



A Tranquil Hill Country



With a wish list as a guide, a Texas couple and their architect built an inviting, accessible, and energy-efficient home

BY BOB REED



Homestead

My wife, Linda, and I had lived in Dallas and raised our four children there. We lived the urban life and had successful but stressful careers. When we retired, we decided to fulfill our dream of building a home in the beautiful Hill Country southwest of Austin. The Hill Country is unlike anything else in Texas: shimmering streams, majestic oak and cedar trees, rugged hills, and meadows full of wildflowers. We toured many lake developments west of Austin but found that boating- and golf-centered communities were too specialized for us. So we looked at properties along some of the rivers that carve their way through the limestone cliffs of the Hill Country. Near a small town with a vibrant community we found six acres of cedar-covered hills and wildflower meadows rolling down to a crystal-clear river.

GETTING STARTED

We begin work with our clients by finding out how they envision living in their new home. We analyze the site and our clients' wants, needs, and budget. Our analysis and creative thinking result in a "program." The program is not the design; rather, it's the information we need to create a design that embodies the clients' vision of their home. Here are some of the things we ask:

Site

- How do you respond to the natural features of your property?
- Beyond the structure, what other uses do you imagine for the site?

Use

- What do you like and dislike about homes you've lived in?
- How will your home be used (and by whom), now and in the future?

Style

- What overall feeling or spirit do you envision for the house?
- Do you have examples of form, light, material, and detail that resonate with you?

Materials

- Is energy efficiency a big concern?
- Are you interested in an environmentally sustainable building?
- Do you want to use recycled materials?

—Sinclair Black,
architect



WARM TIMBERS AND COOL LIMESTONE set the tone for a welcoming great room. The fireplace is flanked by longleaf pine cabinets that hide the TV and stereo. A 10-foot-long antiqued buffet separates the living and dining areas.

We wanted to build an environmentally friendly home that would fit our needs as we grew older, a house that would be comfortable for two or for many. But what did that mean? How would we use our home now and as we grew older? And as our family changed and grew?

Developing a wish list

To help us figure out the answers to all these questions, we signed on Sinclair Black of Black + Vernooy Architects. We had interviewed a number of other Austin architects, but when we met Sinclair we knew that he was the one we wanted. We also quickly chose our builder, Charles Stockton, so that he could be part of the design team.

All photos: Chipper Hatter





FRENCH COUNTRY MEETS HILL COUNTRY Linda loves color and fabric and the French country style. She had a hand in the decorative pillows, the bedding, and the fabric window treatments throughout the house.



DINING INDOORS OR OUT A wrought-iron chandelier lights a large pine farmhouse table used for formal dining. For larger parties, the French doors open to the broad limestone terrace where more tables can be set up.

Sinclair suggested we write down what we wanted in our new home. I think he was expecting us to bring in a half-page or so of notes. Instead we came to our first design meeting with seven typed pages of carefully crafted ideas.

We had thought about how we would use our home—for everything from solitary pursuits to entertaining—and what we had liked and disliked about our previous homes. After much discussion, and with our long list as a guide, Sinclair got to work and designed a home that fits us perfectly.

An inviting home for family, friends, and us

We wanted the main living spaces—kitchen, living, and dining areas—to be open to each other but not too

large. The idea was that our home should feel spacious for entertaining guests and, at the same time, intimate for spending time alone.

Sinclair designed a cozy entry that opens to a large living and dining area. The walls and massive fireplace are of the same creamy limestone blocks that form the exterior of the house. Reclaimed longleaf pine was used for the ceiling's exposed trusses and the wide-plank floors.

While the focus of the living area is the fireplace, the room also comfortable for watching television. Cabinets flanking the fireplace house the TV and audio equipment. A small window seat with a slotted front hides the sub woofer for the stereo.

The living and dining areas are open to each other but separated by a long, antiqued buffet. The dining

DESIGNED FOR COMFORT AND ACCESSIBILITY



To accommodate aging adults or toddling children, most of the house is on one level. Hallways and doors are wide, making circulation through the house easy and efficient. Because the halls are on the inside, wrapping around the courtyard, there is nothing to obstruct views from the main living space to the river and meadows.

area works for a few people or for many. With the patio just outside, we can open the doors and set up tables on the limestone terrace for al fresco dining. When no guests are visiting, we have our meals at the large island in the kitchen or on the screened porch just off the kitchen.

All of these “public” spaces—as well as the master bedroom and my study—are lined with large casement windows and French doors, which provide expansive views of the river just outside, beyond the terrace. And Sinclair designed the kitchen with few upper cabinets, so we have lots of windows with views out to the river and to the meadow on the east side of the house.

The private spaces include several guest rooms to accommodate our children and their growing families.

The grandchildren have their own special room (see sidebar, p. 60).

For our grown children and other visitors, we made a comfortable guest suite with two bedrooms, a small lounge area, and a private bath. To make the place feel like home, we lined the hall leading to the guest suite with family photos and filled the rooms with antiques passed down from my grandparents.

