



FUN HOUSE

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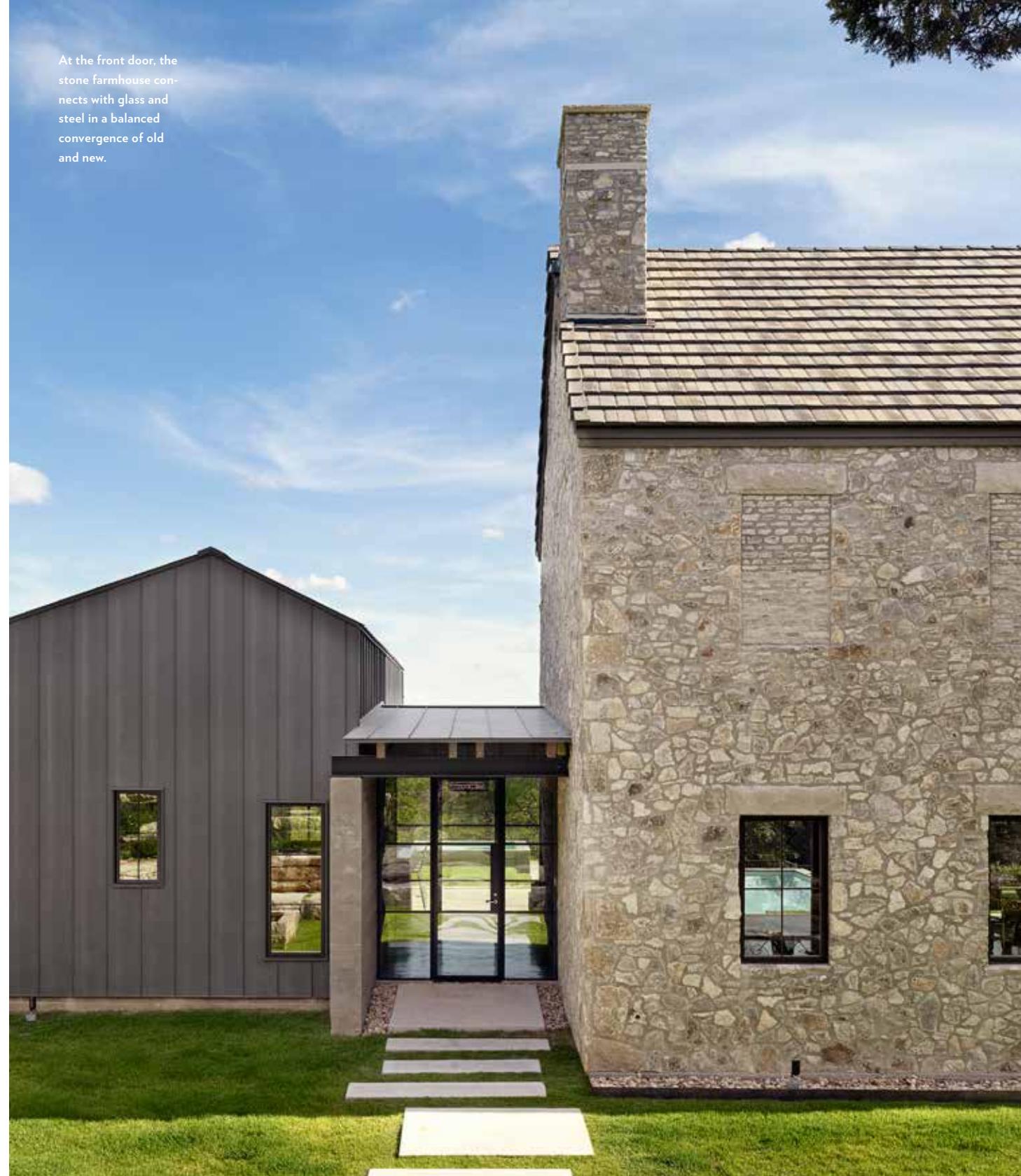
A STUNNING CONFLUENCE OF RUSTIC FARMHOUSE AND MODERN FLOURISHES CREATE A STAGE THAT WELCOMES SERIOUS PLAY, EASY ENTERTAINING, AND THE USUAL MESSINESS OF FAMILY LIFE.

