

an Open Invitation

In an Austin neighborhood, an architect helps friends build a welcoming home.

Sherry Birk, Anthony Orona, and their children, Zuri and Mateo, make the most of the kitchen and dining area in their new home in Austin. The couple tapped HR Design Dept, whose co-principal, Eric Hughes, is a longtime friend of Anthony's,

to design the midcentury-inspired, one-story house. The Tulip table is by Eero Saarinen for Knoll, and the A-Beam pendant is from Hand&Eye. Appliances include a Fisher & Paykel stove and a wine cooler from KitchenAid.



Zuri gives Mateo a hand in front of the floating white oak bench in the entryway (left). An open door reveals a home office behind walls painted Greenblack from Sherwin-Williams. In the large central courtyard (below), a heritage pecan tree rises above the roofline, and a 10-by-30-foot pool is set into the ipe wood deck. “It’s so nice back here in the summer in the shade,” says Sherry. “We don’t even have to put sunscreen on the kids. It’s a true little oasis.”

“Sherry had an amazing vision for the house and a great back-and-forth with the designers. We laugh that if it had been up to me, I would have told them to just do whatever they wanted.”

ANTHONY ORONA, RESIDENT

When Sherry Birk and Anthony Orona moved into their dream house, it wasn’t the ideal time to meet the neighbors. It was April of 2020, and Austin, like much of the world, was under stay-at-home orders. But the couple soon discovered that their house was a point of connection. People walking by could see into the office where Sherry and Anthony take turns working, and where their dog, Bo, keeps an eye on the street. Sherry hung a poster by artist Nicole Lavelle that could be seen through the front window—“I CAN’T DO THIS BUT I’M DOING IT ANYWAY,” it says—and it struck a chord. Neighbors waved and stopped to chat from a distance. “Now we’re all friends,” says Sherry.

It wasn’t quite the move-in experience the pair expected, but the home is exactly what they wanted. They credit their architect, Eric Hughes of Houston firm HR Design Dept, with creating a house that feels like a part of the neighborhood. Sherry, who was born in New Orleans, and Anthony, who comes from Houston, embody Southern hospitality. “I want people to feel at home in this house,” explains Sherry. “Like if we had a party, people could just walk in and get a drink.”

Their architect got it, and not just abstractly. As Anthony’s best friend and former housemate, Hughes has been a guest at many of the couple’s parties. >





He had recently finished his graduate studies at Rice University in Houston when he moved into a house with Anthony and another friend. Over the years, the two have seen each other through marriages, divorces, professional challenges, and successes. Sherry describes the men's friendship: "I don't think it's normal," she deadpans. "They FaceTime. They talk about emotions."

Anthony and Sherry met in 2016 after both moved to Austin for their jobs (she works in tech; he's a political organizer). When they first started dating, Sherry was a single mom to adopted daughter Zuri, then six, and was renting a house in Austin's Crestview neighborhood, an area with a midcentury vibe—most of the houses were built to cater to the post-WWII boom of young families. She loved the neighborhood and Zuri's local school but was starting to think about a more permanent home. "And I was thinking, well, if we get serious, there's just not an option on who the architect's going to be," says Anthony.

They got serious—they married in 2019—and, happily, they agreed on the architect. "I'd seen Eric's work and was super impressed," says Sherry. "He's an incredibly thoughtful person. He pays attention to every little detail. So the opportunity to work closely with someone like that and be part of the design process—I was just like, yeah, let's do it."

After some searching, the couple found a house for sale in Crestview. Built in 1947, the home was in bad shape, but the original owner, who was now quite >

The couple's bedroom features a Nook bed from Blu Dot, a vintage bedside table, and linens from Parachute. Bo, the family's Old English sheepdog, keeps Sherry company in the office (opposite, top). In the primary bathroom, a custom vanity is outfitted with American Standard faucets (opposite, bottom). The light is from Cedar & Moss, and the floor tiles are Concret from La Nova.



