

CASA DE CORAZON

By SHARLA BELL Photography by COLES HAIRSTON



With two unique directives, a retired chemical engineer and his wife, a high school teacher, challenged Winn Wittman, of Winn Wittman Architecture, to design their dream retirement home: “I want the house to look like the bones of the earth,” and “I want curves — I don’t want to live in a box — I’m going to be buried in one.” The finished creation, built on the couple’s 85-acre ranch in Lampasas, Texas, an

hour northwest of Austin, more than meets these expectations with a beautiful, functional and totally original, master-planned space. That it manages to look organic and modern whilst bearing an uncanny resemblance to the rib cage of some prehistoric creature speaks to the vision of the clients and the talent of the architect.



Inside, a neutral palette infused with bursts of bright color and subtle patterns enhance the space without competing with the architecture and surrounding landscape.



Wittman believes in a thoroughly collaborative process when designing a home; he truly wants the homeowner to be involved every step of the way. When this couple met with Wittman, they brought a small tinfoil model with a swooping roof and explained their desire for the house to look like ‘the bones of the earth.’ According to Wittman, “This was a very powerful metaphor for me as an architect, and we had lots of fun with it. In the end, that’s where the curved beams which start at the wall and form the roof structure came from.” These curved beams, which were fabricated off site and erected in one day, not only give the



As a re-interpretation of the Texas ranch house, the curving beams and swooping roof make this classic ranch contemporary.

house great character, but they are also energy efficient. When the curved beams go inside the home they transition from steel to a laminated wood beam, achieving a 'thermal break' so the heat of the exterior is not transmitted to the interior through the steel beam.

Although the beams are the dominant stylistic feature of the home and give it a rather modern look, the home also pays homage to the Texas ranch house. "We wanted the home to relate to the landscape, the context and the architectural vernacular style of the area. We wanted to re-interpret the Texas ranch house in a 21st century form." To that end, the home is low flung with a simple dog run design, and the team selected chopped limestone and stucco for the façade, and zinc-coated sheet metal for the roof. The couple's grown children come to visit often, so they needed a two-bedroom guest house, slightly removed from the main structure, connected by the covered breezeway.

Wittman and his clients also considered how the house would work with the expansive landscape. Located on 85 acres and essentially "off the grid, we had to be really sensitive to orientation and we wanted to take advantage of views. The location of the house was carefully selected to do both." The

main windows face north, which is best for sun and for views of the beautifully-rugged terrain. And because of its remote location, rainwater collection is also necessary. The large butterfly roof slopes toward a central gutter, which directs rainwater to an underground cistern. The roof structure is also filled with six inches of soy-based foam which provides great insulation from the Texas sun. Between the thermal break in the beams, the insulation and the orientation, this house was built smart, with electric bills averaging about \$80 per month.

With the curving beams and the swooping roof, Wittman clearly took to heart the edict that the couple 'did not want to live in a box.' But for all of the exterior's curvaceous appeal, the interior is a study in clean lines and modern charm. Simple, efficient and quite elegant, the main living space has an open design that belies the home's relatively small size of 2,000-square-feet. Wittman called on Lytle Pressley of Lytle Pressley Contemporary to help furnish the home. According to Pressley, "The goal was to integrate the connected open areas into a seamless whole. Thereby, the kitchen, dining and seating areas flow harmoniously with one another. My job was simply to create a backdrop to the architecture that doesn't compete



with Winn’s vision.” To achieve this goal, they selected a neutral palette of grays, black and white.

Wittman then consulted with Emily Basham-Hoelscher of Urbanspace Interiors to help him bring some color, pattern and energy into the spaces; in Basham-Hoelscher’s words, the home “needed a little moxie. We wanted to infuse the space with just a bit of pattern and bright color, but in small bursts and spaced throughout so that it encourages your eyes to move around and take in the full space. This was accomplished with pillows and bedding from Missoni Home, along with a selection of different vases and sculptural pieces.” Like Pressley, Basham-Hoelscher was concerned with giving the unique architecture its due. “The challenge was riding the line of enough color and pattern, and too much of it. In such a neutral space, and a space where the view to the outside and the architectural details are the major focal points, you have to have just enough accessories to add life but not too many to compete and feel out of place.”

While a neutral palette governs the main living space, the homeowners selected a riot of blue for the curvilinear bathroom that is tucked in the center of the home. When asked about the round motif in the room, Wittman explained, “The clients are very partial to curves, and in fact, selected our firm because we love curves, too. They would have had more curves, but the budget, structure and functionality didn’t really permit this, so we went all-out in the bathroom.” The round shower, spa tub, sinks, and even the accessories, attest to this fact.

That the homeowners love curves is also evident in the pool they designed with help from both Wittman and Ocean Quest Pools. Wittman explains, “The curved, negative edge is a big part of the drama of the pool when viewed from the home.” The pool is also a great place to take advantage of views. “Standing

by the pool and looking out at the landscape, as framed by the steel arches, is a favorite spot of mine. There is something about the rhythm of the arches which is both contemporary and very classical,” adds Wittman.

An added bonus to the home is that it is incredibly fire resistant. “The home is primarily steel, with a steel covered roof, eaves and soffit, and the walls are glass and limestone masonry—all very fire resistant as compared to conventional wood construction,” explains Wittman.

Locals driving by will often slow down to look at the home, which has earned a few nicknames, including ‘butterfly house’ and ‘casa de corazon’ (heart house). This writer prefers the latter. It seems only fitting that nestled inside the steel rib cage that was at the heart of this dream also lies the heart of the home. ❖

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