



CG&S Design-Build, Photo by Paul Finkel

Beautiful Backyards: Transforming an outdoor space into a homeowner's oasis

By Mauri Elbel

A well-planned outdoor space isn't just about coming up with a layout to fit the property. Truly good design does that, of course, but it's also capable of flawlessly integrating itself into the client's way of living.

Two local outdoor renovations epitomize this very ideal – a modern addition that has transformed a Central Austin residence into an outdoor oasis for its nature-loving homeowners, and a spacious exterior extended from a historic home in downtown San Antonio which has converted a young family's previously underutilized backyard into an inviting retreat.

The design goals for the 1963 home tucked in the heart of Austin's Zilker neighborhood were simple: to add a carport and garden storage room, expand the entry courtyard, and build a screened-in porch that would provide the homeowners with a greater sense of connectivity to their fruitful backyard gardens. The end result, orchestrated by Gregory Thomas, a senior project architect at Austin firm CG&S Design-Build, was anything but simple.

While the materials used throughout the exterior additions are unarguably elemental – Ipe wood siding and fencing, cypress ceilings, stained concrete floors, Spanish cedar doors – they are rich and warm, creating a rustic yet peaceful aesthetic that spans throughout the design. From the horizontal fencing that edges the property to the screened-in additions wrapping the back of the home, there is a feeling of tranquility and being one with nature that flows effortlessly from one space to the next.

"It is very warm. It is very inviting. It really lures you outside," Thomas said. "And it is a great way to be in connection with the seasons – whether it is spring, summer, fall

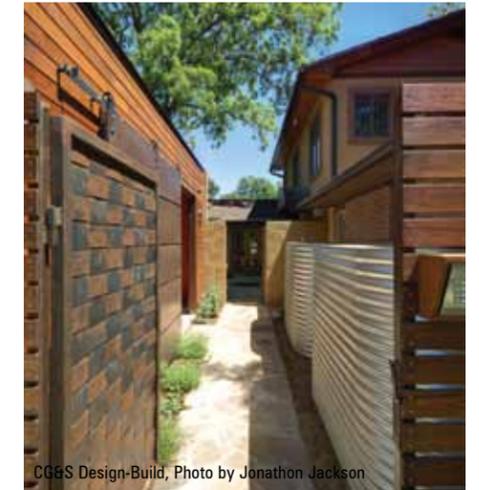
or winter, it really gives the homeowners a place to relax and enjoy the passing of time year-round."

Ipe fence panels and a coordinating entry arbor provided a modern makeover to the home's curb appeal. Prior to the remodel, the homeowners parked on a concrete pad and entered their house through a gate and a small entry courtyard. An Ipe-clad carport was added and the original walls to the entry courtyard were removed. One wall was rebuilt at the property line to enlarge the space while the side of the newly constructed carport became the opposite wall to further define it. From the driveway, the carport is entered via a metal-clad sectional garage door, with pedestrian access from the carport to the entry courtyard granted through a metal-clad rolling barn door. The horizontal fence sheltering the property from street view and the basket weave steel gate, equipped with a doorbell and intercom, enhance both privacy and security.

"Before, you could see straight into the house from the gate so there was little privacy," Thomas said. "Our project added a layered

sequence for guests to enter the house."

But it's only after you pass through the layers – underneath the entry arbor, down the piano key walkway surrounded by a native buffalo grass lawn dotted with low-water plantings, and through the newly-expanded courtyard – that you begin to see how this addition works for the homeowners. The new screened-in porches translate architectural design into a language that speaks to the clients' passions.



CG&S Design-Build, Photo by Jonathon Jackson



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“Their house used to be very closed-off to the backyard, but we changed it,” said Thomas. “The homeowners are avid gardeners – especially interested in growing vegetables and flowers. And they are also bird-lovers, so a lot of the surrounding landscape reflects that.”

