

**The American Institute of Architects
Small Project Awards
2023 Recipient**

The Perch

General Contractor: Nicole Blair

Owner: Dylan Robertson and Annie Cobb

Location: Austin, Texas

Category: Three

Project site: Previously developed

Building program type(s): Residential - single-family detached

Additional information

Project attributes

Year of substantial project completion: 2021

Gross conditioned floor area: 660 sq. ft.

Project team

Structural Engineer: Structures

General Contractor: Nicole Blair

Landscape Architect: D-Crain

"This project is whimsical, and the team was very thoughtful about its presence on the street. Kudos to them for being innovative." – Jury comment

AIA Small Project Awards

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Information from online submission form

Project Name	The Perch
Project Category	Under 5,000 square feet
Completion Date	2/12/2021

Project Statement

Dylan and Annie, a landscape designer and a hairstylist, wanted a flexible studio space for work, hobbies, and guests and to keep their backyard intact. They also didn't want to relocate during construction or to disrupt the mature landscape.

The Perch, a 660sqft structure, is shaped to meet these needs, a separate structure fitting just above the existing bungalow roofline and just below the City of Austin setback tent. Rooms have small footprints and vaulted ceilings for added volume, and the split-level form provides interstitial storage and mechanical space throughout. The Perch rests on four steel columns, three of which pierce through existing bungalow walls to help resist lateral forces. The steel frame was shop-built and craned into place in a single day, to minimally disturb the site. The cantilevered form gently sways in the wind, a reminder of its construction.

Project Overview

Corrugated Corten siding was selected for its low maintenance and to match existing site elements. The open grate with expanded metal stair shares a landing with the bungalow and is barefoot (and paw) friendly while allowing light to pass through below.

From the front cantilevered room, you feel a slight movement when someone walks up the stair, providing a sense of awareness and connection back to its construction and a gentle reminder of wind and gravity. A steel coatrack welded to an exposed beam at the entry is designed to sway, echoing this motion.

Structural steel throughout is left exposed and painted white. A hard-working beam in the kitchen supports an open shelf above the kitchen sink, carries the bedroom floor behind, allows the kitchen countertop to extend deep beyond the sink for added storage, and hides recessed countertop lighting.

Materials were selected for continuity, economy, durability, and efficiency. Materials include: pre-finished T&G pine at walls and ceilings (spanning from the exterior porch into the interior), off-the-shelf Boos butcher block countertops, IKEA cabinets (with custom painted fronts), and standard porcelain sockets and pendant lights the client already owned. Wood flooring is a remnant mix of pre-finished plain and rift sawn white oak, overage recycled from a larger project.

Bent copper plumbing fixtures and recessed finger pulls recall the warm tone of the corrugated Corten siding. Bath stucco walls and ceilings and large format terrazzo tile floor reinforce the minimal, elemental, material palate in this compact space. Integrated supply and return air vents throughout reinforce the project's pared down palate.

A custom vent hood and bath mirror are shaped to echo the form of the building. The mirror is also a nod to Gio Ponti's playful shield-shaped mirrors whose geometries flatteringly frame the viewer.

Three pipes aligned behind the southeast column concealed by the staircase, efficiently and stealthily carry gas, power, water, and sewer lines to The Perch from the bungalow mechanical closet below. A small stackable washer/dryer fits neatly behind closed doors in the upper level hall storage.

A small nook in the hall provides an intimate space within the already compact interior – enough room for a small desk, reading chair, or peloton, with a view to both the entry porch and the living rm.

While a February 2021 freeze claimed most of the site's flora towards the end of construction, reestablishment is underway. The Perch currently serves as a pandemic workspace for the hairstylist.

Project History

Dylan and Annie first asked to renovate their main house. But after developing plans and realizing they would have to relocate to begin construction, they asked if we could design a flexible studio space on the property first, to remain living on the property without having to relocate. They also wanted to preserve their yard and existing landscape if possible. The Perch sits two feet above the existing bungalow and just below the City of Austin building setback tent, to meet these requirements.

