

HOME DESIGN

A family home designed with trees at center stage

By Deborah Mann Lake

The wife wanted a desk in the kitchen. The husband needed a place for a family-heirloom dining table. And the young son just wanted a "double-decker," as he called it.

The result was a modern, colorful, two-story home that functions specifically for the family of three — right down to the views of three mature trees that were a main focus of the home's design.

David Morris, Anne Lewis and their son Henry had lived with those trees since 1992, when Morris and Lewis purchased the original 1940s home on Watts near Rice Village.

Three years ago they bought and moved into the house next door, tore down the old home and commissioned Glassman Shoemaker Maldonado Architects to create a unique space.

"David grew up in a '50s modern house. They wanted a house that architecturally was modern but also lively, one they could grow old in with lots of color and interesting spaces," Carrie Glassman Shoemaker said.

The color is as personal as the design: It came from a book on Paul Klee paintings of South Africa that Lewis liked. The architects followed suit with muted blues, soft luminous yellows and creams, and a pop of bright orange.

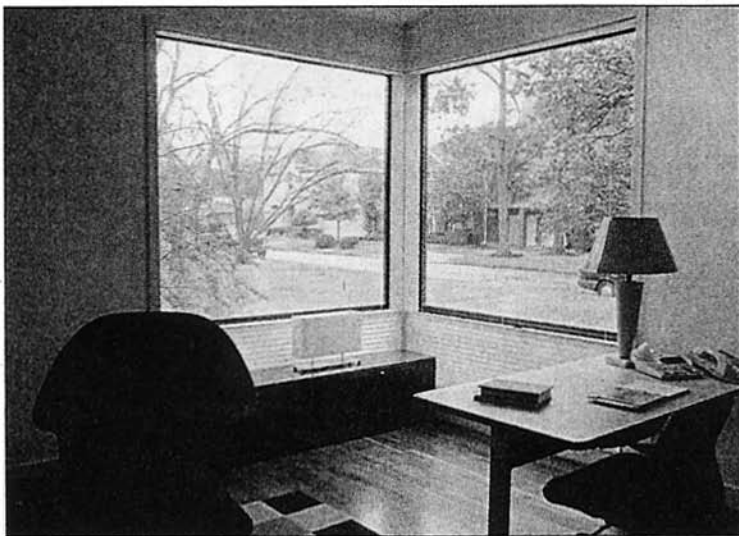
To make sure the colors would work together, Ernesto Maldonado painted squares of them onto a tiny painting that was framed and hangs just inside the orange front door.

Lewis points out the doorbell, which came from Lewis' grandparents' house in Germany, where it was once a service bell under the dining room table. Such personal items and artwork fill the home.

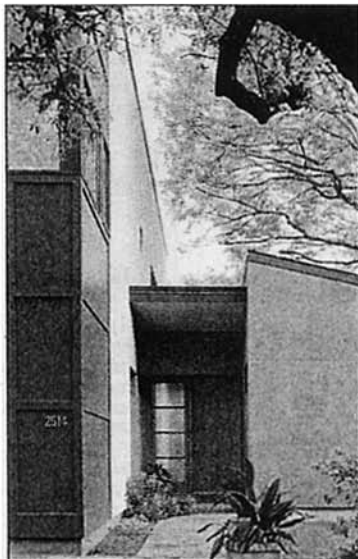
The family didn't have to convince Shoemaker or Maldonado to design the two-story structure around the existing three giant oak trees — that was a given. But the architects took it a step further by creating spaces with a view to those trees and other mature vegetation such as 30-year-old azalea bushes.

"We stepped the front of the house away from the live oak tree in the front to save the roots, and then the beams of the home were hand-dug. We used very little large equipment, to minimize any damage," Maldonado said.

