

Life & Style

Austin American-Statesman
statesman.com

Thursday, June 2, 2005

Section E

STYLE Q&A



THE COLOR (MILWAUKEE) STATE

Kiwi green is just one of the latest colors to be called the 'new black' by fashion designers.

Nothing is really the new black; wear colors you love

Q: I heard the other day on television that "kiwi green is the new black." What exactly does that mean, and is it true? And is pink still in?

A: Kiwi green is one of the trendiest colors this spring, along with turquoise and coral. To say that a color is "the new black" is just a half-facetious expression to say that it's becoming ubiquitous, but obviously kiwi green will never really be the staple that black is.

Every season, you'll notice designers all seem to work off the same palette, just like they come up with a lot of the same ideas about silhouettes and materials. (Let's do Indian tunics! Let's do metallic leather!) That's because not only do designers work in the same zeitgeist, they hire the same color consultants.

As for pink, it is no longer one of the most fashion-forward colors for women, but it has been so consistently popular for the past few years that it's become a staple. Never mind that, though. If you like how a color looks on you, and it puts you in a good frame of mind, then wear it.

— Jean Scheidnes

Style Q&A is written by Katy Barron and Jean Scheidnes. Send your fashion and home design questions to Katy Barron, P.O. Box 670, Austin, TX 78767; (512) 932-2519; e-mail kbarron@statesman.com or fax (512) 445-3666.

GET IT TOGETHER

Book packs in tons of moving tips

Moving is one of life's most dreaded transitions and the subject of much opinion. A new book in the Hundreds of Heads survival guide series, "How to Survive a Move by Hundreds of Happy People Who Did" (\$13.95, Hundreds of Heads Books, Inc., 2005), is welcome relief from the experts who proffer "right" ways to do things, which usually involve complex box labeling systems.

Be warned: This advice from ordinary people is conflicting. Some think it's fun to enlist the help of strong friends when moving. Others (I fall into this camp) believe in the power of paying professionals to move your stuff. One person suggests making a cardboard model to scale of the moving truck and your belongings, while some prefer the toss-it-all-in-trash-bags method. My favorite piece of advice? "Leave everything behind and go to IKEA."

The point is, there's no right way to move. Nonetheless, you're bound to find a tip or two that suits your moving personality in this book. Happy packing.

— Katy Barron

INSIDE

Style Matters

Two new furniture stores — Nest on West Sixth Street and Designs of the Interior on Anderson Lane — open.

TODAY IN XL

Cooks to watch

Four Central Texas chefs get our nod as most likely to wind up on national magazine covers someday.



In architects Cindy and Rick Black's 980-square-foot home, the underside of the steel staircase separates the study/guestroom from the living room. Shiplap walls reflect the flavor of the older homes in the neighborhood.



The Blacks pack efficiency into every space. The washer/dryer is a combo unit, which sits next to the utility closet and the master bedroom closet.

Big concepts cover all 980 square feet

Story by Jeanne Claire van Ryzin

Photos by Brian K. Diggs

ARND BRONKHORST/STYFF

When Cindy and Rick Black went looking for an empty lot in Central Austin, they didn't think they would wind up with one that was oddly shaped and unusually small.

Both University of Texas School of Architecture graduates with their own firm (www.rickblack.net), the Blacks are among a growing number of people who want to build or buy in an older, central neighborhood — people attracted to the idea of living close to downtown and in a densely built neighborhood.

"For a place like Austin to grow into a real urban center, we support densifying existing neighborhoods," says Rick Black.

But as they searched, the young architects couldn't find much they could afford. The typical 50-foot-by-110-foot inner-city lots were out of their price range.

Then they had an idea — and an instant creative challenge.

"Maybe if we could find a lot others didn't want, it might not be so expensive," says Rick, who designed the popular Club De Ville on Red River Street and for a time worked with famed architect Frank Gehry. "And if that lot had intriguing dynamics, it might just force us to come up with a very creative end result."