Thomas designed the L-shaped addition to fold around the backyard, creating a dining area in the section against the house and a living space in the arm extending from it – making sure it was large enough to both entertain and accommodate the

homeowners’ pet birds. Carefully considering the surrounding environment and landscape, Thomas planned for the space to be enjoyed year-round, maximizing outdoor views from every indoor angle. A three-panel folding Nana window sits just above the kitchen sink, providing a conversational and functional pass-through for the homeowners and their guests without hindering views. With a northward facing dining area, Thomas designed a butterfly roof to shoot away from the house, taking advantage of both light and sky. The roof line looming over the living space limits the amount of morning light, invites breezes and facilitates a pleasant cross-ventilation throughout the space.

An existing backyard fountain is an attractive feature for wild birds and adds a harmonious element to mask the city noises just beyond this backyard micro-environment. Rainwater from the roof of the screened porch is directed through rain chains to decorative bowls and used in planting beds while rainwater at the front of the house is collected in two 1000-gallon galvanized metal cistern tanks. This water is especially useful as an irrigation source for planting efforts, including the homeowners’ extensive vegetable garden.

But it is the attention to detail and the uniqueness of local craftsmanship that meshes with nature’s beauty which makes this central city dwelling truly spectacular. Interior details including decorative sconces, copper gutter cove LED lighting and custom-designed furniture complete the living area while exterior finishes including copper rain chains and steel planters add to its outdoor charm. Expertly chosen interior furnishings by Kathy Bergstrasser of Vivid Design Group, such as the bright orange coffee table with bird cut-outs, stylishly convey the homeowners’ passions. Several sets of screen doors, with aluminum grilles custom-designed by local artisan Susan Wallace, feature floral motifs that represent the wildflowers growing in the gardens beyond. LED twinkle lights run along stainless steel cables, forming an implied ceiling and animating the nighttime sky while bringing it down to a human level.

“It makes it more of a defined room, but in a really light-handed way,” Thomas said. “It also provides a little useful light, but it is more romantic than anything else. The homeowner has told me that he sometimes gets up before dawn, makes a pot of coffee and turns on those lights. He says it is just magical.”

In the same way Thomas designed a structure around his client’s desires, Daniel Sexton, owner of Buffalo Contracting Services, fulfilled his client’s requests by creating a multi-functional backyard retreat behind their late-1800s home. When taking in these outdoor spaces, it leaves no doubt in the mind why both projects received NARI’s recent Contractor of the Year (CoTY) award for best residential exterior \$100,000 and over for its Austin and San Antonio chapters.

It is difficult to imagine that the now resort-like space situated behind the historic home nestled in San Antonio’s King William neighborhood was once a solid concrete area with a small, weathered deck. Solid redwood fencing, built identically on both sides to provide a polished look from any vantage point, contains an inviting refuge outfitted with a coordinating three-tiered deck, planters, pergola and arbor all built from sturdy redwood, a fully-equipped outdoor kitchen, fire pit and state-of-the-art pool system.

“The homeowners have been clients of ours for years, and they wanted a place where their kids could go swimming and they could entertain guests,” Sexton said. “They like to entertain, and this is a great space for that. You can fit a lot of people in that backyard –

and we’ve created plenty of places to sit and congregate.”

