



Photos by Josie Norris/Staff photographer

The three-bedroom, 2 1/2-bathroom house Tyler O'Brien built just beyond downtown Comfort features a wraparound porch, cozy rooms and a reading nook.

Inspired by Southern Living

Home in Comfort based on one of the magazine's popular house plans

By Richard A. Marini
STAFF WRITER

Tyler O'Brien is a small-town guy. So when he sold his 20-acre home, he decided to move to small-town Comfort, where he lives kitty-corner to one of the city's oldest houses, bikes into town for a coffee and enjoys the ringing of nearby church bells.

When it came to choosing a floor plan for his new house, he went with that most venerable of small-town institutions: Southern Living.

The three-bedroom, 2 1/2-bathroom house he moved into in October was built using a Southern Living house plan, one of more than 1,300 architectural floor plans sold under the magazine's name. O'Brien's home is based on the Sugarberry Cottage plan, one of the series' most popular.

"People love Southern Living floor plans," said O'Brien, own-



Josie Norris/San Antonio Express-News

Working with a local designer, O'Brien enlarged the kitchen to make it more appealing to potential future buyers. It now has ample room for entertaining.

er of Fredericksburg-based Agave Custom Homes. "They tend to be small-town cottages, with features like wraparound porches, cozy rooms and reading nooks. They go back to the idea of the home as an escape from reality."

The cost of such an escape? About \$1.1 million, according to O'Brien, although that's less than what someone not in the building trade might spend.

"Without my experience and connections, it would cost about \$1.4 million to build this house," he said.

Working with a local designer, O'Brien made changes to the Sugarberry plan, creating a savvy mix of textures, fixtures and finishes that make the home feel at once old and modern.

"It makes you want to kick off your shoes and put your feet up on the furniture," he said.

Comfort continues on E3

Keeping pets healthy amid vet shortage takes planning

During COVID, more people opened their doors to adopting pets than ever before. Animal shelters rejoiced. But COVID — and all these new adoptions — laid bare a problem that had slowly been brewing for over a decade.

There are not enough veterinarians to treat all the dogs and cats in the U.S.

"COVID put more pressure on an already tight labor shortage for vets," said Dr. Whitney Miller, Petco's chief veterinarian at its San Antonio corporate office. "COVID burst the dam, and the demand for veterinary care exploded. There are currently 18 veterinary job post-



Cathy M. Rosenthal

ANIMALS MATTER

ings for every active veterinarian looking for work." According to the Tufts Pre-Veterinary Society at Tufts University, there are 49 veterinary medicine schools around the world, and 29 of them are in the U.S. Many U.S. universities are increasing their veterinary class sizes to meet demand, and nearly a dozen other U.S. universities are seeking accreditation.

But it may be 2030 before we

see how these increased class sizes and new schools will impact veterinary care. And once these veterinarians graduate, there's the problem of attrition.

According to the Journal of the American Veterinary Association, more than 40% of veterinary practitioners who graduated in the last 10 years are considering leaving the profession. They cited mental health (33%) and work-life balance (27%) as their top reasons.

What can pet owners do right now to ensure their pets get the medical care they need?

"Establish a relationship
Rosenthal continues on E2



Sebastian Condrea/Getty Images

Take your pet for regular wellness visits to prevent issues, and establish a relationship with your veterinarian in the process.



The primary suite bathroom was enlarged from the original floor plan, giving it a more modern aesthetic.

COMFORT

From page E1

O'Brien enlarged several rooms in the house with an eye toward making it more attractive to those potential buyers.

"Many Southern Living House Plans have been around for decades," he said. "So the rooms tend to be smaller than what today's buyers are looking for."

Originally 1,700 square feet, he added about 300 square feet to the original design.

"That extra space makes it much more functional for everyday living," he said.

In the enlarged living room, he covered one wall in shiplap, which is more in style than traditional drywall, while the fireplace is faced with brick instead of the limestone found in many Hill Country homes.

O'Brien said, "Brick isn't very prevalent in the Hill Country, so whenever I get the chance to use it, I do. I'm tired of limestone."

He also added a separate garage, which is not included in the Sugarberry Cottage floor plan. The garage also has a second-floor apartment that can be rented, listed as an Airbnb or, as O'Brien has done, used as a home office. The two-story garage also shields the main house from the bright lights of the middle school across the street.

The kitchen, accessible through a cased opening off the living/dining area, is large enough for entertaining, with crisp, white cabinets, a tongue-

in-groove, stained pine ceiling, brick backsplash and walnut-topped island.

This mix of materials and textures continues with the 1-by-4 grid pattern ceiling, the antique newel posts on the stairway banister and, above the dining table, a chandelier of gold-colored metal and rattan arms.

"Together it all gives you the impression that the home is older than it actually is," he said.

This is not "Little House on the Prairie," however. There are plenty of modern amenities. All the appliances, for example — refrigerator, dishwasher and microwave — are built in and neatly concealed behind cabinetlike doors.

O'Brien used designer wallpaper as an occasional accent throughout the house, installing a slate blue paper in an abstract tree pattern on one wall in the living room, for example.

"People want depth and texture now, and that's what wallpaper helps do," he said. "You'll notice going up the stairs I used a similar wallpaper but one with birds among the trees. So it's almost like the wallpaper tells a story as you move through the house."

In keeping with the old home vibe, he installed a transom fitted with seeded glass above the open doorway leading to the owner's suite. Then, at the end of the short hallway, he installed an antique china cabinet purchased locally, tucking it into a niche he created so it looks as if it was built in.



Tyler O'Brien's bedroom is fairly plain, with one shiplap wall and a grid-patterned ceiling that adds depth to the space.

Photos by Josie Norris/Staff photographer



Designer wallpaper is used as an accent in the living area, where the TV is reflected in a large mirror. O'Brien chose brick over the limestone commonly seen in area homes.

Nearby, O'Brien transformed a narrow space intended as an under-the-staircase closet into a handsome pantry, complete with wallpaper, storage baskets and task lighting, all behind a custom door with a beehind panel below a glass insert.

"We made it into a real showplace," he said.

Across the short hallway, he upgraded the original pantry to

a luxe butler's pantry with room for china, a wine chiller and features for entertaining.

O'Brien's bedroom at the back of the house is fairly plain, with one shiplap wall and a grid-patterned ceiling for added depth.

A pair of battered teak doors leading into the main bathroom came from New Orleans and were salvaged following Hurri-

cane Katrina.

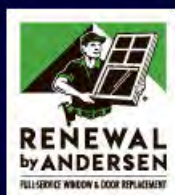
"My painter wanted to sand and refinish them, but I told him no, no, no," O'Brien said with a laugh.

As part of his modernization effort, he expanded the bathroom space, adding a spacious tub and a walk-in shower with a bench seat and built a water closet for the toilet.

Outside, there's a screened-in porch at the side of the house and an open porch across the front.

"I did it this way instead of screening in everything because I wanted just a designated area for the screened-in part, and I wanted that with a fireplace," O'Brien said. "And I wanted the open porch in the front, with an old swinging day bed that to me screams 'small town.'"

Toward the back of the house, along the patio that changes levels several times, is an outdoor kitchen, a tall metal trellis that will soon be covered in climbing vines, and a combination spa and swimming pool often called a "spool" that can be both heated and chilled for year-round usage.



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