

IS

H E L E N C A R R E K E R

by Diane Wintroub Calmenson

Photography by Paul Bardagjy

Local Charm

With the majority of homes today being built in cookie cutter fashion, it is refreshing to find one in which painstaking attention is given to quality craftsmanship, choice of materials and scale. Just such a residence exists in the hill country of West Austin, TX.

The house was designed by Sinclair Black, FAIA, principal of Black and Voornoy



With Texas limestone, aromatic cedar and mesquite, architect Sinclair Black designed a home that is one with its setting.

Architecture and Urban Design, Austin, TX. Black, who splits his time between his practice and teaching at the University of Texas at Austin School of Architecture, almost always uses materials available in and around Austin. And why not? Most of his favorites are located within some 30 miles of the city. For this house, Black makes great use of Texas limestone, aromatic cedar and mesquite.

"The limestone is found right underneath the dirt here, so it's an obvious and relatively inexpensive choice," says Black. "The cedar is from east of here and comes from a local mill, as does the mesquite. Everything we could reasonably find locally for this house we used."

Black's clients specifically requested a "profound presence" of limestone. This, coupled with their desire for a home in which the boundaries of inside and outside overlap, made the stone a natural choice for both the interior and exterior of the house.

The house is framed in wood and the stone was placed in and through the frame, explains Black. Electrical wiring and plumbing was then carefully run through the stone—an unseen but nevertheless important example of craftsmanship.

Hand-chipped limestone walls are set off against the hearty red tones of the cedar ceiling and the mesquite flooring. The 12-foot shelves seemingly lengthen the room.



For the stone itself, Black requested the largest stones available from the quarries and he asked for a combination of white and cream shades, so the stones would have subtle variations. To create a solid, massive look, the mortar joints were blended, not smeared or raked. The project's masonry contractors, Escobedo Brothers of Austin, suggested that the stones be hand-chipped, a popular Mexican technique in which each stone is chipped with special tools to create a fine texture.

Inside, the limestone walls are at once beautiful and functional. According to Black, the limestone creates internal thermal mass, which helps keep the temperature of the house comfortable in winter and summer. Outside, the home's limestone exterior struc-



The fireplace is a combination of straight and battered walls. Walls sconces were hand-made from copper by a local artisan in Austin.

ture, as well as the limestone walkways, back porch and steps, inextricably connect the house to its surroundings. And with the same material used inside and outside, the boundaries between the two seemingly do overlap.

The warm coloring of the woods richly contrasts the stone. Exposed columns on the porch, lintels over doors and windows, the purlins and the ceiling decking are made of the aromatic cedar that grows east of Austin. The flooring is approximately 50 percent mesquite and 50 percent limestone. The mesquite, says Black, is usually considered a pesky weed tree by Texas ranchers. However, it is an extremely hard wood that has recently begun to see commercial use. The limestone flooring appears at entrances and in rooms where there is water, such as in the kitchen and bath. The stones are two inches thick, and are broken randomly and then pieced together.

Drop Off

Another important theme is the seamless manner in which the house follows the grade down hill. According to Black, from the street to the house's lowest terrace there is a 20-

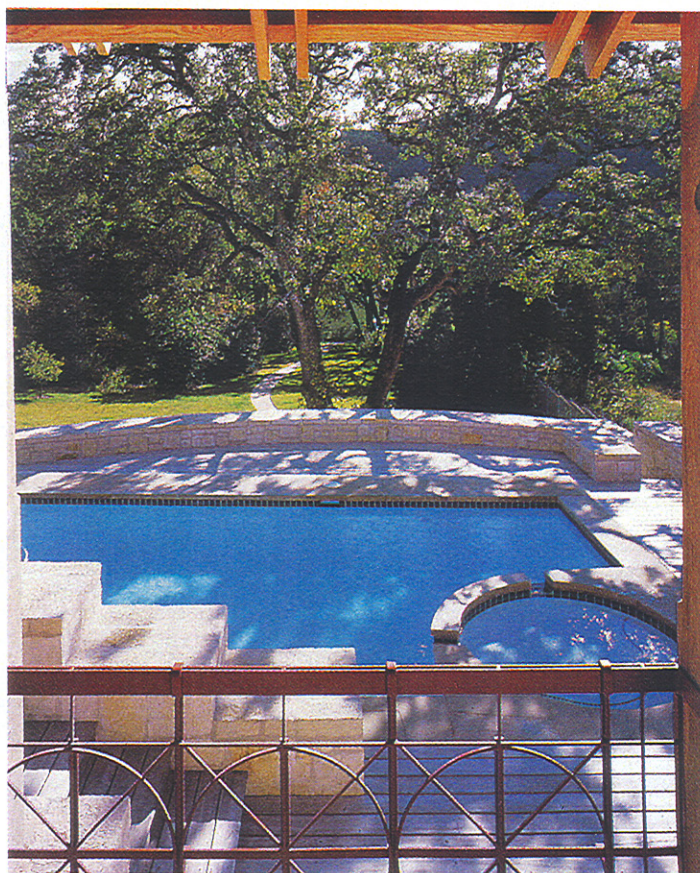
foot drop. However, the progression downward is so gradual it is virtually unnoticeable.

