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The open-plan area fills most of the original structure (there's also a bedroom for the couple's two young sons). Architect Mell Lawrence visually expanded the narrow building and added great natural light with a line of windows along one whole end of the home. Dining furniture includes an old teak table and Thonet schoolhouse chairs. Opposite: Two new armchairs designed by Thomas O'Brien and a vintage Knoll table sit before the fireplace.



Good Save!



MET HOME OF THE MONTH VERNACULAR MODERN

Austin architect Mell Lawrence renovated a hand-built '80s house and added new space in a pair of courtyard-embracing wings.



Kimberly Renner is an indefatigable and unabashed junker. The former manager of a City of Austin recycling program, she will often spring out of bed on a predawn Saturday morning, give the classifieds a brisk perusal and head out with her husband, Dan, to hit flea markets, office closeouts and the monthly city-wide garage sale. When it came time to look for a house, the energetic duo launched the search with similar zeal—and basically the identical goal: to snag an underappreciated, overlooked treasure they could salvage and love back into use.

Although their quarry varies, the Renners' standards are always the same. "We look for something unique," says Dan, an attorney with a background in property development. And they do mean unique, having honed their envisioning skills on a previous residence, a six-unit apartment building that they skinned down to reveal a fine Craftsman-style house underneath. So, when their current search led to the hills ringing downtown Austin and a strange two-story rectangular structure sided in blue vinyl, Kimberly discerned that her mission was accomplished: "I had been interested in rural buildings," she says, "and this one was intriguing."

The Renners' architect, Mell Lawrence, was intrigued too—and worried. "Why did she choose this?" he wondered. "I was kind of freaked." Interior designer Fern Santini concurred: "I'm a pretty good judge of seeing what's possible," she remembers, "but I didn't see it here." And with good reason. The 3,000-square-foot, two-story structure, hand-built in the '80s by an engineering professor, was forbiddingly dark, thanks to its

cobbled-together series of rooms. But the eccentricities didn't concern Kimberly. "The unsightly parts of the house could be easily eliminated," she reasoned with pragmatic conviction.

Besides, the structure was sturdy, if nothing else. "The builder had obviously studied traditional barn construction," says Kimberly. "He did a phenomenal job in the execution of the posts and beams." The skeleton of structural support was essentially the only architectural flourish of the gambrel-roof house. But up close the posts and beams were the wacky adaptations of a self-taught lone builder. "He couldn't lift big beams by himself," explains Dan, "so he used two-by-six pine planks and laid them one on top of the other until he got the thickness needed to support the ceiling as well as the second floor on top."

"Kimberly took that ad hoc spirit and ran with it," says Lawrence. Instead of wrenching perfection from the unrepentantly idiosyncratic residence, she, Dan and Lawrence decided to let the home be what it was. "The architectural elements of this house were unintentionally complex," says the architect, "and the best thing we could do was to make them make sense in a simple way."

"This is where I needed Fern's help," says Kimberly, whose mother, Sandy Thompson—also an interior designer—had engendered in her a near-genetic instinct for constant reinvention. And when it came to furnishing their quirky, hand-built house, predictable just wasn't going to be enough.

