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# Modest Transformation

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Tarrytown is a typical Austin neighborhood, dating to the 1930s, that is characterized by modest homes on relatively large lots. It started out as a middle-class community but has since become more affluent. As that has happened, people have bought houses in the neighborhood, renovating and adding on to them in various ways, or sometimes tearing them down and replacing them with giant, two-story buildings. Unfortunately, these new houses seldom respect the fine scale of the little houses that set the tone for the neighborhood.

I was asked by architect Arthur Andersson to work on his own house project, expanding a small, thirty-foot square existing home that sits on a tiny lot. We searched for ways to mediate between what we would do and what was already there; to respect, especially in terms of scale, the people and houses along the street, even though we planned to add 1,500 square feet to the house.

The original house couldn't have been more modest, a simple wood-frame structure, with peanut-brittle rock on the exterior walls and a diminutive porch. It provided a good basis, we thought at the time, for us to start from or latch on to. Behind it was a studio where Charles Umlauf, a local sculptor of some renown, had worked, but that was really not salvageable. We had to take it down, although we were able to save a number of windows that were later incorporated into the rest of the project.

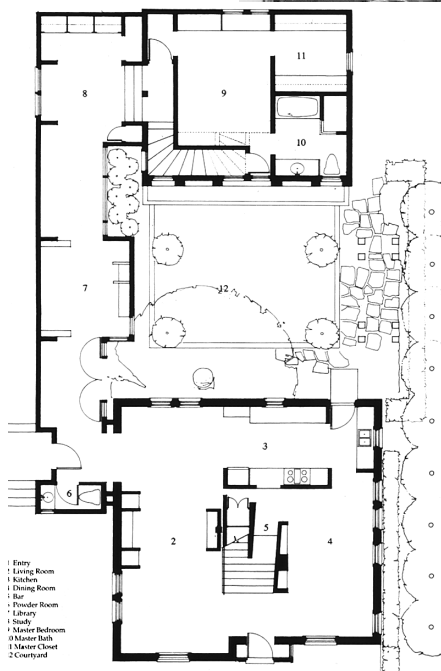
The house required significant changes. The rooms were poorly configured and the roof needed to be replaced. We decided to lift the roof up slightly and tuck a loft underneath; the house was so tiny that this move dramatically improved the sense of space inside. The living room, for example, is only about thirteen feet wide, but it is now framed by two tall sets of bookcases, one of which offers the rail for a stairway, the other which makes a tower along the wall, giving the space more monumentality than it would have had otherwise. We also decided to salvage the external stone walls, which were the best part of the house. The windows from Umlauf's studio were used in the upper part of the building.

Although the views from the house were not significant, we did think it was important to make stronger visual connections to the house from the street, and from the house to the outside and the garden behind the house. At the same time, we wanted to bring more light into the house, but without changing many of the existing windows or adding windows that would look into the neighbor's house. We invented an element that we called the "Stamford dormer" (named for the street where the house is located), which drops down from a metal cap on the new roof. The dormer does double-duty: It not only brings light into

the house from above, but also is part of the ventilation system for the attic. The second part of the project was a two-story addition in the back. There was a nice, big oak tree directly behind the original house, so instead of removing the tree and extending the house, we eliminated the garage at the rear of the lot and built the addition there. We also added a thin, connecting structure that leads along the edge of the lot from the old house to the new building.

We turned the space around the tree into a garden, about twenty feet square. The garden is tiny, but it serves effectively, something that each of the rooms inside the house look upon and over which they have some control. The views through the addition, looking back onto the existing house and to the trees, became important.

This strategy also helped the next-door neighbor, who was renovating his house at the same time. By eliminating the garage, we could incorporate the driveway into the landscape plan. We flipped the location of the driveway from one side of the lot to the other, allowing us to connect the two lawns together—emphasizing the important connections between neighbors and a respect for the integrity of the spaces we all share.



- 1 Entry
- 2 Living Room
- 3 Kitchen
- 4 Dining Room
- 5 Bar
- 6 Powder Room
- 7 Library
- 8 Study
- 9 Master Bedroom
- 10 Master Bath
- 11 Master Closet
- 12 Courtyard

Andersson House, Austin.

Above: Renovated house, exterior view with “Stamford dormer.”

Below: Living room with staircase leading to new loft.

Photographs courtesy Andersson-Wise.