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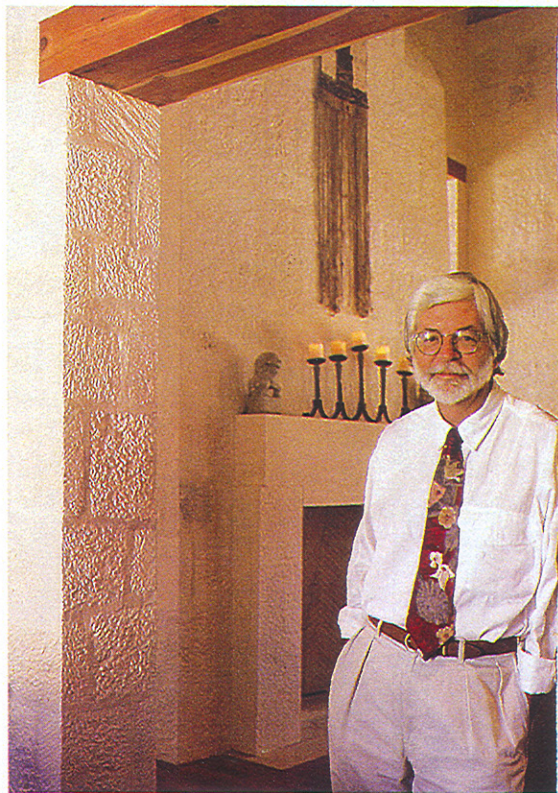
Set in Stone

Native materials make a finely crafted fit for a new Austin residence

by Philip Morris

Photographs by Gary Clark

Austin-based architect Sinclair Black uses local materials and crafts in his residential designs, as he did with this Texas house, to give them an authentic regional character. Native limestone walls flanking the dining room fireplace (above) were battered for a greater sense of mass. A close look at the structure (above right) reveals a hand-chipped surface, along with a smooth mortar joint that unifies the wall. Mesquite wood for floors and aromatic cedar for lintels and ceiling decking were edged carefully to the stone.



Though the hills outside Austin, Texas, sprout some houses that could be found anywhere, certain architects here have a deeper regional sensibility that is evident in their work. But it has more to do with materials and craft and less to do with a specific style. Architect Sinclair Black made that clear in a recently completed West Austin residence, in which he used native limestone, cedar, and mesquite to fit the locale.

Black, who combines working at Sinclair Black & Andrew Vernooy Architects with teaching at the University of Texas School of Architecture, designed the house for a creekside site with a view to a stony, wooded bluff beyond. "There are two themes that run through the house," he says. "One is the use of local materials, the other is craftsmanship."

Exterior and interior walls are clad in native limestone. Lintels, columns,

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and beams on the porch and exposed ceiling decking are built with aromatic cedar that grows east of Austin. Floors are made of mesquite, a small tree considered to be a pest by Texas ranchers but with wood harder than oak. Under the direction of contractor David Dalglish, all materials were cut and trimmed with care, with special attention given to the place where stone meets floor or ceiling.

“The mesquite flooring, which is about as hard as cast iron, came from a small local mill right up the road,” Black says. “The cedar, which is the larger tree from east of here not the juniper cedar to the west, also came from a local mill. Two were all that was needed. The windows also came from a company in East Texas. We did everything we could reasonably do with local materials and local craftsmanship.”

It is the native limestone, used in early Spanish settlements and houses of 19th-century German immigrants,



The limestone exterior includes parapet walls and wall extensions and native stone walkways that ground the house in its setting. Metalwork for the exterior railings and trelliswork, seen here in shadow (above), was handcrafted by Gary Evenson of Austin. Decorative light fixtures also were created by a local craftsman, architect Britt Medford.

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Being sensitive to what a particular area produces and how those who live there build can lead to a house with exceptional fit and finish.

that most firmly weds the house to its setting. Black has used this stone for many houses and other structures during his career, and he speaks of it with an architect's passion for what it means to the region. "The material is profoundly important in central Texas," says Black. "The Germans used it in Fredericksburg to the west of here, Czech settlers to the east. And then you have Mexico and the Latin sensibility with masonry. It all merges in this zone."

Historically, walls were solid masonry. But in today's economy, such methods are almost out of the question. "This house is framed in wood, so the stone is a veneer. Building a house from the ground up, stone by stone, and stopping for electrical systems, vents, and everything a house today requires would just double the cost," Black explains.

But, he says, with care and skill, the character of a solid masonry house still can be achieved. "A lot of people want 'rock,' as they call it, because it suggests a more expensive building," Black says. "But there are refinements in how it is used that make all the difference. If we use limestone on 10 houses, we use it differently each time."

In this case, the architect's instructions called for the largest available stones to be used, particularly for the corners. The stone, Black requested, should be $\frac{1}{3}$ white and $\frac{2}{3}$ cream—quarries offer these as the two basic choices for buyers—so there would be subtle variations. And mortar joints should be blended, not smeared or raked, with the stone face to produce a solid, massive look. "I wanted it to feel like it had been carved out of one

single piece, but with a velvet quality—heaviness and softness at the same time," Black says.

Masonry contractors Escobedo Brothers of Austin suggested using the hand-chipped stone technique—a method popular in Mexico in which the surface of every stone is chipped with tools to create a fine texture. "The stones were dressed to precise sizes on site," Black says. Not an easy task, considering one of the stone lintels weighed 1,100 pounds. "The corners are beautifully handled, and the fireplace is extraordinary, with some walls battered and others straight."

Fabricated with such understated grace, the limestone walls give the Texas house a calm integrity and successfully play off the resonance and rich coloring of the mesquite floors and cedar-plank ceilings. Outside, limestone walks and retaining walls further the sense of being anchored in its setting.

"One advantage in using local products and skills is that you can get genuine value," Black says. "The hand-chipped stone was more time-consuming than the contractors expected. I haven't seen it before, and I don't expect to see it again. But you can get good stone walls here for about the same price as stucco."

That's not true everywhere—that's what *local* means. But being sensitive to what a particular area produces and how those who live there build can lead to a house with the same exceptional fit and finish achieved in Black's Austin design. ♦

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