

Natural selection

Loosely translated, *Wabi Sabi* means lived in, which is exactly the feel of this contemporary home in Houston, Texas.

TEXT: DOROTHY WALDMAN PHOTOGRAPHY: DON GLENZER

A slab of oiled oak atop rough concrete blocks is the centrepiece of the kitchen.

On a tree-lined street of modest frame cottages in the traditional neighbourhood of the Museum District of Houston, Texas, one house quietly stands out from the rest.

Designed to express the philosophy of *Wabi Sabi* by the internationally acclaimed architectural firm of Olson Sundberg Kundig Allen (OSKA) from Seattle, Washington, the house mixes Eastern and Western aesthetics.

Wabi Sabi is a Japanese expression that implies restraint and an appreciation for the humble, the simple, the natural and the impermanent. It implies the understated, a serenity, beauty free of extraneous embellishment and the intermingling of the natural and the man-made. These were the guidelines that Rick Sundberg, lead architect of the project, followed in the design of the recently sold spec house by developer Carol Issak Barden + Company.

Perhaps an unexpected choice of architects for a project in Texas, Barden, a Seattle native, knew that OSKA shared her sensitivities towards nature and architectural design, and convinced them to take the challenge of designing something much smaller and less expensive than its typical projects. Intrigued by the challenge and having never worked in Texas before, the architects readily agreed.

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"Working on a spec house has its own challenges – creating a home that can accommodate a wide range of lifestyles and families; from active young families to empty-nesters," says Sundberg, adding that he organised the layout of the home so every room, except two bathrooms, has a garden view.

Built of Chinese Cedar, a wood that ages gracefully and harmonises with the existing neighbourhood, the 348-square-metre property, situated on a lot of

only 557 square metres, combines natural materials and simple modern forms to create a warm, liveable family home.

Unlike much new construction in the area, the old-growth trees were not only preserved, but Sundberg incorporated them into the design with strategically placed windows to take advantage of their presence and, in one case, decking that flows around a pecan tree. The LEED-accredited lead



Existing trees were preserved and incorporated into the outdoor living area.

architect incorporated in the design of the house operable windows and other provisions for natural light and ventilation, making a bold sustainable statement in the most air-conditioned city in the United States.

The outer wall that softly slants towards the front garden as though to invite nature inside injects an element of the unexpected to the angular lines of the house. Tall, narrow windows across the front and long, low windows close to the floor on the adjacent side of the living room frame unexpected views of lush greenery, while providing light and privacy, and complementing the floors of varying natural shades of ipe, a Brazilian hardwood.

Expanses of glass across the back wall of the open plan kitchen on the opposite side of the house, past the freestanding bamboo walls by Alan Almai that form the stairwell in the centre of the ground floor, frame the lush back garden. "There are no hanging cabinets on the walls," says Barden, who

contributed her style and passion for the outdoors to the design of the home. "Instead, there is a large window across the back," to enhance the view of the bamboo, Japanese blueberry trees, and 50-year-old Magnolia tree."

A multi-purpose island of a four-metre slab of natural wood supported by raw concrete beams anchors the kitchen area.

"I believe there is something inherently valuable about imperfection, and the wooden island with knots and flaws, even looks a little unfinished," Barden says.

Since *Wabi Sabi* implies this type of imperfection, as found in nature, it adds the user-friendly feeling she wanted to create. In addition to contributing the warmth of an organic element above the concrete blocks, it provides a very practical, substantial area to be used for everything from a desk to food preparation.

The kitchen moves seamlessly outside to the reclaimed wood decking, which flows around a 50-year-old pecan tree. A precast fire pit and alfresco kitchen

crafted by Steven Dvorak of Spirit Ridge create an additional living area for entertaining and enjoying the beauty of nature.

Throughout the home, the soft neutral palette of warm tones and natural finishes were inspired from a sycamore branch; the granite Daltile countertops in the kitchen resemble a rock that Barden found while hiking in the Cascade Mountains in the American Northwest, and the wool carpeting is nearly identical in colour to another rock she found on a hike.

