



Photos by Richard A. Marini/San Antonio Express-News

Tyler O'Brien removed walls and doorways to create the combined kitchen and dining area. A buffet with glass-fronted cabinets separates the space from the living room.

Kerrville ranch from '70s blends the old and new

Groovy sunken living room, chic finishes reside in harmony

Tyler O'Brien purchased the curious mid-century home at the top of a hill overlooking one of Kerrville's Town Creek reservoirs in May 2024, expecting to remodel and flip it.

The work took almost seven months — as the owner of Fredericksburg-based Agave Custom Home, O'Brien doesn't do what he calls "lipstick on a pig" remodels — and involved reworking the floor plan to make the home more functional.

Built in 1977, the house had seen only one owner, a local doctor who lived to be 100 and kept the place well-maintained. But it was never truly renovated. As a result, O'Brien said, the interior was "dark, closed-in and choppy."

"I call it a 1970s ranch," he said. "It's 2,500 square feet, so not small by any means. And it sits on 5 acres in an older Kerrville neighborhood."

He paid \$385,000 for the three-bedroom, 2½-bathroom house with room for a home office. But by the time he put another \$350,000 into the renovation, the real estate market was in a slump,



Large furniture in the primary bedroom makes it feel bigger. The wall is made of bricks from the rebuilding in Chicago after the Great Fire of 1871.

and the few offers he did receive were lowballs.

Then came the July Fourth Hill Country floods, collapsing demand. Instead of selling, he decided to live in the house until the market improved.

In addition to the floor plan changes, he put in all new, energy-efficient windows, spray-foamed the walls and attics, and vaulted several ceilings, raising them from 8 to 17 feet. Still, he worked hard retain the home's historical integrity.

"That's important to me," he said. "My aim wasn't to simply modernize it but to work with the old and the new, bringing it all in together."

For example, he kept the central living room's vaulted-and-beamed ceiling because it reminded him of a mountain lodge, a look heightened by the room's large, wood-burning fireplace.

"I love wood-burning fireplaces," he said. "There's something about going outside to get your logs in winter. Most of my clients building today want big wood-burning fireplaces."

To further enhance the look, he painted the walls

Ranch continues on E8

To rebuild trust with a scared dog, take a step back



Cathy M. Rosenthal

ANIMALS MATTER

during a visit to see my daughter (I'm in Austin; she's in Denver), Luna suddenly became fearful of me. Her ears went back, her eyes widened, her tail tucked, and she licked her lips frequently.

Dear Cathy,

My daughter adopted a dog, Luna, several years ago, and we got along well at first. Then

Sometimes, Luna will allow me to pet her, but she remains visibly fearful and quickly reverts to avoiding me. On walks, even when my daughter is holding the leash, Luna constantly looks back at me with her ears back and eyes wide. When I've walked her myself, it's the same — she watches me as if I might suddenly attack her.

I've tried giving her treats. At first, she wouldn't take them. Now she will, but she often just sets them down



Hans Gutknecht/Southern California News Group

A fearful dog often relaxes when pressure disappears, so let the pet control interactions.

without eating them.

I have no idea what triggered this change, and it's been several years with no improvement. I have never experienced this before with any dog. I have owned four dogs over the years and absolutely love them.

Luna is an anxious, somewhat shy dog to begin with, but I am the only person she continues to show this level of fear toward.

I am at my wit's end.

Lisa, Austin

Dear Lisa,

What you're describing is understandably upsetting, especially when a dog you once had a positive relationship with suddenly seems afraid of you.

Dogs don't generalize the way we do, so a single moment — something as subtle as a posture, scent, piece of clothing, tone of voice or a stressful period in their life — can become linked with fear and linger long after the original cause is gone.

Unfortunately, canine

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RANCH

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and trim a dark green called Rosemary from Sherwin Williams and lightened the beams with a stain reducer for a more modern feel. To complete the effect, he hung an axis deer head above the fire-box.

There were some hiccups. The house had a new roof, water heater and air conditioning, so O'Brien thought he'd saved some money. But when workers began opening walls and ceilings, they discovered the AC ducts were the old square kind, which are much less efficient than today's duct-work.