● **Crestview Residence**



ARCHITECT **HR Design Dept**
LOCATION **Austin, Texas**

- A Entrance
- B Office
- C Living Room
- D Dining Area
- E Kitchen
- F Utilities
- G Bathroom
- H Bedroom
- I Walk-in Closet

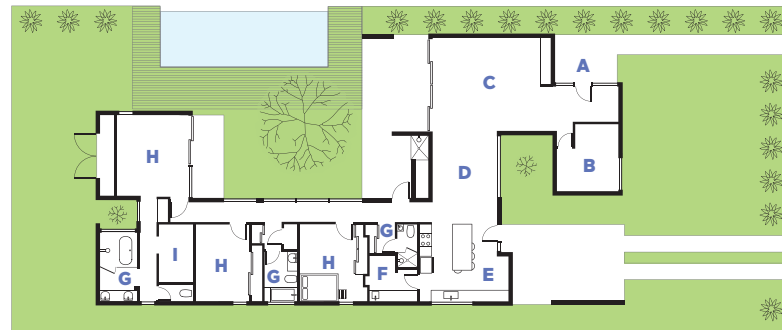


ILLUSTRATION: LOHNES + WRIGHT

elderly, was reluctant to sell the property to builders. Sherry wrote her a letter telling her they would create a house that fit with the neighborhood. “And she accepted our offer,” Sherry says. “It just felt right.”

The lot, roughly a quarter of an acre, had one big constraint—a giant pecan tree smack in the middle. The City of Austin’s rigorous tree preservation requirements and Sherry’s desire for a one-story house with a pool led to a courtyard approach: The house wraps around the tree. While the new structure feels contemporary, it has roots in midcentury design, from the low-slung horizontality of the street facade to the blurring of interior and exterior spaces. The use of brick, which Sherry chose for its solidity and tactile quality, likewise feels like a contemporary twist on a midcentury approach (single-story brick houses abound in the neighborhood). In Hughes’s design, the brick wraps from outside to inside, creating a strong sense of order behind the greenery and glass. At 2,500 square feet, the house is not exactly small, but its size feels considered. There’s plenty of room, all in the right places.

Hughes approached the house as a series of unfolding experiences. “There’s an overarching communal flow to the home and the way in which entertaining spaces work together, and then there are these separate, choreographed moments within that,” he says. A visitor comes right into the kitchen—the formal entrance off the front walk gets much less use than the door from the carport—and is promptly handed a drink across the generous island. The kitchen, dining area, and living room, arranged in a line, are book-ended by vaulted clerestories, one north-facing for ambient illumination and one east-facing to bring in morning light. Windows further define particular experiences: The dining area, for instance, is sheltered from the busy central courtyard and pool area by a solid wall and oriented instead toward a small courtyard >

The dark metal fascia emphasizes the home’s horizontality and complements the earth-toned brick facade. “Brick was such a good material for this project,” says Hughes’s partner, architect Heather Rowell. “It creates a rhythm and simplicity on the outside—a mathematical rigor—but on the inside, it’s so easy to set up a playful contrast with bright white drywall.”



“Anthony and Sherry love to entertain, so they wanted something that felt a little more austere from the street and then became warm and cozy on the interior.”

