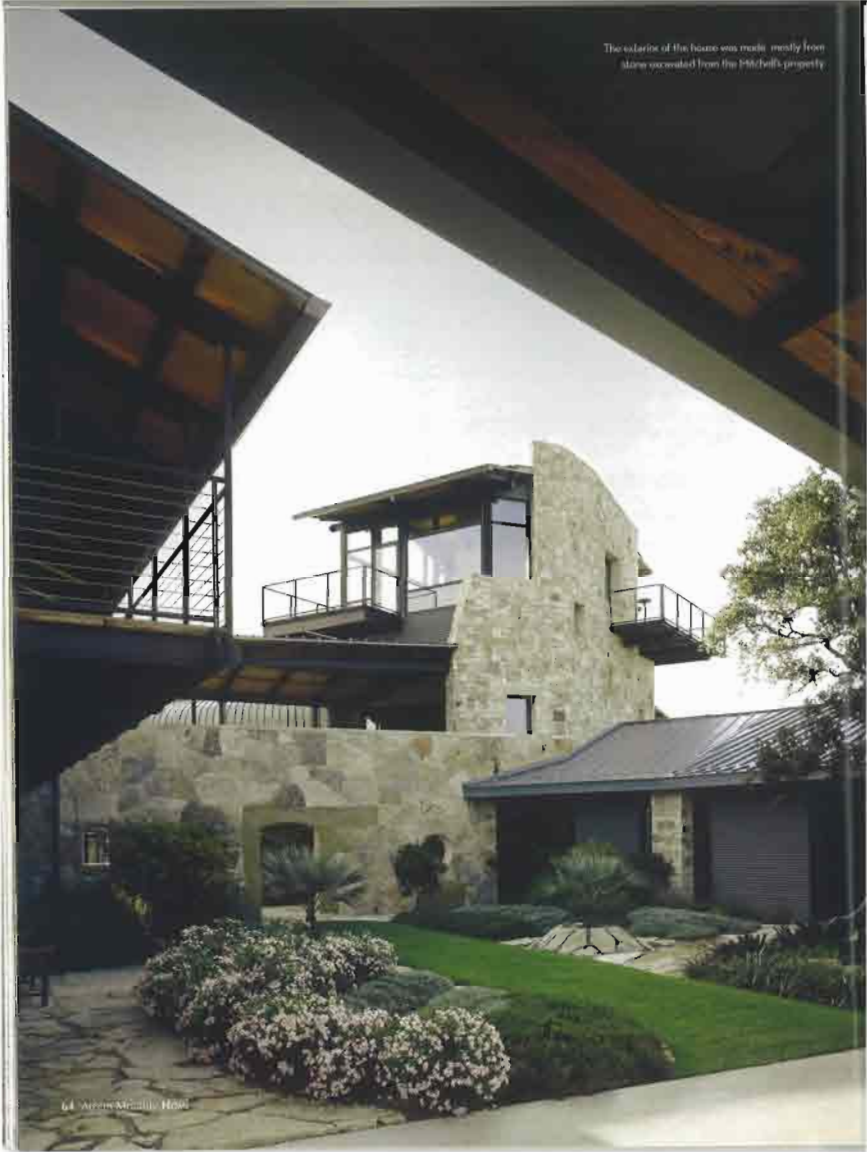


The solarium of the house was made mostly from stone excavated from the Mitchell's property.



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## a sculptured ranch

Rising Up From the Hill Country's  
Earth, a Masterpiece Takes Shape

by clare miers | photography by wesley rose

The brilliant mind of an architect, the skillful hands of artisans and craftsmen, the thought processes of an engineer and the dreams of countless others collided to create a sculptural ranch house that seems to rise up from the rocky ridges of Barton Creek, near Dripping Springs. The mammoth project has yielded a home that finds a union with industrial engineering and natural materials from the surroundings. "It seems to come up organically from the landscape, but also, when you look a little closer, it's a highly precisely engineered thing," Hobson Crow, AIA with Barnes, Gromarzkly, Kosarek Architects explains. "It has those two readings, which gives me a great deal of satisfaction that it works on those two levels."

