

'Duplex Nation' restorations convert multifamily units to single homes

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Tucked away in a pocket of central East Austin is a curious neighborhood made up entirely of duplex apartments.

Made of concrete masonry and covered with stucco, the boxy two-story buildings — with a 900-square-foot two-bedroom apartment on each floor — vary little from each other.

And the rumors about the origin of the singular enclave of duplexes rarely vary, too. Most who know the neighborhood — sometimes referred to as "Duplex Nation" — believe the vaguely midcentury buildings were originally University of Texas married student apartments or military housing.

In fact, the neighborhood is the Delwood Duplex Historic District, named earlier this year to the National Register of Historic Places. Built by a private developer in 1948 to meet the housing crunch after World War II, it's Austin's first postwar neighborhood to be listed in the register and an example of the mass-produced tract development housing that sprung up across the nation to accommodate returning servicemen and their young families.

With few teardowns or major additions to the 77 duplexes that stretch along four streets near Maplewood Elementary School, the district has retained a remarkable degree of historic integrity, even though many have served as rental property, popular especially with UT students and young bohemian types.

But with their now-central Austin address (when they were built, the area around Interstate 35 and West 38½ Street was considered suburban), they're a prime location for fans of inner-city living.

Indeed, Heather Otten and Katherine Loeb are so fond of the neighborhood that when it came time for them to trade up to a larger house, they opted to convert the duplex they've had since 1999 and transform it into one-family home.

And so a few years ago, the homeowners turned to Austin architects Eric Barth and Ryan Burke who were just launching their firm, A Parallel Architecture. (The home was recently featured on the American Institute of Architects Austin Homes Tour.)

The challenge? Figure out how to morph the charming but idiosyncratic structure into a comfortable contemporary home without disrupting the now-historic character of the neighborhood or losing the essential elements the homeowners had come to appreciate — the wood floors, the stucco walls inside and out, the mid-century metal casement windows.

Yet there were plenty of hurdles, too.

The ceilings were relatively low, the circulation between rooms was awkward and the construction on the rapidly-built postwar buildings lacked quality and presented potential (and real) surprises. (Not all of the stucco-covered lath and plaster walls, for example, were built with sufficient plaster.)

Burke sums up both the design and building processes as "strategic surgical interventions."

"We decided to work with (the building), not against it," he said.

On the exterior, the architects stripped off the original fascia, soffits and other wood trim that were styled with the vaguely Classical Revival features popular with postwar homeowners. The architects also removed the second story front porch. The original casement windows were preserved and refurbished with insulated glass. The exterior alterations slim down the house — and especially its front façade — to its essential plain box form, simultaneously revealing the vague modernism of the original design.

Inside, both the homeowners and the architects opted to keep many of the rooms mostly as they were. The main challenge was to find a way to create an open, spacious living-dining area that matched the casual entertaining habits of contemporary life.

Barth and Burke conceived of a design that joins the first and second floors through a double-height great room encompassing the kitchen, dining area and sitting area in space naturally lighted by windows that take full advantage of the two-story walls. The great room is the only new addition to the original footprint of the duplex, and with its placement in the back of the house, doesn't interfere with front-facing façade and its original profile. A larger-than-average set of glass sliding doors added another feature to the great room — an immediate connection to the backyard that was redesigned into a serene landscape patio overlooking a sleek pool. And overlooking the new great room is an office area carved from reconfigured rooms on the second floor.

Throughout the now 2,000-square-foot-house, original white oak flooring from the duplex's former upstairs unit was combined with similar new white oak flooring, making for a unified visual look throughout the house, and accenting the manner in which the architect artfully dovetailed two idiosyncratic duplex apartments into one graceful new home.

Preserving many original details and repurposing much of the existing materials had another advantage; The project generated very little construction debris.

"The trick was to not be beholden to the past, but make (the house) be present and part of the future," said Burke.

Courtesy of JB Goodwin