Stress Free in South Texas

Fine Homebuilding 2013 HOUSES AWARD

BEST RETIREMENT HOME

Our award for best retirement home goes to Jon Nystrom for the house he designed and built for himself and his wife in Boerne, Texas. Designed with an emphasis on long-term livability and built with regionally appropriate, durable, and low-maintenance materials, this home is remarkably fit for aging in place in style and comfort.

Drawings: Martha Garstang Hill

A low-cost, low-maintenance home offers comfortable living for the long haul

BY JON NYSTROM

A controlled approach. *The front of the house is partially hidden by the garage and is accessed by a stone path leading through an iron gate beneath an old mesquite timber and into an intimate courtyard.*

All of us hope to retire someday. To do so in the home of our dreams, one that enables as long a stay as possible, is a goal seldom realized. After living for 21 years in New England, my wife and I finally decided to return to her native Texas Hill Country with the hope of building a retirement home that I would design.

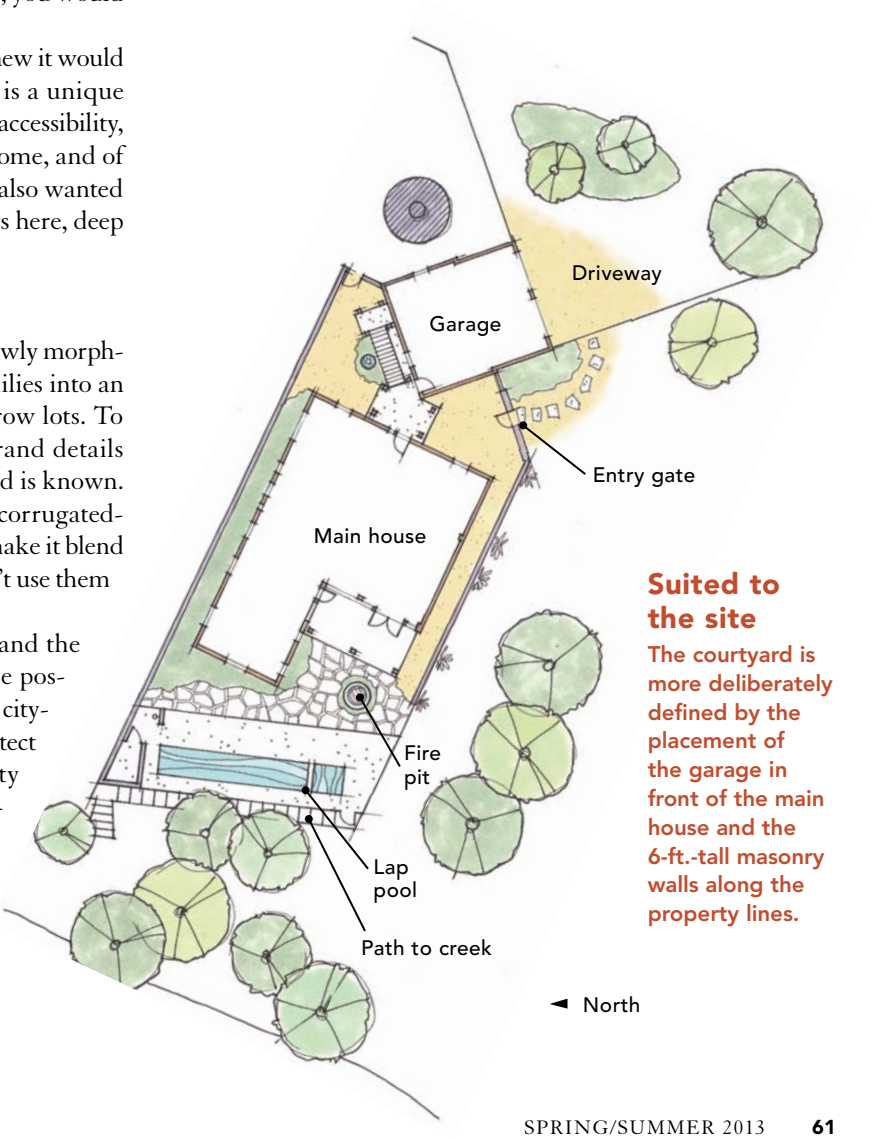
Nancy and I found a small plot of land close to downtown Boerne, just north of San Antonio, where we could walk to shops and restaurants; be near our friends, community services, and health-care providers; and enjoy the area's natural beauty. The house we built there is next to Frederick Creek, and when sitting beside it on a swing in the shade, you would never guess that Main Street is only a few blocks away.

Designing our house was demanding, mostly because we knew it would be our home for the rest of our lives. A retirement home is a unique project in that it involves careful consideration of long-term accessibility, maintenance, energy efficiency, affordability on a fixed income, and of course, comfort. In addition to these practical concerns, we also wanted a beautiful home, one that would fit in with its surroundings here, deep in the heart of Texas.

