



# Ranch Retrospective

An Austin architect revives a midcentury home and brings affordable, modern architecture back into focus

BY STUART SAMPLEY

The modern houses designed by Austin architect A.D. Stenger were modest starter homes built in the postwar housing boom of the 1950s and '60s. Most were smaller than 1500 sq. ft., and they were designed and built with the goal of being expanded as buyers' families and pocketbooks grew. Stenger's aesthetic was sophisticated and casual, and his houses have often been compared to Joseph Eichler's homes in California. Through his work—Stenger designed more than 100 homes in the Austin area—he brought affordable, modern architecture to progressive middle-class clients searching for sophisticated design in what was then a culturally conservative city.

Unfortunately, fewer than half of the homes Stenger designed still exist. Increasing property values and a demand for larger, more expensive houses have led to the demolition of many of his projects. A few Stenger homes remain, however, and this is one of them. Located in Rollingwood, a leafy west Austin suburb still rife with modernist design both old and new, the house is a fine example of Stenger's midcentury work.

By the time the house's new owners called me, the home had suffered decades of neglect and ill-advised modifications, and was nearly uninhabitable. The client, newly relocated to Austin from California's Bay Area and a fan of modern design, saw the work I had done in renovating the Stenger house next door. Although it was hard to see past the rotting roof, the broken windows, and the graffiti, they recognized the home's potential.

Despite its history, the house needed to be adapted to the modern lifestyle of a young family and to accommodate all the trappings of upgraded appliances, technology infrastructure, and of course, energy efficiency. Our goal was to keep the integrity and intent of Stenger's original design intact while giving the house a strong push into the 21st century within a modest budget.

## Enhancing a smart floor plan

As with most Stenger homes, the public spaces are in the center of the house, with bathrooms and bedrooms organized at the periphery. Fundamentally, the layout is designed to bring people together at the core of the house,

*Continued on p. 76*



**A mindful midcentury remodel.** The original home, which had fallen into severe disrepair (photo above), was brought back to life by carefully considering the original architect's design intentions, and improving them. Photos above and left taken at A on floor plan.

## 5 stars from America's first green-building program

In 1991, Austin Energy Green Building (AEGB) developed a citywide program for measuring the sustainability and energy performance of residential homes. It was the first program of its kind introduced in the United States.

AEGB rates projects on a scale of one to five stars. Five-star projects are recognized for having the most consideration for sustainability and long-term energy efficiency. Here's a look at the features that helped this home to achieve the program's top rating.

### Energy

- **Cavity insulation:** Demilec Sealection 500 open-cell spray foam
- **Windows:** Marvin Integrity
- **Water heating:** Rinnai sealed-combustion tankless water heater (exterior mount)
- **Air-conditioning:** Carrier Infinity system (including programmable thermostat)
- **Lighting:** Cooper Halo CFL lighting

### Water efficiency

- **Toilets:** Kohler Eco Cimarron
- **Showerheads and faucets:** Hans Grohe Water Sense
- **Clothes washer:** Whirlpool
- **Landscaping:** City of Austin Grow Green drought-tolerant plants
- **Irrigation:** Texas Green Water rain barrels

### Indoor-air quality

- **Garage:** Detached
- **Exhaust fans:** Broan Energy Star 80 cfm
- **Ventilation:** Central-fan-integrated supply ventilation system with AprilAire 8126 control

Photo top left: courtesy of the author

www.finehomebuilding.com

**REDISCOVER THE RANCH** Built by the hundreds of thousands in a postwar tract-housing boom that placed emphasis on volume, not personalized elements, the American ranch is the epitome of mass-market housing. Seemingly devoid of custom details, the ranch isn't always as respected and admired as homes of other styles, but it has some special qualities. When executed well, the ranch is a home strikingly in tune with casual, modern lifestyles.

The classic ranch is rectangular or L-shaped with a low-pitch roof and an open floor plan. The house is typically long, narrow, and low to the ground, with a focus on the backyard.

Architect A.D. Stenger applied these basic tenets of ranch-house design, but with a modern eye. Many of these details can be replicated easily in new homes and teased out of the framework of old houses—even those in the endless gridwork of a tract-housing development.



**Lift the ceiling.** Vaulted ceilings in public areas increase the sense of space in small homes. In this living room, the ceiling was dropped to provide room for better insulation above. The white ceiling and skylights brighten the space, which is a contrast to the original dark beams that were once left exposed. Photo taken at C on floor plan.



**Embrace windows.** Large expanses of glass window walls and clerestories allow sunlight to penetrate deep into the house's open plan. Additionally, the generous use of glass expands the view and breaks down conventional boundaries. Photo taken at D on floor plan.

- 1 Kitchen
- 2 Bedroom
- 3 Living area
- 4 Dining area
- 5 Storage
- 6 Carport
- 7 Study
- 8 Patio
- 9 Flex space
- 10 Utility



**Place emphasis on the outdoors.** The house opens to a view of the backyard, evoking images of family barbecues and cocktails served on the patio. A large wall of windows in the shared living room and kitchen space provides the indoor/outdoor connection that complements the Austin climate and the modernist aesthetic. Photo taken at B on floor plan.

Photos taken at lettered positions.

**SPECS**

Bedrooms: 4 • Bathrooms: 3 • Size: 2612 sq. ft. • Cost: \$100 per sq. ft. • Completed: 1998  
 Location: Austin, Texas • Architect: Stuart Sampley Builder: Jason Miars, Miars Construction

**A.D. Stenger**  
**An original voice**

BY RILEY TRIGGS

By all accounts, A.D. (Arthur Dallas) Stenger (1920-2002) was utterly incapable of coloring inside conventional lines. Described variously by his contemporaries as a maverick, an innovator, bull-headed, and larger than life, Stenger had a stock response when confronted with an obstacle to an anticipated goal: Navigate around it rather than accept the finality of an impasse. The result is a remarkable number of homes that represent the greatest expression of modernist principles executed in Austin, Texas.

