey worked for an Austin architecture firm at the time, primarily designing Whole Foods grocery stores, but wanted to branch into residential design. She formed a partnership with the firm’s owner, John Beckham, bought the bottle-strewn double lot for \$40,000 and applied for a construction loan through the city’s now-defunct Small Builder Program, which offered no-interest loans to developers who built

homes for low- to moderate-income buyers. Dempsey also hooked up with Austin’s SMART Housing program, which waives city fees for builders who construct green low-income housing. Dempsey and Beckham each designed a house for the property, with Dempsey acting as general contractor for both.

The yearlong adventure of building the houses began in August 2004. At the outset, Dempsey wanted to be sure that residents didn’t feel like their neighborhood was being invaded, so she went door-to-door introducing herself and explaining the project. Still, locals viewed the construction as a curiosity. Some asked when the “offices” would be done; one person thought the Beckham-designed house, painted a bright yellow, was destined to be a drive-through restaurant.

The construction process also met a few obstacles. Materials disappeared, windows were broken, and occasionally, Dempsey would find someone sleeping or drinking booze in the houses. She remembers when ►



A carefully placed window illuminates the corner of the main living area (left). Andy and Regina greet their neighbor Dan Morris (top right), owner of the Beckham-designed house. The platform bed in the master bedroom (bottom right) was crafted by a local woodworker.

a neighbor, clad in a bathrobe and slippers, went into the onsite portable toilet, carrying a newspaper. “It was stressful, and I lost a lot of weight—not in a good way.”

Green concepts define the house from the ground up. A concrete slab serves as the floor, while the exteriors are sustainable Hardiplank lap siding and 12-inch-thick insulated concrete blocks. The openings in the western walls are small to minimize the searing Austin heat, with most of the windows facing north and east, allowing indirect light in.

Dempsey wanted the house to offer varying views, so windows were placed at different heights. In the guest bedroom, which Regina uses for sewing, there is a “doggy window” by the floor, two waist-high windows, and one up toward the ceiling. A skylight punctuates the hallway, which leads off the main living space to the three bedrooms and two bathrooms, minimizing the need for lights, even on dark days. Sliding doors off the master bedroom and living space lead outside. At 1,230 square

feet, the house is relatively small, but feels expansive.

The total construction cost, including the land, was about \$110,000. For Regina and Andy the house forms a clean, unexpected backdrop for their quirky, Tex-Mex-influenced tastes. Glass shards from old bottles found on the site decorate the outdoor sills and fences, silver shoe forms hang from the patio roof, and a pair of steer horns is mounted above the stove. “My friends borrowed my van to go to Amarillo to eat 72-ounce steaks,” Andy explains. “They brought those back.”

Sitting in the living room, listening to a Django Reinhardt record on a 1970s turntable, the couple says they’ve become converts to Dempsey’s vision.

“I thought we’d end up in a 1930s bungalow, but now that we’re here I love it,” Andy says, clutching a beer can in a personalized koozie. “Most of our friends are in the service industry or they’re artists. They’re still renting. They couldn’t believe it when they saw this. I still can’t believe it.” ▶

## How to Make My House Your House

### ■ **Big Box Lighting** / [www.1000bulbs.com](http://www.1000bulbs.com)

Dempsey was shooting for spare, almost industrial-looking lighting. She made the fixture above the kitchen sink from a porcelain socket, three to four feet of electrical cord, and a ceiling canopy. The elements, all available at big-box home stores, can be wired together at a lamp shop. Dempsey fashioned another light fixture with a flood-light kit by Sigma Electric using Silver Bowl incandescent bulbs.

### ■ **Year of the Shelf** / Westbrook Metals: (512) 453-6044 / [www.homedepot.com](http://www.homedepot.com)

The kitchen shelving was made from three-

by-three-by-one-quarter-inch aluminum angles, which Dempsey drilled at six-inch intervals and attached to the wall with anchors. The wood, two-by-ten lumber, was sanded and sealed with clear furniture wax and then attached to the angles with screws and finish washers. Andy copied the method in other areas throughout the house, like Regina's sewing area where the shelves hold miles of ribbons. "I call last year the 'Year of the Shelf,'" he says.

### ■ **Skating Doors** / Westbrook Metals: (512) 453-6044 / [www.homedepot.com](http://www.homedepot.com)

Sliding doors in the hallway conceal the

laundry and storage areas, and also lead to Andy and Regina's bedroom and bathroom/walk-in closet. Dempsey made the doors from one-and-a-half-by-one-and-a-half-inch welded steel angle frames and two-by-fours. She had holes drilled through the steel, then fastened the wood to the frame with drywall screws. Skateboard wheels roll the doors along tracks.

### ■ **Pronomen Desk** / [www.ikea.com](http://www.ikea.com)

The desk in the guest bedroom was made from IKEA's Pronomen beech countertop, cut to size, and mounted on aluminum angles attached to the walls. ■