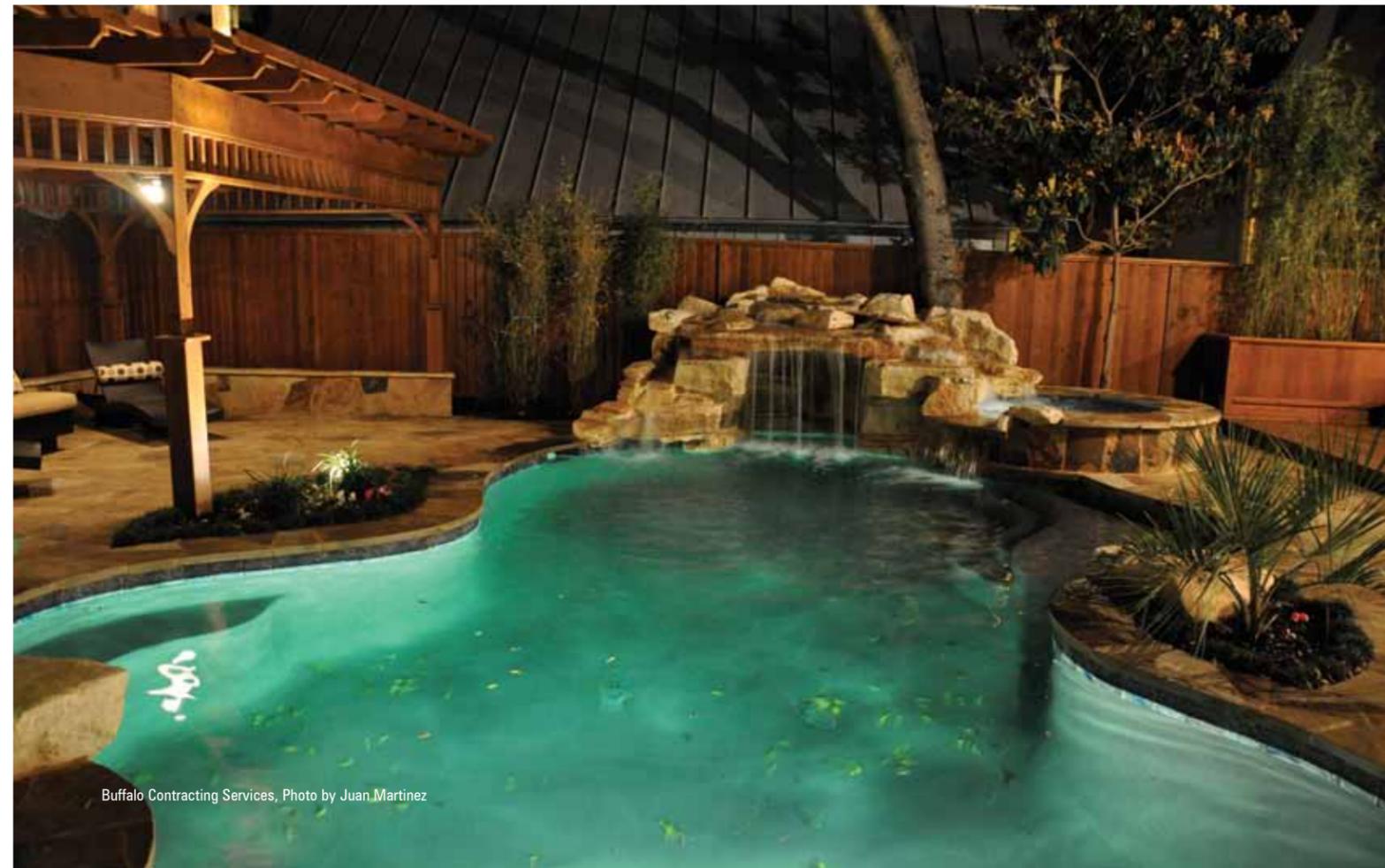
While it could be argued that the contemporary addition is a stark contrast to the otherwise traditional late-1800s home, it seems to be a distinction that works.

“You can definitely tell there is a distinct difference between the historic and modern portions of this home,” Sexton said. “But the historic society discourages you from trying to make new additions look like they’ve been there for hundreds of years – they want old things to look old and new things to look new. At the same time, we wanted to design the addition in a way that flows and looks like it all ties in together.”

The pool, designed and built by Tim Clark of Prestige Custom Pools, features full-heating capability, a stone grotto with two waterfalls flowing into the pool and cascading into the hot tub above, and remote controlled lights and jets. A triple-tiered planter situated at the edge of the pool is a nice parallel to the three-story deck while the rectangular planter fringing the fence houses bamboo to provide an element of privacy between the neighboring properties. The planters throughout the backyard coordinate flawlessly, even if the effect was more happenstance than deliberate.

“Both of those planter boxes are actually made with scraps from the fence, which was initially supposed to be eight feet tall, but we had to cut it down to six feet to fit guidelines set by the historic district,” Sexton said. “They actually came out looking really nice – they added a feature we didn’t even plan for and gave us some additional space for landscaping.”

