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A unique mixture of mid-century modern furniture is softened by Willingham's collection of Japanese artifacts.

# From Duplex to DREAM HOUSE

*By turning a duplex into a single-family home, one Austin couple survived a full renovation and uncovered the house of their dreams.*



BY KATHERINE RICHARDSON  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CASEY DUNN



The original kitchen was torn down to make room for Willingham's dream kitchen, which is at least twice as large.



In 1931, a young couple bought the land on the corner of Enfield and Hartford roads and built themselves a home designed as a duplex.

The pair lived upstairs and rented out the bottom floor for extra income. Through the years, the house grew and changed alongside the lives of the people living within. And after her husband passed away, the owner converted a back upstairs bedroom into an efficiency, rented it out, and lived the rest of her days adjacently.

Fast-forward to June 2003 and a new young family looking to discard their suburban lifestyle and become a part of the city. The duplex could be converted into a single-family dwelling and the “corner-of-downtown” location was near perfect. Jayne and Scott Willingham now revel in the home’s close proximity to Nau’s Enfield Drug, with its ’50s-style diner setup, the Johnson Creek Trail and the nearby city bus line, which rumbles by regularly should the family choose to catch a ride.

As with many remodeling projects, the Willinghams had a modest plan in mind. They adored the antiquity and charm of the home and were thinking of merely rotating the staircase, which ran to the upstairs apartment, so that it opened into the living room, rather than leading outside. It would be a simple endeavor that would let them live upstairs and out of the way until construction was finished.

But, as with many remodeling projects, the Willinghams’ initial plan was not to be.

The Willinghams believed theirs was a modest project that might not require the attention of an architect and went on to choose a builder. On the recommendation of many, the Willinghams hired Greg Brooks of Innovative Builders. But after hearing their ideas and seeing the house, Brooks suggested they consult an architect (as rotating the stairs might be trickier than first assumed). So the couple went to work talking to professionals. After interviews with several architects, Emily Little and Paul Clayton, of Emily Little Architects, now Clayton Levy Little, were brought onboard.



“Isn't every mother a short order cook? Jayne laughs.”

In the first year of the nearly two-year process, Little and Clayton worked diligently with the couple devising a plan to convert the duplex into the single-family home the Willinghams needed: a demanding project in and of itself. By definition, this was a house divided. The architects' task was to create a common relation between the two floors so that the spaces flowed effortlessly into one another as if they'd been initially planned to do so. In the end, the original staircase was removed and a new one fashioned to lead up from the kitchen, which was being transformed as well. This change instigated a renovation of the dining room, which then necessitated a bathroom redecoration, and then led to a complete systems overhaul. And so began what Clayton playfully refers to as “scope creep.” The modest remodel became a full residential restoration

project on a scale far more grand than the architects or homeowners had ever imagined.

The first meeting was in November 2003—design was completed in August 2004. By then, the plan included redesign throughout the house and the group had resolved to complete the task in one fell swoop. The architects spoke of a methodical design process, which, although very detail-oriented, addressed the house as a whole. This route, agreed the architects and owners, was the most efficient and practical way to do it, although they recognized the resource strains and limitations involved. The architects appreciated their clients' ability to see the big picture, which can often be lost when one digs into the overwhelming detail of creating a custom home.

And so, in September 2004, construction began. Brooks had joined the design process about halfway through, troubleshooting when necessary and providing preliminary cost analyses. He was therefore well informed when called upon to get started. It was here, in the earliest of stages, that the seemingly inevitable hiccup of renovation occurred. As demolition began on the stairway, a hole opened in one side of the house. Structural clay tiles, mislaid when the house was originally built, were found crumbling along the perimeter walls.



THIS PAGE: Willingham's collection of Kashigata, Japanese hand-carved wooden molds, is displayed on floating shelves just above the art deco bureau she found at Antiques Marketplace. LEFT: An old-fashioned counter, complete with swivel stools and newspaper shelf, adds charm to the home's kitchen.



THIS PAGE: A deep soaking tub is the perfect retreat for Willingham after a long morning run. RIGHT: The couple's bed dominates the room, with multi-colored obi making a dramatic statement at the foot.



