

# Texas Architect

The Education of an Architect



## Texas Architect

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### More Online

[texasarchitects.org](http://texasarchitects.org)

'Architecture in the Hinterlands'  
Texas Architects Design Committee

Remembering Blake Alexander (1924-2011)

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### Open House

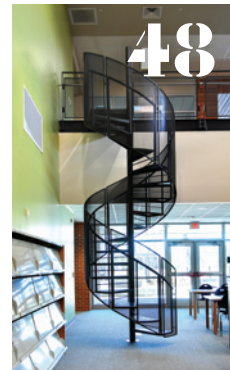


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### Design for Learning



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### On the Jobsite



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# Raven Lake Ranch

by Stephen Sharpe, Hon. TSA

**Project** Raven Lake Ranch, Athens

**Client** Martin and Eileen Bennett

**Architect** The Michael Malone Studio at WKMC Architects

**Design Team** Michael Malone, AIA; Alesha Niedziela, Assoc. AIA; Zachary Schoch

**Contractor** Tidmore Building Company

**Photographer** Jud Haggard Photography

**Resources** CONCRETE/CONCRETE PAVEMENT: Transit Mix; MASONRY UNITS: Headwaters Construction Materials; GRANITE COUNTERTOPS: PQI Inc.; METAL ROOF/FASCIA/SIDING: Athens Steel; LUMBER: Smith Lumber Co.; CABINETS: Ranger Custom Millwork; INSULATION: Garland Insulation; INTERIOR WOOD DOORS: Nelson's Door Company; ENTRANCES/WOOD WINDOWS: Kolbe (Grand Openings); WOOD FLOORING: Builders Carpet & Design Center; PAINTS: Sherwin Williams; TUB/SHOWER ENCLOSURES: Glasshouse; DESIGN SOFTWARE: DC CADD





Eileen Bennett was leaning toward Arts and Crafts but her architect encouraged her to “come to the dark side.” Modern was a better choice, he insisted, for the splendid acreage she and her husband, local attorney Martin Bennett, had purchased just south of Athens in northeast Texas. Warming to the idea, she asked Michael Malone, AIA, to design a sprawling 2,700-sf house she describes as “modern ranch,” the centerpiece of the couple’s 100-acre Raven Lake Ranch.

Both architect and client realized that the house would be very different from anything else around town, a place permeated with a suburban-*esque* cookie-cutter “builder” aesthetic. Nevertheless, Malone says, Eileen Bennett “was fully supportive of our ideas and concepts for the house, even though they varied dramatically from the other homes in Athens.” With a background in real estate, she also proved to be a client eagerly engaged in the process from beginning to end. “Her eye for detail meant she looked through the plans thoroughly and asked a lot of questions,” Malone asserts.





#### preceding spread

*Industrial-like materials envelop the 2,700-sf “modern ranch” house.*

#### clockwise from top

**left** *Interior spaces focus views to the outdoors. An intimate seating area connects to the screened porch. White-painted surfaces contrast with dark-stained oak flooring.*



“We find it gratifying when the clients make an effort to understand what is contained in the construction documents and the result is a better, more collaborative product, one the client has an emotional investment in.”

**An active couple** – she rides horses competitively and he stays physically fit bicycling along the gently winding farm-to-market road that leads to their ranch – with no children, they like to cook and entertain, so their requirements were relatively simple. Malone organized the program as an elongated plan comprising a central public volume – containing a combined living and dining room, a sitting area that opens directly to the kitchen, and a large screened porch that effectively serves as another living room – flanked by two wings, one for the master bedroom suite and the other for a guest bedroom with adjoining bath. A carport set at a right angle to the main house defines the eastern edge of a minimally landscaped entry court that Eileen Bennett calls her “chicken yard.”

Malone wrapped this linear sequence of spaces with an honest assembly of industrial-like materials, primarily concrete block laid in an offset pattern of running bond with deeply tooled horizontal joints and vertical joints struck flush. “This helps to emphasize the horizontality of the composition and ‘tie’ the house to the ground, in contrast to the backdrop of tall trees,” he explains. The plan allows most rooms to receive natural light from at least two sides, and in many cases three. Malone also placed clerestory windows at

the upper reaches of the tall perimeter walls of the master bedroom and the living/dining room, subtly infusing those interiors with a sense of being outside. “We wake up and all we see is sky and trees,” enthuses Eileen Bennett.

