



# Into the Wild

On an untamed piece of Hill Country land, architect Tim Brown builds a home that's sustainable, imbued with New England charm and deeply connected to nature BY CARLA AVOLIO

Brown designed the house (left) east-west to limit the effect of the late-afternoon sun (bottom left) and used salvaged wood liberally, including as a countertop for the kitchen island (right).



Brown's admiration for the work of Australian Pritzker Architecture Prize winner Glenn Murcutt—whose designs connect profoundly to nature by incorporating factors like wind direction, water movement, temperature and light—drives his passion for buildings that are in tune with their surroundings. And if those surroundings happen to be a sparsely vegetated plot in Central Texas, that means contending with infernal heat.

The solution was a rectangular structure orientated so the shortest sides face east-west and with an additional screened porch on the western end to further buffer the searing late-afternoon sun. The sun-exposed south side is sheltered by deep awnings, while the naturally shaded north side is afforded generous windows, which capture those magnificent vistas where the only sign of humanity is Brown's wooden beehive nestled within wild grass.

Brown divided the rectangle into two adjoining structures: a two-story volume housing the bedrooms; and a longer single-story section, containing the entertainment spaces, that he crowned with a diagonal shed roof to encourage natural ventilation. Brown deliberately clad the two-story structure in red batten board and the single story in olive-green shiplap to give, he says, an "anatomical" realism. "Fusing two distinct pieces actually looks more natural, like the joints in a skeleton," he says.

The result is a house that cleverly blends rustic familiarity with sleek sophistication, and that, even in the middle of August, requires almost no electricity to power the two-stage, zone-dampened air-conditioning system. The installation of two 10,000-gallon rainwater cisterns with pump and filter also means that the family is completely self-sufficient for water. Even in the long-running drought, the Browns have only used town water once in five years.

Still, the subtlety of Brown's design is such that the average visitor is unaware that this was among the first rural homes to receive the coveted five-star rating from the Austin Energy Green Building program. The front door opens into a welcoming living room that moves easily to an open kitchen. Here, concrete floors and kitchen countertops lend an edgy, industrial note to an earthy palette of blues, greens and creams, inspired by the plant-based dyes used in New England in the 17th century.

Liberal use of salvaged wood—what Brown calls his "number one splurge item"—from Burmese railroad ties and Wisconsin barns forms a richly hued leitmotif, appearing in wall hangings, a minimalist staircase, bathroom countertops and the 42-inch kitchen island. The island, made at the perfect height for 6-foot-2-inch Brown, forms the headquarters of the home where friends and family gather over shared meals.

In a house where every detail comes with a fascinating story, Brown finds it hard to think of one thing that he loves most. But when pressed, he admits to feeling great pride in the resourceful approach taken to building his first home. "At the

*"I had never seen such openness before," Brown says. "Stepping out of the car and seeing this view literally took my breath away."*

time, we didn't have a huge budget, so we used common materials in a creative way," he says, citing the handsome cabinetry sculptured from MDF and poplar wood and sound insulation made of recycled denim jeans.

Indeed, it's enough to make others want a version for themselves. "People often ask me for the plans so they can build something similar," he says. "But I say, 'Allow me to design something that's right for you.' I believe that every house should fit your life and surroundings perfectly." ■



rustic lap siding and simple lines," he says, adding, "Ultra-contemporary was out and definitely no heavy stone work."

It was then just a matter of deciding where on the vacant land to build, which, for an architect like Brown, is no small trifle. Given his work at Barley & Pfeiffer Architects, which led the green architecture movement in Austin, designing energy-efficient buildings is part of his DNA. But even more,

JON SHAPLEY (BROWN); C.L. FRY PHOTOGRAPHY (3)