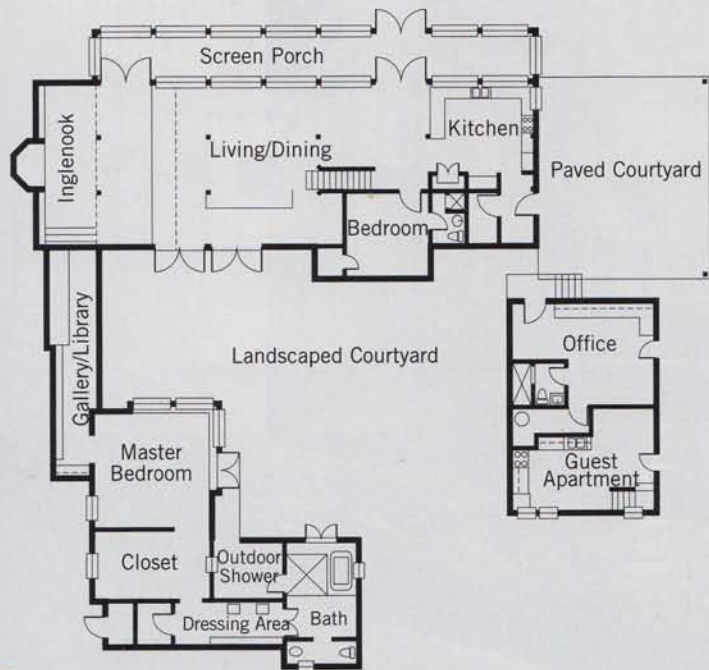
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In the breakfast area, seating from an old filling station pulls up to a new rosewood Parsons table under an Ingo Maurer chandelier. Opposite (from left): A discarded industrial prep table now serves as the kitchen's island; the new master suite and gallery form a landscaped courtyard that is further defined by an office/guest house wing.

The Renners turned an old movie-theater-poster frame into a mirror for the bedroom. Opposite (from top): The bathtub is poured concrete; for the dressing area, Kimberly specified his and her industrial sinks to complement metal hospital cabinets the couple got when the local air force base shut down.





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ecause the space was really long and skinny," designer Santini says, "there weren't a lot of options for what Kimberly wanted to do, which was to actually live in the house." In the final plan, living space is casual around the kitchen; toward the fireplace end of the room things become more formal, with a luminous three-tiered paper chandelier afloat under the 20-foot-high cathedral ceiling.

Furniture selection was a matter of editing down. Thanks to the couple's avid scavenging habit, they had accumulated versatile pieces such as the Thonet classroom chairs from the University of Texas, now paired with a beat-up Spanish colonial table in the dining area. A garage sale yielded the two 1950s-era banquettes and matching chairs from a filling station waiting room. "The upholstery was rotting but really cool," says Santini. Re-covered in Naugahyde and with new nickel plating on the arms and legs, the seating is impervious to the occasional mealtime antics of the Renners' two young sons.

"There are extremes in this house," says Santini, "but the bedroom was the wildest thing Kimberly dreamed up." The mood is summer-camp efficient, with waxed-concrete floors, wood-plank walls glistening in a mossy semigloss and a tented canvas ceiling—except that iridescent taffeta curtains billow out from the windows with voluptuous dressiness (never mind that they hang from galvanized-metal rods).

"Kimberly's got an unbelievable eye," says Santini. "She's a supreme junker of the highest order—and she had the self-confidence to know that this renovation was going to work."





Details

1 Sliding barn doors with hardware off the shelf of the local building-supply store are a space-saving tactic favored by architect Mell Lawrence, who confesses he just plain likes them. The canvas tented ceiling was designed by Kimberly Renner, made by a local sailmaker and hung by Dan (after three attempts).

2 In the master bathroom, part of the home's addition, Kimberly chose plain-Jane outdoor hose bibs from Home Depot for her faucets to contrast with the glamorous gilt mirror above the sink.

3 Plumbing was also a factor in the old house, where the Renners decided to leave sewage pipes from the upstairs bathroom exposed. They became the frame for the steel partition in the entry. "You can only hear the toilet flushing if you are standing really close," says Dan with a hint of amusement.

4 The long gallery connecting the original house to the master bedroom and bath sits on pier and beam, mimicking the home's

dominant construction element. "It's like a bridge," says Lawrence. To take advantage of the transitional space, Lawrence turned it into a library by adding bookshelves and a daybed.

5 An outdoor shower is reminiscent of rugged stone bathhouses often seen in Texas campgrounds built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s and admired by both Kimberly and Dan. The light fixture is another of Kimberly's finds; local sculptor Bertold Haas carved the shower spout from native limestone.

6 Widely available waterproof exterior toggle switches caught Kimberly's eye; she placed them throughout the house. "You can even put dimmers on them," she says. The architect approved: "I like the idea of taking regional materials, such as the wood and stone in this house," he says, "and reinterpreting them with modern design sensibilities." 🌿

See Resources, last pages.