They found those intriguing dynamics in the North Loop neighborhood with a triangular 3,200-square-foot lot — a forgotten parcel on the corner of Evans and Bruning avenues that didn't look to the average passerby like anything. See **SMALL E6**



The Blacks had a small seat formed into the staircase's steel railing. The bench allows for a place to sit in the dressing area upstairs.



With no doors on their cupboards, the Blacks can see exactly what they have in the kitchen. If they haven't used something in 2 years, they toss it.



The Blacks saved space by designing an upstairs without doors, except the bathroom door. The closet opens directly into the bedroom.

Couple's tight space frees lives from clutter

A funny ad for car insurance company Geico features a mock reality TV show called "Tiny House," in which new-lyeds are forced to live in a house with absurdly low ceilings. "This is not awesome!" the frustrated bride cries out, bumping her head. The ad is an exaggeration meant to elicit laughs, but it pin-

points a common fear about small living spaces: They are cramped, tense and suffocating.

If Cindy and Rick Black starred in their own reality TV show, you'd see just the opposite: two people who think it's awesome to live in a house that's less than 1,000 square feet of, of course, their ceilings are of adequate height). The Blacks, both professional architects, live small by choice.

Plenty of people live in apartments and condos much smaller than the Blacks' 980 square foot, and the couple consider their space generous, likening it to a luxury Manhattan apartment. But small living isn't just about square footage.

In her 1998 book, "The Not So Big House: A Blueprint for the Way We Really Live," (Taunton Press, \$22.95) architect Sarah Susanka discusses the unease often felt by people living in larger-than-life homes, what she calls "starter castles." The book was a best-seller, and Susanka followed with three more books on the subject. Today she is a columnist, a sought-after lecturer and a champion of

See **BARRON, E7**



Katy Barron
Homebody



Outside, the Blacks created a sitting area next to their carport. The yard is vespicated so that they don't have to mow a lawn.

SMALL: Creativity deployed in every nook and cranny of house

Continued from E1

more than an overgrown side yard. And on it, the Blacks fit a very sleek, modern house that is — not surprisingly — not very big. The two-story structure is 960 square feet; the footprint, a mere 685 square feet. And it is so eco-smart it earned Austin Energy's 5-star rating, the highest in the agency's Green Building Program.

The average new home in the United States is now 2,330 square feet, according to the National Association of Home Builders (there are no statistics available that are specific to Austin). That makes the Blacks' wee house a whopping 58 percent smaller than average. (In 1970 the average U.S. new home was 1,500 square feet.)

Neighbors say the white, two-story cubelike house is a welcome addition to an already eclectic neighborhood, unlike some of the new oversized duplexes with house-sized garage apartments — also known as "super twos" — that have been squeezed onto tiny lots.

Greg Madsen and Kirsten Bartel, both active in the Northfield Neighborhood Association, have a direct view of the Blacks' house from the front porch of their bungalow.

"People appreciate something different in this neighborhood," says Bartel, who is a landscape designer. "And it's very respectful of what's already here."

The Blacks found their lot when it was still a part of a two-lot parcel with one house owned by a friend who wanted to sell. But that didn't mean the Blacks could just snap it up. First they had to find out whether the vacant parcel could be legally divided from the one adjacent. Then they had to see whether the North Loop Neighborhood Plan — an amendment to the city's Comprehensive Plan — would allow for a small-lot amnesty or variance to build on a lot smaller than current zoning standards.

After title research proved the lot was its own legal entity, they were indeed granted small lot amnesty. The Blacks bought the tiny triangle for \$32,000. Their wish for a challenging lot had come true. And not only was the lot's size and shape odd, its location on a somewhat busy corner also proved demanding. The solution?

The Blacks embraced the bustle of Bruning Avenue and a small neighborhood park on the other side of it. Through a front door faces Evans Avenue (their mailing address is on Evans), a side door, carport, driveway, second story porch and, most importantly, large windows on both floors all look north to Bruning. The windows capture natural light and connect the inside to the street and vice versa. A short berm covered with buffalo grass in combination with a low limestone wall ring the yard and act as the only physical barrier from the busy street.

