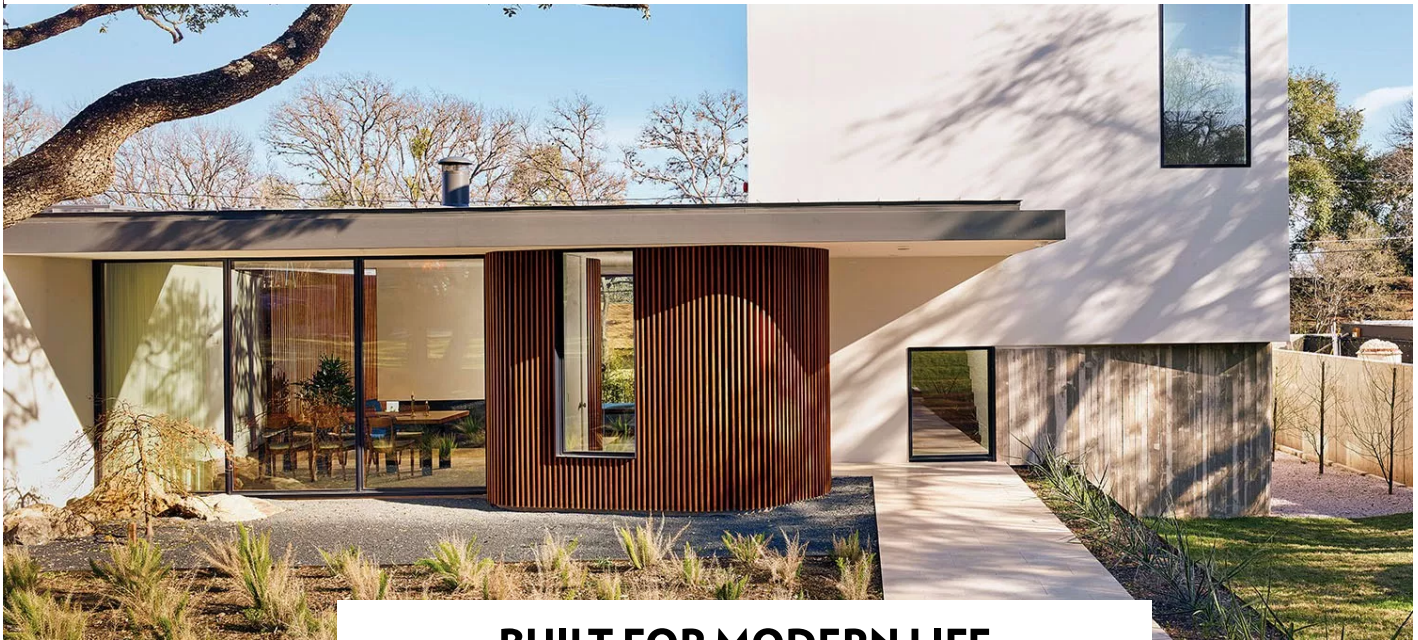


FEATURE: AUSTIN ARCHITECTURE



BUILT FOR MODERN LIFE

Exploring the comforts of a modern home in Rollingwood

by Anne Bruno

Photographs by Casey Dunn

A vast array of new homes around Austin feature flat roofs, unadorned square and rectangular structures, and walls of glass. Beautiful from the street but, really, how comfortable is a modern home? Don't all those hard, white surfaces feel cold? How do people live in such giant, open rooms, anyway? And where is that cozy spot, the one for a quiet chat or reading, craved by human beings since the world began?

Spend time with the friendly folks at Alterstudio Architecture in their open, but warm office space and you might come away with a new view on modern. “I think modern is often misunderstood,” says Kevin Alter. There’s a fundamental difference between style and content, he explains: “From the street you might see modern style, but that doesn’t equal modern content.” In talking about the two-story, five bedroom home Alterstudio designed in 2016 for a family in Rollingwood with a keen appreciation for materials and fine craftsmanship, it’s clear that Alter is well aware of the preconceived notions people often have about modern houses.



Left: One of the defining features of modern homes is their powerful connection to the outdoors. Here, that means a private landscape and pool which the home is centered around. Right: The kitchen’s cushioned banquette surrounds a live-edge wood table. Behind the informal dining space, another of the home’s finely detailed walnut screens can be folded into the wall.

Along with his partners, Ernesto Cragolino and Tim Whitehill, and project architect for the Rollingwood House senior associate Matt Slusarek, Alter holds a strong conviction that architecture should change your life. The arrangement of living spaces should allow you to experience the world in a new way. “It’s not about how a house looks; it’s about how it makes you feel,” he says. To illustrate his point, Alter shares a memory of a very brief conversation that took place at an AIA homes tour in 2002. Alter was showcasing the firm’s Hardouin House (featured on our October 2004 cover), when an older, conservatively dressed woman said to him, “I hate modern, but I love this house.” “She said that because of the way the home made her feel, not because of its looks,” Alter says.



A fireplace of Venetian plaster and waxed steel provides a strong focal point in the sunken living room. The inset davenport sits in front of one of the home's Walnut screens, the kitchen's acid-etched glass backsplash can be seen glowing from behind it.

A common misconception people hold about modern design is that it's all about clean, wide open spaces that might be great for a party, but don't provide the right scale for everyday family living or an intimate conversation between two people. Addressing that notion, Alter explains that the concept of multiplicity is key in modernism. For example, spaces can be both expansive as well as cozy; they can have the ability to be discreet as well as enormous.

Such is the case with the Rollingwood House's generously sized kitchen. A 15-foot island of richly grained walnut cabinets topped by a slab of predominantly white Calacatta quartzite anchors the space and is balanced by an inviting cushioned corner banquette. The comfy dining spot features a set-in-place live-edge wood table, just right for family meals, homework and everyday conversation.



Walnut cabinets in the kitchen surround a generously sized Calacatta quartzite island.

In the sunken living room, a custom inset davenport holds its own adjacent to a large, floating Venetian plaster and waxed steel fireplace. Via a shared wall, the space is animated by shadows coming through the kitchen's acid-etched glass backsplash and a walnut screen behind the davenport. The finely detailed screen is one of several throughout the house, starting at the exterior entry area where the wood of the screen stands in contrast to walls of glass and white stucco.

Shadows and contrast play a large role in the home's design. "Contrast is a powerful tool we often employ in our work," Alter explains. "For example, juxtaposing something vast with something intimate invites an appreciation of the special qualities of each condition."



Left: Alter believes that multiplicity is key in modernism. The Rollingwood home features both a formal dining room, and an informal dining space attached to the kitchen. Right: A wall of glass separates the shower room, which overlooks a micro-courtyard, from the rest of the master bath. Different forms of Silverthorn travertine cover the floor and walls, while Calacatta Lincoln marble tops the counters.

Alter also notes the importance of taking into account the building process when designing a home in the modernist tradition. A look at the unusually large number of detailed construction drawings for the Rollingwood House attests to his point. "So much of the important work in a modern home is behind the scenes," Alter says. "The uninterrupted soffits and floor-to-ceiling walls of glass, for instance, create a powerful connection to the out of doors, but to make that special condition, the house is constructed in a different way than a traditional house." While many details of the Rollingwood House are behind the scenes, their impact is not: together, they add up to a comfortably livable home that sparks the imagination.

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