



BOUGH-WOW

A shady, tree-filled lot in notoriously pricey south Austin offered a young family an affordable price tag, enormous potential — and the challenge of building around protected “heritage trees.”

AT HOME



A HOUSE *IN* *THE* TREES

A young Texas family finds the perfect plot on which to build a modern home in Austin. **Sam Mittelsteadt** discovers how they put down roots — while leaving others undisturbed

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RYANN FORD

“I did not want a modern house — in fact, I *hated* them.” Becky Shaheen had always envisioned living in a traditional, Craftsman-style dwelling, but thanks to fate and thoughtful planning, she and her husband, Eric, ended up building an archetypal-modern jewel box of a home in Austin’s Bouldin Creek neighborhood, a stone’s throw from funky South Congress and just across the river from downtown.

The family had lived in the southwest suburbs for three years, but south Austin’s unique charm always beckoned. “Our house was out there, but most of the time we wanted to come down here,” recalls Eric, founder of an Apple tech support business. “Whenever

we did, though, the event parking was unreal, and we kept thinking, ‘What if we *lived* down here?’ You can get around easily, walking or biking most places, and it’s close to South Congress and Barton Springs. You can get the best bang for the buck.”

But when it comes to bucks, Austin’s ruthlessly competitive real estate market means you usually need a lot of them to score a home within biking distance of downtown. “A lot of opportunities came and went because the market was insane,” Eric says, “so there was a lot of disappointment.”

He stalked the real estate listings and neighborhoods regularly, and one morning in September 2012 he noticed that a landowner who’d been trying in vain to sell three lots as a package had finally given up and broken them into singles. “I was in his living room that afternoon making a deal,” Eric says.

Eric’s favorite lot offered a leafy canopy, thanks to enormous live oak trees, which — unlike deciduous oaks — keep their foliage year-round. The live oaks would be not only beautiful but also energy-efficient during blazing afternoons. But the oaks posed a significant challenge to planning a homesite: The city protects such “heritage trees” and their expansive, critical root zones from being compromised by construction.

On this lot, a pair of particularly neighboring oaks appeared to hinder any chance to build a home. “Everyone kept saying it was unbuildable,” says David Webber, whose Webber + Studio architecture firm had been a client of Eric’s company. “But I didn’t believe that, and I love a challenge that forces you to use your creativity. I always feel like some of the best ideas are those that result from problem-solving and aren’t solely style-focused.”

At the literal center of Webber’s plan is a wide, glass-walled passageway that squeezes between the two oaks and connects larger living areas at each end of the house.

“When we put together a list of what we wanted in the house, our top ranking was the ability to see outside — to have the front and side yards clearly visible so we

“It’s so ridiculously urban-cool. ... The scene ends up looking very curated — and yet, that’s just how they park their bikes.”



STILL LIFE
The home’s expansive windows, wood-paneled walls and modern Southwest furnishings create a warm, light-filled space.





BUILDING CODE
Durable, low-cost cement siding — installed vertically and in varying widths — mimics the lines of a bar code, paying homage to the owner's tech background.

could watch our kids while they play,” says Eric. Floor-to-ceiling windows on both sides of the passageway, as well as the facing perpendicular walls, open up the sightlines and visually connect the kitchen and dining room at the back end of the house with the living room at the front.

“The passageway is a room that almost anything can happen in,” Webber says. Case in point: When the Shaheens host a gathering, the hallway is large enough to hold a spare table with seating on both sides — but on normal days, it’s where they store their bicycles. “It’s

so ridiculously urban-cool,” the architect says. “The way the setting has been created, the scene ends up looking very curated — and yet, that’s just how they park their bikes.”

When it came to finishes, Webber instituted some cost-saving measures that “also ended up making their house feel like a millwork jewel box,” he says. “There’s a way to use low-cost materials in a way that’s rich and interesting.”

The interior walls downstairs, for example, aren’t Sheetrock — they’re finished with panels of ¾-inch cabinet-grade plywood. “Up until a week before, we were going back and forth,” Eric recalls. “But we put a lot of trust in David, and now it’s my favorite part of the house.”

Becky, meanwhile, appreciates the plywood’s easy maintenance — goodbye, kiddo fingerprints! — and now regrets that in a moment of impatience, the Shaheens opted to use traditional wallboard upstairs in the children’s bedroom. “In a few years we’ll have plywood up there, too,” she admits.

The building’s exterior eschews expensive wood siding for HardiePlank fiber-reinforced cement boards, which Webber only half-jokingly refers to as “a miracle, low-cost material. It’s much more durable as far as long-term maintenance, so it made lots of sense. But most people have an issue with it because they think it looks cheap, so we thought, ‘Let’s make it more special.’”

Installed vertically instead of horizontally, and in varying widths, the end result is a riff on board-and-batten siding that mimics the lines of a bar code, paying homage to Eric’s tech background. “I can’t tell you how many people slow down when they’re driving by,” says Becky, who now proudly declares her love of modern homes — well, at least *hers*, anyway.

It has a unique set of merits, says Webber. “It’s low-cost, and it speaks to the nature of the scrappy entrepreneurial spirit of Austin, ... and yet it doesn’t look like anything I’ve seen in Austin at all. It’s experimental and funky-looking, and it’s a little bit of a treasure.” 🌟

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