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Form and function

Thursday, February 16, 2012 | Dane Anderson



ABOVE: Even the rock edging around flower beds in an Escala residence in Barton Creek add architectural elements to the family home.

When LandWest Design Group founder and chief landscape architect Rick Scheen meets people, he rarely walks away without leaving an impression.



Most people notice his focus and his relentless drive for perfectionism. One client called him the most intense person he ever met. Another claims he is “maniacal” in his attention to detail.

It takes all those qualities to be the guy who designs the outdoor living spaces of Austin’s rock star elite. But it takes something else – powerful creative talent. Scheen’s rare gift is that he can paint an extraordinary picture with trees, water, grass and stone – a picture that captures the story of the land, the architecture that graces it and the people who live there.

Stephen Jones, chairman of Jones Villalta Funds, went through three different firms before finally picking Scheen’s LandWest Design Group to create the outside areas of his home. Jones is the first to admit that he has “ridiculously high”



standards. He found something special in Scheen.

“Rick is able to see a piece of dirt as a blank canvas and visualize what will eventually turn into art,” Jones said. “It comes down to a thousand details – everything from the thought that they put into the drainage, to how much sunlight every plant needs, to what the landscape will look like in every season.”

Scheen learned the mechanics he needed, big-picture urban design and how to deal with space from the prestigious landscape architecture program at Louisiana State University. But he learned everything he knows about residential design by meeting and really talking to his clients.

He started walking property and listening to homeowners in 1988 in Baton Rouge. That gives him an accumulated wealth of 24 years of human insight and practical design. The combination of experience combined with a great deal of inborn



artistic talent is the secret to the beauty that LandWest creates.



Scheen starts a project by walking onto the property alone, soaking in what he sees and feels. The better he does that, the better the end result, he said.

“Knowing what the site wants, what the architecture wants – I get that; that’s easy,” he said. “But the client – that’s the wild card. I want to create something they want now and that they’ll want 10 years from now.”

LandWest doesn’t sell any look pre-packaged; everything is designed around the client and the home. Sure, there are some key elements that show through all of Scheen’s designs – they all seem to have a clean, contemporary look with formal spaces. But each has a different feel and each tells the story of who lives there.

For Scheen, form really does follow function.

“I can’t stand walking into something that doesn’t work for people, he said. “We try and make every part of it user friendly, and we try and make sure that the complete project fits together in a way that works seamlessly. We want to

allow life to happen smoothly, without thinking about it.”

When investor and philanthropist Alan Topfer began building his family home eight years ago, a friend suggested he contact Scheen about landscape design. He wound up engaging the passionate designer to create the landscape for his home and his Hill Country ranch.

“We built two very different projects – an Old World style house and a Texas ranch,” Topfer said. “Rick listened to what we were looking for and he customized the design to the architecture of the houses.”

Like most of Scheen’s clients, Topfer expects to be enjoying the beauty of life in both places for a long time. He expects Scheen’s landscape to remain a part of Topfer life, growing and changing as he and his family do.

“There is a lot of heart in his projects and a lot of hardscape and elements that endure – a lot of walls and trees and things that last,” Topfer said. “Even the edging of the flower beds is an architectural element.”

Another LandWest secret to success is that all the work – from the top down – is done in house. Almost all of the company’s employees have been together for years. Scheen doesn’t follow the usual business plan, using contractors to handle the work. It costs him more, but it gives him more control in how the project comes together.

When Scheen takes that first step onto a prospective client’s property, he’s carrying all that artistic vision, experience and a team of creative talent with him. He’s ready to listen.

He’s ready to get down to the three basics.

“To weave this garden we want to create, we have to pull our fibers from the architecture, the site and the client,” he said again. “I can’t weave a great project with poor fibers.”

Inspiration for the magic to come always begins with the fibers, Scheen said.

“Then we just go crazy,” he said, smiling. “We can make beautiful cloth for years.”

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