

FORM and FUNCTION

UTSA architecture students learn to mix art, practicality

Editor's note: The UTSA College of Architecture is emerging with a distinctive approach to architectural education. To learn about it, Senior Critic Mike Greenberg is following the class that entered the program in the fall of 2004. This is his third report.

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"It's like life," Jon Thompson tells one of his students in the UTSA College of Architecture. "On one hand, we have beauty and love, and on the other hand we have to take the garbage out once a week."

The student, Charlene Friedsam, is at midpoint of the final project for Design 3, the third semester of intensive studio work. The project is a hypothetical sculpture gallery on the San Antonio River, across Jones Avenue from the San Antonio Museum of Art. At this stage of Friedsam's design, the gallery's cafe has a loading dock next to the river:

"You will have trouble getting this passed by the re-



ABOVE: Thompson designed this Hill Country home for Jim Spickard and Meredith McGuire to be a sequence of light and spatial experiences.

LEFT: McGuire stands inside the large screened porch of her Thompson-designed home, where a skylight illuminates a fireplace.



Magen Dean brings natural light into her gallery design with 'light shelves' on three walls and a curving interior wall rising above the roof to capture daylight.

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Real-world interlude

Scant ego is evident in one of Thompson's own recent residential projects.

To find it, you drive north of town on U.S. 281 to a large-lot subdivision near Bulverde. You pass numerous houses that are variously successful but invariably cliché-ridden knock-offs of traditional styles. Many of them dress in Hill Country drag. At last, you turn into the woods and find your reward in the secluded home of college professors Jim Spickard and Meredith McGuire.

At a first glance of the exterior, it is self-effacing, almost not architecture but utilitarian construction. It comprises two modest stucco buildings with pitched metal roofs and deep porches, outwardly not very different from thousands of plain-spoken, economical farm and ranch compounds, except for the rich colors of the stucco.

The larger structure holds the living quarters, including a generous screen porch with its own fireplace; the smaller holds the two professors' side-by-side studies. Forming a wide V with an opening between them, both buildings are oriented to a stand of live oaks and a small clearing beyond it.

As McGuire shows the house to a visitor, the intensity of design soon becomes evident. The house is all of a piece, nearly every detail emerging organically from the site, the climate and the couple's specific needs. It is all as inevitable as the egg.

Design began with conversation: "We talked a lot about the importance to us being in touch with nature and simplicity," McGuire recalled. Thompson asked the couple to set aside past desires and present fantasies and zero in on the reality of their life together.

"Jon said it's important to design a home to how you will be living when it's built. It was a way of getting us to talk about what we wanted as a couple. "That process of talking about the value of our marriage, what we enjoy doing together and separately -- that was great."

One challenge was to create storage for the couple's enormous number of books. As though to symbolize that books are integral to their lives rather than something apart, Thompson made the central hall a library, in effect. Thompson designed a wood shelving system that was cantilevered to limit the visual bulk.



The library-hallway of the house Jon Thompson designed for Jim Spickard and Meredith McGuire has framed views and a skylight to create a sequence of light and space.

All the common rooms radiate from that L-shaped space -- the screen porch, the living/dining room, the family room and the kitchen.

Every conceivable residual space was put to use for handsomely crafted storage. The heating system's return-air vent was tucked under a counter and integrated with a storage cabinet.

At the bottom of the kitchen island, Thompson designed a roll-out platform a few inches high -- to put Spickard at a comfortable height for kneading dough.

The house was designed with cross-ventilation in mind. "Even in summer, we can sleep with the windows open," McGuire said.

Thompson took special care to frame views -- not only to the woods outside the house, but within the house itself -- and modulate ceiling heights or room shapes so that the house is not just an arrangement of rooms, but a sequence of movement through and between them.

He also found ways to mold natural light into a sequence with carefully placed skylights: One clear slot opens up above the couple's bed, bathing the wall behind it in light during the day and providing a glimpse of the stars at night.