

# HOUSE 5300



Design: © Darwin Harrison  
Photography © Paul Bardagjy

The site was an undeveloped one acre lot in north central Austin with gently sloping terrain down to Shoal Creek bordering the western edge. The property was never built upon as it was previously part of an estate with a historic home that utilized 2 of 3 adjoining lots, leaving this property as a park-like side yard.

The property was filled with large old growth trees spread throughout. Seven trees have the 'protected' designation from the City of Austin including three that have the stricter

'Heritage' status imposing even more stringent restrictions. The majestic trees made the site desirable but also challenging to find an acceptable placement for any new structures. There were multiple meetings with the city arborist to figure out an approach that allowed development while keeping every single protected tree intact. The spread out nature of the existing trees had a clear impact on the design resulting in a long linear plan weaving its footprint among the existing trees.

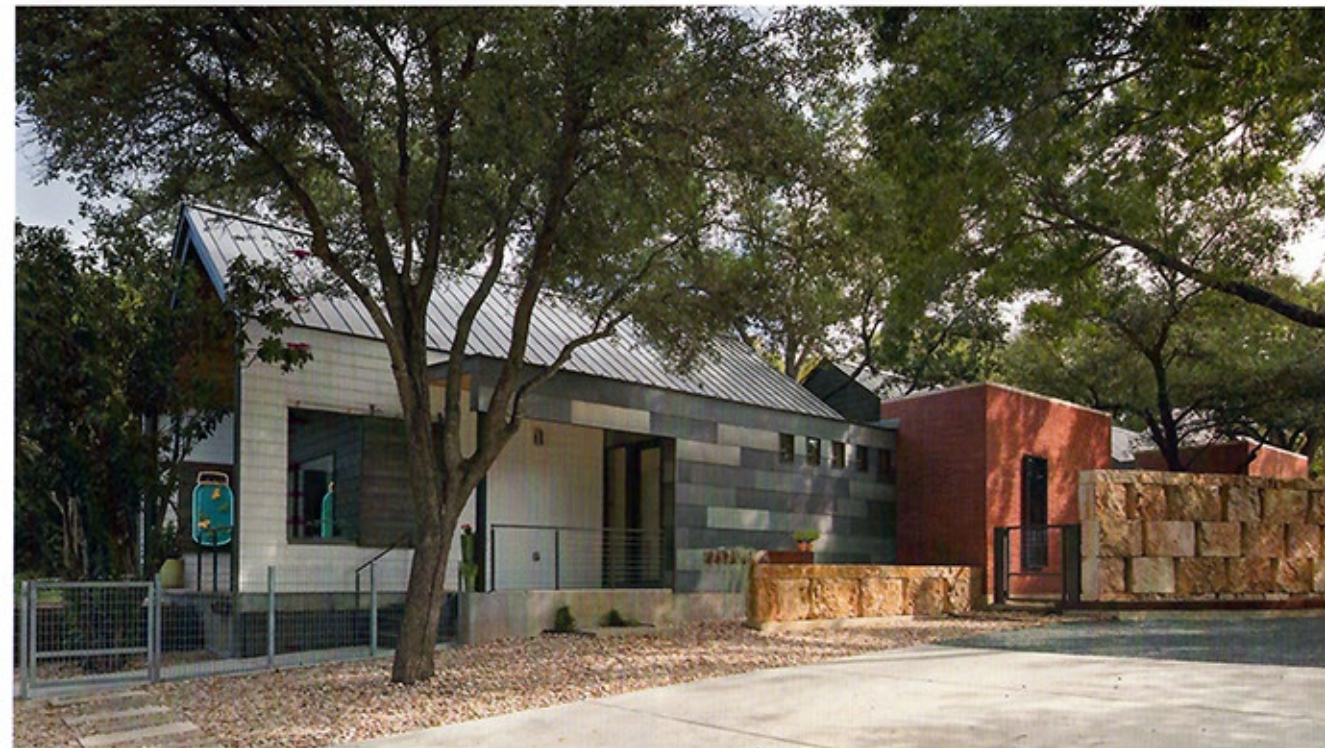
The designer exceeded all requirements in accounting for the CRZs (Critical Root Zones) of protected trees. Once approved, the City Arborist cited the project as an example of how a project can successfully find a way to allow construction and protect the cherished trees of the city at the same time.

