



SOARING WINGS

By MAURI ELBEL | Photography by THOMAS MCCONNELL

Soaring Wings, the distinctive nearly 6,000-square-foot work of art painted on the rugged canvas of the Texas Hill Country, is a masterpiece that lives up to the ascensions insinuated by its name. For architect Winn Wittman, the three-story, four-bedroom, six-bath house was a creative vision built on the momentum of inspiration rather than a project driven by client desires.



“I started building it as a spec house,” says Wittman, principal of Winn Wittman Architecture. “I didn’t have any clients. I just wanted to do something that would push my capabilities as an architect. It was definitely a labor of love.”

The architect’s labor of love led to a Westlake Hills home that has garnered a slew of awards and notoriety from around the world, including a Dream Home award for Best Contemporary Home of the Year and Architectural Record’s House of the Month.

“One of the interesting things about this house is the amount of international acclaim it’s gotten,” Wittman says. “It’s been featured in magazines from China to Germany.”

This past fall, the home also served as a set for Terrence

Malick’s untitled drama featuring Ryan Gosling, Natalie Portman, Christian Bale, Cate Blanchett and Val Kilmer about two intersecting love triangles set against Austin’s music scene. And what an impressive backdrop it is — from the home’s 146 windows to the 3,200-pound bathtub carved from a single block of grey granite that anchors the master bathroom, no expense was spared in the design of Soaring Wings.

The project evolved over four years, and it seems Wittman knew all along: build something great, and they will come. And they certainly did — a family relocating from Houston to Austin began following the home’s progress and decided they wanted to buy it. “They really appreciated the quality and the thought that

went into the construction of the home and the selection of the materials,” Wittman says. “They pretty much trusted me.”

Soaring Wing’s structure is constructed entirely of red iron on concrete piers sunk deep into rock, joined with full penetration welds, the strongest and one of the most costly connections. In total, the solid red iron frame weighs 34,000 pounds. Its shellstone and copper exterior is locally sourced while paying homage to famous designs elsewhere — the 17,000 pounds of honed Texas shellstone used in the house is only found in Leander, Texas yet it resembles the fossilized stone used on the Getty Museum in Los Angeles.

Hand-folded and seamed copper panels were selected for their

low maintenance and longevity — they will naturally weather to a green patina in approximately 20 years. Copper panels, 18 inches by 3 feet in size, are staggered in a pattern that evokes a similar one used by Frank Gehry on his famous Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain.

“I wanted these materials to relate to native materials in Texas architecture but to be used in a contemporary way,” says Wittman. “I liked the ability of the copper to flow seamlessly over a form, and I appreciated the durability as well. Copper is an expensive material but it lasts a long time and gives a rich surface appearance which contrasts nicely with the Texas shellstone, which I had originally seen



in my days at graduate school in a number of buildings at University of Texas at Austin.”

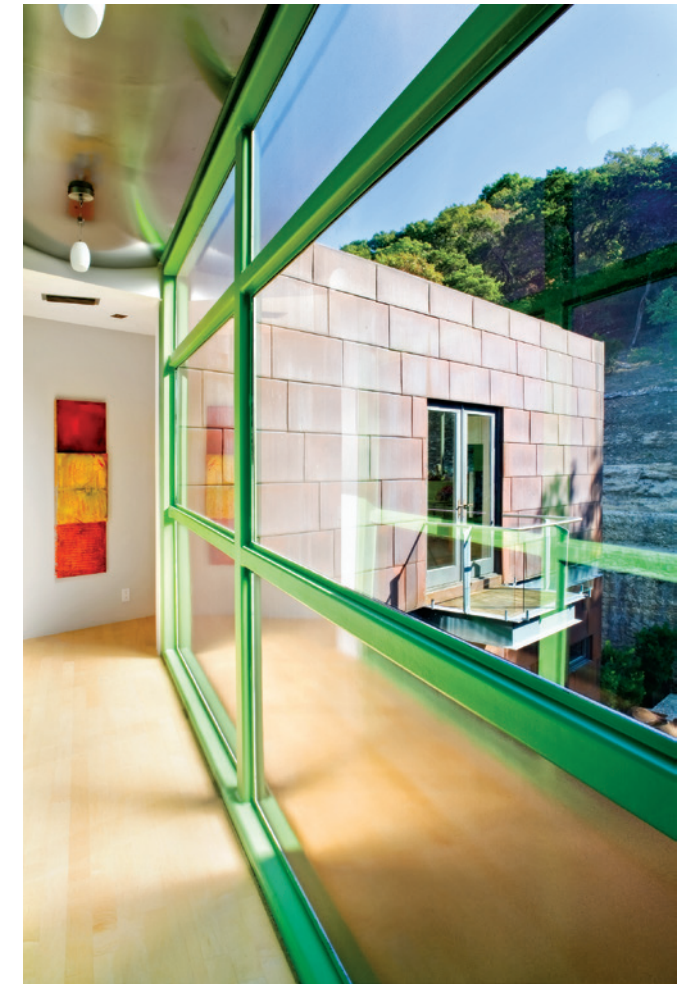
Soaring Wings is divided into public and private wings, separated by a two-story, glass-and-steel bridge with stainless steel ceilings which also allowed Wittman to run air conditioning into the spaces without exposing the vents or duct work. The master suite occupies the entire lower level of the private wing, and consists of a bedroom and sitting area, his and hers walk-in

