

# HOUSTON CHRONICLE

WWW.CHRON.COM

SATURDAY, JUNE 4, 2005

★ ★ ★ VOL. 104 • NO. 234 • 50 CENTS

HOME ALONE



## A birdhouse of his own

*A longtime renter learns the meaning of home*

By DAVID KAPLAN  
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

**A**S a boy growing up in Houston, I fantasized about having my own house one day. It would be two stories tall with flagstone brick in a swank area of town.

After living in apartments all my adult life, I finally got my own place that is nothing like my childhood fantasy.

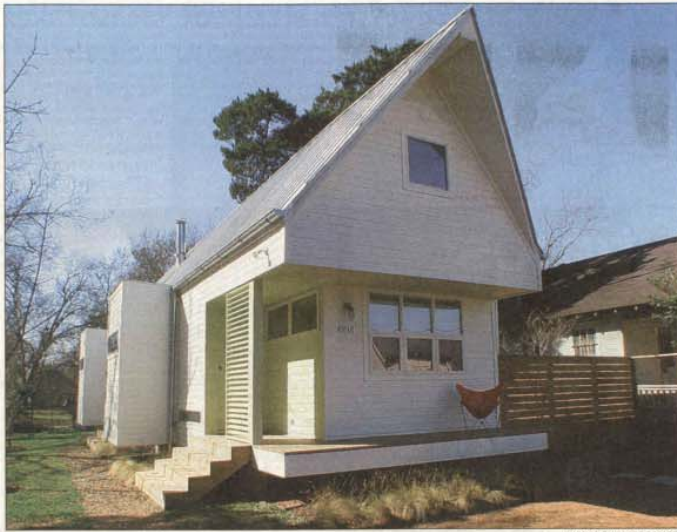
It's a skinny house on a skinny lot on a faded street in the East End. Although relatively small and affordable and off the beaten path, it's getting attention, which makes me feel like a parent living vicariously through a gifted child.

*Please see BIRDHOUSE, Page E8*



PHOTOS BY BRETT ZAMORE

**FRESH AIR:** The home's center has a central breezeway with sliding, louvered barnlike doors and large glass doors.



PHOTOS BY BRETT ZAMORE

**ITS OWN RHYTHM:** The home's rectilinear frame also features two "pop-outs" that contain the two bathrooms.

## BIRDHOUSE: A winner for the environment

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

My house gives me more than pleasure. It's also vindication, since my architect, Brett Zamore, has shown that beauty doesn't require big bucks.

Soon after I moved in last summer, Zamore got the news that the house would be featured in *Dwell*, a hip national magazine devoted to modern houses, and the photographer would be arriving in a few weeks.



**HAPPY TIMES:** Chronicle business reporter David Kaplan relaxes on the steps with his dog, Bella.

I had only begun to furnish the house and had to move quickly if I was going to pass myself off as one of those people you see lounging in his den inside an architecture magazine.

*Dwell* editor Sam Grawe called to interview me and prepare me for the photo shoot.

They wanted to include me in some images, he said, and would also photograph my wife and me or my girlfriend.

I told him I was single and had no girlfriend.

"You're not allowed to hire a model," he said.

I wasn't sure if he was kidding.

"What if I get a girlfriend quickly?" I asked. "Could I tell a woman she can be in *Dwell* if she'll be my girlfriend?"

"I'll leave that up to you," Grawe said.

Misty Keasler, an award-winning photographer from Dallas who already had a boyfriend, showed up to take the pictures.

The daylong photo session was surreal. Only weeks before, I was putting quarters in washing machines in the laundry room of an apartment complex. Now I was posing for a magazine, looking out over my deck.

Keasler wisely focused on the coolest part of the house, a central breezeway, or dog trot. On nice days, I can slide open

side of the house to let the indoors join the outdoors.

After the magazine hit the stands in January, I bought six copies and spent my days waiting for someone to say, "Hey, I saw your house in *Dwell*," after which I'd pretend to take it in stride.

I wondered if that female architect who dumped me years ago was a *Dwell* subscriber.

I've always admired beautiful, tasteful homes, but as an adult didn't have a burning need to possess one. For decades I lived near Rice University, a beautiful part of town where renting apartments was my only affordable option.

I once lived in a garage unit on the luxurious end of South Boulevard. When people asked me my address, I had a choice: I could say, "So-and-so South Boulevard," and let them think I was rich, or be more accurate and say, "So-and-so South Boulevard—above the dogs."

My house grew out of a writing assignment. I met Zamore when I did media relations work at Rice and he was a graduate student in the school of architecture. I wrote a story on his thesis: his renovation of a dilapidated Fifth Ward shotgun house.

Later I told him I was thinking of buying an old house and asked for his opinion. I had made a "now or never" decision to buy, partly because I'd spent enough on rent in one lifetime, and partly because the kind of apartments I liked were being leveled to make way for townhomes.

As we drove through the East End looking at properties, Zamore saw a vacant lot. Why didn't I let him design a house from scratch, he asked? That way, I wouldn't have to worry about a leaky old roof and all the other problems I'd inherit.

After a few meetings, we agreed it would be a modern take on the shotgun, energy efficient and suitable to the neighborhood and Houston climate. Zamore listened to my ideas and wanted the house to be a reflection of my personality.

We had our differences, of course. In almost every architect/client relationship, there is a clash of wills. Whenever I told friends Zamore and I were arguing over design issues, they'd



**HIGH DESIGN:** A vaulted ceiling makes the 1,450-square-foot home with loft feel spacious.

say, "David, it's your house." But I gave in a lot, and everything he pushed for was right.

My property is actually two thin lots side by side. Zamore wanted to build on just one lot; I worried that it would make the house too narrow. But narrowness is part of its charm.

My house and I even came to resemble each other. It's skinny and deep, and I'm skinny, too. Zamore spent 18 months designing the house, and it took seven months to build. But with all the stops and starts, including my search for financing, the process took four years.

I kept hearing that building a house would be a nightmare, but Zamore's eagerness to take on all problems made it relatively painless. He found a great builder, Robert Sanders, who typically builds more upscale homes but wanted to try something different. The house priced out at about \$120 per square foot, a value for a

custom home of its quality and small size.

I traded the splendor of the Museum District for a diverse residential/industrial neighborhood where I can smell the coffee from the Maxwell House plant and hear trains rumbling by at all hours. I'm a three-minute walk from a bus depot that can transport me to the heart of Mexico. I'm lucky to be on a lot with big trees. The land slopes, which gives the house a more dramatic presence.

We strived for house that respects the neighborhood's existing architecture, but that doesn't mean every neighbor likes it. One told me it was odd. A more approving neighbor dubbed it "the birdhouse in the woods," probably because of the pitched roof.

Zamore's design won the 2003 Houston American Institute of Architects "Best of Show" award for unbuilt works. In addition to *Dwell*, it has appeared in *Casa*, a Costa Rican modern architecture magazine, and recently won another local design award.

The house is Zamore's creation, but I'm doing the best I can to bask in all the accolades. I'm proud of my beautiful pine floor, salvaged from a house that was about to be demolished.

When I first moved in, I felt intimidated by the idea of owning a home. But now I have something to call my own, and I've hired an organizer, a maid and landscaper.

The transition from apartment guy to homeowner is a slow process, though. I still have an urge to look for quarters when doing laundry.



**OUTSIDE-IN:** A deck off the home's central breezeway "extends" the living room when the weather is nice.

david.kaplan@chron.com