Given the project constraints, the clients found the solution presented to be both surprising but also an obvious location given their needs. They were excited to move forward with developing it further and they were committed to building this atypical form.

Bungalows in this neighborhood are considered historic by many and the City of Austin works to preserve the best bungalow examples still standing. When we first submitted plans to the City of Austin, the historic preservation reviewers misread the drawings as an addition and flagged the project for a public hearing and historic review. When we received notice of this, we called to explain that The Perch was a freestanding structure, intentionally designed to not disrupt the existing bungalow below. Following this, they cancelled the public hearing and commended us for our ability to add square footage to the site without compromising the bungalow's original form.

Once we had a bid set, we were happy to learn the owners hoped we would also GC the project. We knew an atypical project of this type would be challenging to build, and GCing the project gave us more control of the budget to keep costs in check and to take advantage of design opportunities during construction. We had originally budgeted for drywall interiors, but as GC, we were able to show the cost difference to install a pre-finished pine was not significantly different than our bids for drywall and paint combined, and we found a pre-finished wood that coordinated well with other material selections to pull the space together more cohesively. Near the end of the project, the owners decided the first use of The Perch should be a pandemic workspace for Annie, since her salon had recently closed to the public. Acting as both architect and contractor made this shift in program fairly easy to execute.

The striking exterior form is eye-catching to passers by and to the community. I've heard from countless friends and clients of the owners, as well as more than a dozen strangers, who reach out to share the joy it brings them to see The Perch in person and from the street.

Framework for Design Excellence

Design for Integration

The Perch is a free-standing 660sf studio designed for Dylan Robertson, a landscape designer, and Annie Cobb, a hairstylist. Perched above the couple's 1460sf bungalow on an urban lot in Central East Austin, the project was conceived as a flex space — a place for extended family to stay, a hobby space, or its current use: a workspace for Annie during the pandemic. The clients didn't want to move during construction, and asked to minimally disrupt the mature landscape, if possible. This solution met all of their needs.

To meet these needs, The Perch is shaped to fit just above the bungalow roofline and just below the City of Austin setback tent. Rooms have small footprints but expand up for added volume - and the split-level plan provides pockets for storage and mechanical space throughout.

Structurally, The Perch sits on four 5x5 steel columns. Three columns pierce through existing bungalow walls and tie the foundations together. Interior walls also work to resist The Perch lateral forces.

The steel frame was built off-site and craned into place in a single day, minimally disturbing the site. Corrugated Corten siding was selected for its low maintenance and to match existing site elements. The open grate with expanded metal stair shares a landing with the bungalow and is barefoot (and paw) friendly while allowing light to pass through below.

From the front cantilevered room, you feel a slight movement when someone walks up the stair, providing a sense of awareness and connection back to its construction and a gentle reminder of wind and gravity. A steel coatrack welded to an exposed beam at the entry is designed to sway, echoing this motion.

Materials were selected for continuity, economy, durability, and efficiency. Materials include: pre-finished T&G pine at walls and ceilings (spanning from the exterior porch into the interior), off-the-shelf Boos butcher block countertops, IKEA cabinets (with custom painted fronts), and standard porcelain sockets and pendant lights the client already owned. Wood flooring is a remnant mix of pre-finished plain and rift sawn white oak, overage recycled from a larger project.

Bent copper plumbing fixtures and recessed finger pulls recall the warm tone of the corrugated Corten siding. Bath stucco walls and ceilings and large format terrazzo tile floor reinforce the minimal, elemental, material palate in this compact space. Integrated supply and return air vents throughout reinforce the project's pared down palate.

Design for Equitable Communities

The Perch adds density and programmatic flexibility to the property, allowing it to serve the owner's changing needs - including the ability to work from home during the pandemic, and accommodate shifting needs over time. The site is within walking distance to Ladybird Lake and the Hike and Bike Trail

where the owners go to exercise daily.

Design for Ecosystem

The Perch is designed and constructed to minimally impact the site and existing lush landscape. It is situated on four columns largely above an existing bungalow with permeable staircase, minimally adding to site impervious cover. The structural steel frame was shop built offsite (in 3 pieces), then craned and welded into place in a single day, to further reduce the impact of construction on the site.

