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Modern Love

Story by Heather Staible



Photography by Jack Thompson

The first time Leslie Coe saw the two-story house designed by the late Houston architect Herb Paseur on Institute Lane, she fell in love with it. “I thought it was really well done,” she recalls. Plus, it wasn’t the kind of place that went overboard. “The house had a nice feeling to it and was big enough but not too big,” she says about the 3,000-square-foot residence near the Museum District. Slotted between arching oak trees, the brick and wood dwelling is distinguished in its simplicity; square, with an inset screen porch, it turns a calm eye to the street.

There was just one little problem—it wasn’t for sale. Well, at least not the first time she saw it. And then, a few months later, Coe got a call from her then-fiancé, Bill, who told her that a For Sale sign had appeared on the front lawn of the property. The soon-to-be married couple immediately made an offer, it was accepted, and suddenly they had a new home to go with their new life together—almost. Even though the house already felt like home, both Leslie and Bill realized it would need updating and remodeling.

They turned to Carrie Glassman Shoemake and Ernesto Maldonado of Glassman Shoemake Maldonado Architects for direction. Maintaining the integrity of the home was important to the couple, and they found kindred spirits in Shoemake and Maldonado, who took great pains to preserve everything from the white ceilings to the honey-colored cedar walls, a signature element of Paseur’s architectural design in the 1960s. The muchlauded team has won awards from the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance and the American Institute of Interior Design, and most recently their work on the Institute Lane house won them the American Institute of Architects Houston Chapter 2007 Design Award.

“This was a dream job because it was a gem of a house,” says Maldonado. “This house is really quite special and everybody was respectful of the building.”

Despite everyone’s great affection for the house, the Coes and their architectural team decided that some elements of the structure needed to be updated from the original 1968 intent. The design of the house is based on six squares stacked one on the other, and it incorporates the great outdoors and the subtle cool of

mid-century modern design. Embraced by foliage and tucked back from the street, the two-story structure is filled with light, thanks to plenty of windows, some of which were added during the renovation.

But at the outset there were a few elements that hampered the indoor-outdoor dialogue. One of the issues was an overabundance of balconies. Instead of enhancing the appreciation of nature, the balconies created a brooding presence. In addition, the absence of windows in the kitchen and the master bath detracted from the innate elegance of the house, turning it to just plain dark and moody. Letting plenty of light in was the first order of business for Shoemake and Maldonado.

“One of our biggest questions,” says Maldonado, “was how to deal with the light. It was really a balance of openness while maintaining the feeling of being protected. During the process we kept two things in mind: don’t damage the house and then improve it.”

Improvements included removing the balcony that looked out on the inner courtyard, as well as banishing the backyard balcony outside the master bedroom. The carport was a dark space too, so the cedar wall was removed and translucent resin panels were installed in its place. The off-white panels separate garage from courtyard, and also introduce more light and air into the walled courtyard space. The front yard and the courtyard went from overgrown to shaped yet still lush paradises, and a rectangular pond with goldfish and a simple black fountain refined the courtyard, which is visible from every major room of the house.

Next came some remodeling. The kitchen was a mere sliver of a space, and just behind it was the utility room. The two small spaces were combined into one good-sized kitchen, with new light made available to the room by the inclusion of a floor-to-ceiling window that had been enclosed in the utility room. “The kitchen and master bath areas were divided into smaller spaces,” remembers Shoemake, “so we opened those spaces to incorporate light.” Upper cabinets were removed and in their place, a smooth brick wall serves as the kitchen’s backdrop. Stainless-steel appliances, ample counter space, and built-in cabinets on the far wall where a pass-through to the dining room once was completed the metamorphosis. The transformation was welcomed by the Coes, who love to cook and entertain.

