



PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS MCCONNELL.

# A Texas Whole-House Remodel

Keeping *in-line* with the Joneses

JAMES ASKEW

The Rosedale neighborhood of Austin, Texas, just north of the city’s downtown, is a quiet, residential neighborhood of winding, tree-lined streets and modest, single-family houses. Most of the homes in Rosedale were built in the 1930s and 40s and much of this original housing remains. Low-slung, single-story cottages and ranch homes sit on large, oversized lots that often top a quarter acre or more. Broad, manicured lawns, side yards and hedgerows separate one house from the next. It is the type of neighborhood where young couples move to start a family and where older folks have remained long

after their children have grown. It is also the type of neighborhood, especially in Austin, that has recently attracted considerable attention.

To the city of Austin, Rosedale and neighborhoods like it are an important part of the city’s history, demarcating its progression from a small, southwestern capital into one of the most vibrant and acclaimed cities in the country. Rosedale, having once defined the outer limits of Austin, is now part of Central Austin, a collection of some 40-plus neighborhoods that make up the city center. And the city, itself, is booming. Forbes rated Austin the

“Best City for Jobs in 2011,” and over the past decade the population has jumped by nearly 40%. But, as often happens, with such a sudden and rapid rate of expansion there also comes problems, and Austin has seen its share.

Mark Lind is a senior project designer with CG&S Design-Build, an Austin-based firm that recently completed the whole-house remodel of a typical, single-story Rosedale cottage. It was a squat, nondescript house, longer than it was wide, dark grey with a faded brown asphalt roof and a tiny one-car garage tacked onto the end. Two bedrooms

A SQUAT, ONE-STORY, NONDESCRIPT HOUSE (LEFT) IN THE ROSEDALE NEIGHBORHOOD OF AUSTIN, TEXAS WAS REINVENTED INTO THE SILVER AGAVE HOUSE (RIGHT), A MODERN, TWO-STORY BEAUTY.



and one bath sat on 1,100 square feet; the interior was chopped up into your standard, mid-century dining room, living room and kitchen. The owners, a young professional couple, collect mid-century modern furniture and they wanted the remodel to fit that style. Lind was thrilled. “The original house wasn’t very distinct,” he says. “It was sort of like a cabin, and quite often remodeling clients want the addition to look like the original house. So it was quite refreshing to have people say, ‘No, we want to completely change the appearance.’”

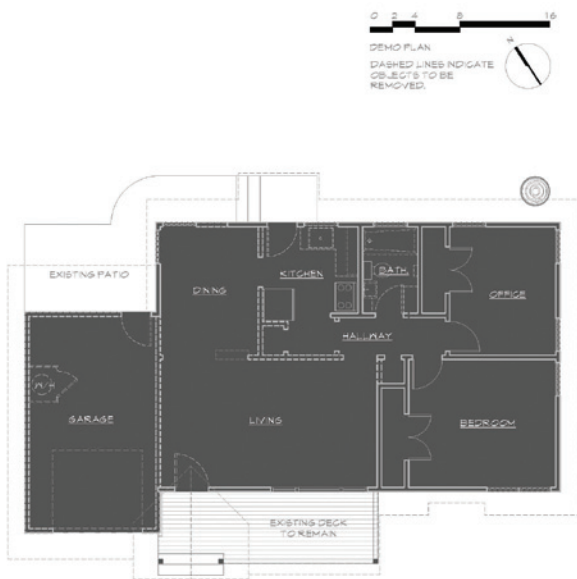
CG&S first met with the clients in the fall of 2008, and Lind says that straight away things went well. A CG&S crew visited the site, took measurements and Lind drew up some preliminary designs—just to get the ideas rolling. At

their first official meeting and before Lind shared his ideas, the clients conveyed more of what they were looking for, and Lind knew he had hit the mark. “It was as if they had already seen the drawings,” Lind says—that’s how close he’d come. Unfortunately for Lind, CG&S and the clients, that was where the ease of the project ended and the worst of their troubles began.

CG&S named the project the Silver Agave House for the three-foot, spiked desert plant that stands at the end of the drive. Shoal Creek, a tributary of the nearby Colorado River, runs through the center of Rosedale and skirts the far, back corner of the roughly 9,000-square-foot lot. This, unfortunately, put the house in the Shoal Creek floodplain, which attracted the attention of FEMA, the Federal