closets/dressing rooms, and the bath area. The focal point of the master bath is undeniably the nearly two-ton bathtub carved from a single block of grey granite that sits in a bed of Mexican beach pebbles, tying into the Zen-like Japanese rock garden beyond. Matching granite his and hers vanities, a steam shower with body sprays and fixtures designed by Phillippe Starck, and a vaulted ceiling featuring a Venetian plaster surface are other visual points of interest.

Throughout the home, a rich mixture of select maple, black galaxy granite and fine carpeting flooring merges to create a subtle palette that is light and contemporary. A media room can be set up for the optimum home theater experience or reconfigured as a private office with a separate outside entrance. The private wine cellar features a shellstone entry and vaulted ceiling. All three levels of the home are completely accessible, and a three-story elevator can comfortably carry up to five passengers or a

person in a wheelchair. It also comes in handy when bringing groceries up to the kitchen from the garage level.

Roughly 3,000 square feet of Pink Arizona sandstone decking and 1,500 square feet of durable IPE wood decking wrap the house. Wittman designed custom handrails and guardrails for the decks and the stairs, consisting of 3/8-inch plate glass held in place by custom-made stanchions cut from 3/4-inch steel and capped with a stainless steel tube section,



resulting in railings that provide an exhilarating experience while remaining safe.

The most impressive array of the nearly 150 windows in the home is located on the second floor — a curved and faceted 40-foot by 10-foot window wall with floor-to-ceiling glass wired for motorized roll shades that provide unobstructed views to the Hill Country beyond.

The heated swimming pool is a feat of hydraulic engineering

and forms the center of the private outdoor courtyard, equipped with three powerful pumps that move over 500 gallons of water per minute over the waterfall edge.

Soaring Wings was designed to accommodate intimate or grand entertaining with its gourmet kitchen featuring Thermador® appliances, a main sink and a prep-sink, and custom-designed cabinets covered in matched vertical grain sustainable fir veneer. Counters are covered in Caesarstone®, a

harder material than granite with a unique sparkling quality.

“I am a gourmet cook and I really take into account what a chef would need in a kitchen environment,” Winn says. “Everything is fairly accessible and there is also a butler’s pantry that comes in handy.”

Nothing in the quality of the construction of the home was compromised, and the mechanical and electrical systems are no exception. Every room is wired for audio, video, computer,

telephone, and programmable capability for dimming, intercom and security. Special lighting fixtures include pieces from Italy with Murano Glass and others by well-known designers from around the world. There are seven separate high-efficiency heat pumps with enough tonnage to cool the home during a big party on a summer day. Even the HVAC vents are a special design imported from Japan. But if you ask Wittman about his favorite elements of this house, you will get a list of accomplishments.



Bella Villa



It might have been this combined fascination with a good design challenge that brought the innovative designers together to execute a vision capable of bringing in and capturing others.

“Even the site Winn selected wasn’t a site most would have chosen, but I enjoy that kind of challenge and so does Winn,” he says. “Some want flat and easy whereas Winn and I want something complex. We see that as appealing.”

The driveway was another exercise in colorful creativity — a testament of the out-of-the-box thinking that was poured into every aspect of Soaring Wings’ design. Winn and Robinson decided to dye the concrete moss green and texturize it using a rather unconventional material: candy. Subcontractors dropped gummy bears and worms into wet concrete and washed them out when it dried to give a fossilized impression.

“That is the way Winn and I both think,” he says. “For us, it is very important to think of the details and come up with ways to make it look interesting and different. It requires some thought and creativity. The driveway was certainly that.” ❖

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“I like the flow of spaces from inside to out,” he says. “There is a corner of the house that actually intersects the swimming pool and there is glass, which is a favorite place for the owners to sit and read. The courtyard is a very serene place with sort of an Asian feel, including bamboo and running water.”

But perhaps the real beauty of the home for the architect, as well as builder Gary Robinson of Home as Art, was derived from the challenge at hand.

“It was a very complex, unusual design that required a lot more thought than a usual house,” Robinson says. “It’s not the most difficult home I’ve ever built, but it certainly was up there.”



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