

## Heart of Gold and Pine

Native Texans and married designers Elizabeth Alford and Michael Young came home to roost ten years ago, when they ditched big-city life in New York for a ranch house in Austin. The home, originally built by architect Jonathan Bowman in 1957, sits in a landscape of limestone cliffs in the Balcones fault zone, the geographical boundary between the prairie lands that extend all the way to the Gulf of Mexico and the rolling, agriculture-rich Hill Country.

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James's bedroom furniture was custom designed by Hatch Workshop.

"We intended to remodel," says Alford, who owns the firm Pollen Architecture & Design with Young and their business partner, architect Dason Whitsett. As soon as they started drawing up plans, they realized that it would be too costly to complete a restoration and, Alford admits, "not that satisfying" to work solely within the existing structure. So they stripped it down to the footprint and rebuilt, shaping a family home that would reflect both the hypermodern lives they left in New York City and the deep-rooted cultural heritage that comes with growing up in Texas.

Though little remains of the old structure besides the limestone foundations and fireplace column beside the outdoor patio, the surviving open-air stair tower hints at the house's unusual past. From the carport below, visitors travel underneath the main volume of the house, then enter the stair tower and exit one floor up, with views down the hill, across a tree canopy, and over a lush ravine. Alford and Young added 1,000

square feet and, most importantly, linked the interior and exterior worlds through their choice of local materials, like the aggregate speckled throughout the concrete floors that was dredged from the bottom of the Trinity River and the East Texas yellow pine that covers much of the walls, doors, ceilings, and floors. The traditional material was brought up to date with quarter-sawn boards that were cut to expose a pattern of fine horizontal lines from the floor to the ceiling.

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Dieter Rams's modular 620 Chair Programme, from the 1960s, takes center stage in the Alford-Young family's living room. The set is accompanied by Artemide's classic Tolomeo floor lamp and a Portofino Bergère chair that was designed by Rodolfo Dordoni for Minotti. The rolling glass doors running the length of the room are from Fleetwood.

In contrast to all the wood, Alford and Young chose a supple skim-coated plaster for several prominent walls. "I love how it receives light and looks like a tactile material instead of paint," Alford says. The wall at the top of the limestone stair tower is perhaps the most adventurous in terms of texture: Using custom molds, Alford and Young made dozens of concrete tiles with a thick, raised vertical relief pattern that emphasizes the sun coming in from a slot skylight above, while transitioning from the rough rock of the original stair tower to the seamless walls of the new house.

"We're very interested in where stuff comes from," says Young, a visual artist who frequently incorporates sand and soil into his art, as seen in the large-scale piece that hangs in the dining area. Young describes them as "a family of makers," where each member—including 13-year-old James and 11-year-old Clara—has allotted space. Command central is the family room's work table, where James's unfinished blimp sits next to a scroll of Greek symbols that Clara painted with watercolors. On the other side of the wall, Young and Alford's office is lined with Homasote fiberboard on which he can post sketches.

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James works on his balsa-wood blimp in the family workspace, illuminated by a Kelvin LED Table Lamp from Flos.

In addition to building with local materials and a rainwater conservation system, the sustainable side of the pair's practice comes out in the home's lighting system. The home's new windows have low-energy, insulated glass that reduces solar heat gain. South- and west-facing window banks feature carefully fitted awnings that shade the rooms during the heat of the day. Strategic clerestory windows reflect natural light onto the family room ceiling from an outside shelf—created by a junction of the butterfly roof—which brightens the space even more. In the bathrooms, the architects designed powder-coated steel tube skylights capped with insulated glass that transmit a few small beams of the bright Texas sun without amplifying the heat. The placement of the windows had as much to do with sun angles as important views on the site, Young says. "This is not a huge house. The outdoors is an extension of the home."

Vintage furniture hits the sweet spot between aesthetics and responsible consumerism. (“One of our definitions of *sustainable*,” says Young, “is that it’s well built.”) The modular Dieter Rams 620 Chair Programme, which dates to the 1960s, occupies prime real estate in the living room. Sporadic bursts of color—a safety-orange Kvadrat rug in the family room, grassy green tile from Bisazza in the master bathroom, and a lighter, celery green for the custom kitchen cabinets—complement the warmth of the pine walls. And many of the beds, desks, drawers, shelves, and cabinets are built-ins designed specifically for the house. One notable exception is an heirloom chest of drawers that, as Alford family legend has it, was buried during the Civil War to protect the silverware from pillagers.

It isn’t always easy for the couple to be architects as well as inhabitants. “You make mistakes,” Alford says. “You can take bigger risks than with clients.” They notice the smallest flaws that they are just itching to fix, but at some point (especially when the kids are begging to install a basketball hoop on wheels), you have to stop working and start living.

[\*See more photos of the house in our slideshow\*](#)