

[Return to Document](#)

The house that Bush built

How many bedrooms does his ranch have? **That's** classified. But we can tell you how **the** architect made it eco-friendly.

BYLINE: Jeanne Claire **van Ryzin**, American-Statesman Staff

DATE: January 18, 2001

PUBLICATION: Austin American-Statesman

SECTION: Lifestyle

PAGE: G1

Come Saturday, President-elect George W. Bush and Laura Bush will be moving into new digs on Pennsylvania Avenue. The house is big, it's fancy, it's monumental, it's historic. It's neo-Classical style pulls out all the architectural stops to say "look at me -- I'm important." But while the Bushes very publicly moved out of the Texas Governor's Mansion and headed to the White House, they've also very quietly moved into an unpretentious new house on their ranch in McLennan County just outside the tiny town of Crawford.

About 20 miles west of Waco, off Prairie Chapel Road, behind a modest iron gate and cattle guard is a residence destined to be known as the Texas White House. But unlike the attention-demanding White House in D.C., this First Residence is meant to disappear into the landscape. Austin architect David Heymann designed it that way.

Most architects only too easily get loquacious when asked about a new project. But Heymann, an associate dean for undergraduate programs at the University of Texas School of Architecture, must keep mum -- it's in his contract with the

Bushes. Two things in particular he can't reveal: the house's size and budget (just the 1,580 acres is estimated to be worth at least \$1.5 million). So while negligible details -- i.e., how many bedrooms the place has, whether the water comes from a well or from a county pipeline -- are now a matter of national security and can't be discussed, the 41-year-old architect (first-architect-elect?) has plenty to say in general about the house.

For starters, the long and low building has a few features that would likely turn Ralph Nader and his Green Party troops, well, green with envy. Clad in Lueders limestone and topped with a galvanized metal roof, Dubya's new house is eco-friendly. Heymann said he suggested a combination of passive and active environmental technologies after the Bushes gave him their primary criteria for their new home.

"They wanted a house that would add to the experience of this really beautiful piece of land that they love," he said. "What I added to that idea is that if you have something you really love -- the land -- then environmental technologies will only add to what you feel about the house you build on that land."

Heymann and the Bushes spent a good deal of time picking out the right site on the ranch. Heymann describes the place they chose as "a little saddle in the landscape with a lake on the east, and to the west, a monstrous grove of very old live oak trees." It was the perfect site to harness sunlight and breezes with a passive solar and wind design. Consisting of three, narrow, straight segments strung along in a curve from east to west along a contour of the land, the house forms what Heymann calls a "solar bowl." In the winter, the bowl is filled with sunlight; in the summer the bowl is in the shade. To maximize cross-ventilation, Heymann oriented all of the rooms to take advantage of the prevailing south-south easterly winds that blow through the many floor-to-ceiling windows.

An efficient geothermal heating and cooling system pumps ground water -- which remains a constant 55 degrees year-round -- through a heat exchanger to warm the house in the winter and cool it in the summer. The geothermal system uses about one-quarter the energy of a conventional heater/air-conditioner. A gray-water and black-water reclamation system will treat and reuse waste water, and a rainwater collection gutter winds along the perimeter of the house, connecting to a large cistern, which will hold the water for garden irrigation.

The architecture isn't all that's green. Though six years ago, in the heat of his campaign for Texas governor, Bush was critical of former Gov. Ann Richards for her support of a federal program to protect the rare, golden-cheeked warbler, things are different when it comes to Dubya's own warblers. Last year, Bush signed an agreement with the Texas Agriculture Department to preserve several hundred acres of hardwood trees on his ranch that are home to the bird. The Bushes also share their hilly spread with about 200 head of cattle -- cared for by a foreman: Bush calls himself a "windshield rancher," preferring to use a truck, not a horse to navigate his ranch.

The style of the house arose from problem-solving, not aesthetic issues.

“We never once talked about issues of style -- ever,.” said Heymann. “Which is very unusual. They said they wanted the house to be something you didn't look at. The purpose of being on the ranch is the experiences you have when you're there. You're not there to look at the architecture -- the architecture is only the setting for the meaningful activities that take place.”

What the Bushes gave him was a list of criteria, some specific, some abstract.

“In one of our first meetings, they said they wanted a house that is extremely calm and quiet and disappears into the landscape,” Heymann said. “They also wanted the house to be small. And they wanted it to be flat and they wanted all the rooms to be immediately associated with the outside. Whatever resulting ‘style’ the house has arises from solving those problems in a direct way.”

Unlike a conventional house, the one-story structure has no main front door, no real front or back.

“There's a long deep porch that wraps around the house. Most of the time you have to go outside to get from one room to another and to reach the adjacent guesthouse and garage,” Heymann said. The porch is 10 feet high and in most places 10 feet deep. The roof is cantilevered -- not a single column or support interrupts the view, nor is there any vertical step to the ground beyond the porch. “The porch is like the brim of a hat,” Heymann said. “It shades you, but makes it possible for you to have an uninterrupted view of the surrounding landscape. Also, at any time of the year, there is a place on the porch that is in the sun or not and in the wind or not. The notion is that you can always find some comfortable place to sit outside.”

What the Bushes wanted was to sit on the porch and feel like they were at the end of the world.

“The house doesn't try to be like the landscape; it just tries to get along with the landscape,” said Heymann, who sited the house so that the view from each room focuses on a different tree on the wooded property. “The architecture is meant to underwhelm you in appearance and overwhelm you in the experience you have with it.”

And how about the overwhelming experience of working with clients who were perhaps a tad more preoccupied than most?

“It's been wild, but it's been great,” Heymann said laughing. When he and the Bushes began discussing the project in August 1999, Heymann told them he could have the designs done by Election Day. “But the (president-elect) said to me, ‘I want to be living in it by Election Day,’ ” Heymann recalled. “The project was fast-tracked, all right .”

Heymann gives credit to the Bushes for their alacrity.

“They made themselves very, very available, especially Mrs. Bush,” he said. “We were able to meet or discuss things over the phone two or three times a week. That's extremely unusual.”

Heymann got the commission after he was recommended to Laura Bush by Deedie Rose, the wife of Rusty Rose, one of Bush's ex-business partners (both owned the Texas Rangers). After briefly meeting Laura Bush in the spring of 1999, Heymann received a phone call from her early one morning a few months later. “She said they had bought some land and could they see some of my previous work. I sent over a portfolio and thought, well, that was the end of that,” he said. “I don't have a big portfolio and I have a very small practice in addition to my teaching. I usually have just one or so projects on the boards at any time.”

Heymann, who grew up in Houston, started his architectural studies at Rice University before transferring to the Cooper Union in New York. He headed to Harvard's Graduate School of Design for a master's degree in architecture. After teaching at Iowa State University for a few years, he and wife, artist Sandra Fiedorek, moved to Austin 10 years ago.

Heymann was shocked when the Bushes called a few weeks after he sent his portfolio and offered him the job.

The project has even been an experience for the architect's children, Walter, 13, and Helen, 11. “They've both been up to the ranch a couple of times,” Heymann said. “And Helen got to dance with (president-elect) Bush at their Christmas party last year.

“I was completely unprepared for this,” he said laughing. “But I'm impressed that the Bushes were willing to take a risk on a young architect and a non conventional house.”

You may contact Jeanne Claire van Ryzin at 445-3699 or jvanryzin@statesman.com.

Austin architect David Heymann says George W. and Laura Bush wanted their Crawford ranch to blend into the

landscape. The large windows were oriented to take advantage of the south-southeasterly winds.