Now generously illuminated with natural light, the materials of the house revealed their vibrancy. The Saltillo tile and the cedar walls conjure up the colors of a coralflecked sunset, while the original black wrought-iron banister evokes the minimalist lines of a piece of sculpture. Bleached pine floors, custom shelving, and more sunshine make the upstairs inviting—a contemporary space that is open to the world below but at the same time very private. The den serves as the centerpiece of the second story, with the master suite tucked away at the back of the house. Here, too, the architects succeeded in updating without sacrificing the house’s personality. A window was added to the master bedroom, echoing the symmetry of the rest of the house and allowing for a spacious view that’s above it all. The master bathroom was modernized and expanded, and another window was incorporated into the room from a tool closet, this time at the corner of the bathroom, directly above the new kitchen window. “One of the issues we resolved was the fact that the tool closet and the utility room had the best light of the house. We opened them up, and it really made the kitchen and the bathroom,” says Maldonado.

But it’s the second-story screened porch that exemplifies the subtle luxury of Pasuer’s design and that also maintains the modernist symmetry of the exterior. Located just off the family room, the porch offers a treetop retreat with a view to the street on one side and a view over the courtyard on the other. “This is why I wanted the house,” says Leslie. “We have friends over for dinner up here and with the exception of July and August, we use this room the rest of the year.” It’s a public/private combination that’s becoming increasingly uncommon since urbanites now tend to prefer insulation from the outside world.

“We talk all the time about how we use the whole house,” says Bill. “It’s not a large house to begin with, but we use almost every square inch of it. There’s no room that just sits there and looks good.”

The now-married couple has elements of their personalities in each room, such as Bill’s collection of Native American pottery and Leslie’s collection of works by local artists like Kermit Oliver, McKay Otto, and James Glassman. A former nurse, Leslie later earned an interior design degree, and she put that to work by decorating the house herself, searching Houston for pieces that would fit the feel of the house.

“I bought both new and vintage furniture for the house. I found stuff at Lawndale and Mid-Century Market and re-covered vintage furniture,” she explains. “I kept the palette neutral, using brown and gray throughout the house.” She sparked that subtle color scheme with pops of primary red, to particular effect in the two Facett chairs by Ligne Roset in the family room.

Throughout the process, infinite detail was at the top of the renovation list, but as Carrie Shoemake points out, this is also a family's home.

"I am so pleased to see Leslie and Bill appreciate the house as a peaceful respite," she says, "and I'm very happy that we could make the changes that made it easier for them to live in and enjoy the house."



Built in 1968 by architect Herb Paseur as his own home, the brick and wood International-style residence recently received a thoughtful renovation by Carrie Shoemake and Ernest Maldonado.



A Knoll sofa is the perfect spot for taking in the view of the courtyard and fountain. The homeowner, a former nurse who returned to school during this project to study interior design, purchased the coffee table from Crate and Barrel and painted it a sizzling shade of acid green.



The homeowners wanted to keep the original rough-sawn cedar paneling as well as the Saltillo tile. Artist Rick Houser designed the zebra wood and stone stereo console over which McKay Otto's painting glows in the dark. The lamp is by Ligne Roset.



The see-through Cassina dining table and cream leather Cassina Cab chairs don't take attention away from the paper Danish pendant, original to the house.



A view into the kitchen reveals brown leather Bertoia bar stools and a Man Ray print on the wall.



A complete renovation of the kitchen resulted in a sleek look: granite countertops, charcoal gray laminate cabinets, a sculptural Gaggenau stove hood over the most minimal of Wolf cooktops have the original brick wall as a textural backdrop.



The glass-topped Noguchi coffee table and black leather Design Within Reach sofa invite reading under the light of the Artemide lamp from Kuhl-Linscomb; a Ligne Roset wood desk is behind the sofa.



The two bedside tables are custom by architect/furniture designer Mark Macek and the homeowner found the lamps at Lackey Prince; the wool and cashmere platform bed is from Design Within Reach. The sequin-sparked gauze is from Area, which the homeowner framed and hung behind the bed.



Cabinets are custom by the architects; the curvaceous Happy D tub is by Duravit. Brick walls are original.