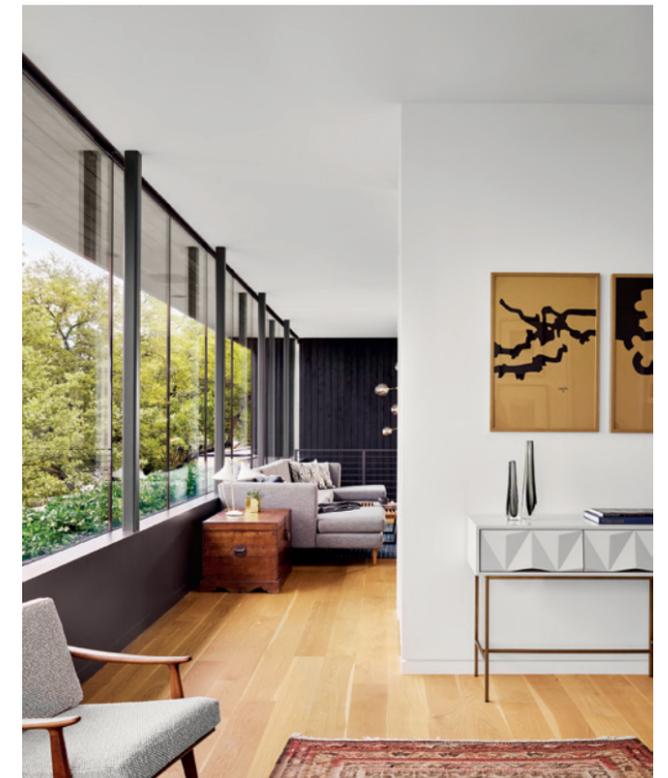


Timeless Treasures

By Mauri Elbel
Photography by Casey Dunn



Modern renovations of time-weathered homes have a tendency of erasing everything that existed before. Sometimes it's easier, not to mention less expensive, to completely start over in order to achieve the clean-lined, uncluttered look that's desired.

But the house, tucked in Austin's Tarrytown neighborhood, is not one of them.



“One of the things we try to do when we renovate a house is to preserve traces of what was there before, especially when dealing with a style that had such a large presence in Austin for a long time,” says Scott Specht, the award-winning Austin architect tapped for the renovation and major expansion of this 1950s suburban ranch house.

The clients, devout modern architecture fans and collectors of mid-century furniture, purchased the original home sitting on a rare triple lot in Tarrytown with a goal of modifying it to fit the needs of their family of three. Drawn to Specht’s modernist architectural style and timeless, minimal designs evident in projects ranging from residences located throughout the country to lauded local works including The Carpenter Hotel, which landed a spot on *Travel + Leisure’s* 2019 “Best New Hotels in the World” list, the couple hired the award-winning architect for the job.

The 1955 Tarrytown ranch house designed by PageSouth-erlandPage (now Page) was very typical for its time and place, says Specht, who describes the existing house as a sprawling,

single-story home with a limestone façade, low-pitched roof, big shutters and small windows.

“It was about as standard of a Texas ranch house as you can get,” says Specht.

The main challenge of the renovation and expansion, says Specht, was transforming the original house into a modern design that was open, bright and inviting without completely obliterating all traces of what had existed before.

“Part of our philosophy is that elements of the history of a place be retained and incorporated into any new design,” he says. “There are characteristics of almost any design, regardless of how banal, that embody memories and a sense of neighborhood. We feel that preserving these adds depth to any new intervention.”

In order to do this, the limestone perimeter wall was largely maintained, using it as a heavy plinth on which a new second level was added, explains Specht. The original limestone was removed, cleaned and reused on the exterior and incorporated in various areas of the interior in an effort to tie the inside to the outside. While the decision to keep the limestone wasn’t the most cost-effective one, Specht says Tarrytown neighbors

