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Verdant Outlook



Although the gardens, patios, and landscaping are outdoors, they remain visible and integral to the life inside this Houston home

INTERIOR DESIGN BY *Kara Childress*
ARCHITECTURE BY *Curtis & Windham Architects*
STYLED BY *Shannon Bowers*

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Opening pages: A new house in Houston's River Oaks reflects an original melding of various Mediterranean styles; among the many distinctive architectural details is a deeply recessed quatrefoil window. Opposite: The glassed entry is furnished with a custom mirror from Holland MacRae set over an 18th-century Venetian console. The antique rug is from Carol Piper Rugs. This page: The living room blends a variety of contemporary items, including a sofa covered with Saladino by Savel Stonewash linen. A low-to-the-ground custom coffee table sits on an area rug from Matt Camron Rugs and Tapestries.





Opposite: A separate room in the home is devoted exclusively to the piano, with a zebra-striped ottoman used in lieu of a traditional stool at the keyboard. A pedestal stone table is paired with an antique sofa that assumes an elongated, sinuous form. An artwork by David Yarrow hangs above the sofa. Above: A stone table serves as the desk in the client's office. A pair of lanterns from W. Gardner, Ltd. hang above. Chairs from Saladino, covered in leather, are grouped at the table.

Architect Russell Windham was pleased to hear one of the first directives from his clients, especially the wife. As he recalls, “She liked the idea of permanence, that the house we designed would be here forever.” Indeed, Windham and his design partner, William Curtis, of Curtis & Windham Architects, a respected Houston-based firm with a reputation built over three decades, have already crafted some of the finest residences in Texas—with many of them in River Oaks, the leafy neighborhood in which his clients were set to build. He and Curtis are well known for taking a fresh and inventive approach to classical design. Many of their finished homes are featured in a new book from Rizzoli, *Building on Tradition*, including this Mediterranean-style home the firm helped develop for the woman and her husband.

The Houston couple, both seasoned professionals, knew what they wanted in a house, and they began their search in earnest. “We’d drive or ride our bikes around on weekends, looking for a place we could build,” recalls the wife, a passionate gardener. “I wanted a corner lot with really old live oaks because you simply can’t buy them.” It took a couple of years, but they finally discovered that a corner parcel they had admired had come back on the market. Within 24 hours, their offer was accepted—and the adventure began.

During the design process, Windham and the homeowner wife met regularly, communicating ideas and reviewing concepts. “You often learn more from what clients tell you they *don’t* want,” says Windham, “and she didn’t want anything goopy or ostentatious with ornate moldings, and they didn’t want a big TV and living room; she wanted something that she said ‘could touch your soul.’” Adds the homeowner, “Builders here typically make these giant houses, but I wanted room for gardens, and I wanted to see green out of every window.” As it happened, Curtis & Windham also have a landscape design department, which developed plans for gardens on roughly a third of the parcel—greenery that surrounds and lends context to the structure. “Integrating landscaping into the design was key; there should never be a line drawn between what’s inside and outside,” Windham emphasizes.

Meanwhile, the home’s rooms were developed by Houston-based interior designer Kara Childress, who had worked on projects with the client twice before. Childress’s ability to blend Old World European elegance with modern, livable interiors for clients from California to New York made her an invaluable part of the team. “All the classic and reclaimed materials we used combine

to give the home a kind of ‘Belgian farmhouse’ vibe,” says Childress, who decided to accentuate the cathedral stone and 18th-century French oak floors, traditional, unpainted lath and plaster walls, and the remarkable custom metal work—beautiful materials with their own provenance, juxtaposed with some modern elements and artwork. “The exterior, with its Mediterranean-style roof, the interior detailing, and the gardens all complement one another with materials that all feel correct for the locale, without it feeling like we’ve imported this home from a big property in Italy,” says Childress.

Claiming that she’d never worked with a client who was so engaged, Childress added, “We became comfortable enough working together that I felt free to say, ‘No that’s awful; we’re not doing that,’ or for her to tell me, ‘Yes, I get it, Kara, but I still don’t want it.’” That directness and honesty made for a great working relationship between homeowner and designer who prized authenticity and took no shortcuts, anywhere. Says Childress, “As designers, we’re trained to do that, but it’s really exciting when the homeowner wants to go that extra mile with you.”

Both Childress and Windham dug deep to create the homeowner’s garden room, noted for its wide, shallow stone sink, rolling bins of zinc and steel, reclaimed gray terracotta brick floor, and unique pendant light fixtures Childress adapted from European bee skeps (wicker beehives). “It’s important that space is so beautiful,” says Windham, “because the homeowner probably spends more of her waking hours in the garden room than anywhere else. It’s what she loves to do when she’s not working, and it’s truly her happy place.” The resulting garden and patio areas are furnished with the same level of décor as the rooms inside, including a stone fireplace, elaborate ironwork, and a potting shed fitted with a Dutch door.

“At one point,” Windham recalls, “I said, ‘What if you had a window where you might otherwise place a great piece of art?’ And because the house—and the view—is the art, we added a quatrefoil window in a thick masonry wall whose depth makes the window a sculptural element. When we started, I don’t think either one of us knew what this would become.”

“She trusted and managed and orchestrated the entire team,” Childress says, “and we all played a role in bringing her vision to life. I’m so fortunate that I get to do what I do, and I just love working with people who appreciate all the details—that’s the real joy,” says Childress. ■



This page: The homeowner’s extensive and much-used collection of copper pots and pans becomes a strong visual, decorative element, especially when set against a dynamically articulated tiled backsplash. Opposite: A long wooden kitchen island, which can be used for eating and preparation, features open shelving for dishware.



A cow's head sculpture is mounted over an antique bench from W. Gardner, Ltd. A bluestone-topped table is set with chairs by Verellen.



An antique armoire found at Texas's Round Top Antiques Fair fills a wall of the mudroom, beside which is set a chair of sculpted wood. The vintage rug is from Carol Piper Rugs.



A Matt Camron Rugs and Tapestries custom alpaca bouclé rug provides a neutral and soft base for all of the elements in the primary bedroom. A rustic Spanish chestnut bench, circa 1820, is set at the foot of the bed.



The floors of the primary bath are Montpelier with Belgian bluestone cabochons. The draperies are trimmed with silk edging from Samuel & Sons and paired with a café curtain to ensure privacy.



Opposite: A devoted gardener, the homeowner spends considerable time in her potting shed, which is equipped with an old stone sink, an antique stool, and vintage beehives that have cleverly been made into lanterns. Above, left to right: The lush gardens are decorated with a variety of planters, with established intimate areas as places to sit and converse. Left: The side yard functions as a true outdoor room, complete with a fireplace. Elements include a laced planter pot from Formations, Rose Tarlow chairs, and an antique convex mirror that serves to visually expand the space.