

## Rock Solid

A mix of styles appeals to this resident, who has a 1940s British bookcase near the front door and a large, circa-1910 table from St. Louis. The pottery was done by his mother, Pam Koush, and the upholstered chairs, ottomans, and couch are from a Houston department store.

Built in 1950 from lightweight concrete bricks similar to cinder blocks, even the roof and ceiling of architect Ben Koush's Houston home are made of cement. This is one house that isn't going anywhere in a hurricane.

"The material weighs a lot less than cinder block, and the aggregate is quite big so there's a lot of airspace; it has really good insulation value," Koush says.

He was attracted to the "Century Built" house designed by Allen Williams for its unique architecture and near-original condition. The price didn't hurt either: \$112,000 in 2004. Koush bought the ranch from the daughters of the original owners, a family who lived in it for forty years before renting it out. The women were happy to find a buyer who appreciated their childhood home.

The 1,600-square-foot structure had some incongruous original touches like medieval iron straps on the front door, wrought-iron railing on the porch, and a rustic mailbox. The previous owners liked the house and the solid way it was built, but didn't feel the need for modern accessories or furnishings.

Koush's fairly modest renovation included central air, slate flooring, new paint inside and out, roofing work, and installing a new sink, counters, stove, faucets, and lighting in the kitchen. The boldest change was to open the former AstroTurf-and-wicker sunroom to the living room by putting in a beam in the opening between the two rooms.

"The structural engineer said I would need a steel beam across the top, not just wood, because the building material was so heavy," Koush says. "He suggested having pipe columns buried in the wall to hold it up, but I wanted it to all be exposed and make it clear what I've added. I specified a steel I-beam with welded flanges for that Case Study look."





The young architect changed out the home's parquet flooring in favor of an elaborate slate pattern that challenged the building crew. His CAD drawing turned out to be a "go-by" since the home's actual measurements were off a little, plus smaller honed tiles had to be sloped to align properly with the larger, thicker natural slate tile. But the international-born construction crew recognized and appreciated the home's solid building methods from concrete structures they knew from their native Mexico and Bosnia.

Although Koush isn't a slave to the period, some details are right out of the '50s. He liked and kept his metal Youngstown kitchen cabinets, cleaning them up with sprayed-on white conversion paint, and when stainless steel counters proved too expensive, he got the idea for red laminate by looking at shelter magazines of the era. While he passed on installing a dishwasher since he didn't want to tear out any of the original cabinetry, he splurged on Dornbracht faucets for the Home Depot resin sink.

Outside, the old, cracked driveway was replaced with a ribbon drive called for on the original plans. The decades-old neighborly four-foot-high chain link fence is still in place, and the contractor convinced Koush that even his tar and gravel roof was something special.

"My roofer wouldn't let me get rid of the existing slag gravel," Koush comments. After the repairs were done, the material was re-spread on the sloping roof. "He said it's from old coal-fired iron furnaces in Pennsylvania and unlike gravel you can buy today, it's flat so it doesn't blow away. You can't get materials like that anymore."





Facing: The former sunroom was opened up to the living room with an I-beam-supported doorway.

Left: This concrete block Houston midcentury was built in 1950. There are *only one or two others* like it in the area.

Above: The homeowner got the idea for the red laminate counters from a kitchen in a 1950 *House & Garden* magazine.