"I had to redo them all, which was basically the cost of almost a new unit, minus the compressor," he said. "But you can always expect these kinds of surprises when you're doing a remodel."

Another hiccup: replacing the brown Saltillo tile that ran through much of the house with engineered white oak. Sure, the wood is warmer, but that warmth came at a cost.

"After we knocked out the tile, I had to reflat the floors," he said, rolling his eyes. "That was another unforeseen cost. Saltillo is a real thick material, so when you buy a home, I suggest you try to keep the Saltillo."

The biggest feature he had to deal with was the sunken living room, a popular look in the '70s but not so much today. It was a deal-breaker for several potential buyers, mostly older folks, who toured the house when it was still for sale.

Yes, he concedes, he could have raised the floor. But that would have destroyed a large part of the home's character.

"My degree's in architecture, so I love when older homes retain the



Tim O'Brien kept the central living room's vaulted-and-beamed ceiling and wood-burning fireplace. Engineered white oak replaced the Saltillo tile.

characteristics they were built with," he said. "The sunken living room defines the space."

Another retain-the-character choice: He kept the original louvered accordion closet doors throughout the house. Many would have replaced them with something more modern, such as sliding bypass, shaker-style bifold or even pocket doors. Not O'Brien.

He likes the look, so he simply painted them and added new hardware.

"The glides were still functioning," he said. "And in my experience, if accordion door glides are still working smoothly after all these years, you don't screw with them."

One update he made was to add wainscoting to the entryway and the short halls leading into the kitchen and guest bedrooms. He said the look elevates the space at a reasonable cost.

In the original floor

plan, a relatively long, L-shaped hallway led to all the bedrooms, including the primary suite at the end. Lots of wasted space. So O'Brien closed off the hallway shortly after the 90-degree turn but before it came to an end, using the space to enlarge the primary bedroom closet.

This necessitated building a new entryway into the primary room to bedroom. For privacy, he added a small alcove with a jog that leads from living room to bedroom.

In the bedroom, one wall consists of Chicago Common Brick, which are bricks salvaged from structures used to rebuild Chicago following the Great Fire of 1871. O'Brien had extra from a previous project. He also added a vaulted ceiling, created from what had been attic space, and a wall of paneled windows that also help make the room appear larger.

"I had complaints when

the house was for sale that the master was too small," he explained. "But that was before it was furnished. Once I added a king bed, a large table and the mirrors, you realize there's plenty of space."

He opened up the bathroom, too, adding a shower room consisting of both a shower area and bathtub. The change required moving some plumbing, but O'Brien said he had no second thoughts.

"I did it to make the room more functional," he said. "It's a master bathroom, so it's worth the money."

Reeded cabinets modernize the bath, which still retains some of the 1970s aesthetic, as does what he calls the "light coastal" wallpaper.

Elsewhere, the combined kitchen and dining area was created by removing several walls and doorways. He separated the space from the adjacent living room with a



A 10-by-4-foot island with a vegetable sink took the place of the kitchen peninsula.



O'Brien opened up the main bathroom, adding a functional space with both a shower and a tub.

dining buffet that's bracketed by glass-fronted storage cabinets.

O'Brien vaulted the ceiling, again taking advantage of existing attic space, added tongue-and-groove wood slats to warm the mostly white room and replaced the small peninsula with a 10-by-4-foot island with a vegetable sink.

"I don't typically do vegetable sinks in the homes I build, but there was already plumbing here," he said. "Plus, my mom had one in her house in Houston and she always said it was her favorite thing."

Taking inspiration from Pinterest, he included furniture-style shelving on the island ends for storing cookbooks, china and other items.

"It's different from just having a big block of an island or waterfalling the stone down the sides," he



The home office could be converted to a bedroom.

said. "More functional, too."

While he removed much of the '70s-era brown wood paneling found throughout the house, he kept it in one of the guest bedrooms and painted over it.

"I like the paneling because it gives the bedroom its own sense of defineness," he said. "I call it old-style shiplap, but vertical."

THEY SAY...

A PHOTO IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

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