Construction halted, the structural concerns were addressed and the issue resolved without a change in design. A second challenge came when Brooks was informed that, due to the home's historic title, the brick veneer had to remain intact and unchanged. With that in mind, the plan was to carefully replace the tiles with modern studs, effectively rebuilding the skeleton of the house while keeping the skin unharmed. (In her own act of historic preservation, Jayne held on to an asbestos shingle, a piece of the structure and a slice of the cottonwood that had to come down.) And although that was not the last of the issues, it defined the way in which everyone involved responded. When something came up, it was addressed, discussed and resolved: a perfect display of the power of good communication and compromise, two integral assets of any project.

A large screened-in porch was attached to the kitchen, which doubled in size; a freestanding garage took form; and a security fence went up to keep the children and dogs away from the busy intersection.

Despite the large scale of work, the only changes to the house's original footprint were to the porch and the addition that contains the new staircase. The dual entrances remain, but the door facing Hartford Road was awarded front door status—Little felt it added a sense of privacy.

When the design process turned to the interiors, Jayne's passion for Asian culture was revealed. Drawn to it as a child, her love has centered on Japan for the past 15 years. As this design aesthetic eased its way into tangible interior design, Jayne's other love, that of mid-century modern design, called out to her. Initially torn between the two, she discovered their implicit compatibility—many mid-century designers were influenced by Asia; for instance, designer George



“The modest remodel became a full residential restoration project.”

Nelson's bubble lamps are based on traditional Chinese lanterns—and her world came together. Her passion is visible throughout the home—never overwhelming but very distinct.

The staircase from the kitchen, lined with trapezoidal windows following the slope of the stairway, leads to wide open space. One corner acts as a studio area for Jayne's many artistic and business endeavors and is separated from a corner library by a narrow wall. Built-in shelves, every one filled to capacity, cover the three walls. The home's three bedrooms, with their vivid color palettes, open up to this space, with wood floors smoothly flowing from under every doorway. The former upstairs' efficiency was returned to the master bedroom and its kitchen became the master bath. Now, brightly colored *obi*, the



13-inch belt of a traditional Japanese woman's ensemble, fall from a track on the ceiling at the foot of the bed. Windows with rice paper-like panes slant upward from the floor, following the slant of the stairway on the other side. An *ofuro*, a Japanese soaking tub, rests impressively just inside the master bath—its fiberglass core enclosed in concrete—alongside a glass-enclosed shower.

On the ground floor, the front door opens into a small cove, home to a weathered, wood-framed mirror Jayne picked up at a California flea market. In a nod to the ideal of a humble abode, she remembers playing with her three babies in its reflection. The space then opens up, becoming a softly colored expanse visually divided into two rooms. A framed assortment of heavy Chinese lattice panels marks one end of the dining room, while four *shoji* screens—intricately patterned and originally freestanding but now fitted with metal hangers to slide back and forth along the ceiling—define the sitting space behind. The plush curved sofas, clad in peachy-pink upholstery, stand in stark contrast to the heavy rectilinear dining table and chairs.

Restaurant-style swinging doors lead into the kitchen where stainless steel countertops and wood cabinetry with frosted glass fronts line the prep area. The tangerine marmalade- and ripe banana-

hued marmoleum countertop and flooring done in the '40s diner-style kitchen are hard to miss or forget. A wood pulp and linseed oil linoleum relative, the product was custom colored and designed. Milk chocolate leather covers the seats and backs of shiny stools that curve around a counter with an antique newspaper shelf below. A booth and table, open on both sides and clad to match the stools, are situated perpendicular to the stainless steel range so meals can be served up short-order style. "Isn't every mother a short order cook?" Jayne laughs. Beyond the countertop, by a wide bay window, is a pleasant window seat—Jayne initially balked at Little's idea, but now confesses it's one of her favorite spots in the house.

Sitting at the dining table, her 3-year-old daughter climbing in and out of her lap, Jayne Willingham says she cannot emphasize just how much her family loves their home. Her appreciation for the hard work and devotion of the architects and builder is matched only by that of Clayton, Little and Brooks for the vision and creative ability of their client. A unique blend of Japanese elements, a traditional and historic exterior and modern interiors, this home is the result of the collaboration, cooperation and communication of everyone involved. Home sweet home indeed.

AMH



THIS PAGE: The heavy, dark wood of the dining table is offset by the colorful light fixture above and the intricate panel just behind it. LEFT: A 1950s secretary, now used as a bar, makes a unique addition to the sitting area.