

LITTLE BUNKHOUSE on the Prairie

By Claudia Alarcon Photography by Brian Milhealsick

A young family wanted a low maintenance weekend home in Harper, Texas, 23 miles west of Fredericksburg in Gillespie County. The idea was to take full advantage of the panoramic Hill Country views and build a space where family and friends could gather in a relaxed environment, both indoors and out.





key in fitting all program items into the small footprint,” says Dax Morton, Associate AIA with ooA. Inside, the open plan and vaulted wood-clad ceilings provide a sense of space and openness that offsets the size of the space. The home is surrounded by windows that provide plenty of natural light, as well as sweeping, unobstructed vistas from a secluded and privileged location.

As a firm dedicated to sustainability, ooA made full scale use of Faswall® ICFs (Composite Insulating Concrete Forms) covered in stucco for all exterior walls. Faswall is a non-toxic, organic material manufactured with over 60 percent recycled content that creates a high-performing building envelope. Highly resistant to mold, rot and decay, it provides an excellent insulation for minimal energy use. Its properties prevent abrupt humidity and indoor temperature swings, also creating a very quiet indoor environment.

“The choice of composite insulating concrete forms (ICF) as the primary building material goes hand-in-hand with the simple design and the owner’s desire to create an energy-efficient home,” says Neel Morton. “Open cell spray-foam insulation in the rafters completes the highly efficient thermal envelope. Careful consideration of the HVAC system and duct layout within the thermal envelope helps maintain the open ceilings, eliminating the need for fur downs or exposed ductwork.”

The Office of Architecture (ooA), an award-winning, design-oriented firm with over thirty years of experience, was tasked with creating a simple, elegant and efficient layout for the family. The firm, led by Neel Morton, AIA, was responsible for site selection, schematic design, and development and construction drawings. Built by Kenny Therrien Custom Homes, ooA stayed involved with the owners and builder during construction.

The result is a modern yet cozy three-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath house contained in 1,425 square feet, featuring geometric shapes and elements that honor the German and Spanish architectural heritage of the area. “Efficiency was

primarily west view by locating the larger door and window openings within the front porch where a deep overhang provides sufficient shade. But the clever and aesthetically pleasing addition of a movable panel of wooden slats allows the interior kitchen and living areas to be shaded even more. The panel can simply be rolled where needed, depending on the time of day and season. A large window with southern exposure also benefits from a wide overhanging awning. To the east, windows were kept to a minimum. “The entry drive and parking is located on the east side of the house to keep the main views to the west unobstructed,” says Dax.

Minimalistic and low maintenance details are evident in other areas of the home. Concrete floors stained in shades

of straw flow throughout the home, and polished concrete countertops in the kitchen, poured on-site, makes clean-up easy and are a nice contrast to the white stucco walls and wood ceilings, while coordinating with stainless steel Samsung® appliances. The combination of cabinets and open shelving provide ample storage in a compact space.

One of the most notable uses of space is the offset staircase leading to the loft that houses a guest bedroom. “The alternating tread stairs were a key part of achieving the efficient footprint and layout of this small home as they allow for a steeper slope and smaller footprint than a traditional staircase,” explains Dax. At the top, the bedroom loft boasts a skylight for views of starry, starry nights.

Outside, landscaping is also low maintenance. At the conclusion of the project, “the vegetation around the home was brought back to natural conditions. Gravel walks and drives around the home were used to this same affect,” says Dax.

While the entire project was a successful study in minimalistic, energy efficient, low maintenance design, the combination of comfortable farmhouse style and bunkhouse amenities contrasts with vignettes of the striking white stucco form set against blue Texas skies and open green fields. It’s the perfect space for weekend retreats and allows the homeowners to enjoy their stunning Hill Country property to its fullest. ♦

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