But the deck is what truly makes this outdoor space a functioning extension of the home. The lowest level of the three-tiered deck serves as the entry point from the arbor gateway, featuring contemporary seating situated around a circular flagstone fire-pit that gives off an intimate ambiance when the sun goes down. The main level of the deck, accessed from either of two outdoor staircases or from the home’s main kitchen, features a fully-equipped outdoor kitchen complete with a sink, garbage disposal, mini-refrigerator, extended countertop, and a Bull barbeque stainless steel outdoor kitchen grill. Cabinets located beneath provide ample storage while the bar-height marble countertop, appropriately named Rainforest, harmonizes with the backyard’s resort-like theme and allows for family snacking and conversing when the nearby bench-seat picnic table isn’t being utilized for mealtimes.



Buffalo Contracting Services, Photo by Juan Martinez



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The upper level of the deck remains private, with exclusive access from the upstairs rooms. The client's existing hot tub was crane-raised and installed in the top deck, offering an intimate outdoor Jacuzzi experience underneath the stars with an adjacent hammock completing the fantasy. While the homeowners wanted the upper level to remain open to the sky above, a roof system was installed beneath, allowing for congregation on the lower deck despite wet weather conditions. The entire deck was engineered to be completely free-standing – beefed up with structural support from heavy posts equipped with additional bracing to keep the wood from shifting the structure laterally.

"The deck is not actually attached to the house at all," Sexton said. "We didn't want the weight of the deck to cause any kind of strain on the house because it is so old. It is designed to move independently of the house."

Liberal lighting choices, from outdoor ceiling fans and pendent lights dangling over the bar to task lighting above the outdoor

kitchen and built in stair-lights, further define the backyard elements while giving off an inviting glow after dark.

"All the lights we put in the yard are on dimmers so you can control the ambiance," Sexton said. "There is plenty of lighting out there – we can light up the whole backyard at night."

While the concept of creating an outdoor space suitable for relaxation, recreation and entertaining has been in the works for a few years, Sexton said his clients couldn't be more pleased now that the idea has come to fruition.

"They utilized every single square foot of that space without it being overwhelming," Sexton said. "Everywhere you stand and look, you see something that is not only pretty, but also functional. Everything just flows together." ■



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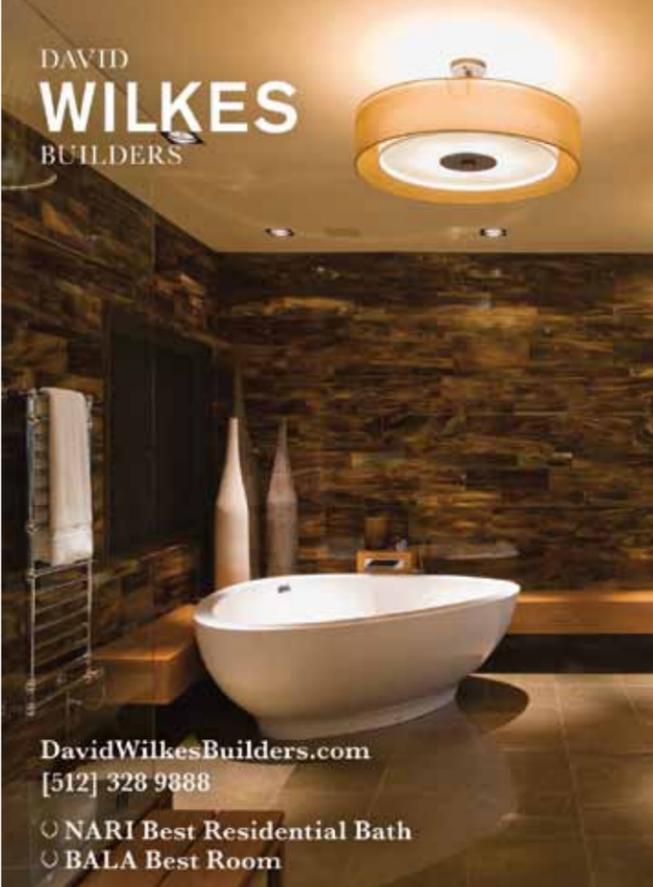
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