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LIVING IN TEXAS

home



From top: The luminescence of white plaster walls contrasts with the texture of the reclaimed wood ceiling planks and beams in the Burruses' dining room; Ruthie Burrus admires the work of John Saladino and asked designer Ginger Barber to model her kitchen after his romantic Montecito villa, where he designed stainless steel lower cabinets as an antidote to the rusticity of reclaimed wood ceilings.

AUSTIN

PAST MEETS PRESENT

Beloved antiques and reclaimed wood make an Austin couple's newly built house look aged to perfection.

By Helen Thompson // Photography by Casey Dunn

It would be easy to imagine that the rambling limestone house where Ruthie and Gene Burrus live is original to the beautiful hill atop which it sits, a perch overlooking the city of Austin that could be praised as the best elevation in the Hill Country. At the tip end of a suburban road, the two-story house is so neatly tucked into the landscape of its own little mountain that it might be the best-kept secret in town. "Nearly everyone," says Ruthie, "who comes up here says, 'We didn't know this was here!'"

The Burruses are from East Texas but had always wanted to live in the Hill Country. When Gene sold his company and the children all went off to college, the couple decided to begin a new adventure in Austin, where they had close family ties. They interviewed architects and settled on Ryan Street (rsassoc.com), an Austin native with a flair for designing gracious site-specific homes. "He immediately

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From top: Just beyond the living room, the porch offers alfresco dining around a custom table topped with a slab of Pennsylvania bluestone; the cozy guest room is meant to feel like a traditional Fredericksburg Sunday house with its plaster fireplace, shiplap walls and wood ceiling.

«*“Being a fourth-generation lumberman, it was important to use material that told a story. I handpicked every beam and every piece of heart pine flooring and paneling used in the house.”* —HOMEOWNER GENE BURRUS »



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...CONTINUED understood what we wanted,” says Ruthie. “This house is for family—we didn’t want people to drive up the driveway and say, ‘Oh! House!’” Instead, they wanted something quieter—“Underwhelming,” explains Ruthie. “Not overwhelming.”

Street’s design steers away from the nostalgic, though, offering a renewed version of much-adored Hill Country style. The architect has deftly edged what could have been a traditional house into the more invigorating realm of modern with the prominent use of expansive steel gridded windows that look into courtyards, define porches and capture big views such as the close-up garden vision from the dining room. “I have nothing on the dining room table because the outside is so packed with texture and color,” Ruthie says. “The view is like the wallpaper.”

To keep the focus on the outside world (it’s a certified Monarch Waystation as well as a Certified Wildlife Habitat) that avid gardener Ruthie has lovingly cultivated, she and Gene worked with Houston-based interior designer Ginger Barber (gingerbarber.com), who is well-known as a virtuoso of the neutral palette. “I didn’t want anything with scrolls or that was shiny,” says Ruthie. Barber’s natural style is tranquil, and she stays away from the clutter of accessories. “I emphasize rugs and special pieces,” she says.

Barber incorporated old wood into the decor, making room for antique chairs and tables that belonged to Ruthie’s and Gene’s parents and grandparents. She also worked with Gene on his special interest: “Being a fourth-generation lumberman, it was important to use material that told a story,” he says. “I handpicked every beam and every piece of heart pine flooring and paneling used in the house.” The main center beam in the family room came from an 1860s-era building at the Naval Air Station Pensacola; most of the other old pine was salvaged from a turn-of-the-century warehouse adjacent to the Harris County Jail. Although the Burrus house is brand-new, it’s full of the kind of character that comes only with age—which is exactly what the couple asked for. “We wanted this house,” says Ruthie, “to look like it had been here a long time.” ■