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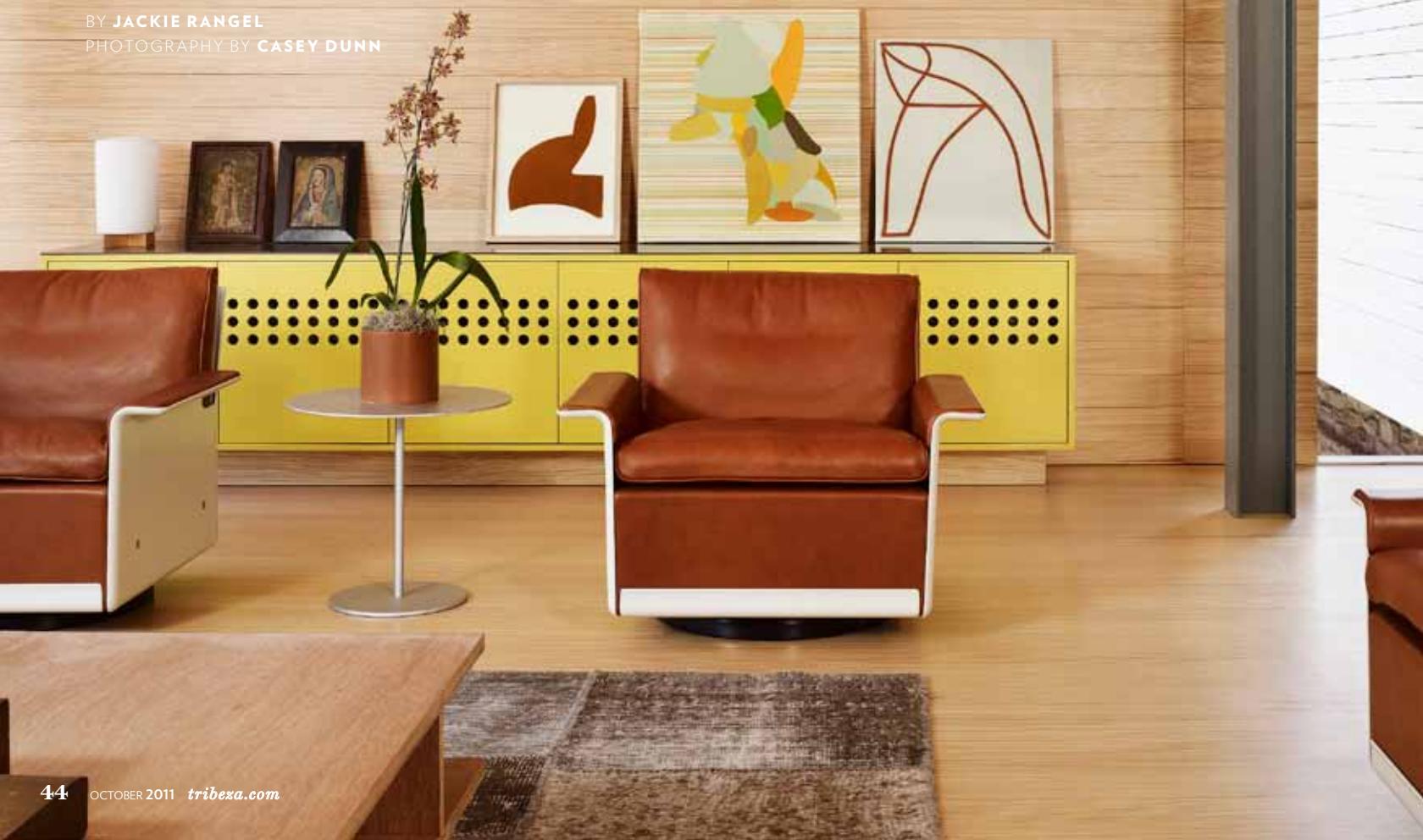
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# THE BALCONES HOUSE

A Family of Makers — a look inside the stunning house of Elizabeth Alford and Michael Young of Pollen Architecture.

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**FACING PAGE** A few of homeowner Michael Young's paintings and 19th-century Mexican retablos fit perfectly on this citron stereo cabinet by Pollen Architecture, quarter-sawn yellow pine from Delta Millworks and chairs by Vitsoe.

**THIS PAGE** This cast-concrete cladding was designed by Pollen Architecture to capture the light at the home's entry.

Meet Elizabeth Alford and Michael Young. Husband-wife design team, two-thirds of the acclaimed local architecture and design studio Pollen, and the proud parents of two children and a recently completed "labor of love" in Austin's Mount Bonnell neighborhood.

Although the couple has been collaborating on client projects since 2008, the completion of their latest work is perhaps the most personally rewarding of their joint efforts. The couple fell in love with the original house designed by Jonathan Bowman in 1957 and one of several modern designs that dot the area, tucked away amidst the rolling hills along the Balcones Fault line.