The home is a dream realized by owners Bill and Mary Mitchell, who purchased the 460-acre ranch and walked almost every inch of it until they, along with the architect, discovered the optimum place to break ground. "The cedar was so thick at the time, but this spot, where the home sits, had a nice view of the property. We just love the privacy of the ranch," Mary Mitchell explains.

"The given site dictated how the house was going to shape up. If you were given a map and you looked down on the contours of the site and saw the way the land falls down to the creek bed, the house actually follows the contours of Barton Creek's ravine or watershed. The shape of the house really came from that influence," Crow

reflects. The ranch house has two levels on the slope, and the architect was able to straddle the house over both levels, yielding a fascinating design for the residence. Curious winding roads lead to the house from various entry points, creating a feeling of anticipation as guests approach this work of art made from rock and steel. The sun sets in an approximate 360-degree dynamic ridge around the stunning Star Canyon ranch as though there were a glowing aura circling the property. The house looks to this spectacular ridgeline formed by Barton Creek. It is a breathtaking sight to see from all vantage points on the ranch.

"The house is built with concrete and steel framing. We left most of that steel exposed, and so there was a lot of precision in how the steel frame was put together. The steel became part of the aesthetic of the house. The steel, stone, and glass became the main components," Crow says. Bill Mitchell, a former vice chairman and director of the corporation for Texas Instruments with an engineer's mind, wanted a solid construction that would last into future generations. For example, the exposed fixed tension straps that carry the aerodynamic load of the breezeway come into play as needed to counter the various directions of the wind gusts that flow into the property from the hills and valleys. "It's very precise engineering," Crow says. The house faces due south and has many passive solar features and green



LEFT: A Dulvo Yimoye painting stands prominently in the middle of the living room, accompanied by a Charles Uphoff sculpture. BELOW: The Mitchell's piano glows as natural light passes through the windows. RIGHT: The entry hall opens into the living and dining areas, creating a fluid space that is perfect for entertaining.

points, including a geothermal loop heat-exchange system. Instead of a compressor or condenser to air-condition the house, the ground serves as an exchange for the heat to control the home's climate. "The house is a collaborative effort among the Mitchells, builder Bob Rizzo, a lot of extremely talented artisans and craftsmen and me," says Crow. "Chuck Naeves and the structural engineers from Architectural Engineers Collaborative were very critical in the development of the house."

The stonework is enchanting. Most of the rock used on the house was lifted from the land and hand-cut by the Escobedo Construction team, members of which worked tirelessly to cut and place the rock and stone on the house. Some larger pieces of rock were brought in from Big Spring. A beautifully cut radius window was fashioned out of rock on the garden wall near the main entrance to the home and constructed without using mortar. "It was all cut to fit, so it's kind of an organic deal," says David Escobedo. "I wanted it to look like it has been cut in after the fact."

In addition to developing the beautiful gardens and grounds on the ranch, Artist C. L. Williams, of Cicl Design for Gardens, and his team resourcefully created amazing stone mounts for the couple's extensive







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LIFE in the dining room, an antique French farm table, chairs, a white Belgian linen and the painting *Contemplating the Universe*, by John Alexander, are anchored by an antique serape. THIS PAGE: The kitchen serves as home to two Charles Umlauf sculptures, *Large Goat* and *Small Goat*, and a relaxing 1988 Country view.



LEFT: The Mitchell's bedroom was designed with a wall of windows that takes in natural light.  
RIGHT: A sloping tile ceiling is a dramatic point of interest in the bathroom.

art collection by using stone from the building projects. The mounts showcase sculptures seen throughout the lush, green meadow adjacent to the house.

As any dream home should, the Mitchells' homestead represents them. They appreciate art, music and nature, elements now embedded into their home. The house is serene, calming and somewhat minimal, with a unique design blend of contemporary, soothing interiors combined with natural materials. "The furniture is not the most important thing in this house; the architecture is," says interior designer Gloria Frame. Frame and her daughter Hilary Crady, of Plus Two Interiors, did not want to detract from the owners' sculpture collection and the magnificent architecture. "I wanted things to be uncomplicated, not contrived. I didn't want anything to look as though a decorator overdesigned the spaces. I wanted to work with the rough and the smooth elements. The house is a wonderful backdrop for paintings and art," Frame explains. Some of the Mitchells' fascinating collections include works from

John Alexander, Anita Huffington and an artist related to Mary; Cynthia Camfin. They collect Charles Unlauf sculptures, which are found in galleries such as the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, the Smithsonian and the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as in many private collections. Unlauf was an art teacher for 40 years at the University of Texas and created the Unlauf Sculpture Garden and Museum in Austin.