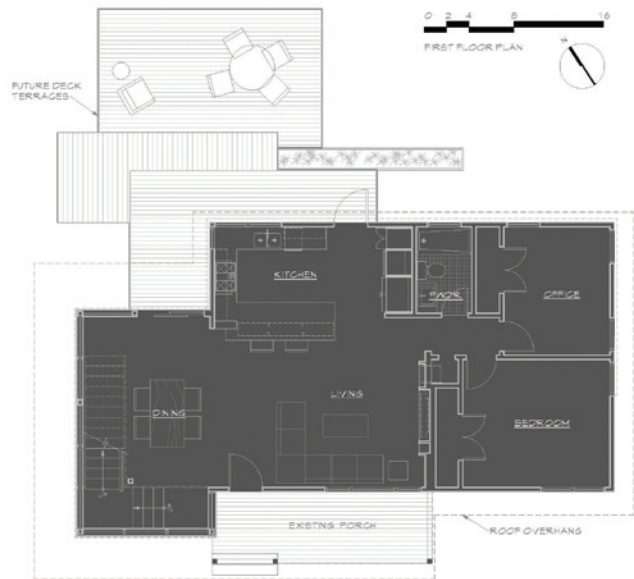
Emergency Management Agency. FEMA, since 1968, provides low-cost, federal flood insurance for houses in high-risk areas. The insurance is cheap, cheaper than it would be otherwise, but as a consequence, FEMA also gets a say in what can and can’t be built. The FEMA approval alone took six months, Lind says, set strict restrictions and vastly hindered the design. “Basically, [FEMA] told us: ‘Limit yourself to the existing footprint; you can’t spread out,’” Lind says, “and so we changed from pushing out to deciding we had to go up.”

But going up, as Lind notes, would present its own list of challenges and concerns, the most important of which involved the existing Rosedale residents. Rosedale, like most of Central Austin, has recently attracted a new, younger buyer, looking for homes close to the city center.



**ORIGINAL HOUSE**

FIRST FLOOR ■ 1,100 SQUARE FEET



**FINISHED HOUSE**

FIRST FLOOR ■ 2,100 SQUARE FEET



INTERIOR VIEWS OF THE SILVER AGAVE HOUSE.  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS MCCONNELL.

As a result, the neighborhood is being redeveloped, and in several instances this has led to some of the smaller, historic homes being torn down and replaced with much larger, two- and three-story homes often out of character with the existing neighborhood. Many of the residents objected, and the city reacted. In 2006, the Austin City Council passed the “Residential Design and Compatibility Standards,” dubbed the “McMansion” ordinance for its far-reaching and contentious efforts to limit the size and shape of homes built in Central Austin. The list of McMansion limitations is numerous and includes, among others, a restriction on the home’s floor space to no more than 40% of the lot size and front-line setbacks based entirely on the average setback of the surrounding homes.

While Lind’s design of the Silver Agave House fit well within the McMansion parameters, not even coming close to such expansive dimensions, Lind says that nonetheless the ordinance has had a major impact on his work as a designer. “You have to put this into the context of this really rancorous debate over what is or is not a McMansion,” he explains. “What no one wants now is to be accused of building a McMansion.”

The owners wanted to reinvent the house, to add more space, and the budget allowed for a near doubling of the existing home. The challenge for Lind, however, was to do all this, on the existing footprint, while creating a look that remained compatible with the surrounding single-story houses.

The first to go, says Lind, was the garage. Originally a one-car garage built on a shoddy concrete slab, Lind transformed this into a two-story addition and added nearly 500-square-feet of living space. Immediately, Lind saw the impact this could have on the home’s appearance and sought to reduce it. “I didn’t want to have a tower sticking onto the front of this one-story cottage,” Lind explains. The first floor siding is cement stucco, intended to give weight and presence at the end of the driveway. Above that, a slender bank of horizontal windows rims the entire structure, dividing the lower and upper floors. Vertical, fiber-cement siding with cedar battens on the second floor help further this division. The near-flat roof, no attic and broad overhangs cap the tower, stopping the eye and condensing

the visual height of the structure. The continuation of the standing-seam roof down one side of “the tower” further draws the eye downward, as would the flow of water over a waterfall.

Lind then continued this diminishing approach to the design for the second-floor addition on the main house. A master bedroom and bath attaches to the second floor loft and stairwell that, along with a first floor dining area, replaced the old garage. The result is an 800-square-foot master suite that includes a utility room and a second-floor living area. Again working to reduce the home’s visual impact, Lind slid the addition to the rear of the house and recreated the original low-pitched roof at the front. The attic was eliminated once more and the second floor ceiling follows the pitch of the roof—from 8’ 6” at the peak to 7’ 6” at the outside wall. Another long row of windows faces the street. “The second floor does not have any wall at all, just a bank of windows,” Lind explains, “so that the apparent massing of the house still reads like a one-story house.”

The ground floor of the main house was left much like it was. The same roof line. The same front windows. And the recently installed Ipe (a Brazilian wood) covered porch and banister were left intact. “You don’t put Ipe up and paint it,” Lind explains. “It’s just too expensive.”

Inside the house, the interior is a stripped-down, box-like design that coordinates with the home’s exterior. The existing bedrooms were repainted and the ground-floor bath updated with new fixtures and a low-cost ceramic tile. The main living area was then opened up to include the added dining area, the sparse, open staircase and a compact horseshoe kitchen that faces the living room. The inclusion of the beefy, custom-built shelving above the kitchen counter accentuates the mid-century modern motif and melds well with the owners’ tastes in furniture.

At a finished 2,100 square feet, it is fair to say that the Silver Agave House achieved most, if not all, of what Lind, the clients, FEMA and the Rosedale community had hoped it would. It is new. Modern. Different. And yet, in the vernacular of the existing neighborhood, it fits and fits well, ready to blend into the historic fabric of Rosedale, rather than stand out as an obvious (and oversized) addendum to it. 