

# livin' on the **edge**

A CLIFF-  
HANGING  
HOUSE OVER  
BEE CREEK  
COVE  
PROVES  
THAT THE  
IMPOSSIBLE  
IS POSSIBLE  
BY  
**GENE MENEZ**

COLES HARRISTON



**THE HOUSE TO THE RIGHT OF THIS PAGE—THE BEAUTIFULLY MODERN HOME WITH THE FLAT ROOF, THE CLEAN LINES AND THE TO-DIE-FOR PANORAMIC VIEW OVERLOOKING BEE CREEK COVE IN WESTLAKE—WAS THOUGHT TO BE IMPOSSIBLE. THE LOT IS TOO SMALL; THE SLOPE IS TOO STEEP; THE CLIFF IS TOO HIGH TO BUILD ANYTHING BUT A DOLLHOUSE THERE, SO THE THINKING WENT. ONE ONLINE LISTING OF THE LOT WARNED POTENTIAL BUYERS, “PLEASE USE CAUTION WHEN WALKING PROPERTY—DROP OFF IS SEVERE!” NOT EXACTLY A SELLING POINT. BUYER AFTER BUYER LOOKED AT THE LOT AND PASSED ON IT. IN ONE OF THE MOST DESIRABLE PARTS OF THE CITY, AT A TIME WHEN PROPERTIES IN AUSTIN WERE SELLING LIKE BREAKFAST TACOS, THE EMPTY LOT SAT UNSOLD FOR YEARS.**

Lisa Laughlin Boyd is the beneficiary of everyone who just said no. A former Highland Park-based investment counselor who now spends her time painting, rowing and managing her family’s oil and gas business, Boyd owns the home no one thought could be built. It is no ordinary home with a cookie-cutter design. The box-shaped, two-story cliffhanger is an architectural and engineering wonder, a product of the creative minds at the highly acclaimed Michael Hsu Office of Architecture and Texas Construction Company. The house almost must be seen to be believed, which Austinites can do on Oct. 25-26, when it will be a must-stop on the 11-house AIA Austin Homes Tour.

**PREVIOUS SPREAD**  
The back of the home overlooks the popular swimming area of Bee Creek Cove and has an unobstructed view of the Texas sunset.

**RIGHT**  
The window box is designed to extend beyond the frame of the house and is one of the places where Boyd spends much of her time.

ANDREA CALO





**THE PROPERTY POSED A DAUNTING CHALLENGE. A 25-FOOT LIMESTONE CLIFF SEPARATED THE FRONT OF THE PROPERTY FROM THE BACK, SO EVEN THOUGH THE LOT WAS A REASONABLE 50 FEET WIDE BY 250 FEET DEEP, THE BUILDABLE PORTION WAS JUST 40 BY 47, HSU SAYS.**

Visitors to the home should be prepared to be awed. The house features a window box in the dining area that is pushed out over the cliff and is a spot where Boyd can read. The box is not, however, for those who are acrophobic. The ceilings throughout the home are whitewashed hemlock, which adds warmth to the very modern space without making it look rustic.

But the showstopper of the house—and Boyd’s favorite—is the view. The southwestern panorama of the cove and the hills of Westlake is more Lake Como than Lake Austin and can be seen whether one is standing at the front door or bathing in the BainUltra tub in the master suite. Every room (the 2,800-square-foot house has two bedroom suites and a painter’s studio) has a view of either the sky, a tree or the cove.

“The house feels like a little resort,” Boyd says.

It almost did not happen. In June 2011, despite hearing that the lot was unbuildable, Boyd closed on the property. However, she was prepared to execute her opt-out option if it was truly unbuildable.

On a recommendation from a University of Texas architecture professor, Boyd asked Hsu to visit the property to determine if a house for her was possible. Hsu, a father of two children who were then 5

and 3 years old, walked the lot on a Saturday and brought his kids.

“We were trying to keep them from falling off the cliff,” he recalls.

The property posed a daunting challenge. A 25-foot limestone cliff separated the front of the property from the back, so even though the lot was a reasonable 50 feet wide by 250 feet deep, the buildable portion was just 40 by 47, Hsu says.

Boyd, however, had one advantage that other potential buyers didn’t: economy of size. Since she would be the home’s only permanent resident, she didn’t need more than two bedrooms or a one-car garage.

“When I first looked at the lot, I said, ‘Oh, this is going to be a tough one,’” Hsu recalls. “But once I understood Lisa’s needs, I was like, this is a perfect fit. She wasn’t asking for a six-bedroom and a three-car garage. Someone else would’ve tried to cram something else here, and it probably wouldn’t have been a great project.”

**ABOVE:**  
The dining/breakfast area is accented by a 1970s chandelier that Boyd bought on eBay and chairs from Restoration Hardware.

**RIGHT:**  
From the living room, Boyd can access a balcony overlooking the cove or close a screen to block the afternoon sun.



