

Dallas Couple Calls Fort Worth Pied-À-Terre Home

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By Gaile Robinson



Photo by Ralph Lauer

It was just going to be a small house, something Ernie Easley could stay in overnight instead of commuting back to Dallas during the work week. Three years ago, Ernie, who is a geologist, began working for a Fort Worth-based oil and gas company and had no intention of moving permanently to Fort Worth. His wife, Diane, who was tucked into her dream home in Preston Hollow, certainly didn't want to move. The commute became grinding, and Ernie decided to build a pied-à-terre — someplace where he could overnight. He found a lot he liked near Shady Oaks County Club and began talking to architect Joe Self with FIRM817.

Fast-forward, and now both Ernie and Diane — and their three dogs — have relocated to Fort Worth. The Dallas house was sold. It was during the construction phase of the overnight house that they made the decision to relocate. When it was completed in the fall of 2014, everyone moved in. There were some big changes; they were downsizing by half, and most of their furniture had to be jettisoned.

Ernie had a few requests before the design process began. He wanted some rock masonry by Doug Robinson, whose work he had seen and admired, and he wanted an L-shaped house to allow as much back

yard as possible. While he didn't ask for it, he got something he had wanted: a master bedroom with a view of the pool. It was a short list.

Diane was still under the impression she would be living in Dallas, so she didn't weigh in during the early rounds. The Easleys' house is surrounded by mock Meds — two-story, white stucco-walled houses with orange tile roofs and wrought-iron balconies. These were built in conformance to the HOA building guidelines and also because it is a popular builder template. Initially, Self worried that there seemed to be little room for deviation. "After closely reading the guidelines, I realized there was a lot of latitude," he says.

Self's solution was a two-story, prairie-style contemporary house with four porches — two upstairs and two down — and lots of windows that allow natural light. The three-bedroom, 3 1/2-bath home had to meet a square-footage requirement in relation to the lot size. Self managed to design the house with the smallest allowable square footage, place it as close to the lot line as allowed, bring it as far forward as possible and give the Easleys a sizable back yard.

The exterior belies the expansiveness within. The kitchen and living area are a single room with a two-story ceiling and a wall of windows to the back yard, so it is always light-filled and airy. A second-floor gallery connects the two upstairs bedrooms and small seating area. Steel rails along the stairway and gallery provide shadow play most of the day.

Self is a proponent of elements that cast shadows, saying they animate the space. He is not crazy about western-facing windows, and in the dining room with a west-facing wall, the windows were kept low to the ground and quite narrow. They allow natural light but not blazing afternoon sun.

For all its simplicity of spatial volumes, there is an exquisite interplay of textures inside and out. The smooth Lueders stone used as pool coping and wall caps contrasts well with the stacked limestone and granite on the fireplace wall. A polished quartzite counter underlit with LED sheet lighting and the porcelain tile floors on the ground floor offer a slick reflective contrast to the maple cabinets and rough stone. "We wanted tile floors because of the dogs," Ernie says. The couple also wanted baseboards that would be as easy to clean as the floor. So Self designed a tile border treatment with a recessed aluminum strip between the wall and the tile. Walls of natural maple cabinets with straight grain and no hardware hide all the stuff that usually sits on counters and tabletops. "We don't like a lot of clutter. We don't have baby pictures and plates or tchotchkes," Diane says. The blond maple was also used for shelving to display Ernie's collection of rocks and minerals, and for the floating cabinets in the dining room, as well as all the kitchen cabinetry.

Because the house was designed as a simple stopover for Ernie, Self included many built-ins so he wouldn't need a great deal of furniture. An L-shaped, white-leather sofa and bar stools are the only furniture in the living area. Diane found those at BoConcept in Dallas. Most of the art was bought from the galleries in the Dallas Design District or in Santa Fe. Self and his wife, Tracy, who helps with the space planning, measured

the Easleys' art to make sure works would fit the walls and that the cabinetry could support the weight of the sculptures and fossils.

“They wanted a lot of open living because they entertained a lot,” Tracy says. “So we designed space that was easy to have people go in and out from the pool and outdoor kitchen. “Almost all of our designs begin with space planning; we organize it around how the family lives and functions. “This house was actually not a difficult design process.” she says. “In fact, it was probably the fastest one we have ever done. They responded quickly and rarely changed a thing.”