ERIC HUGHES, ARCHITECT

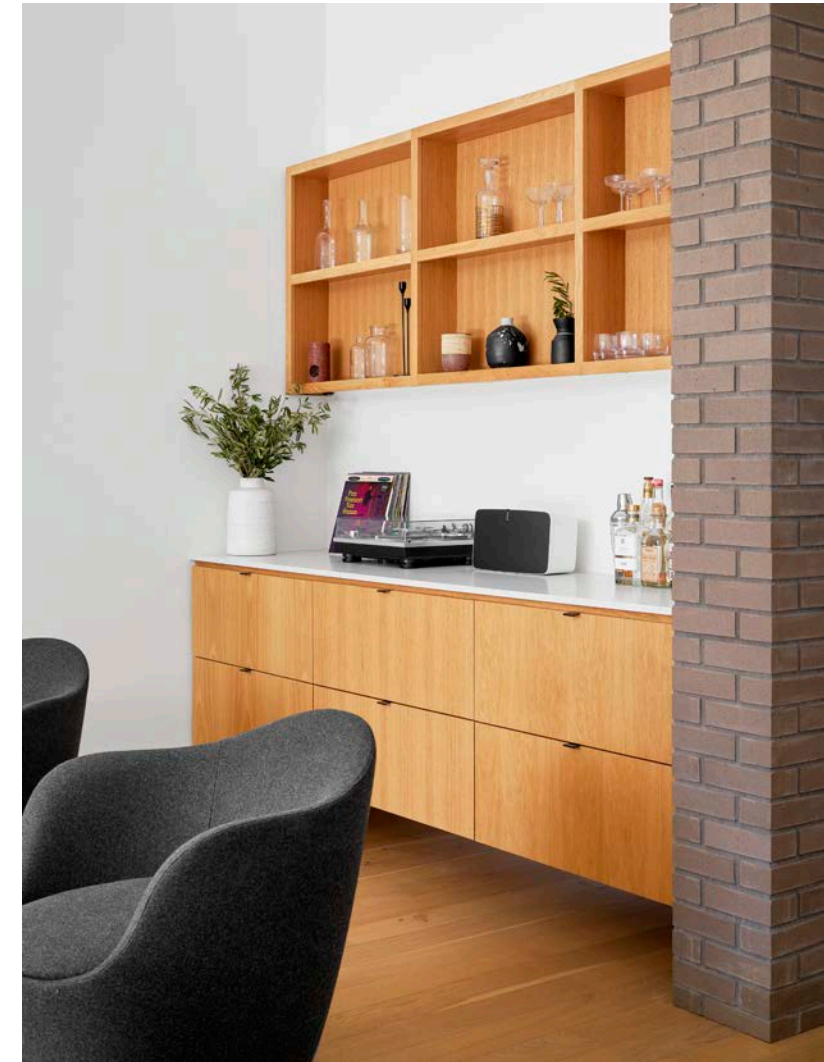


near the front of the house. In the living room, splayed light wells bounce sunlight off the ceiling in contrast to the brick walls. A long, sunny hallway leads to a guest bathroom and the kids' rooms, and the couple's bedroom and bath are tucked in the back. Here, the primary bathroom faces a private internal courtyard, creating a moment of cool calm.

Sherry and Anthony adopted Mateo, now two, as the house was under construction. Hughes designed the interior trim with kids in mind, eschewing pristine details like flush baseboards for practical ones like jambs that stick out past the drywall, "in case someone runs a dump truck down the hallway," he says. For Zuri, now 10, Hughes designed built-in bunk beds that lead to an alcove for stuffed animals, Legos, and other treasures. (Zuri has clearly inherited Sherry's hospitable nature—her bunk beds are her favorite place in the house because she can have sleepovers.)

"We really want whoever is going to live in a house to take ownership and make the place their own," says Heather Rowell, Hughes's partner at HR Design Dept. "In a kid's room, it's by adding these little playful elements that make them fall in love with their room just as much as their parents fall in love with their house."

Parties may be on hold for a bit longer, but meanwhile, the carport provides shelter for frequent poker nights, and neighbors are talking about enjoying the pool this summer. Hughes is also looking forward to spending time in his friends' new home. "It's very satisfying—it's the first time I've completed a house I get to spend the night in," he says with a smile. ■



Floor-to-ceiling windows from Ram usher in light during the day and emit a welcoming glow at night (opposite). A pair of Lina swivel chairs by Hlynur Atlason for Design Within Reach sit in front of custom white oak cabinetry designed by Hughes and fabricated by Austin Wood Works (above). Zuri and Mateo share reading time on the bottom bunk in Zuri's bedroom (left).

