



TRIBEZA

COVER P. 37





schematic

KEEPING HISTORY | LIVING MODERN

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Emily Little is an architect and historian. And an ardent believer in smart growth.

The longtime East Austin resident recently completed her “backyard house,” just behind the historic brick home on East 8th Street that contains her office. A native of West Austin, Little moved into the historic Guadalupe neighborhood in 1985 when her firm was just starting out, and she has no plans to leave.

“Finding this house was great,” she said. “It was like moving to another town.”

After several years of living and working in the “front house,” she was ready to expand. In 2001, she built a new living space—not to replace the original dwelling, but to complement it. After all, designing for adaptive reuse is one of her strong suits.

“It is our philosophy to enhance the old with a dazzle of the new,” Little declares on her Web site. So dazzle she did.

Back in 1893, when the front house was new, there was a small structure in the backyard, “so I went with the garden building or carriage house idea,” she explained. “That’s why it’s dark green—to blend in. I wanted it to be subdued.”

The house isn’t immediately noticeable from the street. Its dark color and set-back position behind an old iron gate belie the dramatic space inside. The proportions are very vertical, in the style of Victorian homes, which helps it integrate with the surroundings. A stone patio, dropped just

below street level, peeks out from within the cottage garden.

“It’s contemporary, but not contemporary-looking from the street,” Little said.

A two-story wall of north-facing windows lets in generous amounts of “artists’ light” (a northern exposure is said to provide “true light” for painters) to both the downstairs living area and the upstairs bedroom. Although the southern side of the house faces an alley, preventing her from orienting the house toward the sunlight—a design feature she uses often—she was able to attract southern breezes through the “lookout.” This lofted bedroom is tucked under a dramatic point that solved the geometrical riddle of the oddly shaped lot.

“The play of the design was thrilling,” Little said. “It gave me confidence to play more with my clients’ designs.”

Her bedroom, which overlooks the living area below, has a view of the French Legation, the one-time residence of France’s emissary to the Republic of Texas. Originally built in 1840, Austin’s oldest standing wooden structure informs much of Little’s thinking about living in a historic neighborhood.

“We must keep what we have and work with it,” she said. “Don’t tear down and start new. We can’t let money be the governing reason in a district as sensitive as this.”

Instead, Little advocates building on existing land in historic neighborhoods.

facing page emily little's backyard house

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this page from courtyard facing page open living room



this page upstairs bedroom facing page a wall of windows





this page north-facing windows illuminate the office facing page the dramatic point punctuates the southeastern sky

“This is the essence of good infill: respect historic constraints.” Infill is using land wisely, she explains. Just as many East Austin artists have built backyard studios, Little created a backyard house that not only fits into the aesthetic sensibility of the area, it allowed her to continue to live and work on the same property.

“It’s always been a live/work situation for me,” she said. “Now it’s a compound. When I needed more space, I didn’t want to be anywhere else.” **CL**

Resources

Architect

Emily Little, AIA

General Contractor

Curtis Gravatt, Construction Arts

Engineer

Jeffrey L. Smith, P. E.

Landscape

David Ramert, Landscape Architect

Hardscape

Bolm Studios

Forged Iron

Lars Stanley

Fabrics

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Tile

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