



When architect Craig McMahon first visited his client's 350-acre ranch property sitting on rolling Hill Country land along the Guadalupe River just 10 miles outside of Boerne, he was speechless.

"I had never seen rolling hills like this in Texas and I am from here — it was absolutely amazing," says McMahon of the ranch fringing a quarter mile of the Guadalupe River. "The home, although beautiful, is really second to the land."

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RIO ESTANCIA

By MAURI ELBEL | Photography by DROR BALDINGER AND CHRIS COOPER

The architect's deep respect for the spectacular site inspired the design for Rio Estancia, awarded Home of the Year in the 2014 Best in American Living Awards by the National Association of Home Builders. Taking cues from the panoramic vistas offered on the property, Rio Estancia is a commendable marriage of home and site, wrapping around its natural environment and blending tranquilly within a picturesque setting of mature oaks and rolling hills.

Embracing South American "Estancia" (ranch) fashion,

McMahon organized a series of buildings that give the appearance of a ranch home that has been added to over time. His clients, a retired couple relocating from Chicago wanting to escape the cold, became enamored with the unique nature of the Texas Hill Country surrounding San Antonio and Boerne, and envisioned a home that was more refined than rustic.

Taking an urban approach to Hill Country living, the design concept was to create a series of buildings organized to the southeast for the best orientation for the view, the sun and the



trees, all while respecting the land, says McMahon. Initially, the design began as a second home for the couple, but as time moved on, they fell in love with the opportunity and the concept evolved into a primary residence that would accommodate the couple on a full-time basis, as well as the ability to entertain their friends and extended family. Walking the property, McMahon searched for a site to build the home which wouldn't require cutting down any of the numerous, up to 60-diameter oak trees scattered throughout the property.

"We couldn't find a large enough building site to build one large house because there were too many trees, so we had to make the house work around the trees," explains McMahon.

Dictated by the land, four separate zones utilize pavilion style framing elements throughout the main house, guest quarters, a carport/office and master wing. The buildings are organized behind a steel-framed entry arbor trellis which consists of weathered steel — a material that gives the appearance of wood but remains maintenance-free — and leads to the front door,

a unique natural entry point that captured full vistas of the stunning landscape.

"Upon walking the property, we found this one amazing tree and wanted it to be the front door, seeing an opportunity to create a courtyard where the home itself is treated as the background," he says of the trellis arbor and courtyard featuring a heated pool, outdoor barbecue area and fireplace.

The four-zone building program allows the owners separate spaces for living and entertaining with the ability to maintain private spaces within the main home, bedrooms and guest quarters. Designed to be a 6-bedroom, 5-bathroom house, the 6,700-square-foot property consists of versatile spaces which allow the owners to use as little or as much as they want.

The first building currently functions as the guest quarters — a two-bedroom, two-bathroom unit with a compact living and dining space where visitors can have a private experience without interrupting the owners. Dubbed the "ranch headquarters," the second building serves a more utilitarian function, consisting of



an open carport building, two additional bedrooms, a bathroom and a laundry room which now house the ranch office and exercise room with a private bathroom and steam sauna. The third building is the largest space, featuring the home's main living, dining, kitchen and media room. As the darkest area of the house, this luxurious cave-like space is paneled in Douglas fir, inviting the owners to read or watch television before retiring to bed at night. The last building, the master suite, remains McMahon's favorite space of the home.

"The owner said she wanted to feel like she was camping in her master bedroom with the trees growing all around it," he explains. "It is a fish bowl. It looks like you are in nature with glass all around. The master bedroom is jaw dropping. Sometimes I am amazed we had an owner who wanted us to do this the way we did, but it fits so well. Everything just fits like it should be."

Each building is linked via air conditioned, aquarium-like glass connecting spaces which function more like galleries than

hallways where the homeowners can look out and spy deer or turkey roaming the property. The transparent and open plan is complemented with large covered terraces and arbors extending the living spaces to the outside which are fanned by southeastern breezes.

Each of the buildings are clad in locally quarried Texas limestone which pay tribute to the area's surrounding limestone cliffs — the stone walls block the north wind while large overhangs block the harsh summer sun. A gray band of Leuders limestone runs along the outside, breaking up the look of the tall walls and creating cohesion between the buildings. Exterior materials include red cedar and Oklahoma flagstone, both chosen for their durability and low-maintenance qualities, while Douglas fir dominates the interior.

The design does an excellent job at creating a shared sense of space between the home and nature.

"As in historic Texas homes of the region, the stone comes on the inside in almost all the rooms," says McMahon. "The outside



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materials wrap into the inside and the same banding follows so there is a very transparent connection to the outside.”

Building orientation, electronically controlled window and mechanical systems, geo-thermal heating and cooling systems, tankless water heaters, expanded foam insulation and reclaimed water systems are some of the green elements embraced throughout design and construction.

McMahon claims one of the design’s greatest assets is its ability to keep one foot in history while placing the other in today. The historical approaches to building blend flawlessly with the home’s Hill Country contemporary aesthetic.

“All the overhangs were done in the old German way of building when wood was very hard to come by but they had plenty of stone,” he says. “But the clients wanted a refined nature to the look of the home, so there is a contemporary feel with this historical approach to building.”

McMahon and co-designer and -builder Billy Johnson

of StudioIndustrielle had a unique opportunity to build the home once the design was complete. The architect calls this experience one of the biggest challenges and greatest opportunities of his career.

“It was the most amazing opportunity I’ve ever had in my whole life,” says McMahon of the process. “It was extremely hard to get things done to this level of expectation. It took 18 months from start to finish — probably a two year process with the barn and the roads. But it all fits together so well. I am very flattered our clients gave us the opportunity to not only design this home, but to see it through all the way to the very end.” ❖

ARCHITECT Craig McMahon Architects, Inc.
210.710.3874 | Cmarctx.com

BUILDER StudioIndustrielle
830.228.5916 | Studioindustrielle.com