"From the street level to the motor court there is a six-foot drop," Black explains. "Then there is a four-foot drop from the motor court to the front door of the house. The living area and back porch are on this level, and then there is another four-foot drop to the pool. The terrace below is two feet down and from there it's four feet down to the lawn."

Because of the grade, the house is really a split level. A bedroom, bath and painting studio above what the home owners call their winter room—a place for reading, watching television or listening to music—make up the only space that is on the second level. The



Limestone steps leading down to the pool are one element that bridges the gap between the inside and outside of the house.



From the back porch, one can see the gradual slope of the lawn down to the water.

living room, kitchen, dining room and other bedrooms are on the main level.

The lush, green lawn stretches 150 feet down to the water. At the water's edge is the boat house. Because regulations limit the width and length of boat houses around Lake Austin, Black designed this one with two stories. The lower level stores boating supplies, while the second level is a deck that has a kitchenette and bar that make it ideal for relaxing get-togethers at sunset.

The boat house and its decks are made of cypress, which comes from east Texas and, according to Black, does not rot. "When a cypress tree dies and falls into the swamp, it can just lay there for hundreds of years without ever rotting," he says. "Then we come along and dig up the logs with a crane, let them dry out and saw them for construction. I think that's fascinating."

Black prefers cypress over redwood, which is more commonly used for decking.

Vernooy Architecture and Urban Design
 Sinclair Black, FAIA,
 principal-in-charge
 Gregory Thomas, project
 architect
 Mell Lawrence, Associate
 Architect

Stone walls, floors and fireplace

Esco Construction

Wood floors

Artisan Floors

Framing, carpentry and exterior wood deck

Esco Construction

Custom crafted light fixtures

Two Hills Studio, Britt

Medford, Ala

Custom crafted metal railings and trellis structures

The Forge, Gary Evenson

Custom crafted entry doors

Louis Fry

Cypress ceiling decking

Texas Kiln Products

Texas cedar columns, beams and lintels

Wampler Mfg.

Windows

Kolbe and Kolbe

Cypress is abundant, he says, whereas redwood is a finite resource and harvesting it has caused tremendous erosion in California.

Gracious Scale

Yet another client request was to create a home with gracious scale. To achieve this, Black designed the home with eight-foot doorways that are topped with lintels and transom openings on interior walls and windows on exterior walls. The effect not only makes each doorway appear even taller, but gives visual access from space to space.

Shelving in the living room stretches up to 12 feet. Black used these shelves instead of a



The two-story boat house is made of cypress, a wood that does not rot.

solid wall at the end of the room in order to give the appearance of greater length. In between the shelves is the doorway that leads to the winter room. Although it is not topped with a transom opening, the space beyond is clearly visible through a custom designed and crafted balcony railing that is made of painted steel. This railing is used in four places inside and outside the house. However, each one is slightly different because of the way it is mounted and the role it plays in each spot.

In addition to the steel railings outside the house, there are painted metal trellises on which green vines climb and twist upwards.

The roof of the house is a basic asphalt shingle. Nothing fancy was necessary, says Black, because the stone architecture, which includes parapet walls, chimneys, gables and dormers, is appropriate decoration.

Like the house, the furniture and accessories feature hand-made quality that is simple and elegant. The client previously owned most of the items. **IS**