

A Joyful Noise

By Julie Catalano

Photography by Christopher Davison

The calming sight of a cool pool and the irritating cacophony of a busy road go together about as well as oil and water. For this backyard makeover in Northwest Hills, Austin, priority one was blocking out the traffic sounds from a nearby crosstown thoroughfare. The creative use of water features brought peace to the poolside and a welcome splash of serenity to its grateful inhabitants.



The house itself — a 1950s vintage ranch style residence set among a canopy of native oak trees on a .41 acre lot — had already been through an extensive and meticulous remodel by the award-winning father-and-son design-and-build team of David Davison, president, CR, CKBR (Certified Remodeler, Certified Kitchen and Bath Remodeler) and Christopher Davison, AIA, of Realty Restoration, LLC in Austin.

The house now boasts a new open floor plan with an exquisite kitchen perfect for entertaining, rooms featuring Old World touches incorporating mesquite, knotty alder and reclaimed pine, a bronze-finish standing seam metal roof, the rare quarried stone front facade, cobblestone pavers and much more. The result was a Texas Tuscan beauty, much to the delight of the homeowners who welcomed the idea of the home's outdoor warmth carried through to the rustic, sophisticated indoors.

And then there was the backyard pool — outdated, unsightly and downright hazardous, with its original rough plaster finish and rotting wood deck. Coupled with the less-than-pleasing soundtrack from the highway, the dilapidated eyesore added insult to design injury.

Fortunately for the Davisons, the homeowners knew of the sound benefits of water features from a recent trip to Italy. Tired of being unable to enjoy their own backyard without the constant drone of traffic that ranged from tolerable to teeth-rattling, they were ready for anything that would put them on the path to peace and quiet, especially during — yikes! — motorcycle rally weekends.



Designing this highly specialized project was a first for the team. “We had done water features in the past as part of a pool’s renovation, but never specifically designed to address noise issues using a stand alone.”

Make that three stand alones. The first was a small, four-sided fountain adjacent to the newly renovated master suite and porch. Constructed of limestone slabs — the clients have friends who have a ranch with a quarry — the fountain’s centerpiece is a large hexagonal pillar of six mitered pieces made to look like a single column, where the water circulates from the pump to the spouts to the catch basin and back again. It produced just enough “white noise” to act as “a natural sleep aid,” says Christopher. “I think this is something that even a client without a noise problem could appreciate.”

The second was the hot tub built on one end of the pool. With an inner diameter of 7 feet, 6 inches, a second three-foot wide spillway created the pleasant sound of a waterfall splashing to the pool below. Oklahoma flagstone on the pool deck surround (which was used throughout the outdoor project) was incorporated into the hot tub coping and ultimately provided the

clean edge required to promote a smooth, sheer flow of water that “comes directly from the hot tub,” says Christopher. “In the heat of summer it’s obviously not turned on, and in the winter helps to heat the pool to some degree.”

We saved the best for last: The indisputable focal point of the overall design is the eye-catching lineup of three large Tuscan urns set along a 47 foot stone/plaster screen wall, softened by natural greenery and standing 66 inches tall off the pool deck and up to 15 feet tall in the back to hide the steps down to a lower side yard.

“The urns are approximately 38 inches tall,” says David, “and we made custom stainless steel cradles (feet) that make them appear to be sitting on the water.” Lovely to look at — the homeowners chose the colors to match the blue pool tiles — they’re even easier on the ears. Three individually controlled spouts give complete control over the flow rate, with water cascading down the sides of the urn to a catch pool, trickling down a series of dry stack Oklahoma stone steps, and finishing its journey in a recirculating trench that connects the three water features together and sends the water



back to the pump — every step of the way creating more white noise to muffle the din of pesky traffic. The urns are from Desert Dreams in Austin, and the 6 x 6 Blue/Tan Azurite pool tiles are from Little Tile, Inc. in Yorba Linda, California.

Unique constructability issues came with the project, such as blending the newly renovated home with an existing pool shell and elevations that did not coincide. The main water feature of the urns presented a real challenge, adds David, “in getting the common gutter elevation coordinated with the opposite sloping flagstone surface.” For Christopher the biggest challenge was the pool construction. “The client wanted a seamless pool deck all the way to the water’s edge so the flagstone was laid overlapping the pool edge and then was cut to a smooth radius to follow the irregular shape of the pool.”

The completed project yielded one unexpected result, says Christopher. Initially the water features were designed to be more of a distraction, essentially the next best thing to eliminating the noise. “But we ended up drowning it out completely,” he says. “With the exception of the occasional Harley-Davidson.”

The intermittent vroom-vroom aside, the backyard is now both a restful respite and a lively gathering place. Now guests are surprised to turn off of that busy road, drive up to the house, and find themselves in a calming oasis. Pools are not uncommon in homes, says Christopher, “but water features tend to pull people outdoors, turning what could otherwise be a more formal indoor gathering into a more relaxed outdoor one.” In fact, the Davisons have attended several social events at the residence, “and the fountains and urns are the hit of the party.” Sounds wonderful. ■



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512.454.1661
www.realtyrestoration.com