Room for us to be together and alone

Linda and I are busy in our retirement. We have learned that to make this time successful for us requires a balance of living spaces where we can relax or work together, and private spaces for reading, study, medi-

**PERSONAL SPACE
TO WORK AND READ**
A comfortable chair and a wall of bookshelves make this a simple, functional study for Bob. The concrete floor is stained a rich brown, which makes it look like leather.

**A DESK TUCKED UNDER
THE STAIRS** Household business is managed in this tiny hallway office. Built-in file drawers take advantage of space under the stairs.



NO DRESSERS
Built-in drawers, cabinets, and lots of closet space mean that no free-standing dressers are needed in the master bedroom.



tation, and creative work alone. To meet our needs, Sinclair designed separate studies for us.

Linda's "away room" faces east, so it catches morning sun. But it also has French doors that open to the courtyard. It's a cozy, bright room with a comfortable love-seat. There are two closets. In one, a TV and her desk and computer are hidden away behind bifold doors. Her sewing supplies are in the other closet.

I wanted a room that felt like a calm and simple retreat rather than a dark, paneled library. My study faces the river and has a built-in desk on one wall and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves on the other (top photo).

A separate workshop off the garage has "hers and his" workbenches. Here, Linda can work on her pique-assiette projects (mosaics using shards of colorful plates and dishes), which need plenty of room to make a good mess.

THE GRANDKID MAGNET



To welcome our grandchildren, besides the tempting attraction of splashing in the river below, we have a loftlike upstairs room especially for them. It is a sunny, carpeted room with lots of large windows. There are hinged window seats that store toys and flank a large closet/desk armoire built in the shape of a house. While our grandchildren are still too young to sleep away from their parents, the loft is a safe space where they can enjoy toys and games without cluttering up the downstairs. When they are older, we will add beds to the room, and with the adjacent bathroom, they'll have their very own guest suite. Sinclair realized what we really wanted with the nearby river and a special play space was a grandchild magnet. —B.R.

A KID-SIZE READING NOOK has a tiny window with a private view of the river. Shelves hold toys and treasures, and the hinged seat doubles as a toy chest.

EASY ACCESS TO KITCHEN TOOLS
The homeowners chose drawers instead of doors for the base cabinets in the kitchen, to eliminate rummaging around in low, deep cabinets.



THE PASS-THROUGH from the kitchen to the living and dining areas keeps the cook involved in the action.

Accessible for all ages

We plan to live in our new home for a long time and to have a steady stream of grandchildren visiting, so we emphasized the need for accessibility and safety for young and old alike. Sinclair followed the Americans with Disabilities Act guidelines to make sure all doorways and hallways are wide enough for a wheelchair. Additionally, most of the house is a single level, without steps or raised door sills. Easy-to-use lever handles are installed on all the doors and faucets.

We carefully thought through the things that would make kitchen work easier for us: counter space near the stove and refrigerator, a spice drawer for easy access and reading small labels, slide out trash cans and space close at hand for recycling, and lots of room to navigate between the center island and the counters.

We chose drawers for most of the lower kitchen cabinets. This eliminates the need to crouch down and rum-





mage through deep cabinets or to store things in hard-to-reach upper cabinets. In the master bathroom, sturdy framing inside the walls will allow for the installation of grab bars if we need them at some point.

An environmentally friendly home

Because of our love of nature and our deep concern for the environment, we wanted an energy-efficient home that uses green materials and methods.

Sinclair made some great design choices so that our house would be environmentally friendly. In fact, it received a three-star rating from the Austin Energy Green Building Program. Points are scored for energy, water, and materials efficiency; health and safety; and community. The total score results in a rating of one to five stars: the more stars, the more green features in the home.

There were several strategies that helped the house earn its rating. The U-shaped design of the house

with its long, narrow sections makes the rooms shallow enough for lots of natural ventilation. Increasing natural light and thus reducing dependence on artificial lighting is also a result of the narrow house design. Finally, thick limestone walls give the house thermal mass, which helps to maintain a consistent indoor temperature.

A sustainable aspect of the house is the recycled wood we chose. It is longleaf pine, which once covered about 90 million acres in the southeastern United States. Now, less than three million acres remain. Our longleaf pine was reclaimed from an old warehouse, and we used it for trusses, wide-plank floors, and cabinetry in the living and dining area. We also used it for the stairs leading to the grandchildren's loft.

The house was built in a grove of trees to provide shade from the hot Texas sun. More protection from the sun comes from extra-long eaves and metal awnings over all exposed windows.

A RIVER VIEW FROM THE SINK
Windows above the sink and honed granite countertops make kitchen work a delight. Casual meals are served at the large center island.

OUTDOOR SPACES FOR ALL SEASONS



SUMMER BREEZES AND RIVER VIEWS
Cooled by steady southeasterly breezes, the limestone terrace is the Reeds' favorite spot to sit at the end of the day.