Indeed, a verdant stand of native post oaks a few yards away screens the master bedroom’s southern exposure to the sun. This arc of mature trees marks the innermost edge of the clearing in the forest that screens the house from FM 1615 located about a quarter-mile away. Complementing the woodland setting, two small lakes are visible from the forest side of the house. To the rear unfurls open pasture. Carefully sited along this mediating edge between forest and pasture, from porches oriented toward those views, the Bennetts can savor the early morning sunlight spreading through the trees and sunset’s lengthening shadows over the land.

**Concrete steps and terraces** extend the dwelling into the landscape, inviting immediate access to the surrounding nature. Nowhere is the sensation of being outdoors more pronounced than in the large screen porch that projects out a few feet from the rest of the house and focuses the view toward the trees and the dammed creek. Eileen Bennett describes spending time in this space as being “as close as you can get to living outdoors and being sheltered.” Malone composed the pattern of the screen framing to match that of the windows in the other parts of the house, which reinforces the impression of being an outdoor room. “It was important to the owners that





**left and below** *The screen porch projects into the landscape with the same horizontal composition of framing as the windows elsewhere in the house. The ceiling slopes upward over the living/dining area, allowing for additional natural light from clerestory windows.*

the house support activity focused on the land itself and the beautiful views to the outdoors,” he says, adding, “In a way, the house is really nothing more than an extension of this screened porch.” Delineating the porch

*“In a way, the house is really nothing more than an extension of the screened porch.”*

from the interior sitting room, a broad chimney of concrete block contains two fireplaces, one opening to the sitting room and the other to the porch. (Another two fireplaces, with chimneys constructed of the same block, bookend the central core of the house.)

Galvalume clads the roof and also extends down as metal siding on some portions of the house, its vertical orientation emphasizing the sloping central core that peaks at a height of 26 feet. The overall gray color of the exterior envelope’s metal and concrete serves to distinguish the house from the bright green backdrop of trees and pasture. The utilitarian materials, specified for their durability and low maintenance, recall other rural structures in the area. “It’s a tribute to the owners that they could see the visual opportunity in selecting materials like these as opposed to more characteristic finishes seen on most houses,” Malone notes. “Early in the design process we emphasized that the design of the house was primarily

