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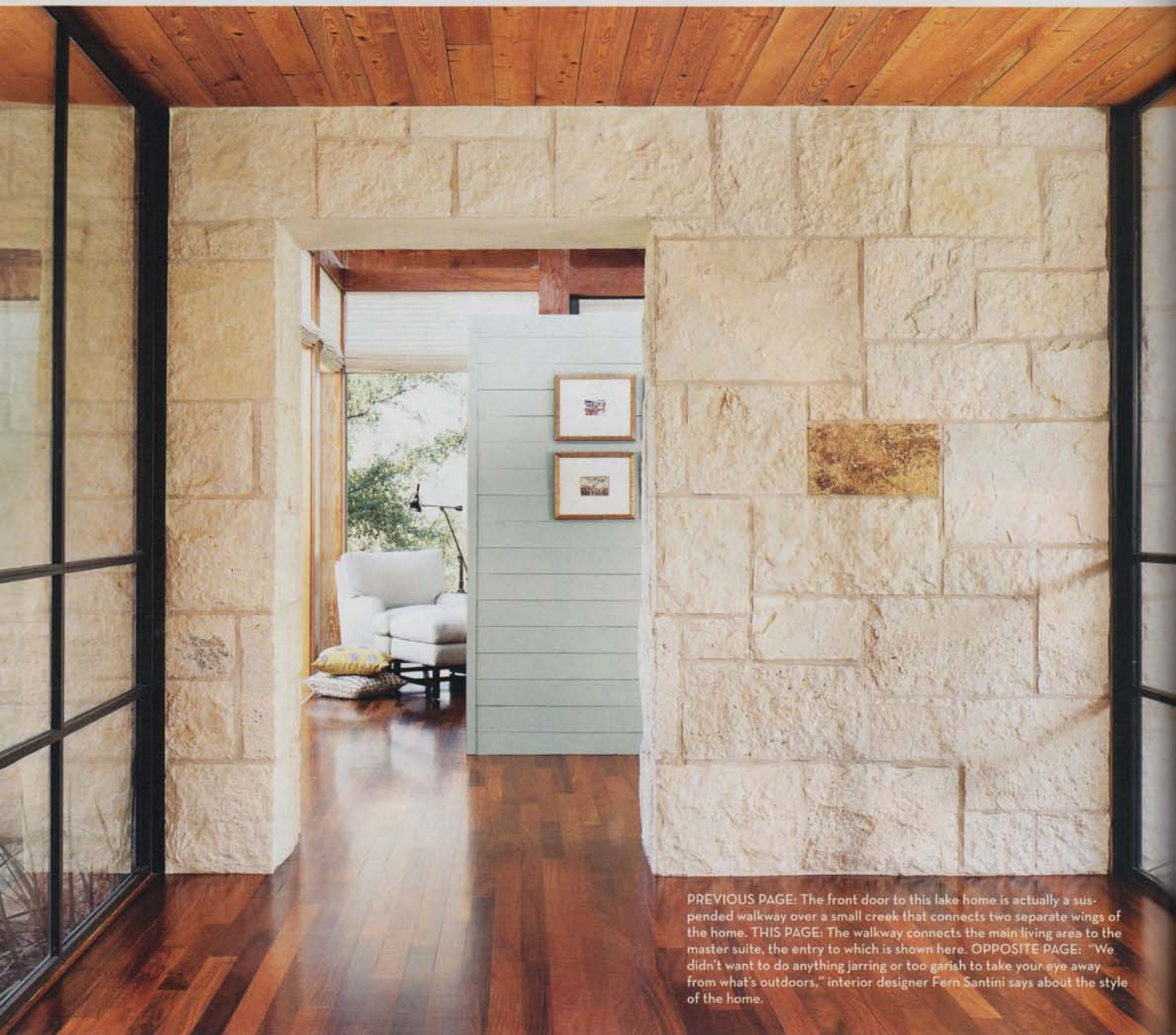


# a natural fit

Architect Mell Lawrence designed a Lake Travis home that blends effortlessly with its natural environment.

BY LIBBY DEAN HOPPE  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CASEY DUNN





PREVIOUS PAGE: The front door to this lake home is actually a suspended walkway over a small creek that connects two separate wings of the home. THIS PAGE: The walkway connects the main living area to the master suite, the entry to which is shown here. OPPOSITE PAGE: "We didn't want to do anything jarring or too garish to take your eye away from what's outdoors," interior designer Fern Santini says about the style of the home.

“**T**his is not a house that says, ‘Look at me. I’m here,’” says architect Mell Lawrence, describing the hillside home he designed on the north shore of Lake Travis. From the street, the house is barely visible, even though it measures more than 6,000 square feet and incorporates a separate garage and guesthouse. The house overlooks the lake, but from the water, it disappears under a canopy of live oak trees. Built from natural materials like Texas limestone, cedar and glass, the house feels like an extension of the nature that surrounds it. Even the front door, camouflaged as part of a bridged walkway connecting two separate wings, is a little hard to spot.