While there is much to delight you when you first walk into the home of John and Sara Oates—a sweet country breeze, the smell of fresh espresso, a handsome trifecta of glass, concrete, and stone walls framing the entryway—the thing that stands out most is a child's swing. Behind the glass back wall of this contemporary farmhouse, hanging from the porch on thick chains that John Oates put up himself, a simple red wood swing looks out over the green backyard and the surrounding hills of far West Austin. This

swing is both an invitation and a hint of what's to come. Here is a house where you're allowed to have fun, it says. Come on in.

Indeed, play and ease seem to inhabit every corner of this winsome union of stone farmhouse with minimalist glass and metal forms. In my short time in the Oates' gorgeously spare kitchen and living area, two wet Labradors traipse inside to wrestle, leaving little trails of water and slobber in their wake. Later, a confident nine-year-old boy skateboards back and forth across the

At the front door, the stone farmhouse connects with glass and steel in a balanced convergence of old and new.



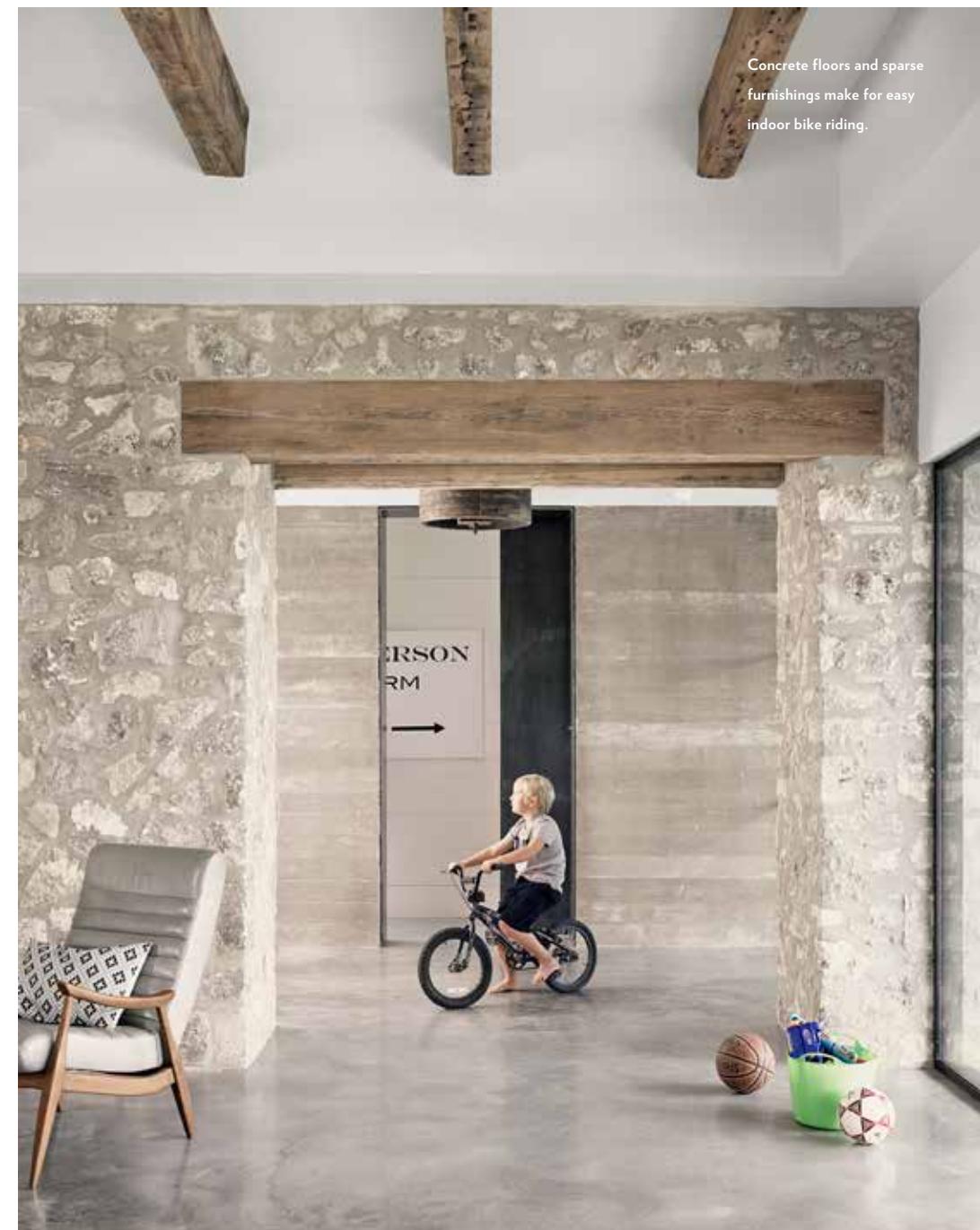
smooth concrete floors as if that's the norm for kids' activity in the living room. Because here, it is. Forty-three-year-old John has even ridden his Vespa through it. And no one bats an eye.