The house is the home for the designer and partner. It was a surprise to the designer how tough it was to get started on the design – a major case of writer's block ensued. Designing





a home for oneself proved to be a daunting task. The fact that as a designer, you are aware of so many options for design directions, materials etc. created a design paralysis and this crisis of confidence and the desire for something great fostered too many divergent ideas and a lot of uncertainty. The designer also found himself thinking the design should be more avant-garde, more creative, more bold etc. – all in an attempt to create some noteworthy, cutting-edge design. After several months of overblown schemes that just didn't seem correct, that seemed somehow forced to be something overtly dramatic, the designer one day took a look at some of the artwork and collectibles around his current home and realized he had been deliberately avoiding the classic house shape one might see in a child's drawing of a 'home' and one he loved and collected without hesitation.



There was a fear that this shape was cliché and overdone, how could it possibly be the right direction? But after some simple sketches it was clear the genesis of the entire design scheme could be built on taking this classic form and extruding it through the site and then cutting out sections to make courtyards that responded to the trees etc. The designer also reminded himself to revisit what he loved about his favorite building, the Kimbell Museum - how the use of simple, powerful forms, carefully defined proportions, evocative honest materials, intelligent use of rhythm and small courtyards to connect interior to exteriors are more impactful than wild, attention-grabbing design moves. The stalled design process quickly took off and the final floor plan and primary volumes were developed fairly quickly.



Once the floor plan and some of the primary forms started to coalesce, the designer began dreaming about some of his favorite materials, including several that for a variety of reasons he had been unable to use on past projects. Here are the key materials:

### **RAMMED EARTH**

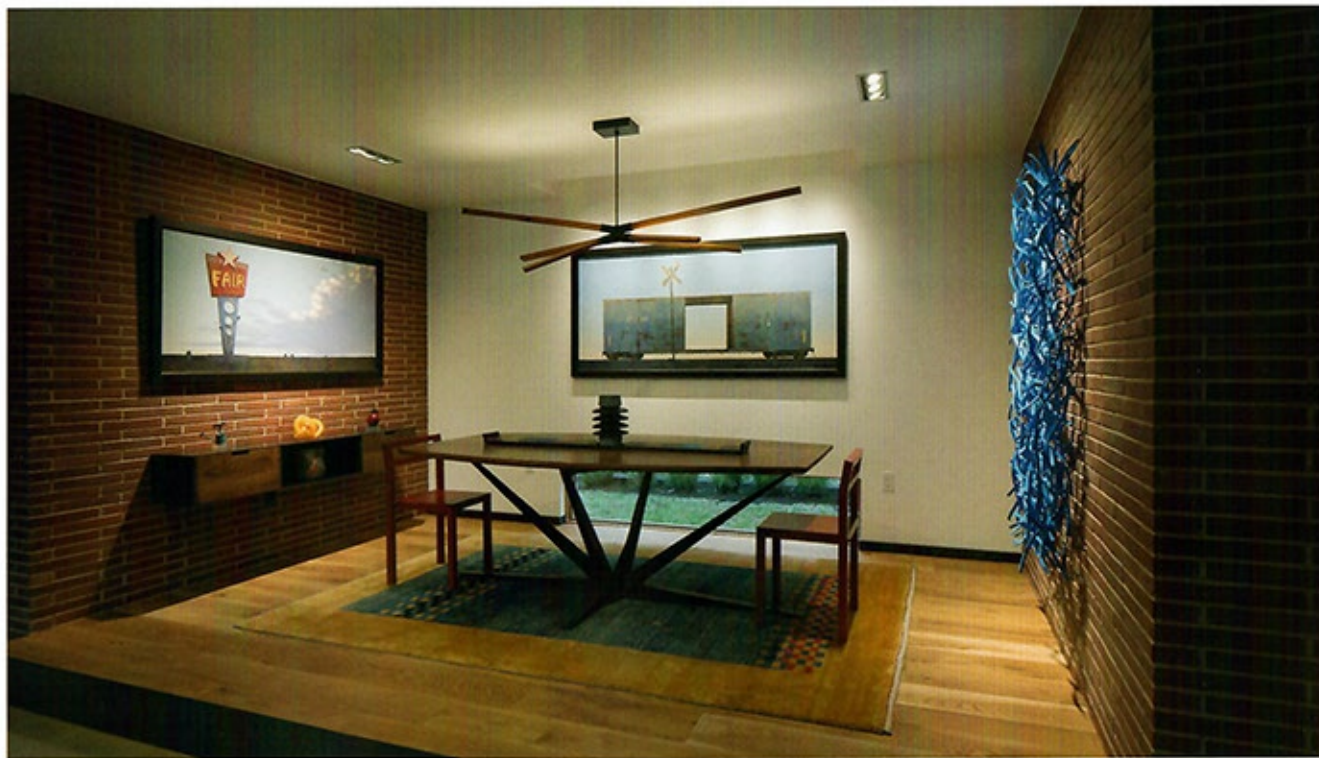
As an admirer of the homes of Rick Joy and others who use rammed earth there was a desire to see if the material could be utilized in Austin. Research and experimentation followed as well as convincing the city that the wall system meets energy codes etc. Full-size mock up walls were incorporated into the landscape design to allow for some trial and error while not wasting the effort and materials. The dirt was basic road base from the region (Buda). The rubber tamping head left an amazing pattern of random markings on the form boards inspiring the designer to use them for a sliding barn door for the studio as well as other accents.