ANDREA CALO (2)



**"IT'S A TONE-ON-TONE HOUSE," HSU SAYS. "IT'S A VERY MODERN HOUSE. THIS WASN'T ABOUT A LOT OF DIFFERENT MATERIALS WITH A LOT OF CONTRAST. IT WAS ABOUT VERY SUBTLE TONALITY OF MATERIALS."**

In order to build Boyd's house to fill the 40-by-47 envelope, Hsu designed the structure so that the back half cantilevers over the cliff. Much steel and concrete were brought in to construct 12 beams that help hold the house up. "It just floats off the ground," Hsu says.

The property also forced builder Royce Flournoy, a native Austinite who grew up swimming in the cove below, to get creative. He installed a net system at the back of the lot so that workers would not fall over the cliff. He also needed a crane to attach scaffolding to the back of the structure and a second crane to remove the scaffolding over the house once it was complete.



CASEY DUNN (MASTER BEDROOM); ANDREA CALO (4)



"I had never had to do that to this extreme," he says.

The result of Hsu's design, Flournoy's execution and Boyd's artistic talents—she did her own interior design—is glorious. Upon entering the house, guests are greeted by a back-painted, glass gallery (Hsu calls it a "wonder cabinet") that displays dozens of pieces from Boyd's collection of paintings, Central American masks, books and vases. Boyd paints in oil and pastel, and she has exhibited professionally since 1996.

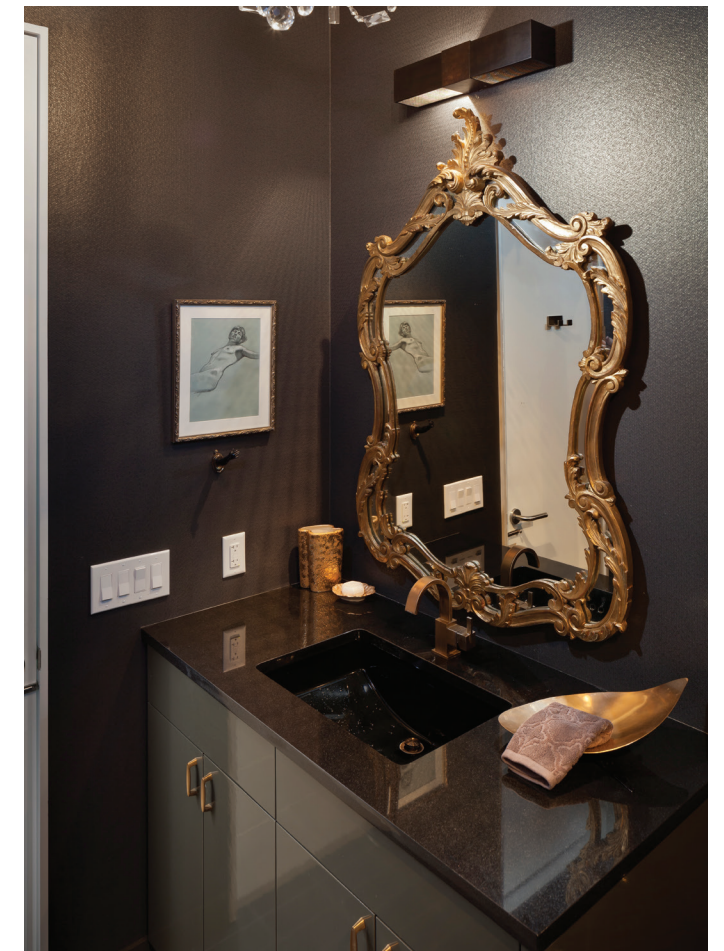
Adjacent to the gallery sits the sunken living room, furnished entirely by pieces that Boyd owned. Some pieces, such as a traditional Kisabeth chair, were rebuilt, recovered, repainted and lacquered to better blend with the more modern surroundings.

The living area is splashed with light from a 22-foot-wide window wall that leads onto the first-floor balcony. (There's a matching balcony on the second floor.) Smart placement of windows and skylights by Hsu results in a home that's full of light while still maintaining privacy. "You don't even need the lights on in the winter on the grayest of days," Boyd says.

An all-black powder room—featuring black sequin-like vinyl wallpaper, porcelain tile and a granite countertop—provides welcome contrast with the rest of the house and was deliberately planned by Hsu. "It's a tone-on-tone house," he says. "It's a very modern house. This wasn't about a lot of different materials with a lot of contrast. It was about very subtle tonality of materials."

A stairwell that features treads suspended trapeze-style by steel rods leads to a second floor that composed of the painter's studio and Juliet balcony, guest suite and master suite. Aside from the window box, Boyd says, she spends much of her time in the luxurious tub, appreciating the view of the cove.

The spot provides a great place to reflect on the circumstances that led to the project. "I told Michael everything I wanted," she says. "And I got everything I needed." ▲



OPPOSITE PAGE

The furniture in the living room (top) and throughout the house had previously been owned by Boyd. The kitchen (bottom left) features satin lacquered white oak cabinetry and an Ann Sacks cornflower-blue backsplash that pops against a dark grout. The master bedroom, like the living room on the floor below, has access to a balcony.

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The all-black powder room (right), with its sequin-like vinyl wallpaper, is an intentional and striking design shift from the rest of the house, such as the master bathroom (left), which is predominantly white.