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Light Fantastic

Blending unique Texas landscapes with bright mod shapes, Jiménez has become Houston's 'It' architect

| By Peter Barnes | Photography by Paul Hester and Julie Soefer |



POOL POSITION

Jiménez situated the pool at the Crowley house so it would catch the warm Marfa afternoon light and, above, inside the mod living room with sweeping desert views.



Carlos Jiménez defines space differently than the rest of us. It's not, for example, the air between four walls, but instead the calm that prevails when light hits the walls at sunrise. Or how a building, its landscape and its inhabitants merge into a single experience: a home.

For Rice prof and architect Jiménez—celebrated in a new book on a project of his in Marfa, and as an inspired trendsetter among in-the-know Houston art types—simple shapes, lots of sunlight, prominent courtyards and stout materials connote comfortable modernity. His houses are luxurious but never excessive, and always the result of a careful dialogue between designer and client, part of what he calls the “story.”

“I’m always fascinated by the narrative. Each design is like beginning a new story,” Jiménez says in his Montrose office, where pencils overflow from Café Bustelo cans and bookshelves stretch to the ceiling. “I become taken by this story. I like to read it, study it.”

Take the four-year tale of a River Oaks penthouse gutted and remade for Bob Schultz, a developer best known for mixed-use projects like the block surrounding Midtown’s Continental Club. He met Jiménez while critiquing students’ work at Rice, where Jiménez is tenured, and shared a few rough concepts for two apartments he purchased and planned to merge.

“It was like he waved a magic wand over it,” Schultz says of Jiménez’s first suggestions to open up the spaces. They re-imagined the apartments, which Jiménez describes as a confused mansion plucked from the neighborhood below and set atop a tower. Schultz, who likes to entertain, wanted to balance panoramic views with walls showcasing his contemporary art collection highlighting Ann Stautberg and Frank X. Tolbert.

Jiménez obfuscated a rack of exhaust pipes from the floors below by encasing it in a floating art niche that perfectly divides the living and dining CONTINUED...



ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

From top: Jiménez in his Memorial Park-area project; like an abstract bouquet of daisies, a James Surls sculpture stretches into the corners of the art niche designed to conceal piping in the Schultz penthouse; light pours into the Memorial Park home, which has concrete floors and a galvanized steel roof, demonstrating the value Jiménez places in durability over flash.



...CONTINUED rooms. Schultz filled it with an abstract James Surls sculpture. Behind it, a wide island is all that separates the kitchen from the rest of the space. “People can occupy the living, dining and kitchen areas and still be part of the party,” he says.

As for the architect, his own “story” began in Costa Rica. After immigrating to Houston as a teen, his raw design talent quickly became apparent at the University of Houston, where awards for his thesis and portfolio would become precursors to numerous commendations in a 28-year (and counting) career.

While he’s lectured at dozens of universities here and abroad, Jiménez, 50, relishes the challenge of a new site as much as the rewards of teaching. His smooth voice and warm brown eyes become noticeably more animated as he describes his largest, and arguably most impressive, home—the Crowley house in Marfa, named after one of its original owners. Situated 600 miles west of Houston and six miles outside chic, art-crazy Marfa, the house sits low against a rise in the Chihuahuan desert and is the subject of the 111-page book, *Crowley*, published by Oro Editions.

“There’s a profound solitude there,” Jiménez says. “It makes you feel very vulnerable to all the elements.”

So remote was the site that tradesmen practically camped there. But after two years of construction, they created a structure the architect describes as like a sundial, directing one’s view across the endless desert. “You know that in the afternoon the best place to be is by the pool, and in the twilight the best place to be is on the deck,” he says. “The house gives you these positions by which you can measure your place in this vastness.”

Shaped like the numeral “2” on a calculator, Crowley winds to ensnare courtyards and mountain vistas. Jiménez says the living room that juts off one corner and takes in panoramic views of the Davis Mountains was a favorite enclave of lawyer Tim Crowley and art dealer Lynn Goode, former owner of a Jiménez-designed gallery that played a big role in Houston’s modern art scene. Among the paintings and sculptures peppered throughout the house, a Dan Flavin light installation ornaments the living room while a George Nakashima table graces the entry. (The couple recently split, and Crowley owns the house.)

If the Crowley house is a testament to what Jiménez can do with a generous floor plan, his skill is no less evident in the smaller homes he’s built for Houston families. Among them, a two-bedroom near Memorial Park provides a light-drenched haven for filmmaker Rebecca Marvil and her husband Brian Smyth. The couple asked for a modern space roughly the same size as the crumbling structure it replaced—a request Jiménez admired in an era where urban tear-down projects tend to dwarf the lots they occupy.

The vivid, sharply angled brick-and-green-stucco exterior stands out among the traditional homes on the street, yet almost hides behind a carefully preserved oak tree. With a floor plan laid out around front and rear courtyards, it’s hard to escape a lush view.

The owners love the house because its simple design reflects the way they live. And, of course, it’s filled with light. “The most luxurious material,” says Jiménez, “turns out to be the least expensive.” ■