



MENJIVAR



MENJIVAR

MAXIMIZING SPACES

By MICHELLE BURGESS | Photography by DROR BALDINGER AND MARK MENJIVAR

It takes a bold individual to build a home as “an experiment,” but that’s just what San Antonio architect Craig McMahon and his interior designer wife did when they decided to downsize.

Their older children in college, the McMahons and their 9-year-old daughter were flush with space — much of it no longer used — in their home of 11+ years on Lamont Avenue in Alamo Heights. So when clients were continually turning down the smaller lots in the areas due to zoning limitations, McMahon was intrigued by what he could imagine doing for his own family as well as for neighbors who had expressed to him over the years their own frustrations with being space-challenged. When he found a squat, unassuming bungalow in his neighborhood, he immediately recognized its potential.

Similar to many of the historic homes in Alamo Heights, the boxy, 1940s-era, 1,200-square-foot house the McMahons purchased rested on a 7,500-square-foot lot — downright Lilliputian when compared to many suburban neighborhoods, where yards are often twice times that size.

But McMahon welcomed the opportunity to turn what he calls an “odd” abode into something magnificent. Most important to the family was having “a modern, contextual home offering both inside and outside living,” with areas sized according to the amount of time they are used.

“I wanted to show a new way of living, one that offers the same opportunities that we find on our ranch-retreat properties,” he says. “That meant an open floor plan, appropriately sized spaces, and no wasted space for things such as hallways or large dedicated rooms used as closets.”

In addition to the obvious space restrictions, McMahon was also constrained by zoning laws dictating the positioning of the requiring detached garage to be located to the rear of the property. But he did have some advantages; for one thing, he could take all the time he needed.

“Since I was the architect, owner and builder, I started without



BALDINGER



MENJIVAR



MENJIVAR



a complete idea of where I was heading, design-wise,” he says. Because he wanted the existing bamboo around the property to become a screen between their house and the neighbors’, the new 220-square-foot cabana was designed as a pavilion in the landscape and now serves as a guest house and office. Other design ideas evolved organically as well.

To compensate for a lack of yard and maximize space found on similar sized lots, McMahon introduced a new approach to the typical concrete drive by adding a sliding barn gate and reclaiming the space with gravel bedding and transforming it into a true backyard. Additionally, to expand the outside living concept, a rooftop deck accessed by a spiral staircase was built to act as the home’s outdoor relaxation and entertainment area, and what eventually might become a third bedroom was left open for use as a dining room. “Each of these items helped us be satisfied with less square footage,” says McMahon, of the house’s flexibility.





the same house — same shape, same overall structure. The beauty is in the details.

“The existing home had good ceiling height — 9 feet — and I was able to open it up to get a better, open feel,” McMahon says. “I wanted to respect the original concrete nature of the existing home, which was made with pre-cast concrete exterior panels as well as solid concrete interior walls and beams.”

One of the biggest surprises McMahon encountered was just how solidly the original home was built. Constructed by HB Zachry as a precursor to a planned pre-fab hotel on the river, the house featured poured-in-place concrete walls reinforced with 1 1/8th-inch-thick steel rebar; McMahon likens the structural changes to “tearing down the Berlin Wall” and says that demo of the main house took six months.

The challenges didn’t end there, though many of the more time-consuming parts of the process stemmed from McMahon’s own desire to be precise in completing the vision he had in his mind.

“I wanted to explore every detail to see what one could do with an open, livable floor plan,” he says. “I spent hours and hours at the lumber yards, culling through every piece of vertical-grain Douglas fir to find the exact pieces I needed to complete the windows and trim. I exhausted those supplies and would wait until the new bundles show up so I could rush over to find the necessary pieces to complete one area of the home.”

Ultimately, the entire project took about two years to complete. For McMahon, it was worth every second.

“My favorite, favorite part of living in this house is waking up in the master bedroom, without any window coverings, just seeing the sunrise peak through the 20-foot-tall



bamboo trees. We don’t have a single window blind on the home, and the mornings feel like you are waking up in the mountains somewhere — it’s so transparent and so open.”

Also satisfying is the satisfaction McMahon gets from achieving his goal. His home was featured on the 2013 AIA San Antonio Homes Tour, where guests’ reactions were even better than he could have hoped for.

“I had someone challenge me that the property could not possibly be a 50-foot lot, as it was too open,” he says. “I bet she walked in and out five times looking at the spaces and going out in front of the house.” ❖

ARCHITECT Craig McMahon Architects, Inc.
INTERIOR DESIGN Molly McMahon
BUILDER Craig McMahon
 210.710.3874 | Cmarctx.com

“The 2-bed, 2.5-bath space meets our needs right now,” he says. “We also designed each of the living areas of the living/dining/family area to be changeable ... and ceiling fans and light fixtures can change as well if the use of the space need changed later. We are really happy with the flow of the open (area).”

And indeed, while the overall space is definitely cozy in the best possible way, the McMahons’ refurbished home feels anything but cramped. Light, airy and modern, the house is furnished with timeless pieces and warmed by wood accents and trim throughout. The floors are polished concrete, and the bathroom and kitchen counters and cabinets are a sleek white. Plenty of windows accentuate the feeling of openness.

The house would be stunning regardless of its origins, but it is all the more impressive when its provenance is considered. It is simple to build a new home to owners’ specifications, but this was no tear-down. Before-and-after photos clearly show