

ARCHITECTURAL EVOLUTION

Radically reconstructed bungalow becomes
modern family's dream home

By MAURI ELBEL | Photography by WHIT PRESTON



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Ofentimes life becomes the driving force behind design.

For architect J.C. Schmeil, it took nearly 15 years of re-edited dreaming and evolutionary designing to transform his family's 1935-bungalow into what it is today — an amalgam of clean lines, clever nooks, soothing colors and well-lit spaces. Tucked into Austin's downtown Bouldin Creek neighborhood skirting bustling South Congress Ave., this radically reconstructed bungalow is not only a testament to good design, but one that has evolved with him and his family over the years.

"This house is really tailored to our lifestyle," says Schmeil, owner of Merzbau Design Collective, who orchestrated everything from the design to the construction of their home. "It's very open — even when people are in separate rooms, we still feel connected. The footprint is small, but there is still enough space to stretch out. It takes advantage of the light and trees, but in a way that still makes an inner city house feel private."

Schmeil and his wife, Ashley McLain, a principal at

Cox|McLain Environmental Consulting, Inc., bought their 1935 Austin bungalow in 1998. Originally 820 square feet with two bedrooms and one bathroom, the space suited their needs as a couple but they knew they would want to add on when they had children.

"I think the moment we moved in I started designing things in my head," he says. "But as our lifestyle has changed, our needs have changed, too. When we first moved here with no kids, it was the perfect size for us. I even had an idea of having a whole 'sake lounge' where the guest bedroom is now. Then you have kids and that idea sounds so ridiculous."

In 2002, Schmeil and McLain almost doubled the size of their house when their first son was born, bringing it up to 1,500 square feet. They called it the stealth addition because they cut the back of the cottage off and added a family room, master and bath behind the original structure, leaving it completely unaltered from the front. But another child and almost a decade later, they felt it was time to expand again. In 2011, the architect finally got the chance to dramatically redesign their home.



"This was not a remodel — it was radical reconstruction," says Schmeil. "I've gone through this process a lot before with clients and I know it can be this sort of emotionally taxing but also very exciting process. But I think I didn't realize what a big deal it really was until I opened up the front door and there was no roof. We kept the bones, but we made everything else new."

Today the 2,150-square-foot, four bedroom, three bathroom house complete with an office and music room offers a practical and playful solution for a family with two growing boys, now 11 and 13. The once cramped bungalow is now both spacious and connected, boasting a soft modern aesthetic characterized by clean lines and sleek finishes but warmed up with white-washed woods and a few traditional elements that were left intact such as the gabled roofline and arched entryway.

Schmeil, McLain and their two sons, Corbin and Beckett, lived on-site during the 2012 construction process. Plywood walls were put





up around construction zones, the master bedroom was used as storage, the boys slept on couches and their bathtub doubled as the kitchen sink.

“The kids were great about it, but living there during construction was part of the reason it pushed us to get the whole renovation done so quickly,” McLain says. “It also made it exciting because we could see how much progress was made each day as we came home.”

The result was everything they hoped for — a comfortable, open home suited for daily family life as well as social entertaining. Walking into the home, you enter the dining room/library, a towering space featuring floor-to-ceiling bookshelves that frame the front door and rectangular windows that grant treetop views.

“This library wall is a huge favorite of mine,” adds McLain. “We are serious book collectors and before we just would have our books stacked all over the place. This is a personal touch that really reflects who we are and what we care about. Looking at this wall, you will see a lot of evidence of our travels, which is very important to us. It’s fun to look at these things and make our travel plans — the next spot in the world we will show our kids.”

Schmeil says, according to Austin’s McMansion Ordinance, residents can build a house only as large as 40 percent of their lot’s

square footage or under 2,300 square feet. To avoid exceeding the square footage allotment, Schmeil tore the original roof off and vaulted the ceiling in the front room — an effect that creates dramatic appeal upon entering the home.

“Another part of the impetus for going up was that we have two heritage oak trees and we wanted to keep some element of yard,” he says. “Going up also gave us the views. It feels a little like a tree house up here.”

To the right of the entry dining/library is a charming guest room they refer to as the “gran-suite” because it is where McLain’s mother stays when she comes to visit. The bedroom is connected to an office via a small stretch of storage lockers, unique built-in cabinets perfect for storing their boys’ sports equipment, and a bathroom outfitted with slate floors and cool blue glass tiles.

Maple plywood with a white wash finish is replicated in several areas of the home — on the lockers, stair rails, media cabinet and the fabulous panelized plywood tile wall in the entry, resulting in a visually cohesive yet cost-effective design choice. Schmeil collaborated with longtime friends Paul Wintle of Texas Trim and Jeffery Bennett of Bennetthaus for the unique custom cabinetry and storage spaces seen throughout the house.

Schmeil was able to double the size of their kitchen by removing a wall between the kitchen and former dining room.





The couple says the kitchen is now undeniably the heart of their home where they spend ample time talking, eating and cooking together. It's an inviting space with walls painted in Benjamin Moore's Beach Glass, custom cabinets from Texas Trim painted in Healing Aloe and white HanStone® countertops.

The bungalow's original white oak floors remain in the entry and kitchen while stained concrete floors make up the family room and master bedroom. Salvaged longleaf pine planks from the home's original interior walls were reused for flooring throughout the second story addition. The boys share a bedroom, complete with a reading nook carved out of the wall which duals as a twin bed loft during sleep overs. If desired, the adjoining play room space can easily be converted into a separate bedroom.

"Beckett loves to perch in the corner window and read books and Corbin likes to relax, play games and read in the nook," says McLain.

But one of the coolest design features sits adjacent to the boys' bedroom/playroom — a secret room accessed via a "Scooby Doo" bookshelf. A large bookcase set on heavy duty skateboard wheels slides open to reveal a hidden music room outfitted with a set of drums, a guitar and a keyboard.

"The boys love it," Schmeil says. "Whenever they have someone over that is the first thing they show them. They will say, 'do you like the bookshelf?' Then they open it up for their friends and you can hear them saying 'wow, cool!'"

Green elements were utilized throughout the house — an investment both Schmeil and McLain felt was important given their commitment to sustainability. The home's original pine was reused for the flooring upstairs and the original oak flooring was kept downstairs, travertine from the LBJ Library at The University of Texas where both Schmeil and McLain attended graduate school was salvaged for the front porch, and recessed LED lights were installed through the house. A tankless water heater, open cell foam insulation and Andersen® 100 series windows increase the efficiency of the old home.

The redesign makes great use of natural light — windows bathe sunlight throughout the home and those placed high give way to views of neighboring trees during the day and stars at night. A soothing palette plays throughout the house in variations of watery blues and greens with bolder punches like Benjamin Moore's Fresh Grass wall color seen in the music and laundry rooms and the boys' reading nook. The home's design is both open and inviting, creating flexible communal spaces that work for both private and public uses.

"I realize one of the main things I appreciate about the house is that I can work at home at any time, which I often have to do at odd hours, and I love being able to look out the big windows at our beautiful Live Oak trees," says McLain. "Quite often, one or both boys are in here in the evenings, too, doing homework on the computer or projects on the floor. And when I do find a little free time, there's plenty of room to practice yoga."

Schmeil admits designing a home for his family was a difficult undertaking but one that proved to be incredibly rewarding — a modern-day answer to urban family living.

"I like the fact that we can walk to a ridiculous amount of restaurants within a three-block radius, there are multiple grocery stores, coffee shops and public transit options as well as hike and bike trails all around us," says Schmeil. "We are really happy with how it turned out, and it suits us well." ❖

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