"Given that we were building something so different and



AMERICAN STATESMAN

modern compared to what else is in the neighborhood, we wanted to keep it open and friendly," says Rick.

Indeed the steel and concrete structure stands out from the surrounding woodframe bungalows. Welded steel beams augment a light-gauge steel frame. Concrete panels covered with stucco form the outer skin; inside, shiplap walls make a nod toward the ones found in older neighboring homes. Cellulose insulation fills the wall cavity, blocking heat and noise. An energy efficient geothermal air-conditioning system — which exchanges heat with the earth via a closed water circulating loop — eliminates the need for a noisy outside unit. And by so doing, it saves the Blacks from having one more thing on the tiny lot.

The only exterior appendage to the house? A 53-gallon rain barrel that collects runoff from the heat-reflecting metal roof. Because it isn't easy to fit one bedroom, one-and-a-half baths and a study/guestroom onto such a small footprint, precision reigns when it comes to the interior spaces. But rather than leave space as open as possible as with a loft, the Blacks divided it up into multiple rooms (although they don't have doors).

"Different spaces create more interest in a small house," says Cindy. And thus many spaces and features perform double duty.

The underside of the welded steel staircase is left exposed and forms a division between a cozy study/guestroom and the living room. Upstairs, a bench built into the steel handrail surrounding the staircase augments the dressing area. (The Blacks credit builder Guldo De Vita of Domus Inc. for inspiring them to use so much steel throughout the house.)

But while fitting every feature into the small house took a great deal of design savvy, the Blacks are most proud of the way their house fits into the neighborhood.

And so is the neighborhood. "This project really sets an example," says Madsen, the neighbor, who is chair of the Northloop Neighborhood Planning Team. "If we could encourage more of this kind of in-fill building, it would be great."

janryzin@statesman.com; 445-3699



The second-story porch and the large windows on both floors all look north to Bruning Avenue. The windows bring natural light inside and connect the rooms to the street outside. A low retaining wall and a short berm of buffalo grass provide a physical barrier to the street without isolating the house from the neighborhood outside.

living small



Upstairs, an outdoor balcony acts as an outside den. The Blacks made the upholstered sofa.



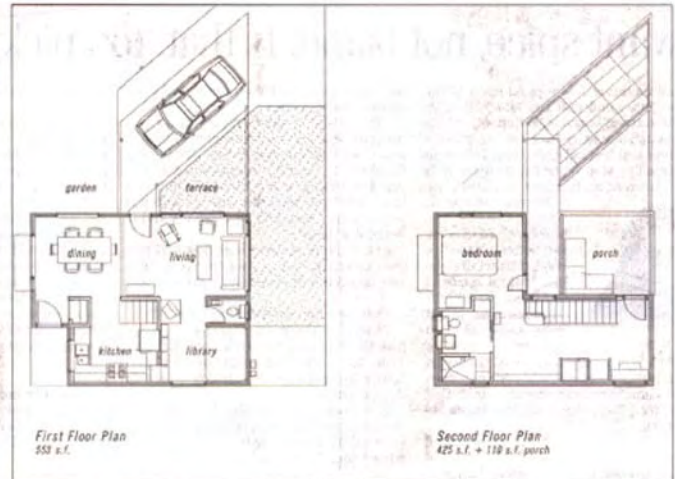
A queen-sized bed just fits in the space next to the stairs. The TV rotates so both guests on the bed or the couple in the family room can see it.



In the dining room, large picture windows frame views of the street. By facing north, the windows admit ample natural light without direct sun.



The Blacks created an upstairs nook that is the width of the piano. They built the house around what they had, not what they would acquire.



On the blueprint of the house, you can see how the size of the car compares with the size of the rooms.



In the kitchen, a window draws in light. For efficiency, glasses hang from a wall-mounted rack.

BARRON: Small home showcases couple's philosophy for living

Continued from E1

the not-so-big lifestyle. On her Web site (www.notsobighouse.com), she links her not-so-big theories with the roughly 50 million Americans some demographers call the "cultural creatives," a subculture she says is adopting a smaller lifestyle because they want more balance and authenticity in their lives.