But inside, the grand home commands attention. Visitors’ eyes are drawn to sweeping dark wood floors, a wall of windows revealing a panoramic view and an exposed-beam ceiling spanning the main corridor. The interiors feel rich but not overwhelming.

The homeowners are Texas natives who lived in Colorado for many years before returning south, so hints of stately log cabins nestled in the Rocky Mountains creep into some design elements, such as the large stone fireplace and substantial fir beams that connect the floor to the ceiling. But the house feels contemporary and fresh, maintaining an open layout while still feeling cozy and inviting.

Like the winding path that leads to the front door, the design process was a long one, going through a series of





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LEFT: Architect Mell Lawrence designed the home to follow the natural ridge of the limestone cliff it sits on. The outdoors and the environment dictated many of the design elements of the Lake Travis home.

dips and curves along the way. “The idea for the house you see didn’t begin at the beginning,” says Lawrence.

When he first met with the homeowners, they had purchased a narrow lot on relatively rough terrain in a new neighborhood. Designing a custom home on a small lot was the first challenge Lawrence faced, but there were other limitations, too. The lot faced west, which meant sunlight would stream directly through the windows that would provide the lakeside view. That can be hard on air conditioning bills in Central Texas. The house would also sit on the edge of a limestone cliff with a ledge 100 feet above the lake. A vast collection of evergreen live oak trees also challenged the design team because the homeowners wanted to keep the trees and the natural environment relatively untouched.

But planning around those hurdles ultimately led to a stunning, innovative and creative design. A few months into the project, the homeowners lucked into buying the adjacent lot, which opened up both the design possibilities and, in essence, the home.

The house ended up following the natural curve and direction of the large stone cliff on which it sits. Lawrence incorporated an entire wall of windows on the west-facing side and added a 15-foot overhang above the windows to shade from the sun. But as it turns out, the trees shade more than the overhang does. “The roof never gets higher than the tree canopy,” says Lawrence, and the natural environment the homeowners wanted to preserve found its way indoors. The style, materials and design features of the home mimic the surroundings beyond its walls.

The most striking and visible natural element inside is the wood. The floors throughout are ipe lumber, oiled and waxed multiple times for the smoothest finish, which Lawrence chose because he wanted the darkest wood possible. All exposed beams and framing are Douglas fir, complemented by cypress ceilings and pine walls.

Interior designer Fern Santini helped the homeowners choose a soothing color palette that draws in the trees,

cold.  
very livable.”





OPPOSITE PAGE: The master suite is separated from the main part of the house but maintains the same design elements, such as the exposed-beam ceiling and ipe floors. THIS PAGE: The master bathroom sits right off the bedroom and includes two separate vanities and a walk-in tiled shower.



ABOVE: The kitchen and the adjacent family room are the most utilized spaces in the house. BELOW: The walls that separate each room never reach the ceiling, giving the home a very open, inviting atmosphere. OPPOSITE PAGE: Natural materials are used throughout the home, including steel, wood and glass, to keep the home connected to the outside environment. "I try to stay away from too many painted surfaces," says architect Mell Lawrence.





“The house is open but not wasted. All the spaces are so usable. You don’t have rooms that you never go into.”

stone and vegetation outside. They chose a range of greens with hints of blue and gray for the walls and pulled in punches of copper accents. “We didn’t want to do anything jarring or too garish to take your eye away from what’s outdoors,” Santini says. She chose Farrow & Ball paints because of their color dimensions and dynamic qualities. “The blues are not too blue, the grays are not too gray,” she says. “The colors change throughout the day with the light.”

Other highly visible natural materials in the house include limestone blocks and glass, used on the interiors and exteriors. The 2-foot-thick limestone walls creep toward the ceiling but never reach it, giving the home a very open feeling. “The wall comes up high enough so you get privacy, but the glass above still lets you get morning sunlight,” says Lawrence. The house is open but the distinct living spaces feel separate. The primary living area, which includes the kitchen, sitting room, formal dining room and living room, occupies the main hallway that bends along the curving wall of windows. Two guest bedrooms with attached bathrooms extend down another hallway near the entrance of the house past the kitchen.

“The house is open but not wasted,” says Santini. “All the spaces are so usable. You don’t have rooms that you never go into.” The master suite is on the opposite side of the home, connected to the main living area and guest living area by the bridged front-door walkway. A small creek runs underneath the walkway and leads to the open-air patio that can be accessed from the main living area. “The master feels connected to the house but still private,” Santini says, making it perfect for the couple when guests, including children and grandchildren, visit.

Santini describes the home as casually elegant. “It’s contemporary without being cold,” she says. “It’s very inviting and very livable.” Lawrence, Santini, the architectural design team and a crew of contractors created a home that feels open but private, concealed from the neighborhood but exposed to the natural environment. The design looks random and loose, but it actually followed very rigid and concise planning. It’s a house that’s not really what it seems on first glance, or even on the second or third. “It’s a nice house to move through,” says Lawrence. “You propel your body through the house and around corners, and it just feels right.”