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Project Preservation

A designer's Hackett House remodel values restoration over demolition BY RAMONA FLUME

Kimberly Renner specializes in restoring homes that most people would tear down. An interior designer and contractor, she pours long hours and devotes passionate work into preserving old, even historic, structures for future generations.

This life work began 20 years ago when, new in the business, she needed to buy inexpensive properties (translation: mostly undesirable and even uninsurable) in order to remodel and then sell them for a profit. What was initially an economically-driven decision became her m.o. and passion, and over the years she has restored what she calls some “truly heinous dwellings.”

“I’ve kind of made a niche for myself,” says Renner, whose design firm, The Renner Project, does most of its work in the older neighborhoods of Central Austin. “My husband calls me a ‘bottom dweller.’”

This, however, wasn’t the case for the Hackett House, a 1920s Prairie-style home in Aldridge Place (just north of the UT campus). Named after the four generations of Hacketts

who had owned it and lived there for almost 90 years, the two-story brick home still retained much of its original integrity—such as the hardwood stairwell, trim and floors (oak and long-leaf pine)—when Renner remodeled it in 2011, adapting it as a residence for her, her husband and their two sons.

It also retained, however, some major issues that needed fixing: failed mechanical, plumbing and electrical systems; foundation problems; a lack of insulation and a minuscule kitchen. But instead of going through the house with a sledgehammer approach, Renner decided to use more of a scalpel one.

“Most of the time we take homes down to their skeletons, but in this case, we needed to keep the skin intact so we had to fish the innards through the walls,” says Renner. But maintaining the integrity of the house “was a pleasure because the former owners had a unique love for the home. The sense of place they had here was very important and historically identifying.”

The traditional Prairie exterior, Craftsman interiors and room configurations remain the same. And even the most significant changes to the home—the expansions to the kitchen



Renner (bottom right) made custom wall coverings for the dining room (left) and expanded the kitchen (below) and master bedroom.



and master bedroom, which were both impossibly small by modern-day standards—were made in keeping with the home’s authentic aesthetic while supporting the Renners’ lifestyle.

“We wanted to retain the original integrity of the home,” she says, “and so our renovations were just made to accommodate the needs of a modern family.”

The kitchen, which was strictly a utilitarian space when the house was built in the 1920s, was expanded by 260 square feet to accommodate a stovetop and breakfast nook. Finishing

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touches included materials popular in the past (concrete floors and a steel island) alongside bold, modern accents (the island is illuminated by three Alexander Merchant light fixtures).

The adjacent dining room showcases the Renners’ individuality, with walls covered in the pages from a three-volume set of *Great Drawings from the Louvre Museum*. Renner, a UT art history graduate, covered the walls by grouping the “drawings” in the same way as the real ones appear in the Paris museum, so walking around the room is, in a way, like strolling through the Louvre.

Bright colors and pops of personality are strewn throughout the house. There is a Moroccan-pattern grasscloth wall covering by Phillip Jeffries in the second-floor living room, an Indonesian “lazy chair” in the master bathroom, a beloved art deco burl wardrobe and a cozy Eames recliner in Renner’s favorite reading nook. “The house lent itself to a funky, eclectic vibe because it already had so much texture,” she says, “so I thought it could be very layered and colorful.”

The changes to the home sit well with members of the Hackett family, Renner says. Some even came from out of state to see the house during April’s Historic Homes and Gardens Tour.

“I can’t tell you how many times [Hackett family members] have come back and looked at it,” she says. “I’ve hosted several little gatherings and ‘come-for-tea-and-see-the-house’ parties because such-and-such’s cousin is in Austin visiting aunt so-and-so.”

She adds, “But I feel the connection. The minute we walked into the house I thought, This is a house for real people. People lived here; they left themselves here.”

Unlike the Hacketts, the Renners won’t be leaving themselves there. Renner says they will be putting the house on the market this summer and eventually move into a loft above the furnishings and accessories shop that she plans to open. “This is a new chapter—or even a whole new book,” she says.

The next preservation project calls. ■