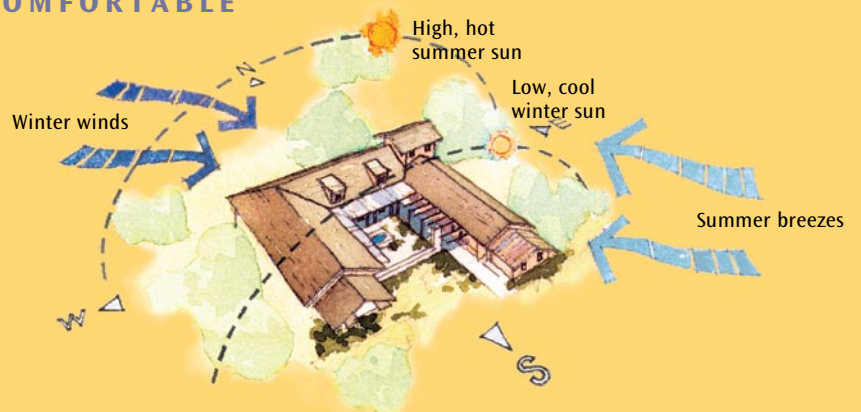
WINTER PROTECTION On sunny winter days, the front porch overlooking the interior courtyard offers a warm and comfortable spot well protected from cold north winds.



THE PORCH BECKONS
The east-facing screened porch warms up in time for breakfast, spring through fall, and makes outdoor dinners a delight in summer.



SITING, SUN, AND WIND MAKE THIS HOUSE ENERGY EFFICIENT AND NATURALLY COMFORTABLE



The U-shaped house is sited for protection from hot summer sun and for capturing low winter sun. In summer, the veranda and awnings shade windows from intense sun. Trees provide protection on the west and north sides of the house. In winter, low sun reflects from the courtyard into the living areas, and two dormers above bring in even more light.

Summer breezes roll down toward the river, bringing cool air into the house and across the screened porch and pergola-covered back terrace. When winds change direction in winter, the veranda is protected from harsh gusts and is comfortable even on brisk days.

For more information on this article, see Resources, page 92.

Illustration: Iain Stewart

NATIVE PLANTS AND A LITTLE RAIN MAKE A GARDEN

We used low-e (low-emissivity) windows and French doors throughout the house. They help reduce heat transfer so the house stays cooler in summer and warmer in winter.

Air conditioning is almost a necessity in this hot, dry climate, but we were concerned about the noise generated by air conditioning units. We were delighted to find that geothermal heating and air conditioning would be a much quieter option.

While outdoor temperatures change continually, underground temperatures remain consistent. Geothermal systems take advantage of these constant temperatures. Our system has a heat-exchanger loop that goes into the earth about 250 feet. In the winter, water circulating through the loop absorbs heat and carries it into the house. When the weather turns warm, the system reverses and pulls heat from the building, carrying it down and diffusing it into the earth, which is 30° to 40°F cooler than the outside air in summer. Although costly to install, the system saves money in the long run because it is up to 60 percent more efficient than conventional systems.

A tranquil mood and spirit

Friends and visitors say that our house feels peaceful. As you drive up to it, you get a sense that it's been here a long time. Limestone walls and standing-seam metal roofs echo the homesteads of German immigrants who settled this area. The house is sheltered by trees and embraced by a meadow of tall grasses and wildflowers. The natural materials (stone, wood, and metal) and classic motifs tie the house to its surroundings and give it an Old World but ageless quality.

The wish list we made helped us define what we expected from our new home and even helped us imagine how we'd live our lives here. It also made clear to us the things that were most important in the design: a simple, comfortable, and inviting house; accessible design; and green features. **h**

Bob Reed traded his busy, stressful life as a corporate executive for a busy but relaxing retirement.



We chose to cooperate with nature by planting all native Texas plants in the courtyard, front gardens, and wildflower meadow. Native plants are better adapted to local conditions—they require much less water and no fertilizer.

Jill Nokes, an Austin landscape designer and native plant expert, advised us on plant selection. Her rich description of the landscape helped us imagine seeing the house “through an intermittent



screen of trees and an open view of mixed prairie plants.”

After doing the hard work of installation,

maintaining the gardens is a real joy for me. The gardens are now in their third year, and I no longer have to plant anything. The challenge is deciding which plants to take out or cut back as they continue to reseed and

multiply. There are many surprising native plant “volunteers” that the birds and the winds bring in.

Burgundy-and-yellow Mexican hat (*Ratibida columnifera*) (inset left) and tall purple mealy cup sage (*Salvia farinacea*) (right) dominate the

meadow in front of the house in late spring and early summer. The buffalo grass lawn in front and on the east side requires no watering. Best of all, it never needs to be mowed.

Until they became established, the gardens needed water regularly. Now we water the plantings only during long dry spells. Everything is mulched with native cedar bark, which reduces water evaporation, discourages weed growth, and helps to keep the plants cool during the summer. —B.R.

