

The design of the back of bungalow is Rivera's way to be surrounded by water and trees.

The Home of **Earthy Delights**

Award-winning architect Miguel Rivera breathes new life into a deteriorating, 1904 bungalow in historic Clarksville

BY CARLA AVOLIO / PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL FINKEL



A glass wall in the living room allows people to enjoy the pool and trees and, when opened, the breezes and sounds.



When it comes to Austin architecture, Miguel Rivera needs no introduction. In the 14 years since starting the firm Miró Rivera, he and partner Juan Miró have created some of the city's most celebrated constructions. From projects like the Trail Restroom, an 80-square-foot sculptural work of steel panels that spiral out of the ground at the hike and bike trail, to the 251-foot-tall tower of cascading red tubes at the Circuit of The Americas, the architects (both members of the AIA's College of Fellows) have established themselves as designers of creative yet functional structures that connect with their surroundings. And with their portfolio of residential and commercial work recognized by more than 70 awards, Miró Rivera has earned its place in the firmament of American architecture.

These days, Rivera can be found working on ambitious international projects like Yaraui, a parabolic necropolis made of concentric rings destined to float on the salty waters of the Dead Sea. When it comes to building for himself, however, the architect's needs are far simpler. "I want to be surrounded by clean spaces, water and trees," says the Puerto Rican native who worked in New York for 14 years before moving to Austin in 2000. "I grew up in the Caribbean, so I'm used to being around nature and the sea."

With this earthy sensibility, it comes as no surprise that at the architect's home in the historic district of Clarksville, nature takes center stage. In his airy living room, a sheer wall of glass frames views of the garden's turquoise pool and soaring oak trees and, when opened, allows breezes, sunlight and the sound of cascading water to come pouring in. "From wherever I am in this space, I feel connected to the earth," he says contentedly.



The first change Rivera made was to build a pool (above) in the backyard. The extension he designed ended up including a stairwell (opposite page), living room, dining room and kitchen (top).

MIRÓ RIVERA ARCHITECTS (POOL)

But rewind 14 years and things were a little different. Rivera had just moved into the site's original, 900-square-foot bungalow, which was in a state of disrepair. The circa 1904 structure offered enormous potential, with 15-foot-long pine floorboards and deeply coffered ceilings, but much work needed to be done. The property also included an expansive, weed-filled backyard where the element of water was conspicuously absent. "My first summer here was brutal," recalls Rivera, who moved to Austin so he could be in the same city as his sister Rosa and Miró, a professor of architecture at the University of Texas. (Rosa and Miró are married with three children.) "I missed the water so much that I joined a rowing team. I also decided that I had to build a pool."

Thus began the process of breathing life into the bungalow, removing the dated, popcorn wall texture and rearranging the rooms to improve flow. A major extension, however, was not in the original plan. "I'd just come from New York, so a 900-square-foot house seemed like so much space," he recalls. But living in Texas has a way of changing one's perspective on size, and by 2009 he'd laid plans for an addition.

Making use of the narrow garden, Rivera designed the rectangular extension to be a seamless flow of living, dining, kitchen and media room. By moving the front door to the extension, Rivera created a narrative that introduced an important element of contrast into the small space. "What I love is that from the street, all you can see is the original house," he says. "But when you walk through the front door, you enter a foyer that's totally modern and clean. Then, in just a few steps, you're in the living room surrounded by water, trees and all this greenery."

Inside, a sparse palette allows the striking garden views to take center stage. Walls are painted white, floors are tiled in



Very little of the addition can be seen from the street in Clarksville on which the house (above, right) sits. In the bathrooms (opposite page), Rivera found original plank siding under wallpaper and left it untouched.

smoky porcelain and the kitchen is covered in slabs of dark-gray Pietra Cardosa limestone. But there's nothing cold about this austerity. The clean, expansive surfaces provide a boundless playscape for Rivera's two daughters—Antonia, 4, and Clara, 2. For his wife, Elisa, the enormous, 5-by-7 kitchen countertop is “the best thing in this house.” Here, they can prepare each meal as the girls spread out with art and toys. Other warming touches come courtesy of a multi-colored door screen, low-slung, mid-century Danish armchairs with vibrant cushions and a lime green couch that encourages relaxing in front of the television.

This same aesthetic—one the architect calls “warm contemporary”—also drove the treatment of the renovated section. Handsome, wooden features, such as window frames, doors and floorboards are given a starring role. In the master and guest baths, Rivera removed wallpaper and drop ceiling tiles to find original plank siding, which he left untouched, preserving its authentic hue of chocolate brown. (It was in these walls where he also uncovered a shoebox containing

letters belonging to the bungalow's original owners.) With this richly aged material, Rivera mixed in white marble countertops, sleek furnishings and paintings from Cuban artist Agustin Fernandez, a close friend.

The bungalow's floor plan, although compact by Texas standards, fits nicely with the family's way of life. The former living and dining rooms have been converted to a spacious master bedroom, with a balcony overlooking the herb garden, and a comfortable guest room that plays host to a regular stream of visiting relatives. The girls' bedroom is a pocket-sized space furnished with beds, designed by Rivera himself, which include cubbies for toys and books. And here, his New York perspective still holds. “People often tease us that this room is only big enough for a child's closet,” he laughs. “But we happily fit both of them in.”

For the couple, a certain degree of separation is also essential. “We play our Latin American music—we entertain friends,” he says. “It's great that we can do this without waking up the children.” The perfect sound barrier comes in the form of a cleverly appointed “transition” room and heavy door, which separate the extension from the main living quarters.

The balance between creativity and livability, evident throughout the house, forms the bedrock of Rivera's design philosophy. “Yes, a building should be interesting, but more than anything it has to make sense,” he says. “Our designs aren't modern, futuristic or trendy. They're contemporary, which means they make sense at this point in time.”

“You couldn't get glass of this size 100 years ago,” he continues, gesturing to the wall lining the living room. “But now we can. So why wouldn't you make the most of this material and be connected to this beautiful landscape? This room might be small, but I feel like it goes all the way to the end of the garden.” ■

