

Clarksville freedman's cottage on AIA Austin tour redone with modern simplicity

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Chris Archer first experienced the 1909 Albert Lawson House in the Clarksville neighborhood fresh out of college in 1998. A former swimmer at the University of Texas, he stayed on the couch of friends from the swim and dive team for a few months while starting his career in high tech.



"I knew the woman who planted the tree in the backyard," he says of his previous experience with the house.

When it was time to buy his own house in 2011, he knew about this pocket of homes but was looking in South Austin when this house went up for sale.

And he took a look. He remembers his real estate agent could tell that he liked the house when she noted that he had been in there for more than five minutes.

"I knew it was where I wanted to be and plant roots," he says. "I was in it for the long haul."



▲ HIDE CAPTION

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Chris Archer's home in Clarksville was a freedman's cottage that has been made structurally sound and given a modern feel by Webber + Studio architects. The transom has glass that brings light from one room to another. [Contributed by Jake Holt Photography]

This is part of the more modern history of this house. The longer history earns this house a place on Austin's list of historic structures. A plaque by the front door marks this distinction.

The Walking Tour of Clarksville brochure notes that the house was built around 1909 by Albert Lawson, who was a porter at a local bank and later worked at the Crescent and Dunbar theaters. The Porter family owned the house for more than 80 years.

When Archer bought the house, some changes had been made to this classic freedman's cottage. A former associate professor of architecture at the University of Texas had added a large room at the back of the house above an unfinished open laundry room in the early 2000s. Most of the changes and updates of the home had been done a bit at a time.

Archer moved in and lived in the space for a few years. And then the home's age announced itself in a big way when the claw-foot tub fell through the floor with Archer in it.

Luckily, because he's over 6 feet tall, he could lift himself out of the floor. It became clear that the whole house needed an overhaul to make it structurally sound.

"I knew it was going to be considerable," he says.

Working with architect David Webber of Webber + Studio, Archer got to define the look he wanted while honoring the home's history and keeping the historical designation. The finished home is on the American Institute of Architects Austin Home Tour on Oct. 19-20.

Archer's style of choice is Australian modern: clean lines with a lot of wood. In the front room, gone are the tangerine walls. Instead the horizontal white oak-paneled walls and ceiling give it a modern cabin feel. Treated white oak floors create a blank gray slate for

rugs. A large doorway leads to a matching reading room. Webber found ways to bring light into these rooms, which historically had only small windows. He created a window in the transoms between rooms to pass light from one room to the other. He also created skylights throughout the original home to bring in even more light.

The home's original bathroom has been modernized with a walk-in shower covered in white tiles. The original bedroom also has received an update to complement the redone house.

The kitchen creates the connection between the original home and the redone family room. Steel counters, gray-green cabinets and floating steel shelves give it a clean, modern look.

The kitchen funnels into the most open space in the home: the family room. Large windows overlooking the backyard below make this a very light space. In this room, the walls are white, and the ceiling brings in the white oak of the other spaces.

Stairs lead halfway down to a patio area with seating and a grill, and then farther down to the new master bedroom suite on the lowest level. Before, this suite was an unfinished laundry area. Now it looks out on the redone backyard with large windows.

Webber brought a lot of light into the master bathroom by using glass covered with a privacy film as the wall between the bathroom and the bedroom. A walk-in shower, white tiled walls and smart storage spaces make this a sleek-looking but usable master bathroom.

Smartly, the laundry closet sits between the bathroom and the large walk-in master closet.

The backyard previously was a sloping hill, but part of the redesign of the house included leveling the backyard and redoing the landscaping to fit the aesthetic Archer enjoys. He was specific in his request: A simple palette of shades of greens with no flowering plants and simple gray stone pathways.

Archer says about the home's transformation, "It's peaceful. It's a home now."