At once expansive and intimate, the home's interior is a study in efficiency — of space, vantage points and individual industriousness. Perched on the

sloping hillside of the fault line with a 100-foot-long natural outcropping of layered limestone, the architecture acknowledges the site's variegated landscape by ensuring maximum appreciation for the beautiful surroundings whenever possible. From the living room, a directed series of windows focuses the eye on the lush foliage of the ravine below, while the tone of the casual workspace-cum-family room is set by the stair stepped native plantings embedded within the rising limestone cliff in the rear of the house.

Alford and Young, architect and artist, respectively, launched their thriving creative careers in New York City, cultivating their individual work there for many years before deciding in 2002 that it was time to return to their native Texas. (He, originally from East Texas and she, Austin.) While making the cross-country transition, Alford and Young found and fell in love with the "Balcones House,"



**LEFT** A view into treetops from the living room; custom steel bookshelves by Pollen Architecture, rolling glass doors by Fleetwood and table and chair from Scott + Cooner. **ABOVE** An entry stairwell gives a glimpse through house. **FACING PAGE** The living room hovers over the carport entry that features stained cypress wood cladding.

thus beginning their over two-year affair of designing their dream home. Although they chose to live in the house for a few years before commencing on official re-design plans, Alford says she started sketching and describes the process as having started “pretty much right off the bat when we moved in.” Spoken like a true architect. Although the initial plan primarily involved renovations, when all was stripped away, the team decided that a completely new start with a nod to the original structure was the only answer. Alford says: “We took it down to slab and rock walls

and reinvented it with new structure, openings and different proportions.”

But how much more painstaking is the process when designers design for themselves?

“One thing that’s been really amazing about working with Michael is that with his background as an artist, he will experiment with a form or material just because it’s interesting and he may be thinking about an idea.”

With so many creative opinions and approaches between the pair, Alford acknowledges the inherent difficulties of knowing when to simply draw the

line. “It’s funny, we were so excited to do our own house and get it just the way we wanted. But it’s hard when you don’t have a client in the conversation. Without that, you can just keep thinking about it — you can just keep designing.”

There is, however, a very finite deadline for the self-proclaimed detail-obsessed couple. Their continually evolving modest modern masterpiece will be part of AIA Austin’s 25th Anniversary Homes Tour on October 1-2, a showcase of 15 locally designed modern houses.

As architect and artist, they have





**THIS PAGE** The master bedroom is filled with natural light from the clerestory window; plaster walls by Sloan Montgomery. **FACING PAGE** The family room, which stores the children’s art supplies and projects, features contrasting plaster and pine walls, polished concrete floors and the always appropriate — Eames chairs; storage unit by Pollen Architecture with Heart of Texas Metalworks and Hatch Design, nana folding window system.

revealed in the ability to design, build and make as many unique creations as possible. From minimalist door hardware to modular shelving units, they have taken full advantage of reimagining even the most seemingly insignificant of household accoutrements.

“The quality of a room is defined by the details,” explains Young as he walks through the house, proudly pointing out the subtle artifacts of their exploratory creative processes.

The most instantly recognizable of these details is the interior enve-

lope of stunning straight-grain pine boards that line the walls and extend to the ceiling of the house’s original footprint. Plaster is used in other areas to create a contrasting effect. For Alford, the wood represents her favorite, and most gratifying, part of the process. It not only defines the touchstones of their work — “we like to use very modern shapes, but with a materiality that has another identity and sense of tactility” — but it embodies the importance of finding the uniquely skilled local craftsmen who







**ABOVE** The family's perfect outdoor living space. The concrete board-formed fireplace wraps an existing stone chimney. The outdoor furniture is by local company RAD Furniture.

can help make even the smallest of their "customization dreams" a reality.

"It gives us the chance to experiment and find ways of doing things that we can then suggest to clients. Finding the right people to work with you is half the battle."

For Young, who grew up on a sprawling East Texas farm — complete with a three-acre vegetable garden — adopting the role of garden designer for the property has been a welcomed challenge. Bringing the same sense of meticulous yet melodic design to the walkways and gardens as to the windows and gutters, he has created an outdoor environment that organically

integrates the house with its unique natural setting. As with the interior, the beds and paths feature individually crafted components like custom-built raised steel planters and poured concrete stepping-stones, made on-site

While the architecture's "warm geometry" and modern aesthetic resonate from its every angle, the Balcones House is far from detached or unapproachable. It is comfortably modern, inviting and flexible — key elements in a home for hyper-creative individuals like Young, Alford and their two young children.

"We're a family of makers," Alford says. "We're always working on something." **T**



**ABOVE** The modern boy's bedroom: powder-coat steel shelving by Pollen Architecture and cabinetry by Hatch; pirate flags and knots by James Young. **FACING PAGE** This is where the family usually gathers when company comes over — table by Macek Furniture Co., painting by Michael Young, lamp by Muut.

