



Architecture That Appreciates Nature

CHRISTOPHER SANDERS INTEGRATES SURROUNDING LANDSCAPES INTO HIS HOMES

By Liz Harroun
Photos by Ryann Ford

AUSTIN-BASED FIRM SANDERS ARCHITECTURE WAS FOUNDED in 2009 and is known for attention to detail and a collaborative approach to residential and commercial design. Founder Christopher Sanders grew up in Lufkin, Texas, where he spent his childhood camping, canoeing, hunting and fishing — which fostered a deep appreciation for nature that he brings to his projects. Christopher later traveled through South Asia, studying the colonial influence on local architecture and city planning. His architecture is inspired by his love for the outdoor environment, and each project is deeply intertwined with the site.





One recent project that demonstrates this is a house he designed in the Pemberton Heights neighborhood, on a site located on the western slope of Shoal Creek. Primarily, goals of the clients were to visually engross the landscape and to allow light deep into the interior spaces. At the same time, maintaining privacy was important to them.

“Considering the proximity of neighboring houses, it was a challenge to balance all of these goals,” says Sanders. “These challenges informed locations of the windows and inspired a light well that penetrates two floors of the home.”

The windows in the house are positioned so that the trees and landscape are experienced from within. To maintain privacy, a light well allows sunlight to enter from above in the kitchen on the ground floor as well as private spaces on the second floor.

The footprint of the 5,370-square-foot home and the form of the building were determined by the critical root zones and the canopies of the heritage live oak trees that are endemic to Shoal Creek.

“The natural landscape’s colors and textures influenced the facade materials,” says Sanders. “In addition to variegated brick, the team used wood siding made of thermally stabilized ash that will take on a gray patina over time. The exterior also features concrete and weathering steel, which are meant to visually ground the building on the sloped site.”

The interior is strongly connected to the landscape, with incredible views throughout. The swimming pool is tucked into the landscape and exposed upon entry to the home, foregrounding





the tree canopy that slopes down to Shoal Creek.

“As often is the case, the project’s challenges led to our favorite design solutions,” says Sanders. “Controlled views to the exterior of the house sometimes frame beautiful views to the exterior and other times offer expansive views into the tree canopies.”

Another recent project by Sanders is “Rockin’ 8 Ranch,” a modern ranch-style house that sits on a property of 350 acres in Brown County, about two hours northwest of Austin. When considering building on the property, the owners envisioned a house where they could fully take in the landscape. A couple with grown children and young grandchildren, they wanted a re-

create where they could host gatherings of family and friends.

“With hundreds of acres to choose from for the new home’s site, our client was particularly drawn to one area of lichen-covered sandstone boulders, dotted with post oaks and mesquites,” says Sanders. They chose to build on a site that’s on the side of a hill, with views of the rugged, bouldered landscape in the foreground as well as an expansive north view over the alluvial plain of Jim Ned Creek.

On the rocky hill sits both the main lodge structure and a smaller guesthouse. The two-bedroom guesthouse creates a courtyard space where the pool overlooks the valley. With ample windows, placed to both maximize



views and to allow for seasonal cross-ventilation, every room at the ranch embraces the surrounding landscape. The living room has huge windows that open up on three sides to allow for natural airflow and to highlight views of the Jim Ned Valley below. The office offers views to the south of the house, while the dining room offers views to the courtyard space.

The clients wanted the house to be built from locally sourced materials as well as to require minimal maintenance. Finding materials that will not deteriorate easily in the Central Texas sun is difficult, but Sanders chose local sandstone — laid by third-generation masons — a durable material that further connects the building to the land. Painted steel was also used, along with wood elements, the former limited to areas with less direct sun exposure. The juxtaposition of ashlar masonry with rubble chinking against the tailored metal panels creates a façade that feels both warm and modern.

Many of the light fixtures in the house were designed in collaboration with Britt Design Group, an Austin-based interior designer.

“We enjoyed a great working relationship with them,” says Sanders. “These light fixtures were a real testament to this collaboration: living room pendants, the pendant over the bar and the exterior steel light fixture at the front door.”

These two projects are just a small representation of what Sanders Architecture has done around Central Texas. Christopher’s eye and appreciation for nature bring a special touch to each space he designs. By intertwining outer landscapes into the interiors, he provides a lasting reminder to occupants of nature’s power and beauty.

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