

FRENCH TWIST

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With thoughtful design, a home can accomplish many things at once.

The custom home that architect John Hathaway designed for a family in the Four Points area of North Austin is something of a multitasker: it straddles styles. It was built to be functionally fluid and it even plays a bit of an indoor/outdoor trick on guests upon entering.

Unlike a good magician, the home reveals what's behind its illusion almost immediately: what appears to be the front door isn't really at all. Rather than opening to a foyer or living room, the arched door at the front of the house unexpectedly accesses an interior courtyard.

"When you walk through the front door, you're in a covered loggia, which is a covered porch or walkway," the architect said. There are three separate entrances off this central area. The guest suite door is down the walkway on your right. Follow the walkway to your left and you will discover the

homeowner's office entrance. The main door to the home is straight ahead.

The home, which was built by Taylor O'Brien of Grandview Custom Homes, covers 7,740 square feet, with 4,891 square feet as part of its interior, showing the extent to which outdoor living was a priority in the design. While the perimeter is covered, the courtyard itself is an open-air space with comfortable seating areas, an Old Chicago brick fireplace and a fountain that doubles as a hot tub. The homeowners use this space for entertaining throughout the year but favor it especially in the cooler months, serving gumbo and gathering

close to the fire with friends. Lighting fixtures in the style of old gas lamps give off a warm glow, and pavers in variegated colors and sizes are underfoot, calling to mind cobblestone streets in a European city. These accents represent the French-by-way-of-Louisiana influence the homeowners admired and wanted to bring to Texas after spending a good deal of time in New Orleans and Baton Rouge.

The second outdoor living space of this home is in the backyard and includes an outdoor kitchen, comfortable seating spaces and an expansive pool. There is a gate leading out the back of the yard which the children use to walk to their nearby school.



The style Hathaway terms “transitional French” is evident in the pitch of the roof which curves outward like a bell, as well as in the iron work and copper accents and the smooth, pale surfaces of the walls. While the outside of the home might look traditional, the aerated concrete panels are engineered to be insulating, soundproofing and fire resistant, as well as insect-proof. This advanced material raised the energy rating of the house significantly.

So what does transitional French mean? It gets back to the idea of a home that achieves several things at once.

“There’s a real warmth to the house but there’s a crisp cleanliness to it,” said Hathaway, owner of Vanguard Studio, Inc., a firm that has specialized in designing higher-end custom homes for the past 15 years. “It’s comfortable and elegant, all at the same time.”

Sitting on a one-acre site, the home bears a spare, clean feeling commonly present in more modern styles while also representing traditional French design — without being overly heavy.

“We went for a cleaner feel so it wasn’t so dark and heavy — like you were walking through the fields of France and came upon this house,” Hathaway said. “We were interested in keeping some warm wood elements in beams and floors, but it has a lot of sunlight and windows so it’s not a typical dark, old-world retreat. ‘Transitional’ means it blends the old world and the new so that it’s the best of both worlds.”

The home features many common French amenities. The vaulted ceilings boast hand-hewn beams and large chandeliers you might find in a classic home in France. The lime-based plaster on the interior walls in the great room, master bedroom and



kitchen, called Provencal Stucco, was ordered from Marseille, France, through Miclén Resources, while grey travertine stone was shipped from Turkey. The kitchen, with its gray washed cabinets and light Carrara countertops, are a nice contrast to the darker rich wood floors.

The homeowners enlisted Patricia Berry, an Austin designer and owner of Design Time Interiors, to furnish and pull together their look. The downstairs of the home includes the family room, dining and kitchen, each boasting its own area yet open and welcoming as one expansive central family space. Also downstairs is a beautifully furnished master bedroom with its private living room. The master bathroom with large tub and separate shower features an extensive master dressing area with a built-in three-way mirror, “to always be able to do a style check

Wood plank floors and hand-hewn beams, along with walls of plaster imported from France, provide an element of warmth throughout the home. The contrasting chandeliers, cool palette, luxurious fabrics and clean finishes create a crisp atmosphere that feels anything but old world.



from all angles.” The guest quarters have a private outdoor entry, as does the parents’ light-filled office which looks out onto the front yard of the home.

Function was paramount for the homeowners as they designed the house for the lifestyle particular to their family of five, including three school-age children. The upstairs playroom has a balcony overlooking the pool, and they can see the Frost Tower and downtown from there. The boys share a jack-and-jack bathroom, and the daughter’s bedroom suite has a view over the driveway. The kids don’t have laundry hampers in their bathrooms; instead, they’ve learned to take their clothes down the hall to the upstairs laundry room. This second laundry room was one of the best ideas these parents incorporated for saving time and steps.

The homeowners were closely involved in the aesthetic elements, from selecting plumbing and light fixtures down to every other detail such as random sized wood planks on floors. Throughout the home you see the contrast of light and warmth creating a dramatic, elegant space that is warm and welcoming.

“There really isn’t anything we’d change!” ❖

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