REVIVING A CLASSIC

By MAURI ELBEL | Photography by MARK MENJIVAR

Bringing the 1950s-era pool house tucked behind this historic Terrell Hills estate designed by Atlee B. Ayers up to date wasn’t easy. But one glimpse of this palatial pool house project that’s been remarkably restored to its original condition and revived for modern day living makes it evident every struggle has its reward.
Built in 1951 by the prominent architect to sit off the main nearly 10,000-square-foot home on the property, the pool house and expansive pool had suffered significantly over the decades. “It was in bad disrepair,” says Craig McMahon, the architect brought onto the project at the suggestion of John Troy who had been working with the homeowners for over a decade to update the property to its current state. “The pool itself was built in the same period as the pool house but had literally jumped out of the ground because of soil conditions and ongoing bandaging over the years. So both the pool and the pool house needed total renovation.”

McMahon says McMahons. “I like that they respected the original intent of what it was designed for — it is rare nowadays to keep original character in place.”

Wanting to restore the building while updating and expanding it to suit their modern day lifestyle, Troy says the owners had several objectives: to revive the beautiful, classical pool house, add a barbecue component, and create sitting areas for outdoor dining and poolside lounging.

“There were decades upon decades of poorly executed design revisions and ‘improvements’ that had made it worse and worse,” says Troy. “Arizona sandstone had been put around the pool which made it higher than the cabana so the drainage was going to the cabana. It had been cracking and flooding.”

Troy lowered the pool coping so that the water would not drain into the cabana, removed all the layers and existing gutter system and replaced it with a traditional skimmer system. The pool was rather large — 22-feet by 45-feet — and Troy wanted to create a sense of scale both with the existing pool house structure and the surrounding tree-filled landscape. McMahon

added the barbecue on the left side, and Troy utilized landscape design to give it a true sense of balance. Because of the ordinary material, slowed the renovation process because it required cutting torches and steel equipment from the inside.

Even remodeling the pool proved to be extremely difficult due to the prior strand of piecemeal renovations that had occurred over the decades, according to Brett Corrigan of Artesian Pools. While it would have been easier to remove the entire pool and start over, he says the owners insisted on keeping it for its historical significance. Linking the process to peeling an onion, Corrigan says layer after layer had to be peeled off in order to locate a sound structure.

Throughout the remodel, McMahon says the owners remained very careful to protect the original architect’s intent, with each detail requiring extreme attention. The original concrete masonry walls with stucco finish on the outside were respected, cleaned and refinished. Each square of the structure’s authentic dentil trim had to be pulled down, sanded and repainted before being reinstalled. Original true divided light windows were respected and recrafted to ensure everything kept its old character in place.

“We are modernists by nature so to open this space up was important to me,” says McMahon. “I kept trying to reimagine how he (Ayres) would have wanted it to be done today. I tried to respect the original intent but give it a modern use.”

McMahon noticed a vaulted ceiling existed above the flat ceiling. While the owners were adamant to respect the history of the building, they allowed McMahon some wiggle room to vault the ceilings, opening up spaces to a more current era of use while respecting Ayres’ original details.

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Taking out the flat ceilings made the space feel larger than it is in reality but McMahon says steel framing, an out-of-the- ordinary brand new while having it appear old,” he says. “But it turned out amazing. Just incredible.”

McMahon converted one side into a home theater, opened up the lanai to be part of the living area for the outdoor barbecue addition. “I love the lanai now because it provides such a great outdoor experience, protected from the harsh sun while remaining in scale functioning like a pavilion in the landscape that doesn’t overwhelm or underwhelm,” says McMahon.

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“All the team players really worked together to help create classical design in an asymmetrical sort of way,” says Troy. “It seemed symmetrical but it was anything but. We balanced it really well by keeping the classical lines in place and strengthening the symmetry that existed.

For example, the wing of the house was not centered on the pool so Troy created a more symmetrical feel by splitting the walkways into two arching curves rather than one straight walkway.

Before, the front foot of the pool house functioned like a country club with his and her restrooms flanking a central, open-air lanai. No longer needing his and her restrooms, McMahon converted one side into a suite featuring a fold-out couch and bathroom, opened up the lanai to be used as a sitting area with an overhead projector to watch sports games, and transformed the other end by removing the bathroom and building a kitchen that serves as an air-conditioned prep area for the outdoor barbecue addition.

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ABOUT ATLEE BERNARD AYRES (1873–1969)

This pool house and residential estate was one of the many architectural legacies left behind by Atlee Bernard Ayres, a well-known architect in the first half of the 20th century who left his mark in the form of more than 500 architectural projects, many of which are found in the San Antonio area including the Tower Life Building and the McNay Art Museum. Ayers graduated from the Metropolitan School of Architecture, a subsidiary of Columbia University in 1894, before returning to Texas. In 1915 he became state architect of Texas; in 1937, as a charter member of the Texas Society of Architects, he was one of three architects instrumental in passing state legislation for the licensing of architects to practice; and he remained an active architect until he died at age 96.