A Stenger house, with its low-pitch gable roof, pronounced rafter tails, post-and-beam construction, conservative footprint, and exposed beams and decking above an open living area, is as recognizable as an Eichler for many of the same characteristics. Unlike Joseph Eichler, however, who, his son asserts, never held a hammer, Stenger often did much of the construction work himself, despite a prevailing norm that strongly discouraged the design/build practice.

Stenger's work was regularly interrupted by forays that took him beyond the limits of civilization. In the early '60s, Stenger and a guide crossed the Arctic Circle and ventured within a few hundred miles of the North Pole with the intent of lassoing a polar bear. Often repeated, this tale testifies once again to the tenacious personality that enabled Stenger to introduce a then-radical architecture to a conservative Austin.

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rather than forcing them to retreat to isolated domains. The new floor plan retains these notions of privacy and connection.

Working with the same restrained hand as Stenger and a similarly modest budget, I enhanced the interior spaces to build on the house's existing charms. The living and dining rooms were pushed to the front of the house and enlarged by capturing a part of the original deep front porch. A walnut-paneled wall now acts as a threshold between this public area and the more informal communal spaces toward the back of the house.

The original kitchen was a boxed-in galley. I opened it to interact with a large adjacent living room and to get views of the backyard. This openness better accommodates the lifestyle of a young family of five.

Midcentury bathrooms often can be confining. To bring them up to date here, I simply pushed out a wall in the children's bathroom to enlarge it and to make room for a tub, and did the same in the master suite. Both changes were only minor interventions designed to create more room and to create spaces in line with contemporary expectations.

#### A modest approach to energy

The original 2x4 walls didn't have any sheathing. The T-111 siding was backed by rock-wool insulation. Inside, the roof rafters were left exposed, a hallmark of a Stenger home. Installed between the rafters was rigid cellulose board with a tar and gravel roof applied above. The beams supporting the rafters penetrate the gable walls and help to give the home its distinctive look. Austin's climate is somewhat forgiving, but we knew that with subtle changes, we could improve the home's energy performance.

A new roof was installed. Preserving the exposed rafters was a challenge I debated heavily with the clients. We all appreciated the exposed-rafter detail, but insulating the roof from above would compromise the proportion of the eaves and ultimately have a negative impact on the home's appearance. We finally agreed that insulating the underside of the roof with open-cell spray foam and dropping the ceiling would be the best approach, because the assembly also would yield an HVAC chase within the conditioned envelope. This is among the most dramatic changes to Stenger's original design, but the clients were pleased with the results.

The rest of the house was insulated with spray foam, sheathed, and covered with house-



**Use authentic materials.** Most of Stenger's houses were built for clients using postwar FHA loans, which had certain aesthetic requirements regarding the use of masonry and other materials. Rather than apply imitative elements, as was the case with many homes of the time, Stenger built his houses with real masonry and local materials, and he made honest use of concrete and metal. Photo taken at E on floor plan.



**Design a backyard patio.** The original house had a deep screened porch that served as an outdoor living room. That space was remodeled into the new living room; a new patio was installed to create a retreat from the activity inside the house. Photo taken at F on floor plan.

wrap to make a better weather barrier; the housewrap was covered with furring strips to create a rain screen under T-111 siding. The small original windows were replaced with better-performing Marvin Integrity units, and the large expanses of glass were replaced with insulated commercial windows.

I consider the energy performance implications of all design decisions. For instance, the beams that penetrate the exterior walls are blatant thermal bridges that reduce the performance potential of the new envelope. However, because they are also an important part of the home's design and because the energy penalty is tolerable, the beams were stripped, then clad in rough-sawn cedar.

This is not a deep-energy retrofit, but rather an example of how modest upgrades can help to transform dated construction techniques into a solid building envelope. As a result, the house achieved the highest rating from the Austin Energy Green Building program (sidebar p. 72) while still meeting its low remodeling budget of \$100 per sq. ft.

#### Evoking original simplicity

The exterior of the house is closely aligned with Stenger's original vision. All battered

limestone masonry walls were preserved, and the siding option was kept the same. The concrete slabs at the front of the carport were original to the house. These slabs, often found on Stenger houses, likely were used to shield views from neighbors or to create sculptural elements. Because the panels at every house are different, I speculate that Stenger had them cast on site, perhaps with leftover concrete.

The exterior of this home was taken back to its original simplicity by eliminating some of the distracting elements—a fence that had been added to the front of the home, for instance. A stand of trees planted directly in front of the entrance was preserved, however, and complemented by simple landscaping that accentuates the lines of the house.

I made only slight changes to the exterior elevations of the home. I designed new carport doors made of rough-sawn cedar and placed in custom steel frames that slide on a simple barn-door track. I also added a soffit, which along with the fascia is painted white. The siding is painted green. The original color scheme had been the opposite. Darker colors had been applied to the roof and the siding above the light limestone walls, which

made the house appear to be sinking into the ground. The changes I made, though subtle, allow the house to sit more lightly on its lot.

#### A project well received

The success of any project can be measured in a variety of ways. I think that A.D. Stenger houses are worth preserving and think that this one is a good example of what they can become if they are cared for.

I have received good feedback on the work as well. Most notably, when the project was finished, an elderly man approached me on the street outside the house one evening. He told me that he had known A.D. Stenger, and that if the architect were alive today, he would be pleased with what I had done here. That means a lot to me.

Today, Stenger houses are becoming highly cherished by modernist aficionados, and it is satisfying to know that this house will be a part of that revival. □

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