The Blacks don't consider themselves small-living evangelists, but they do think about its greater lifestyle implications. The size of their house was the result of a tight budget. They could have afforded more space in the suburbs, but they wanted to live in an area of town that would keep them off the roads as much as possible. Their home is about a 15-minute walk from restaurants on 43rd Street near Hyde Park, and the commute to their East Austin office is about seven minutes. They also were inspired by places they've traveled, such as the Netherlands, where living space is tight, the scale is human and everyone leaves the shades open to look down on the active city streets.

"We wanted to test the scale on ourselves first, before we tell our clients that's how they want to live," Cindy says.

They've been testing for almost a year now, and they're pleased. Like the Dutch, they leave the curtains open most of the time for the sense of life that street activity brings to the home. "If the blinds were always drawn it would feel smaller. (With them open) your attention is drawn outside and your mind is expanded," Cindy says.

"The only things they wish they had are a tool shed and more usable outdoor living space, both projects they'll tackle in the coming months. If they or future owners need another room to accommodate children, the upstairs porch could be enclosed as a bedroom. But for now, an extra room, even a bathroom, would feel like an unnecessary luxury, Rick says. "You shower 95 percent of the time. We decided to go with the 95 percent and not the 5 percent."

Most people buy a home and make their stuff fit into it. The Blacks designed their home around their stuff. An upstairs nook snugly holds Cindy's digital piano. The upstairs hallway is the exact width of the queen-sized bed tucked into the study below.

Although they seem like the perfect candidates for multi-functional furniture, the Blacks don't own any. No coffee table that doubles as a filing cabinet or a storage ottoman. They don't store things under their master bed. The one built-in bench they have doesn't lift up to stow extra blankets, and neither has any idea what a space bag is.

When space is tight, "you're more careful about what you do have," Rick says.

kbarron@statesman.com; 912-2519

The key to their lifestyle is not nifty storage solutions, but an ongoing awareness of their stuff. "It takes discipline to keep accumulation from taking over the environment," Rick says. The couple had a light wedding registry, asking mostly for china and kitchen equipment. They don't own everyday china, but rather use their fine china every day. They use silver Cindy inherited as their everyday flatware.

The design of the house helps hold them accountable for their belongings. There's no closet in which they can cram excess junk before an impromptu party. The only doors are the pocket doors on the bathrooms. The lack of doors also makes the space feel continuous, Cindy says. "There's no sense of enclosure or restriction."

In the kitchen, open shelving means they can see their inventory at all times. "If something's been sitting there for two years, you know it's time to get rid of it," Cindy says. "The same is true upstairs in the master closet, which is wide open for inspection. Cindy culls her wardrobe every three months or so, donating or consigning items she never wears, and she operates under a "bring one new thing in, take one old thing out" theory. Cindy is a do-it-yourselfer who, in addition to designing homes, makes her own shirts and sofa cushions and is currently trying to learn how to make shoes.

"I'm not a Sarah Jessica Parker. If I want to go shopping, I feel like I have to justify it," she says.

With all their openness, it's easy to see what the Blacks own. What's less obvious is what they don't own. They have no lawn mower because they have no lawn — their yard is xeriscaped with rocks and cacti. They have no vacuum cleaner because their floors are hardwood. They shake out the one rug they own when cleaning the house. Rick washes the dishes by hand because you can't put fine china and silver in a machine. They have only one extra set of linens for their beds, and they don't have bedside tables.

They don't have much wall decor either. "We're on the slow artwork accumulation plan. It needs to be something special and worth seeing every day," Cindy says.

But don't think they're heartless minimalists. "Sheer economics keeps us lean," Rick says, and they do stow sentimental things, such as old love letters and Cindy's wedding dress, under the guest bed. If they've learned anything, it's to only bring things into the home that are well-designed and will last.

When space is tight, "you're more careful about what you do have," Rick says.