

# *hover* CRAFT

INVOKING A PLAYFUL, SKY-HIGH  
FLOATING MOTIF, AN ULTRA-  
MODERN HOUSE TAKES FLIGHT

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PHOTOS BY TRE DUNHAM

With floor-to-ceiling windows, the Mulvas' living room appears to hover as daughter Emily peers down toward Bull Creek.





**D**riving through Austin's Courtyard neighborhood, it could be said that the ultra-contemporary house of civil engineer Stephen Mulva and wife Megan, a former Delta Airlines engineer, *floats* amid the boxy 1980s-style limestone houses that dominate the area. In fact, with its clean, low lines and a shallow, square entryway reflecting pool surrounded by cattails, papyrus and tall grasses, it could even be said that the house, which is featured on this year's AIA Austin Homes Tour on Oct. 1-2, appears to drift.

What's wilder, though, is that once you start looking closely at the interior, the whole floating metaphor starts to unravel. Nearly everything seems to hover, glide and soar. Built-in desks have no legs, benches never touch the

floor, cabinets seem to hang in the air and the backs of nearly a dozen vintage Wegner chairs look like miniature wings. But it's not until you see the media room—a space Stephen, a private pilot hobbyist, outfitted to look exactly like an airplane cabin—that things really take off.

Apart from the media room, the Mulvas didn't exactly have the floating concept in mind when thinking of their dream house. With help from the couple's go-to art and design consultant, Santa Fe-based Laura Carpenter, along with architect Kevin Alter, the style of suspended design elements took shape, establishing the motif.

For example, the master bedroom and living room—at either points of the U-shaped house that wraps around a central courtyard—jut over Bull Creek, with floor-to-ceiling windows

*above*  
The Mulvas and dog Katie gather in the sleek, modern kitchen, which features ultramarine blue, one of Megan's favorite colors.

*right*  
Benches, such as this one that makes up a small reading nook off the kitchen, never touch the ground, adding to the floating motif found throughout the house.





that create spaces that feel frozen in mid air.

But it doesn't end there. The clutter-free vibe—there are no knickknacks or car keys anywhere—and Megan's love of blues seem to put guests right in the clouds. Megan's mother, no fan of modern architecture, remarks every time she visits, "I have clarity of thought here."

Like most well thought out plans, the Mulvas' developed over time. The couple purchased the lot in 1999, prior to living in Atlanta. Both graduates of UT, they wished to return to Austin someday, so securing a piece of land made sense. After returning to Austin and having daughter Emily in 2002, they got serious about creating the right space to raise their family.

Though the couple adored the suburban intimacy of the area, they knew they wanted to build something unique to their lot and lifestyle. Since nearly all the other houses nearby looked similar architecturally, the Mulvas also wanted to respect those around them.

Cutting-edge design might have been the biggest influence of all. The couple was both raised around awe-inspiring architecture. Megan once lived in Chicago and Tulsa, the nation's Art Deco capital, and Stephen grew up in London and Bartlesville, Oklahoma, the site of Frank Lloyd Wright's only skyscraper, The Price Tower. So they sought out a design that would make a statement. "We knew we wanted an architect-designed house," says Stephen.

They did this by handing over creative control to consultant Carpenter and architect Alter, with the couple only requesting three things: a place for Megan's Kohler Caribbean tub in the master suite, a small reading niche and Stephen's aviation-themed media room. Meanwhile, furniture, chosen by Carpenter, is functional, contemporary and unassuming.

Since emerald-colored light from the outdoor hills floods through the glass, Carpenter dabbled with a palette of off-white tones—



*above*  
Katie runs across the inner courtyard, around which the house forms a U-shape. An ipe-wood awning creates cool shadows, while an all-glass walkway allows views from the street.

*left*  
A large diptych based on the Bible passage John 8:12 by artist Nikola Savic hangs in the living room. Simple mod furniture creates an airy space. The flower arrangement is by Austin Ikebana.

*right*  
Jutting over the creek, the light-washed master bedroom, with a white Eames lounge chair, makes a cloud-like space.







daughter Emily points out that the exact color is “Wind’s Breath”—and soft gray hues, letting nature views and natural light take the lead, just like looking out an airplane window.

Eschewing canned ceiling lights because they “would break the flow of the design,” Carpenter, along with Austin-based Jeff Mendrala of KL Lighting Consultants, hung statement light fixtures, each with a specific ambient purpose.

A mod, cloud-recalling chandelier hangs above an oval dining table, and there are various lights hidden in shelves throughout the house, creating subtle bits of artificial illumination that twinkle like plane wings at night.

The various lighting plays off a range of blues, found in the subtle Israeli Bluestone floor tiles featured throughout the house and in the bold bits of ultramarine paint in the kitchen. The design aesthetic is a Scandinavian color scheme that celebrates the color of sky, sea and fjords. Being both bright and natural, the blues add to the sky-like freshness of the house.

Artwork, although sparse, also adds a bit of color. The 10 photos off the entry hall appear to be floating clouds in a cobalt sky, but in fact

are photos of cotton balls shot by German artist Oliver Bobeck.

The couple commissioned Serbian artist Nikola Savic to create a diptych based on the Bible passage John 8:12 (“I am the light of the world...”). The large painting hangs on an exposed brick wall in the living room. “I think this piece echoes what we tried to do with the house—bring the light in,” says Stephen.

As for that media room, Stephen got the idea at an airplane convention after seeing original airplane seats for sale. Years later, he bought seven first-class seats when Delta retired the L-1011 fleet. He then bought wall panels and bins from an old Google corporate jet.

Computer monitors hidden behind real airplane windows will show video taken from flights over Austin. A 90-inch screen, an overhead projector and custom-made airplane-themed wallpaper along the back wall add to the fun. “There are even seat belts to keep you in your seat if the movie action gets too intense,” says Stephen.

Sure, having a plan is always a good idea. But sometimes the best things come when you just fly by the seat of your pants. ■

*above*  
Glass panels in an entryway allow outside views from nearly every room. Hidden uplighting recalls an airplane cabin, while ipe-wood slats add texture to the stark interiors.

*left*  
The master bedroom floats high, while the brick exterior adds texture by way of cool shadows.