Blending into an evolving neighborhood

We built our home in a transitional neighborhood, an area slowly morphing from a barrio of homesteads occupied by extended families into an eclectic mixture of new homes built close together on narrow lots. To build a house in the middle of a manicured lawn with grand details would definitely stand out in The Flats, as our neighborhood is known. However, simple homes with limestone-gravel driveways, corrugated-metal roofs, and stucco walls are common. In an attempt to make it blend in, we built our home with known elements, even if we didn't use them in quite the same way as our neighbors.

We carefully considered the siting of the house as well, and the arrangement of the main house and the garage were made possible by our unique lot. Our site is bordered on one side by a city-owned 50-ft.-wide easement. Not only does the easement protect us from future development on the southwestern property line, but we're also allowed to use half of it for our driveway, which allowed us to turn our two-car, detached garage 45° to the street. We did this for two reasons. The roof is oriented due south at a 30° slope, which is ideal for photovoltaic panels. Currently, only solar hot-water panels occupy the garage roof. We are waiting for more tax incentives before filling the remaining roof with PV



Suited to the site

The courtyard is more deliberately defined by the placement of the garage in front of the main house and the 6-ft.-tall masonry walls along the property lines.

The heart of the home. *The combined living and dining area is the epicenter of the floor plan and is set before a glazed wall to establish a strong connection to the outdoors and creek basin.*

panels. The location of the garage also allows it to serve as a buffer between the house and the street. Stucco privacy walls along the side property lines terminate in iron gates on both sides of the garage. This layout creates an intimate front courtyard between the house and the garage that is private, quiet, and shaded, with the prevailing breeze floating through. With a small fountain that gurgles close by the front door, the courtyard offers a secure, serene feeling as you enter the house.

Wide-open living

I organized the floor plan so that visitors are welcomed immediately into the house's core: a timber-frame dining and living area with soaring 22-ft.-tall ceilings. The massive Douglas-fir beams evoke a remarkable sense of structure and craftsmanship, but they also temper the scale of the room to make it feel expansive yet comfortable.

The floor plan grows from this main living area and is as space efficient as I could make it. There are no hallways occupying valuable square footage or limiting accessibility, and there aren't any spaces we don't use daily. The plan has been distilled to our absolute needs: a master suite, an office that can serve as additional guest space, a bathroom, and a kitchen connected to our living and dining area. The house is just under 2000 sq. ft., small by some standards, but it feels much larger due to this layout, the volume of each room, the amount of natural light, and the views introduced through carefully placed windows and doors.

The floor plan is also organized to create a focus on the outdoors—a big priority for Nancy and me. Having forgone the Hill Country trend of carving a building site out of a hilltop to capture panoramic landscape views, I designed a glass wall using Kawneer commercial window units to invite the outdoors into our daily lives and to allow the interior living space to extend onto the patio. Beyond the covered sitting and grill area, I placed a lap pool and spa that cling to the edge of the 18-ft.-high slope to the flood-

Photo this page: Jeff Williams

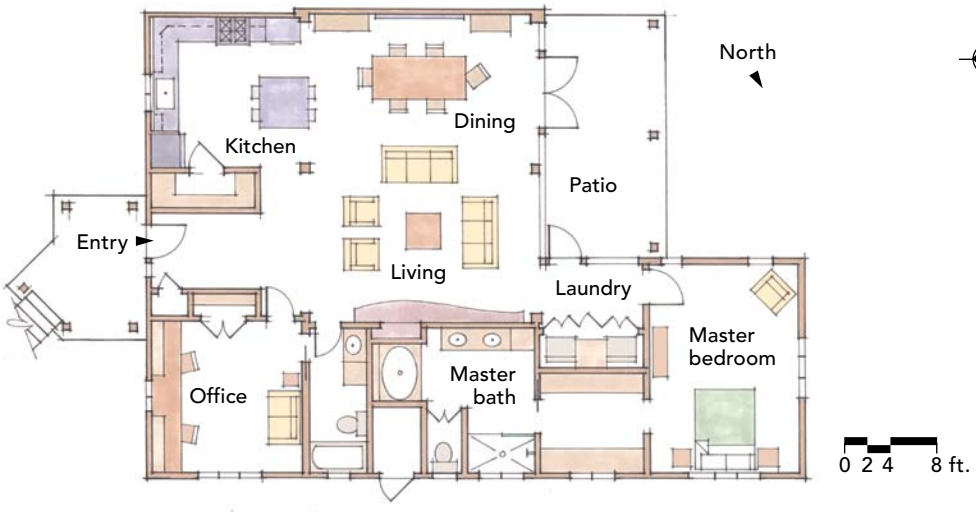
Design details that age well

You can't live in a home for very long if you can't maintain it, so this house was designed to be as maintenance free as possible to limit future expenses and also to accommodate aging occupants.

On the inside, concrete floors throughout the house are virtually indestructible and were chemically sealed as opposed to having a sealer applied. The more they're used, the more polished they will appear. The walls are not painted but instead have been finished with American Clay plaster impregnated with Nantucket Sand pigment in Enjarre finish. The timber-frame structure is made of pickled Douglas fir. The framework, combined with a minimal amount of similarly stained wood trim, enables the home to age gracefully, without the need for laborious repainting. All bathroom and kitchen countertops are poured quartz, requiring no special care.