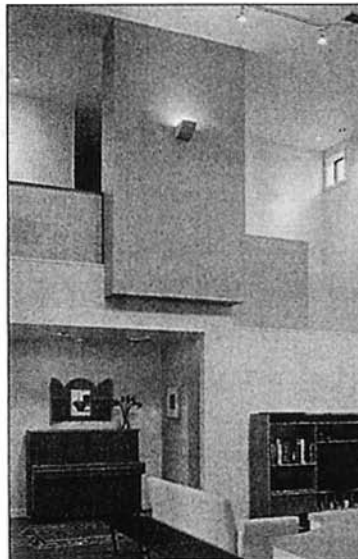
The foundation is unique. Taking Houston's clay soil into account, the home was



The study's large windows were put in the corner to take advantage of the view.



The orange front door is the first indication that color was an important consideration in the home's design.



The back of the upstairs bookcase is cantilevered into the family room. A nook was built for the piano below.

built on what's called a "structural slab." Piers are first sunk into the ground. Then they are spanned with concrete beams laid into the hand-dug trenches in the ground. The concrete foundation then rests on the beams, six inches above the soil, so that soil movement does not wreck the foundation.

Inside, the architects worked to layer glass and walls with the outdoors in mind, starting with the entryway, which has a view through a courtyard to a wall leading to the master suite.

"Although the entry is small, you have the sense of expansiveness because of the glass," Maldonado said.

Taking the edge off the modern lines is a warm cherry flooring that was located by Morris, who is in the construction business.

To the right of the entry is a study, one of three identical small rooms — the others are the dining room and master bedroom — with slanted ceilings on the first floor that all look different because of the placement of the windows. The study's unusual large corner windows allow a view of lawn and tree-lined street.

The study can be closed off with a pocket door from the entry hall, which leads left to a large family room with open living, eating and cooking spaces.

"This room is how the family lives together," Maldonado said.

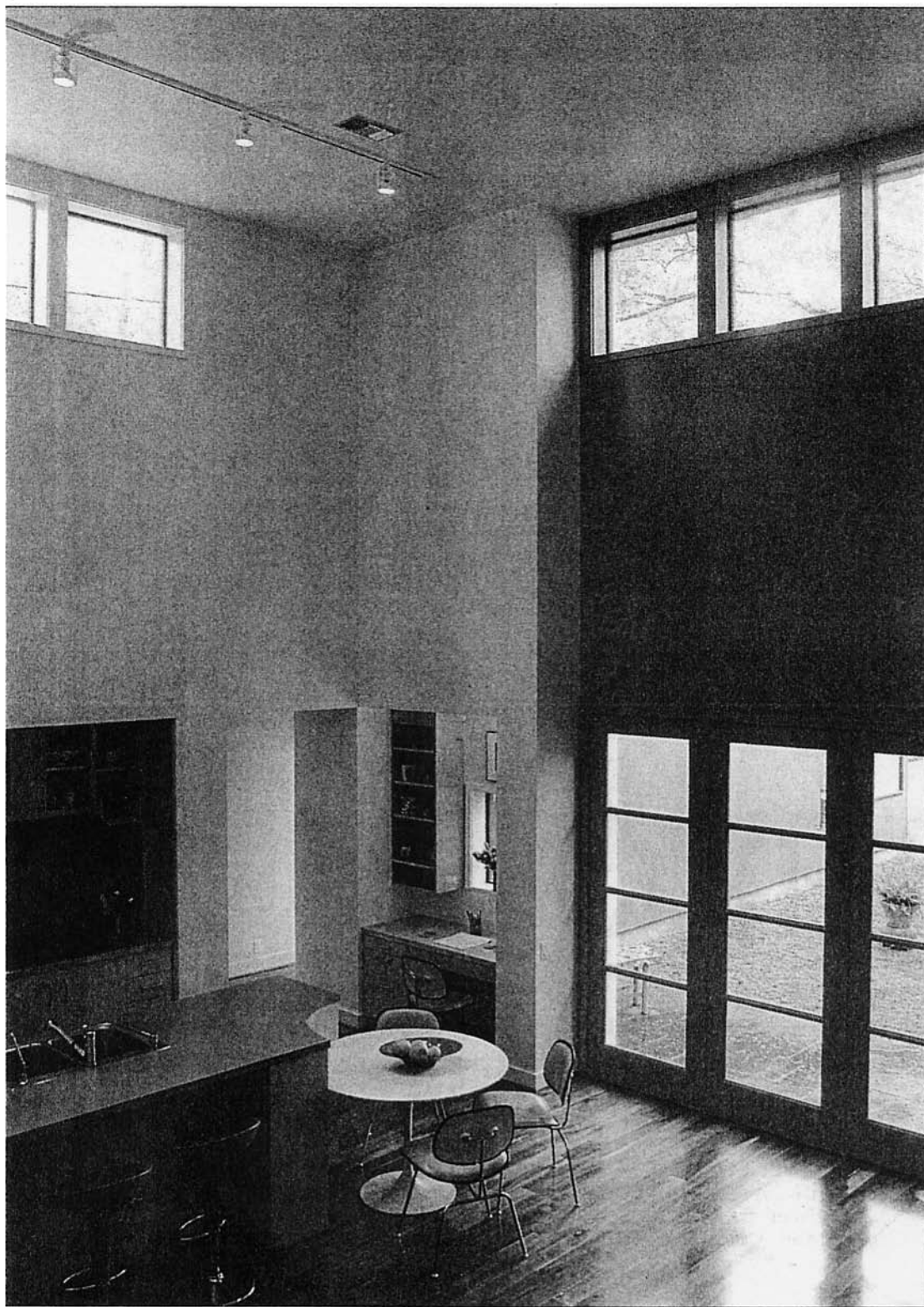
A focal point of the room is a two-story orange wall — the same shade as the front door — punctuated with large windows and doors at floor level and smaller ones at the ceiling.