### **ROMAN BRICK**

A deep solid red roman brick was utilized, some smooth and some with a horizontal band of texture along the face. These brick are also solid unlike most bricks and have a more refined proportion and weight creating a simple yet distinctive series of brick pavilions.

### **ROUGHBACK AND CUT LIMESTONE**

Large, thick roughback stone blocks were used for the living room façade facing the street as well as the curving courtyard wall separating the courtyard from the driveway. The size and thickness add a desired heaviness and pronounced texture projecting a sense of permanence. The stone was quarried in



West Texas where both owners grew up and many were hand selected to find distinctive cleft marks and unique coloration. The same limestone blocks were also cut with a Fantini blade leaving shifting, pronounced grooves that catch the light at certain times creating a dynamic corduroy effect.

### **STONE SCRAPS**

When visiting the stone quarry the designer discovered acres of 'junk' stone, items that were either made incorrectly or had natural blemishes that made them unacceptable for use and cast aside as waste. Sixteen of these stones were hand-picked and used as landscape accents.

### **PAINT-GRIP METAL**

Roofing and portions of the siding were composed of paint grip metal, a material







normally prepped for a subsequent paint finish but left natural with some intentional color variations coming from using different batches of raw material.

### ALUMINUM WALL TILES

A textured aluminum shingle was also used at each of the walls where the classic gable shape was sheared. These wall tiles with their subtle repeating pattern also catch the light showcasing the slight variation in depth. The tiles are extended into the interior to reinforce/complete the gable planes that are 'cut' and allow exterior materials to become interior materials much like the rammed earth.

### SHOU-SUGI BAN WOOD (JAPANESE BURNED WOOD)

This traditional process of using a torch to toughen up wood has been reborn by local Austin craftsman. Red, blue-gray and natural tones were used to bring a richness to certain features as it highlights the grain and creates

a subtle yet pronounced grain pattern.

### DOUGLAS FIR

Window frames, door and cabinets used Douglas Fir for its rich grain and amber, golden colors.

### THICK GLASS BRICKS

Clear, Amber, Grey and Blue 2" thick Italian glass bricks are used to create pockets or ribbons of light – an amber color vertical ribbon in the powder room and multi-colored accent niches at the front stone façade and intermittently placed along the stone screen wall at the driveway.

### POLISHED & BURNISHED CONCRETE

Natural and colored polished concrete floors were used for the main gallery hall as well as the studio with some accent sections utilizing burnished concrete to create a textural change from the polished finish.

### COMPOSITE ROOF TRUSSES

The studio space roof framing is composite wood-aluminum trusses to create an open warehouse feel for the designer's home office.

### LEGO®

At one point, the owners wanted to place something inside one of the rammed earth walls to act as a time capsule element. The designer found some of his childhood LEGO® bricks and sprinkled a few in one layer adding a pop of primary color as well as a nod to the building block toys that started him on the path to becoming a building designer.

### GLASS - NATURAL LIGHT

Generous glazing areas were utilized to maximize natural light and create views to the park-like setting. Butt-glazed glass was used at key locations such as the breakfast room

'cube' to minimize interruptions of the view as well as highlight where unique geometry comes together. Operable windows are used throughout to allow cross-ventilation. Every major living space has natural light, even the guest bathroom at the interior of the house has borrowed light from the hallway.

With all of the materials, there was a desire to be modern and yet warm, elegant and simple yet not so stark as to be sterile. The house was also a showcase for a growing collection of art and as such they wanted a museum-like feel yet a place that was comfortable and livable. The end result was hopefully a design that started with a simple well-known house form and morphed into a complex palette of materials that create a place to relax, reside, work and live and yet do so in an environment that enriches the daily routines in varied and changing manners based on light, space and tactile experiences. **Q**