From the front cantilevered room, you feel a slight movement when someone walks up the stair, providing a sense of awareness and connection back to its construction and a gentle reminder of wind and gravity. A steel coatrack welded to an exposed beam at the entry is designed to sway, echoing this motion.

Oxidized steel siding was selected for its low maintenance and to match existing site elements. The stair shares a landing with the main house below and its permeability maintains natural light into the bungalow.

Design for Water

Permeable groundcover with lush drought resistant landscaping stabilizes the site, manages stormwater, and mitigates the need for irrigation. A devastating deep freeze in Feb 2021 claimed a majority of trees and landscape towards the end of construction, and will take several years to re-cultivate. The owner, a landscape designer, said while there are a few non-native species planted on site, they are all regionally appropriate.

Design for Economy

The split-level structure follows the roofline of the bungalow below, providing chase and storage space in the adjoining spaces between levels. The Perch shares a porch with the bungalow below. Perch columns extend through existing walls of the bungalow below, tying the foundations together. The interior bungalow walls work together with the Perch columns to resist lateral forces from above.

Materials were selected for continuity, economy, durability, and efficiency. Materials include: pre-finished T&G pine at walls and ceilings (spanning from the exterior porch into the interior), off-the-shelf Boos butcher block countertops, IKEA cabinets (with custom painted fronts), and standard porcelain sockets and pendant lights the client already owned. Wood flooring is a remnant mix of pre-finished plain and rift sawn white oak, overage recycled from a larger project.

Elemental and economical bent copper plumbing fixtures and recessed copper finger pulls recall the warm tone of the corrugated Corten siding. Bath stucco walls and ceilings and large format terrazzo tile floor reinforce the elemental, durable, minimal material palate in this compact space. Integrated supply and return air vents throughout reinforce the project's pared down palate.

Design for Energy

Operable windows are positioned throughout to take advantage of Austin's southeasterly breezes and

to minimize afternoon heat gain. The warm natural light that floods into rooms minimizes the need for artificial light during the day.

The compact 660sf footprint maximizes use within a minimal footprint – less area to heat and cool. The mechanical space is consolidated in a single run the length of the Perch, in the interstitial space between floors.

The Perch is metered together with the bungalow below, so energy use is not able to be separately calculated.

Design for Well-being

Windows are situated for passive cooling (to capture Austin's predominantly SE winds) and sized to maximize soft Northern and morning Eastern daylight while minimizing harsher southern and western sunlight exposure. An eastern-facing skylight illuminates the central bath. There is almost no need for artificial light most of the day (for most of the year) and the owners often rely on windows instead of the AC for airflow.

Design for Resources

For cost savings and efficiency, the hardwood wood flooring is a remnant mix of pre-finished plain and rift sawn white oak, overage recycled from a larger project, since only 600sf of wood flooring was needed. We also selected off-the-shelf pre-finished T&G pine, off-the-shelf butcherblock countertops, and IKEA cabinets with custom fronts.

Common porcelain sockets and pendant lights, already owned by the client, account for the majority of lighting.

Materials were selected for their low maintenance and durability. Oxidized steel siding, terrazzo bath floors, stucco bath walls, butcher block countertops, and pre-finished wood siding will require little to no maintenance over time.

Design for Change

The project is designed as a flex space for the owners to utilize as their needs change over time - a home office, hobby space, or place for guests to stay.

Design for Discovery

The architect and owner are in regular communication and continue to work on additional projects together. Most recently, the owner's hired us to add the custom bath mirror, counter stools, and built-in refrigerator and tall cabinet to the left of the range at The Perch, which were not there at initial move in. The shampoo bowls were also added towards the end of construction, after the pandemic forced the owner to begin working from home. In hindsight, I would have vetted the corrugated metal siding installer better. Installing the siding proved more difficult than planned, and the screws were not installed in alignment as intended.

The Perch

Austin, Texas
660 sf



