"The Mitchells had appreciated traditional designs in the past, but Mary showed me some images that suggested that she would be open to something more modern. I wanted to let the house serve as a way to look out on the landscape but also as a backdrop for the art," says Hobson. "The house is a work of art in itself," says C. L. Williams.

"When we sit inside, we want to feel like we are outside with all of the nature surrounding us," says Bill Mitchell. Turkeys, bobcats, blue herons and summer tanagers are among the many Hill Country regulars. Working with the University of Texas's biology center to preserve nature, the Mitchells have restored native grasses and wildflowers and have







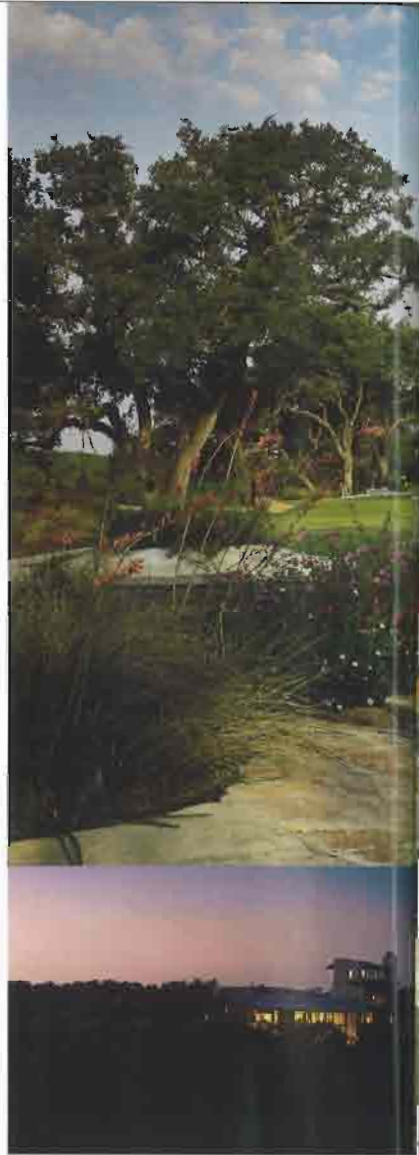
cleared cedar trees, allowing native trees to prosper and grow. Crow used local sources for much of the interior's natural materials. "Hobson helped us to select native Texas woods for the house, and those materials are beautiful," says Mary. "The kitchen hosts pecan veneers and red cedar purlins, and we used Texas mesquite wood flooring."

Bill and Mary Mitchell don't just admire the phenomenal art they display; they have a deep connection to their collections and revel in the roots, history and stories behind the artists and their creations. Bill has a pioneer mentality with a can-do spirit, always looking for a better way to do something and never forgetting the art of living and enjoying life, art, community and relationships. He admits to being all work in the past and no play. But no more. He's found balance in life. His work in developing the ranch is a labor of love, and a state-of-the-art rainwater collection facility is just one of his many planned projects. Asked if this incredible home was truly Mary's dream, she replies: "I guess I wouldn't dream up any more of a house than this. I find this house very comfortable. I love the architecture. It's a lovely place."

In creating this lovely place, Crow was the consummate artist and sculptor, using his mind to shape and mold great structures and dwellings. He left this inspiring body of work at the Mitchell ranch with sentiment, as he delivered a copy of W. H. Auden's poem, *In Praise of Limestone*, and a sculpture he designed using pieces of mesquite, zinc and stone from the ranch.

"The Hill Country is filled with limestone. It's ubiquitous. It's everywhere. You can mold it and shape it and use it so that it takes on new character," Crow says. "The poem seemed to describe the work that we did in the house. It talks about us, as people and how we yearn for something that is timeless."

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- Hobson Crow, Architect