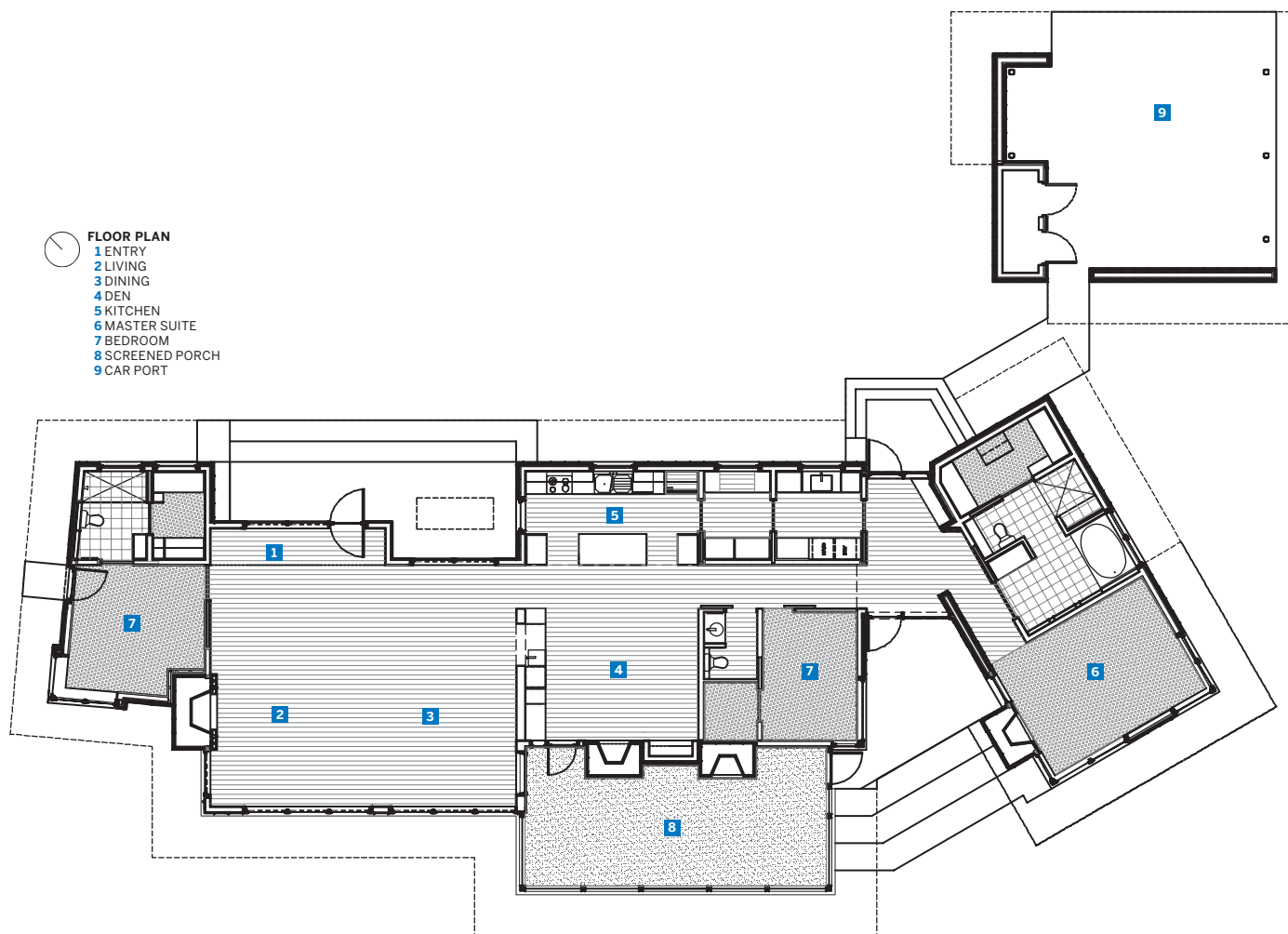




**clockwise from right**  
*Uplighting turns the tall central core into a lantern after sundown. The continuous “eyebrow” shades an inset porch on the north side. The home’s site marks the divide between forest and pasture.*







about the views out to the grove and the two ornamental lakes, that the house itself should attempt to become background for this very beautiful

*Both the architect and his client realized that the house would be very different from anything else around town.*

setting. By extension, the materials the house was made from should also be humble, retiring even, but at the same time be appropriate to the setting and have a proven history of aging gracefully in the climate.”

Where people come in tactile contact with the house, Malone opted for a softer touch and chose cypress planks for the cantilevered soffit. This horizontal “eyebrow” runs continuously around the entire house, shading the lower bank of windows and visually tying together the outlying wings with the taller central volume. Because the client didn’t want gutters, Malone devised a French drain that follows the contour of the house.

**Interior flooring** is chiefly quarter-sawn oak panels, stained dark to accentuate the grain, and in some areas laid diagonally due to the slightly skewed plan. Similarly, the architect playfully angled at 95 degrees the short perimeter wall shared by the smaller bedroom and its bathroom at the

northwest end of the house. Set on a combination of concrete slab and pier-and-beam foundation, there’s sufficient crawl space for HVAC ductwork and even for emergency shelter in the event of severe weather.

Suffused with copious amounts of sunshine, most rooms seldom need artificial lighting during the daytime. Walls of gypsum board and wood trim are primarily painted white, further brightening the interiors. In the evenings, fixtures set high on the walls of the central volume reflect light off the upper ceiling. From the spacious living room, its ceiling sloping up to 26 feet overhead and with expansive glazing at either end, the Bennetts enjoy the delights of life in the country with their friends, as well as coyotes, bobcats, foxes, Chihuahua ravens, and other denizens of their rural neighborhood.

Stephen Sharpe, Hon. TSA, is the editor of *Texas Architect*.