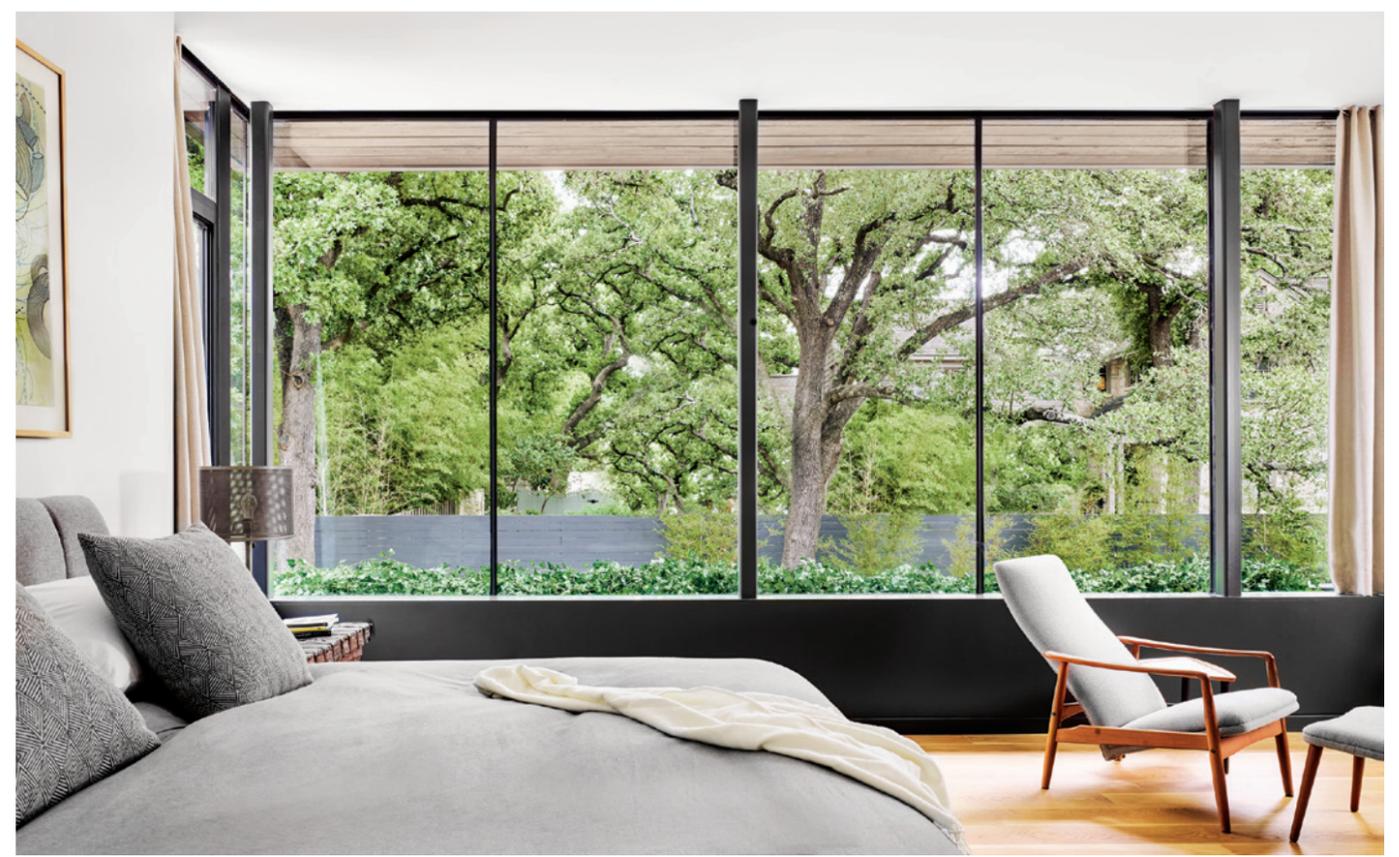
have commented that they appreciate seeing evidence of the house that was there before.

Specht says the project presented some interesting questions of preservation versus change and a compelling story of dealing with a challenging — and ultimately rewarding — site. Because the house sits on a site that straddles a fault line in the limestone base strata below, water continuously flows up through this fault and flows out onto the property.

“The project was a challenge in terms of geology,” says Specht of the original house featuring a foundation with extremely deep concrete piers — sunk 90 feet below in order to reach stable strata far below the surface.

Because building new piers was cost-prohibitive, the footprint of the house couldn’t be expanded. Instead, the design cantilevered the new second level out from the existing structure — a strategy that not only allowed the project to remain within budget, but also gave it a distinctive







charred cypress prevents glare while adding a textural counterpoint. At night, the home's second level serves as a lantern of sorts which Specht says adds to the streetscape and activates the corner property while maintaining a sense of privacy for the homeowners.

While the original floor kept its same footprint, Specht opened up the layout to create open communal dining, living and kitchen spaces. The sprawling kitchen, spacious enough to accommodate two separate islands, features countertop-height serving windows that open out onto a pool terrace and entertaining area, as well as unique built-in storage and display elements. Rather than building a flat ceiling over the expansive kitchen, which can result in a monotonous look, the design wraps each of the joists supporting the second story above to create texture and life in an otherwise simple space. On the opposite end of the home's lower level are two guest suites as well as an office which remain true to the original layout.

There's a simple material palette throughout the home — oak flooring, porcelain tile, custom cabinetry created from rift sawn oak — and elements from the exterior such as limestone and shou-sugi-ban are thoughtfully incorporated in various interior spaces to connect the outside and inside. The homeowner, an avid collector of mid-century and vintage furniture, impeccably outfitted every space inside the home — Specht even designed a closet into the house large enough to store chairs and furniture pieces so they can easily be swapped out from time to time.

The landscaping features low-maintenance plantings and native Mexican grass, creating the perfect foreground to the home, especially when the wind sways the long and wispy grasses back and forth. A large oak tree presides over the front of the property and in the backyard, a cluster of oaks creates natural privacy. Specht says the back yard was designed to read as an outdoor room, connected to and extending from the kitchen with the long and narrow pool, which parallels the length of the home, serving as a beautiful backdrop.

The end result of the two-story modern composition is a new home that is clearly of its time, but also respects and reflects the time and place in which the original house was created.

"We tried to keep things as simple as possible," says Specht. "This was about keeping traces of what was there before to create a clean, elegant timelessness." ♦

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dynamic expression and expanded the original 5,140-square-foot home to 7,530 square feet.

"That drove our decision to leave the first floor perimeter as it was and add a whole new second floor," says Specht.

The different materials and profiles of the first and second floors emphasize the house's horizontality and create another kind of stratum that is visual and expressive. The upper level addition is comprised of stucco with accents of shou-sugi-ban, a dark wood burned through a Japanese process that produces a charred surface requiring very little maintenance. A continuous wall of frameless glass windows floods the second floor with light throughout the day which funnels downstairs through the center of the home that was opened up to create double-height spaces.

Inside the house, the soaring entry hall features stairs that lead up to the second-level main living space. Upstairs, the wall of windows becomes a perch to soak in the dramatic views and peer over the treetops of Tarrytown. Large overhangs provide shade at all times of the day, and the surrounding cladding of