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On the Wright Side of the Street

Jimmy Jacobs' historical home displays the skills of two parallel architects.

By C. Wayne Dawson

This year, hundreds are expected to attend the annual Georgetown Historical Homes Christmas Tour. In years past attendees have seen Craftsman bungalows, Queen Anne, and Vernacular styles, but only a handful of Prairie style homes. Local homebuilder Jimmy Jacobs' personal residence, listed as the Marsh F. Smith house in The Historic Homes

of Georgetown, stands out among the latter category of houses and is part of the Tour this year. The aforementioned publication says the home, located at 1242 S. Austin Ave. "departs from the earlier Victorian homes of the neighborhood, reflecting instead the strong horizontal lines created by wide eaves and windows common to the Prairie School design movement of the

late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries." Frank Lloyd Wright, the most prominent founding father of the Prairie School of architecture, strongly influenced the design of the Jacob's Home. When Jimmy Jacobs wanted the home remodeled, Jeannine Weisbrod owner of Diva, The Ultimate Design Studio, along with Carol Dishman, a designer for Diva, were instrumental in ensuring that all design aspects reflected the architect's style throughout the home's interior. The actual builder of the home was C. S. Belford, a legendary name amongst the city's Old Town homeowners. Belford was considered Georgetown's pre-eminent builder from the 1870s to the 1920s, and many of his homes have survived to the present. His legacy is so revered that his master carpenter's tool chest continues to reside in Southwestern University's Special Collections.

Somewhat eccentric, Belford had a reputation for appearing at a building site sporting a suit and derby as he went over his crew's workmanship with a fine toothed comb. If the work did not meet his demanding standards, he had it torn out and redone.

The structure is a four-square house raised in 1908 for Marsh F. Smith, mayor of Georgetown from 1926 to 1946 and owner of a local cottonseed oil mill. The home boasts two historical medallions that identify it as a Texas historic landmark and as belonging to the National Historic registry.

When Jimmy Jacobs originally called Jeannine to discuss the possibility of a remodel of his home, he wanted to change the home's existing interior—a Victorian, very ornately appointed design, covered from ceiling to floor with either wallpaper, stenciling, or fabric. From



their discussion came his decision to strip the walls and ceilings and remodel, restoring the Spartan minimalist look that Frank Lloyd Wright endorsed.

Even the home's special amendments bear Wright's stamp of understatement. Chair rails, often made from fancy trim, are used to keep chairs set next to walls from damaging the wall. They were also used on staircases to "keep the wall from getting banged when someone carted furniture upstairs," says Jeannine. The chair rail in this house, however, is simply a flat, dark slat of wood, matching the spare design style.

This "less is best" minimalist theme is repeated on all floors of the house by the installation of dark oak cabinets. The style of cabinetry, known as four-corner accent, is typical to this period and is characterized by wooden frames separating the glass in doors and windows into rectangle sections and squares in each corner. Many of these panes are made of reed glass,

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Randy and Jeannine Weisbrod

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composed of vertical fluting that resembles thin, transparent tubes. The house “maintains this vertical linear construction from one room to another,” says Jeannine, “not many circles or curlicues. That’s the way Frank Lloyd Wright designed his homes, with straight lines and angles.”

The observant will notice these themes repeated in other locations, such as in the gathering room, where the metal Victorian firebox and old brick used for the fireplace facade were removed to instead surrounded the fireplace with built-in bookcases bearing four-corner accented doors. Here, however, the doors have seeded glass—panes permeated with bubbles. They also replaced the old-style brick with earthy, thin “horizontal stack” slate.

This design binds the room elegantly to the kitchen next door, also completely renovated. Much



like other Wright-inspired kitchens, thin horizontal tiles adorn the wall, but these are multi-colored glass tiles. The old, enclosed pantry was removed, making that area a part of the main room, with ceiling-to-floor cabinetry, leaving the two original windows at the end of the wall for natural light. Acknowledging modern

needs, however, the kitchen was equipped with commercial-grade stainless steel appliances. Despite the changes made, the kitchen retains the turn of the century feel with a maple hardwood floor, a ceramic farm sink, a tongue-and-groove ceiling, even an old fashioned pull-down ironing board.



Frank Lloyd Wright’s influence on the design of the home extends even to the furniture. The dining room, for instance, contains a replica of the only known table and chairs designed by the architect. It also has built-in cabinets, and an old-fashioned window seat. A copy of a desk designed by Mr. Wright sits proudly in the second floor study.

But the home reflects the Jacob family’s tastes as well. Diva refinished and reupholstered two of Mr. Jacob’s grandfather’s chairs, placing one in the study, and the other in his son’s bedroom. Mr. Jacobs was also the one who suggested removing the old pantry next to the kitchen. Additionally, he agreed to removing all the cabinetry in the master bathroom and replacing it with more Wright-styled furnishings.

The 4,675-square-foot house accommodates four bedrooms, three and one half bathrooms, six



fireplaces, and three stained-glass windows. In 2003, Mr. Jacobs added a breakfast room (known as the gathering room), utility room, office, and two bedrooms with adjoining baths to the structure. It was finished so faithfully to Belford’s original construction that an observer will have a tough time telling where the addition begins and the original ends.

The outside of the home is no less impressive than the inside. The Jacobs family can sit in the comfort of the gathering room and gaze out over an outside heated, in-ground pool, spa, and palm trees. The house has a four-car garage and carriage house, and a well on the property feeds the sprinkler system.

The final triumph for all involved was when Mr. Jacobs moved into the completed house in early September and announced his satisfaction with the home. One could imagine his approval echoed by the ghosts of Belton and Wright.

The Georgetown Heritage Society Holiday Home Tour will be held on Saturday, December 10 and Sunday, December 11 from noon to 5 p.m. Tickets are \$15, and can be purchased online at georgetownheritagesociety.com or at Diva, The Ultimate Design Studio, located at 115 West 7th Street. ■

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