

HOMES

Austin's modern home story

New designers take off from predecessors' inspirations

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SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Sunday, February 25, 2007

Call it a throwback to simplicity or a backlash against monster homes. But modern architecture is alive and well in Austin, and it's because today's Stengers are making sure of it.

Besides Joseph Eichler, A.D. Stenger was perhaps Austin's first truly modern architect, using his own land and creating the kind of homes he wanted to build. Now, Austin architects with the same idea of creating usable, livable space; using natural materials where possible; and connecting the outside with the inside are putting their own twist on modern design.

"The vision for the city lies with designers who care about the region and the climate and who are eco-conscious," says Travis Young, an Austin architect and the owner of Studio Momentum who has designed residential projects for Austin builder Metrohouse, private clients and others. "You get to do your art in a built environment."

For Young, that environment includes one of six duplexes he's designed in the Crestview area of Austin. Initially developed on spec with Metrohouse, the duplex has two units, simply noted "a" and "b" in large lowercase letters at each one's entrance.

A tall structure with a loft feel, the first unit has an aluminum overhang over the entrance and a commercial-grade glass front door. Slatted steel and South American hardwood doors swing out over a front porch and open front yard that's shielded from the street by a low concrete block wall. With a three-star rating from Austin Energy's Green Building Program, the duplex is oriented to the sun and is designed for energy efficiency.

It's also private, yet open, using materials that make it unique. For example, the window surrounds on the porch are aluminum rather than 1-inch-by-4-inch boards. Upstairs, there's an open room with an office on one side, a sitting room in the middle, and a bedroom tucked away in the back, but privacy is preserved with custom-built sliding panel doors made of pine and translucent polycarbonate that not only divides the space, but also lets in natural light from the front windows.

"This is about taking things that are status quo and reinventing ways to do it," says Young. "It's not so much original invention as it is re-creation."

It's a style that's appealing to many who desire simpler living in less space, but it's especially attractive to young, successful professionals who want something a little different.

"These are people who are excited about modernism," says Young. "They're well-traveled, they're hip and, while they can't afford the expensive downtown loft, they're looking for design aspects that aren't traditional."

Bruce Levenstein, 36, who works in technology and owns a Travis Young-designed, Metrohouse-developed home with his wife, Karin, says that besides their desire for good design, their decision was also heavily influenced by economic considerations.

"There aren't a lot of people in Austin doing modern speculative design," he says. "I couldn't afford to hire an architect, buy land, and build the house I wanted from scratch, so this was a great alternative."

In the end, Levenstein and his wife got the house they might have designed for themselves.

"A big part of the appeal is the balance between the modern loft aesthetic and a traditional house," he says. "It comes down to function — I wanted a house that's designed for the way I live, not one with a formal dining room I'll never use."

It's a house that makes sense, and that's what Patrick Ousey and Pam Chandler, his wife and partner at FAB Architecture, achieved with their own house. A designer of modern residential and commercial spaces,

Ousey calls the firm's work a "spirited regionalism with a modern edge." And much of that revolves around a Stenger-like philosophy of melding the outside with what's inside.

"It's about extending views, using natural materials on the inside, or walls of glass in the interior where you can see the exterior," says Ousey. "It took a while, but people realized you can come in and out, and that those connections make for a smaller overall environment."

Take Ousey and Chandler's own house. Purchased nearly 13 years ago, the 1948 Bouldin Creek bungalow had one bedroom, two bathrooms and about 1,100 square feet before they designed and added a two-story modern addition with a living room downstairs and a master bedroom and bath upstairs. Now, the house is a study in contrast: a traditional bungalow elevation in front and a modern structure in back.

"The back of the house is definitely more our spirit, and we were able to freely express our style with it," says Chandler. "I like that it's multidimensional — 1948 and now — but also friendly to the context of the neighborhood."

Chandler says the quality of natural light — not merely its presence — and a real connection to the outdoors were necessities. Through high windows in the new master bedroom, all that's visible are the treetops — as close to living in the trees as one can get. In the living area, the supporting second-floor joists are left exposed, creating a different look for the ceiling below. Large windows in the stairway are free of coverings, creating an area so full of light in the stairwell that it's visible from the upstairs bathroom.

"You can see outside from almost every angle in the house," says Chandler. "I like the scale of it. It's really evolved with our family."

For Austin architect Chris Krager, principal of design-build company KRDB, it's about making good design accessible to more people — a desire that's similar to Stenger's passion for making good design affordable to Austinites after World War II.

"I'd always loved architecture, but I was put off by its inaccessibility," says Krager, who came to Austin from Michigan to attend graduate school at the UT School of Architecture. "I was also interested in sustainability on a larger scale, so I decided the way to do it was to buy land and design and develop what I wanted to build on spec."

Krager and his business partner at the time, Christopher Robertson, used the City of Austin's SMART Housing Program, which supports building affordable housing, and designed two homes on Cedar Avenue that sold for about \$150,000. And they were cool. Featured in Dwell magazine in 2002, the designs were lauded for their cubic shapes, flat roofs, open floor plans, natural light and windows that brought the outside in.

Now Krager's on his own, with eight full-time staff, and the firm is designing for private client.

"The Financial Times mentioned 'affordable modern' and us — and those two words don't often go in the same sentence, but that's our *raison d'être*," says Krager. "My bottom line isn't my top priority. It's more about building to fit with the environment and taking advantage of what's already there."

Amy Dempsey, an Austin architect and owner of Studio Robins Dempsey, likes the "calmness" of modern architecture. And bringing that calm to more people is her goal.

"I design the way I think it will feel inside. Modern style lends itself to that calm," she says. "You don't want to be in a cramped, dark room."

That's why Dempsey is adamant about natural light — wherever and whenever she can get it. A recently completed speculative home off East Eighth Street in East Austin is just 1,250 square feet, with three bedrooms and two bathrooms, but it feels much larger because of Dempsey's use of what she calls "residual space."

For example, Dempsey wanted to avoid the typical suburban placement with the house in front and yard in back. Instead, the main yard is on the side, the front door can't be seen from the street, and large and small patios offer outdoor living that adds interest and extra living space, especially since the larger patio has a polycarbonate cover that lets in light while offering protection from the elements.

"There isn't a feeling of connectedness to the outdoors with the typical design, so I narrowed the house and opened up the side yard instead," she says.

For these modern Austin architects, it's the antithesis of building something just to build it, and it goes beyond assuming there's one design for everybody.

"Modern homes are about a certain economy, about saving space and using materials that lend a tactile humanity," says Krager. "Typical buyers have a certain sensibility: They don't want to live in the suburbs, they're interested in sustainability, and their house isn't a status symbol. It's a home."