A similar approach was taken on the exterior. Stucco and metal siding and roofing create a simple, durable exterior shell. There is no lawn, and planting beds that contain native wildflowers and plants that thrive in the hot, dry climate of the South are watered by an irrigation system supplied by water catchment in an added effort to make this home as easy to live in as possible.

Open access. *The kitchen offers plenty of circulation space, full four-finger-grip door and drawer pulls on maple cabinets, and an island with deep countertop overhangs that can accommodate wheelchair users.*



SPECS

Bedrooms: 2, including apartment

Bathrooms: 3, including apartment

Size: house, 1970 sq. ft.
apartment, 450 sq. ft.

Cost: $150 sq. ft.

Completed: 2011

Location: Boerne, Texas

Architect/builder: Jon Nystrom; jonnystromarchitect.com

plain of Frederick Creek. We will always experience the presence of water, even when the creek runs dry during periods of drought.

A garage apartment creates an adaptive home

Perhaps more than any other type of residence, a retirement home needs to be flexible. With this in mind, I designed the house to be as functional as possible and to adapt to our life as we age. The 450-sq.-ft. fully equipped apartment I placed above the garage is an important part of our efforts to live in this house for as long as we can.

We finished the garage apartment first, then lived in it for four months while we completed construction on the main house, which allowed us to move out of our rented condominium earlier than we would have otherwise. In addition to this early economic perk, the garage apartment serves as a guest space for family and friends. We also rent it out frequently, earning roughly twice the amount of our annual property-tax bill by doing so. As we age, we envision the apartment serving as living quarters for an in-home caregiver while we continue to enjoy privacy and a sense of independence in the main house.

Efficiency enables stability

Energy is getting expensive in South Texas, and we are running out of water—problems that are not at all unique to this part of the country. To maintain a sense of security and economic stability for our future, I designed the house to respond to the diminishing resources in our region.

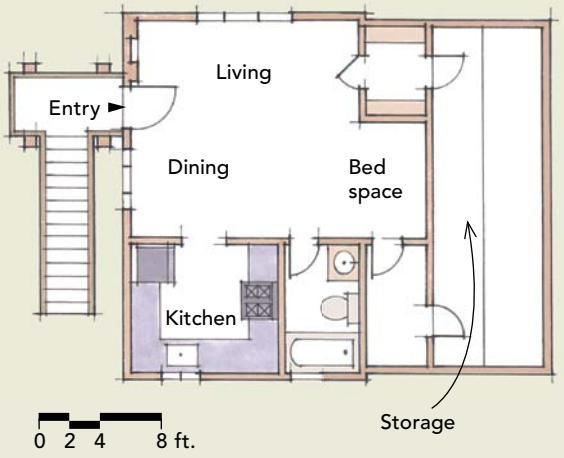
Not only can our roof efficiently accommodate the installation of photovoltaic panels, but we also harvest valuable rainwater from our roof. It doesn't rain often here, but when it does, it's typically a violent gully washer. We collect 1000 gal. of water with every inch of rain and store it in an 8400-gal. corrugated-steel tank. Reminiscent of some of the silos in this region, the tank is in the front yard beside the garage. The stored water irrigates the small amount of landscaping that we have on the property and helps to offset the water we consume for our pool.

Our biggest move toward creating an economical and efficient home was to build it

Flex space for long-term living

Homeowners committed to living in their house for the long haul need to prepare for unexpected challenges and potential services. The linchpin of this home's flexible design is the 450-sq.-ft. apartment over the garage. Designed to be comfortable for short or long stays, the apartment has a full kitchen and bathroom, should Jon and Nancy ever need permanent live-in help. The main living space, which serves as a den, a bedroom, and a dining area, is set beneath a ceiling clad with corrugated metal salvaged from the roof of the house that once occupied the site.

Overlooking the front courtyard, the apartment is isolated but not completely disconnected from the main house. Creating spaces that anticipate the trials of age—without stark reminders of the limitations ahead—is what comfortable, flexible design is all about.



with structural insulated panels (SIPs). The SIPs represented a 12% increase in construction cost over conventional framing, but now we have R-19 walls and an R-40 roof. With a tight, well-insulated envelope that minimizes thermal bridging, 1-in. argon-filled low-e windows, and permanent metal sunshades over south- and west-facing windows to reduce excessive solar heat gain, our HVAC system is roughly half the size of what it would have been otherwise. The design of this assembly, much like all the other elements in the house, is intended to yield low utility bills and minimal upkeep costs, which is paramount for our future comfort and our financial ability to stay put for as long as we can.

Nancy and I can't predict what lies on the horizon. Because we put a lot of ourselves into this home, however, we're confident that it's going to give back just as much and take care of us when we need it the most. □

Jon Nystrom is based in Boerne, Texas.
Photos by Rob Yagid, except where noted.

Design video: Scan here or visit FineHomebuilding.com for an inside look at this home and those behind its design.