Up the stairs, brightened by a skylight shaded by overhanging tree branches, the master bedroom opens onto an 74-square-metre rooftop terrace, which has a tree house feel with views that peer through green, leafy branches. The closet by Program Martin, an open area tucked behind a wall without a door, in the master bedroom has glass front drawers, pull-down bars so clothes hanging near the high ceilings can be easily retrieved and hooks that recede into the wall

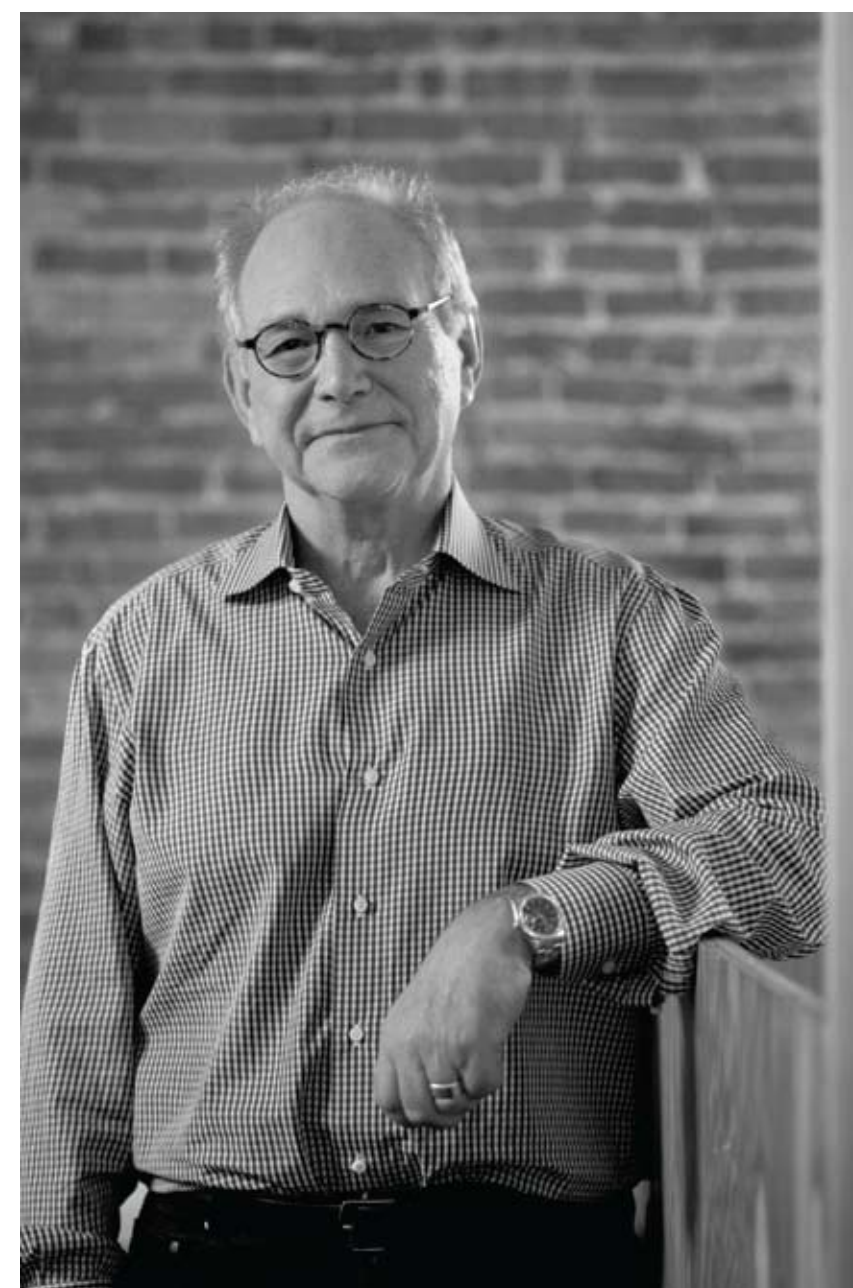
when not in use. With ceilings soaring more than four metres high and a strategically-placed window that perfectly frames the trunk of an old tree in such a way that it allows light to enter while still affording privacy, the master bathroom, like the other rooms of the home, also has views that bring nature indoors.

Mahogany cabinets add another wood element to the bathroom, with soft sage subway tiles, granite counters and limestone floors. The WC area and the oversized square shower are concealed behind a wall of heavy tempered glass doors, which, like the windows, allow light to enter while remaining private.

The serenity, humility and natural imperfection of *Wabi Sabi*, so prized by Eastern monks, has now been introduced into the Houston housing market. The rapid sale of the house proves its has come. **ID**



Left to right: Natural elements inspired the colour palette; the façade slopes outwards by 15°; architect Rick Sundberg; guest bathroom.



TIM BIESOLOON, SUNDBERG KUNDIG ALLEN ARCHITECTS