Because for the Oates family, form definitely follows function, and the function for this daring couple and their three young children is to live, play, and work close to the land, unfettered by extras. Relying on the innate appeal of the raw materials themselves—limestone, glass, steel, wood—simple and unadorned, they and their architect, Sam Burch of Shiflet Group Architects, have built a home of elegant indestructibility. With no paint on the exterior, no fancy adornments, no stains on the decks, no precious antique furniture and rugs, and no maintenance, there is a lot more freedom to swing, skateboard, plant a garden, have a party.

“Really, for us the design was secondary to the lifestyle we were trying to create,” says John Oates, who grew up on a West Texas farm where he learned the value in having a piece of land that offers endless outside chores and adventures. “The kids can come in from the pool wet. We often entertain their friends, and there will be 20 kids here and we don't have to worry about it; there's no ‘Don't touch that!’”

But building a simplified house is not always so simple; the Oateses were met with resistance from some architects and subcontractors along the way. They interviewed four or five architects before they met Burch, their ideal match. “We talked to other architects,” says Sara. “We took them our inspiration picture and said, ‘This is what we are looking for;’ and then they would bring out a picture and say, ‘This is what I think you should have. Let's

Concrete floors and sparse furnishings make for easy indoor bike riding.





It's not always about fun around here; the dining area is a clutter-free zone for homework.

A spacious, streamlined kitchen offers plenty of room for cooking amid hula hoops and guitars.



meet in the middle.' And we would say, 'Why don't we just meet where we started?'

Finally, they approached Shiflet Group Architects. "We went to them and said, 'Sara wants a farmhouse and John would love to live in a glass cube, and we've got to figure out a way to make those two things meet.' Sam got just what we were looking for. We were lucky to find an architect who could turn our vision of a really low-maintenance and livable house into something really pretty as well," says Sara.

With the tabula rasa of a cedar-and-oak-cov-

ered sloping lot as their starting point, the Oateses and Burch focused on the farmhouse as the heart of the project. Sara, a real estate appraiser with Danish roots, wanted an authentic Scandinavian-style farmhouse and barn with vaulted roofs and rough-hewn stone and wood. (The barn, now Sara's home office, is built of wood treated by a process called *shou-sugi-ban*, a centuries-old Japanese method of burning wood to help prevent rot and insect infiltration). They collected the limestone rocks scattered around the property and showed them to the

stonemasons, saying that this was what they wanted to use to build the farmhouse. The stonemasons balked.

"The masons were pushing us toward cut stone, something with more polish," says John. "And we said, 'The ugliest possible stone is what we want.' Sam helped a lot with that, too. He definitely had an opinion of what would make it look old."

The farmhouse looks so authentically time-worn, in fact, that most people don't realize it was recently built, believing instead that it was a



The barn, treated by a Japanese wood burning process called shou-sugi-ban, makes a handsome backdrop to Sara Oates' vegetable garden.



A book in one hand, a skateboard in the other; homework and play coexist peacefully.



The upstairs music room doubles as a studio for aerial acrobatics.

long-standing fixture on the property. And yet its juxtaposition with the contemporary pool house and sleeping quarters feels natural, like an easy meeting of different eras.

“The rural Texas landscape is dotted with collections of farm structures born out of necessity,” says Burch. “For me this is a beautiful image and is in large part responsible for the outcome of the house. From the beginning of the project I felt the key to executing the concept was to careful-

ly blend the old with the new. Too much blending would have resulted in a very homogeneous house, and too little blending would have made for an austere compilation. The traditional and contemporary elements needed to stand on their own without one or the other dominating. Hopefully people will find the contemporary aspects of the house to be unpredictable, timeless, and comfortable.”

That’s certainly how the home is playing out for the Oates family. While their young daugh-

ter practices her aerial dance moves from a hook in the children’s music room, kids outside jump from a mini-trampoline into the swimming pool; shoot archery and BB guns on a green lawn edged by Sara’s vegetable garden; and ramble down a trail to the creek below, where they swim, kayak, and get muddy. Even the dogs paddleboard in the pool. It would seem that if you can’t have fun at the Oates house, then you probably can’t have fun, period. **T**



Air-born children and Labradors on paddleboards are not uncommon here.