

The flanking brick wings are connected by a gallery sided in Hardy plank, a thoroughly modern product. Robert Bowen gives all the credit to the couple's architect, Dillon Kyle. "This house is a lot more interesting because he designed it," he praises. "We wouldn't have had the sloping roof, or the cutback between the two wings. He made the house more livable."



Express Yourself

Please do touch the art. An art collector uses her own house to prove that living with art doesn't have to be a hands-off experience.

By David Thiers
Photography by Jack Thompson

If you look at the Heights house that gallery owner Franny Koelsch shares with her husband, Robert Bowen, and their six-year-old son, Rex, you can tell that it was conceived by a lively brain trust made up of thinkers and pragmatists—namely Koelsch, Bowen, and architect Dillon Kyle (with probable contributions from Rex).

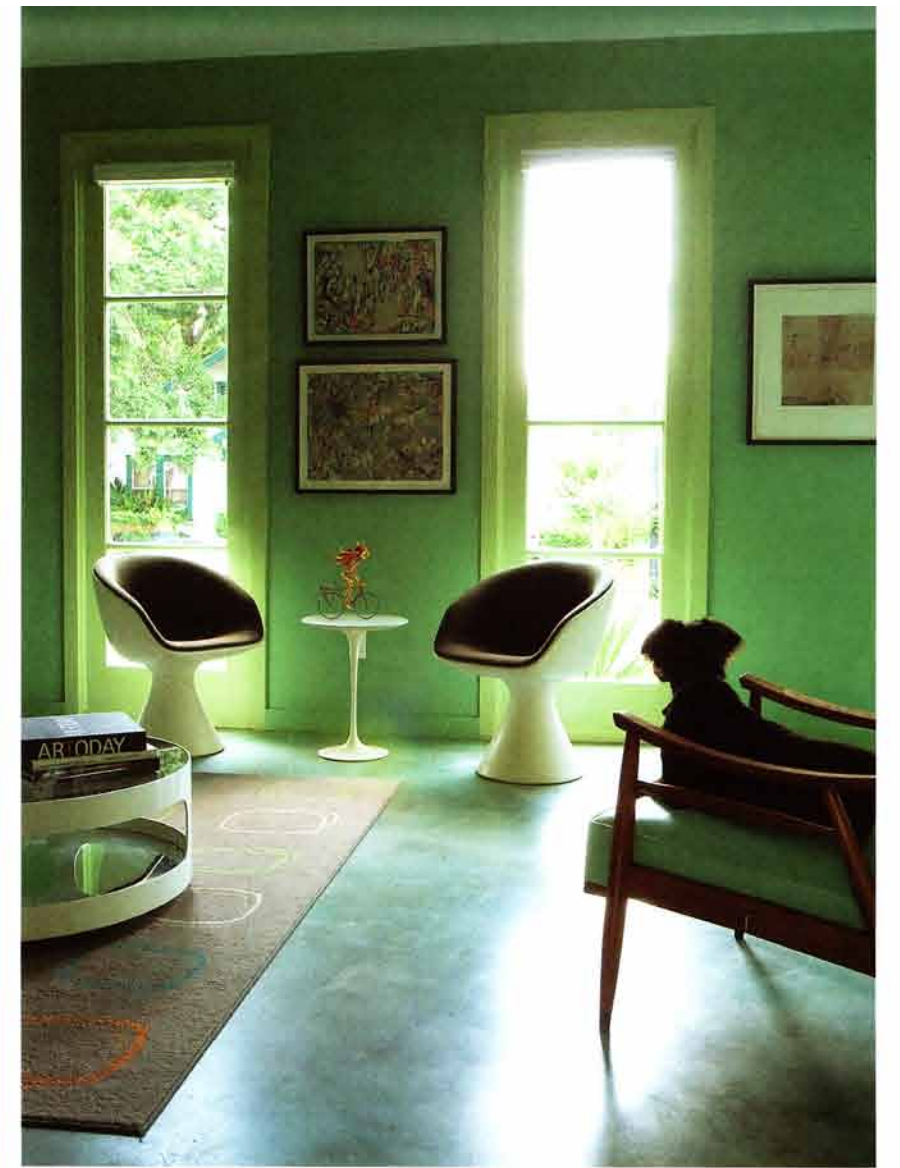
Mysterious and genially monolithic, the brick and glass house is surrounded by very Heightsian bungalows, of both brick and wood. The couple had such admiration for the neighborhood and its modern bungalows that their choice of where to build was easy. Predictably, perhaps, the neighbors were concerned when Koelsch and Bowen built the house on the vacant lot. As construction advanced, how—and whether—the house fit into the architectural pattern of the neighborhood was a topic. For Koelsch, though, the conversation was not between the groups of people but between the new house and the older residences on the block. "The house was designed with the neighborhood in mind," she says. "The other houses in our neighborhood are from the beginning of the modern era. Our house is a study of modernism. We took pieces from different elements of the era." The continuum begins with the straightforward and unadorned lines of the original—quainter—houses and ends in the flat edifice of the Koelsch-Bowen house. With its glass front, humble materials, and assertive practicality, the new house has references to almost every phase of modernism.

