

HOUSE



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on A HILL

A home located off a historic Texas
high road achieves grandeur
while still honoring the simplicity
of the area's past





After The Alamo fell, Sam Houston, his men, and fearful Texas settlers fled the encroaching Mexican army in what became known as the Runaway Scrape. Legend has it that they retreated by taking the high road. Just off this path, located somewhere between Houston, Austin, and San Antonio, is a hill that's now dotted with dozens of big oak trees and a large, gabled, and light-filled home. "There's a natural parting in the oak trees at the top of the hill," says architect William Curtis. "And you have a 40-mile view. If I hadn't decided to put the house right there, I wouldn't be any good at my job."

It's the weekend-getaway home of a Houston couple seeking a different kind of retreat. And its design was inspired by a small, historic place in the nearby town of Round Top, "an iconic little house that has been in the community for 160 years," Curtis says. "The owner loved it. So we had to find a way to build that distinctive image into a 5,000-square-foot space." The result is a home that feels like it's straight from a Texas history book on the outside with all the modern comforts of today inside. This mixed aesthetic is also deftly executed by interior designer Phoebe Howard and one of her senior designers, Lindsay Plyler. "I love to find a client who likes traditional decorating and appreciates when I find something one of a kind," Howard says. "A room doesn't really come to life unless it has some antiques in it." Her work is also informed by the pastoral scenery. "I wanted it to feel inviting, what everything in the South stands for: comfortable and hospitable, like a relaxed farm," she says. Follow along to uncover Howard's and Curtis' best tips for bringing that relaxed farmhouse philosophy into your home, no matter where you live.



RURAL CHARM

The exterior's front windows are smaller and reminiscent of the mid-19th-century house that inspired this home, but Curtis modernized the rear facade with floor-to-ceiling windows that capitalize on the view. He also carried a single gutter across the windows without interrupting the look with downspouts to avoid "disrupting the calm exterior," he adds. The function-first design is appropriate for the home's country aesthetic.



OLD INSPIRES NEW

Howard designed this home by building around the owners' antique pieces. After selecting one of their tables for the entry, she chose a set of wicker bull heads for the stairway wall. "I said, 'These just have to go here.' " Howard recalls. But the homeowners weren't so sure. "We hung them up with Command removable hanging strips and then took a photo. The owners decided to leave them after seeing how cool they looked. Sometimes, you have to do a little convincing," she adds.

Practical Beauty
Howard works in pieces with utility. Here, an urn is pretty on its own or filled with branches, and a bowl makes a great spot to hold keys.



MATERIAL WORLD

The brick floors on the two interior "porches" are another nod to many other traditional historic homes in the area. "We have a lot of clay in Texas," Curtis explains. "It is the natural material they would have used to build a home in the mid-19th century. Secondary spaces weren't afforded fine materials." Howard included both upholstered chairs and a love seat around the dining table. "We wanted to create a relaxed farm atmosphere, so a formal dining room was not necessary," she says.

Gracious Gestures

Beside a sofa or next to a chair, the designer prefers low tables (about 20 inches high) instead of traditional end tables. She says, "My theory is, when you sit down, you want a place to put a drink that's at the right level."

CREATIVE LICENSE

"This is one of two rooms that were designed to seem like porches," Curtis says, referring to how the shiplap siding and overall ambience of the room make you feel like you are outdoors. "Although you're walking into an interior room, you move through an exterior door to get here." Howard pulled a design fake-out by creating an antique-style coffee table by shortening the legs of a 19th-century table. "Coffee tables didn't exist at that time," she says. "They're a modern invention."



Throwing Shade

Go ahead and mix floor and table lamps, but it's important to make sure the tops of them are level. "I like for the shades to be around the same height. It makes them look less busy," Howard says.



OPEN SHELF HELP

Howard complemented the owners' library of books with two different collections: antique baskets and blue-and-white spatterware. She explains, "Each of the pieces is unique, but there is consistency so they don't seem random." The changing arrangements also help distract from the TV that Howard sneaked into the shelves. She does warn that a haphazard bookcase can really bring down a room: "Don't put one in unless you have books. It's too hard to fill with just bric-a-brac."

Mix Masters

To give a large room the same comfort as a small one, Howard advises using "a good mix of fabrics, prints, and textures to help it feel cozy."





VIEWING PLEASURES

The living room, which is visible from the entryway, is 18 by 34 feet. Curtis wanted a large room so visitors could see straight through to the back of the house and down the hill. The size is also a way to match the magnitude of the rural Texas landscape. "We thought that beautiful view was worthy of a big room designed to help enjoy it," he says. Howard managed the living room's grand size by breaking it into two seating sections with matching back-to-back sofas—but she avoided too much symmetry by keeping the ensembles distinct with different furniture and fabrics.

**PURE
AND
SIMPLE**

The kitchen matches what Curtis describes as the "straight-forward character of the house." Although he made some modern-day concessions like the large island, he conjured up old-house authenticity with a few well-chosen carpentry details like the wall's wainscot, brackets beneath the upper cabinets, and the island's thin, turned legs.



Rise and Shine

Howard says antique beds work great in guest rooms because they give instant warmth to the space without needing much else.

ROOM TO REST

"Guest rooms should not be cluttered. They should stay a little on the sparse side," Howard explains. In this case, that translated into a few blue accents and the primitive painting over the bed. She advises keeping the space relatively neutral so your guests will have an easier time slipping into it and making it their own. "They will also have much more space to spread out their things," she says.



HIGH SPIRITS

"You need something to hang over a wet bar," Howard says. "I prefer to put a mirror there instead of a painting." This antique wooden piece she found won her over because, "It just felt like Texas without being cliché." She also applies this advice in other geographic locations. "Beach houses, mountain homes, and city apartments—they have their obvious decorating go-tos," she says. "I try to be more subtle about it." **SL**

At Your Service

Arrange a handful of bar items on a tray. "I like to have things on display instead of behind the cabinets," Howard says. "It feels more festive."



Three Ways To Make a Home Flow

THE BEST HOUSES keep you moving easily from room to room. Curtis and Howard share smart tips for getting that just-right feeling in your home.

LET IN NATURAL LIGHT

Putting the floor-to-ceiling windows on the back of the house adds a psychological bonus. It's human nature to gravitate toward light, so having a lot of windows in the back helps ensure that people will move through the house. Curtis further amplified the sun's rays with transoms over the windows and doors.

BE CONSISTENT

Howard wanted the rooms to all share "the same sort of feeling," she explains. "I used blue as my thread throughout the house and then added another color in each room." The placement of antiques provided yet another constant theme.

USE IT, OR LOSE IT

Encouraging people to engage with the room is key. This can be done by setting out binoculars to look through or a coffee-table book to read. "Anytime someone can pick up part of a room and use it, that's a real plus," Howard says. "Pitchers can be like living arrangements." Fill one with flowers and another with sweet tea.