The light is balanced with ceiling-level windows on the north wall and a single, high opening on the west wall.

"When we first moved in two years ago, I didn't want to go to work because the light would keep changing and it was so wonderful to watch," said Lewis, a publicist.

From the kitchen, there's a view of the stairs with their second-floor, perforated-metal railing and the cantilevered back of a bookcase painted blue that the architects refer to as "the cloud" to emphasize the home's relationship with the sky.

Expensive granite countertops and commercial-grade appliances are the expected items in a new kitchen these days, but Morris, the son of well-known Houston architect Si Morris, had a different opinion.



"We had a limited budget, and I wanted to invest in the architecture. The luxury in our minds was being able to hire a designer to do the house," Morris said. "The countertops are plastic laminate, which I grew up with and I like. I don't like the cold of stone. The problem with laminate is heat, so we have stainless next to the stove to take care of hot pans."

Bathrooms are also similarly treated with simple white fixtures and a soft green tile. But the his-and-her countertops are deliberately high so the couple don't have to lean over the sinks.

To make room for the classic modern table by Eero Saarinen and chairs by Charles Eames, the architects carved out a curve in the island that separates the kitchen from the living space.

On the way to the dining room from the kitchen are a cubbyhole desk and shelves that Lewis specifically wanted as an organizational spot for the family.

The dining room might have been left out of the home's design plan altogether except for Morris' grandparents' massive antique table, chairs and sideboard.

Morris' research shows they are probably circa 1930s and came from a company in New York City, where his grandparents went on business — they lived in Columbus, Ohio, and his grandfather sold high-end suits for \$9.99 in the '20s.

Down the hall is the master bedroom, which again has windows strategically placed to take advantage of a playing field and Charles Tapley plantings where the second home once stood.

The upstairs, Henry will tell you, belongs to him — and the occasional guest. He has a game table set up on the landing, and his room is filled as expected with signed baseballs and sports memorabilia.

There is no wasted space in the home, which holds three bedrooms and 2½ bathrooms in a tidy 2,100 square feet.

The final unique touch to the home is the lack of an enclosed garage. Instead, Morris insisted on a carport below the upstairs bedrooms with built-in space for storage and a tiny workshop.

He wanted the family to enter the home through the orange front door. And isn't that the point?



Hester + Hardaway photos

Deborah Mann Lake is the Chronicle's design writer.