



# DESIGNED WELL

By Claudia Alarcón  
Photography by Twist Tours (home)  
and Matt Batista (office)

*When Laura Britt, owner and principal of Britt Design Group, decided it was time to remodel the family's 1951 ranch-style house, it was determined that this would not be feasible due to structural issues with the existing foundation. As the project shifted to a new construction, Britt sought for her personal residence to serve as a role model for universal design and accessibility, and to be an example of a home showcasing thoughtful 'visitability.'*



**T**he objective was to implement environmental and health and wellness aspects of sustainability for the family, especially since both Britt and her son suffer from respiratory problems. The resulting LEED-Platinum certified 2,750-square-foot, single-family home references the WELL Building Standard in its design, which included an additional 1,000 square feet for exterior living porches and carport pavilion.





To achieve this important certification, Britt and her team — with architect Tornjberg Design and Bonterra Build | Design — made decisions throughout the design process, from building orientation and siting, to energy sources, material selection and even furnishings. Britt applied healthy living features that support enhanced indoor air quality (IAQ), healthy food prep and filtered water. Energy efficiency and water conservation were also priorities for the family.

Britt’s environmental resolve began when, rather than demolishing the existing home and sending it to a landfill, she donated it to a family of 14, transporting it to Bertram — approximately 50 miles east of Austin — in three segments over three separate moves.

The home’s energy footprint was minimized by installing LED lighting, efficient appliances, a rooftop solar power system and a charging hookup for an electric car. The home was sited perfectly for solar panel orientation to be south facing, so the energy generated powers the entire home and the excess is fed back into the overall City of Austin energy grid.

Britt also incorporated design solutions for aging in place, including an ADA ramp for access into the home, low-maintenance materials, universal design features within the interior, and a pier and beam foundation that provides subtle shock absorption for joints. “The ramp was installed as a convenience for everyone, and everyone uses it,” says Britt. “When cabinets and furnishings were being installed, the guys opted for





the ramp rather than the stairs. It also serves as a great scooter ramp for kids during family gatherings and may someday aid people with mobility impairments.”

The home’s design minimized water use with efficient plumbing fixtures and a rooftop rainwater collection system that irrigates the certified green landscape directly at the roots. Flores - Shephard landscaping team designed and implemented a drought tolerant, native garden with very little turf grass. “I had a vision of a modern audible water fountain at the entrance of the home to aid in the transition between outside noises into a more peaceful interior environment,” says Britt. A strong connection to the outdoors is apparent throughout the home.

Kitchen cabinetry was designed and specified with health and wellness in mind. “We extensively researched substrates and finishes without formaldehyde or VOCs in the adhesives and glues and finishes,” says Britt. “This isn’t the standard process of production, so each and every decision required extraordinary efforts to find the healthiest solutions.”

One of her favorite features are the kitchen countertops. “I had the distinct pleasure of visiting Spain to tour the Cosentino® factories to see how their products are manufactured,” says Britt. “When I toured the Dekton® factory, I was amazed at how the production of the product didn’t create any toxic



fumes and used naturally occurring earthen particles that are essentially pressurized and baked to create the countertop material. I wanted to experiment with this product, and the Cosentino family was more than generous in working with us to utilize their product throughout the home.” The material is extremely resistant to stains and heat and can withstand hot pans directly from the oven. It is durable and UV resistant, so Britt has even used it in outdoor applications.

Britt was so pleased with the approach to her home that she implemented a similar one on the design and build of her new office building in conjunction with architect Mark Odom and



builder Franklin Alan. This recently completed project exemplifies WELL build and design. The building houses two offices, with Britt Design Group occupying the bottom floor. The main lobby is the primary entry for interaction between offices.

The lot was an infill project and although it was zoned commercial, the property was deemed unbuildable due to the compatibility setbacks triggered by single family residences to the rear. The building’s footprint was dictated by setbacks on all four sides. Mark Odom Studio requested a variance from the City of Austin to park in the compatibility setback, which they understood to be a hardship, so they granted the variance.





“This office building was designed and built with the well-being of its inhabitants in mind,” says Odom. “The structure is naturally lit on all sides with open floor plan focus and access to the outside. Bringing natural light into the two-story building was one of the most important elements.” Views are framed by large windows from two opposite sides allowing occupants to keep an eye on the busy street or retreat to the quiet view of the backyard. The landscaped side yard connects people to the natural surroundings.

“Presenting areas of social interaction is key to a lot of our work,” says Odom. “The building was intended to have a single user per floor so that the occupants could experience the continuous run of windows and natural light from all angles of the building. The form takes cues from the residential neighborhood surrounding it. We wanted to be mindful of scale, vernacular and materiality of the neighborhood. Materials used are timeless, sustainable and will last for hundreds of years to come.”

As was the case with her residence, Britt incorporated many healthy elements into the office building, such as low or no VOC materials and finishes, touchless faucets, low energy use LED lights with good color rendering index, an outdoor ‘conference’ meeting space, and a wellness room for taking a few moments to regroup or for nursing moms who need a quiet, secluded space. Plants were incorporated to reflect the firm’s biophilic approach to design, along with a rotating display of original organic art forms. “One of my favorites is the interactive magnetic and writable pin-up walls, which allow for team interaction and an ongoing display of inspirational projects and materials and messages,” says Britt.



Building with LEED certification and WELL design in mind may not be the most economical approach, but it will pay off in the long run with energy and water savings, as well as health wise. “It’s difficult to measure exact ROI but we know that toxic overload in our bodies wreaks havoc and we’re doing our best to eliminate or limit those in our buildings,” adds Britt. “We also know that people who *enjoy* their work environment are happier and most productive, so we created an office that our team enjoys and thrives in together.” ♦

**BRITT DESIGN GROUP**  
512-458-8963 | [www.brittdesigngroup.com](http://www.brittdesigngroup.com)

**MARK ODOM STUDIO**  
512-469-5950 | 210-688-4630  
[www.markodomstudio.com](http://www.markodomstudio.com)