

A modern homage to beloved bungalow

By Diane Cowen | September 29, 2017

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Photo: Elizabeth Conley, Staff

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Kimberly Hight, from left, with her husband Christopher in their Montrose home with general contractor and architect Camilo Parra on Tuesday, Aug. 1, 2017, in Houston. (Elizabeth Conley / Houston Chronicle)

Christopher and Kimberly Hight loved their bungalow across the street from the Rothko Chapel. It had charm and history and cultural surroundings.

But there was no escaping that their family of four had tired of sharing a small, single-sink bathroom.

The Hights had lived in a signature-gray bungalow, one of many that surround the Menil Collection in Montrose, since they moved to Houston in 2003 when Christopher was hired at Rice University. He is an associate professor and director of undergraduate studies in Rice's School of Architecture.

He grew up in Charlotte, N.C., where his dad, Charles Hight, was dean of the University of North Carolina's School of Architecture.

Christopher first found his way to Houston as a student at Rice, and Kimberly, his high school sweetheart, followed to study at the University of Houston.

A Fulbright award took them to London, where Christopher earned master's and doctoral degrees. The tenure-track post at Rice brought them back, and Kimberly is now a counselor at St. Vincent de Paul Catholic School.

And though they wanted a new home, they'd fallen in love with the community and loved being surrounded by art and culture.

So as Christopher sketched ideas for the 3,000-square-foot modern home he designed for his family - there were hundreds of

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iterations over about a year and a half - they searched for land as close as they could get.

"Everyone in the neighborhood knew we were looking for a lot in the neighborhood," he said. Friends were on the lookout.

It was hard for them to imagine living anywhere else. "We loved, loved, loved the neighborhood. That's why we were in that house for so long," Kimberly said. "The Menil is an extension of your home; you're so connected."



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With the help of neighbors, they found a spot nearby. That their new home would be so close made moving easier. The couple jokes that there were days they hauled things over in their son's wagon.

"It's pretty funny moving five blocks. We got a few friends to help move the kids' trampoline. We were carrying it down the street, and the Menil had this VIP event," Christopher said. "We walked in front of the Menil, and all these people are getting out of cars and going to this opening. We joked that we were a performance piece and part of the exhibit."

For their new home, Christopher wanted to design a usable, compact house with more square footage and the comforting flow of the bungalow, all on a modest budget. Though he is an

architecture professor, he teaches about landscape and large-scale design - not residential work.

A friend offered great advice: "You should talk to Camilo Parra. He'll really complement your personality."

Christopher laughed and had a "what-did-you-mean-by-that?" pause. Then he realized the friend was right.

Parra is calm and methodical while Christopher would sweat every detail.

But would Parra want to build another architect's design?

Parra, who owns the Parra Design Group, didn't hesitate. There were revisions to be made and blueprints to be drawn up, as there would on any project.

He urged the Hights to consider an exterior of gray stucco and silver ribbed metal with a wider profile to make the house look smaller. Rooms that cantilever over front and back porches required extra attention as well. They're details that matter in modern architecture.

On an overcast day, the exterior is reminiscent of the gray bungalow; on a sunny day, a golden hue emerges.

Indoors, an interior wall needed to be reinforced to handle the heavy load of some substantial sliding doors upstairs. That wall turned out to be a pivot point in the downstairs, keeping any mess in the kitchen out of view, while breakfast and dining areas remained open.

So much of the home was inspired by the Menil bungalow they loved so much, yet adapted to a more grown-up family. The process also proved to be an extension of Christopher's lifelong connection to architecture.

"I'm a real architect," he said, acknowledging this first step into residential design. "And as an educator, I've learned so much."

The home's interior is eclectic but filled with modern and midcentury-modern touches. The dining room has a rosewood dining table surrounded by a set of rare high-back chairs by designer Arne Jacobsen. They're artful, and they create intimacy at dinner, as the tall backs define the space by drawing everyone in.

Classic midcentury pieces in the home include Breuer and Eames chairs and pieces by Eero Saarinen.

Though many modern homes have standard white walls, Kimberly wanted some color, and the couple opted for a bold chartreuse.

"The color choice was very difficult as it would be with any architect," Kimberly said of the colorful accent wall downstairs that repeats in the kitchen as well as upstairs. "When I saw this, I was so excited. It's such a statement, and you can commit to something like that for a while."

Keeping things low maintenance was important, too. Kitchen counters are honed quartz by Dekton, billed as virtually unscratchable.

A skylight above the staircase brings the outdoors in, even when you're transitioning from the open public spaces downstairs to the more private spaces upstairs.

At the top of the stairs is a family room, where their younger son plays with friends. Their older son, now a teenager, prefers his own space in his room. Off this room is a balcony, where they relax and look down on their backyard as well as a neighbor's vast garden.

Their younger son got to choose where his window would be, so he imagined where he'd lie at night and placed the window for a view of the moon.

Then there's the master suite, a just-right size that fits the couple perfectly. In fact, they opted to have a smaller bedroom to provide more square footage for the utility room.

Porcelain tile with a white-gray marbled look covers the shower walls and around the bathtub, and slate-gray flooring provides contrast.

"I am totally in heaven after living in the bungalow with one bathroom for everyone," Kimberly said. "I was sharing one sink with all of those boys. I'm in heaven. Heaven."

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