At 2,400 square feet, with three bedrooms, the house isn't quite as big as it looks. Tall and wide—so that it

stretches across the width of the lot—the building is narrow in the middle (where the front gallery opens onto a gathering room). Flanking wings house a living room and kitchen on the right and the family's private space—bedrooms, baths, and laundry—is buffered from public view by the gallery. Multicolored brick cladding on the street-facing side is ultimately more playful than imposing.

Architect Dillon Kyle had originally wanted to use colorful cinder blocks for the exterior, but he decided the surface created by the concrete blocks was too harsh and omitted references to other dwellings in the neighborhood, recalls Koelsch. Instead Kyle purchased bricks from demolition sites around the Heights, selecting especially those that still showed traces of the old paint colors from the demolished houses—blue, gray, and a pleasingly faded red. These bricks now form a subdued facade of Heights memories that makes up the exterior front of the Koelsch-Bowen home.

Not that anyone would likely wax so nostalgic upon peering into the house from the sidewalk. Actually, one's gaze would more likely be directed to the large Sally Bennett painting that is grandly visible through the glass front door. And a passerby could be forgiven for thinking that the structure looks like a pool house. But maybe that's a retroactive reaction, formed when you walk through the door, look down at the aqua-tinted concrete floor, and then straight through the dining room to the pool itself. It's in the backyard (which Koelsch



FACING PAGE An untitled work by outsider artist Purvis Young hangs over the fireplace. It's sided by bookshelves that house the owners' collection of art books. Down the hall, an acrylic and mixed medium painting by Sally Bennett is entitled "Wait to Decide to Wait." On the Saarinen table, the Camp Bosworth carved wood hammer is poised to strike. **THIS PAGE** The family dog appreciates the floor to ceiling windows and a comfy chair as a vantage point to look out for the letter carrier.

THIS PAGE "Seeking Guidance," a painting by Cisco Tucker Kolkmeier, hangs over the sofa; next to it, Claire Cusack's sculpture "Firecracker" is comprised of colorful old broomsticks. **FACING PAGE:** Vintage music sheets are perfect for a tiny party dress by Donna Rosenthal. It's easy to play a guitar if it's part of your own body, or so the work of Mr. Imagination suggests.



considers an extension of the house), but the house is so narrow and the pool is so close to the back door that it would be easy to feel that a few missteps might land a footloose visitor in the drink.

Combine that suggestion of aquatic adventure with the sorbet-like colors of the walls (good-enough-to-eat mango and a deliciously tart chartreuse)—not to mention the intense but cheery art hanging on the walls—and you have one cool, comfortable vibe.

That's exactly the effect Koelsch and Kyle were going for. Bowen is a computer programmer who appreciated the visual aspects of the house, but to Koelsch comfort was imperative. Bowen, though, asked for a couple of specifics: "I just wanted something that was simple to maintain," he says. "And durable."

The house is open and unfussy, with its mainly midcentury furniture consigned to positions along the walls and in nooks, except for a large antique table in the center of the gathering room. Natural light streams in, and the walls are reserved for the display of art—two attributes that the house shares with Koelsch's gallery at 703 Yale Street. The two also share the same architect. "No detail is left unturned," Koelsch says, describing Kyle's philosophy. "And simple materials are greatly appreciated."

Obviously, art is a big part of the equation, both personally and professionally. Speaking about her philosophy of gallery owning, Koelsch says, "I believe in living with art. The premise is to create comfort around art." Her opinion was formed when she was a teenager, after a fateful trip to the Centre Pompidou, France's national museum of modern art in Paris. There Koelsch couldn't help but notice how the masterpieces of modern art were displayed without pretense and with none of the reverential posturing that are hallmarks of most museum settings. "It occurred to me then," she says, "how important art is in our lives."

Rather than following any Collecting 101 dictates, Koelsch has purchased art that suits her own eclectic tastes. The paintings and three-dimensional pieces occupy the zone between outsider art and a kind of funky fine art. "I'm attracted to borderline obsessive work," she says. For example, she has a small wall dedicated to the lively and eccentric bottle cap figures of Mr. Imagination. The "art hall," which has the family's laundry room on one side, a door leading to the pool on the other, and the master bedroom straight ahead, is lined with paintings and personal mementos, such as a framed artist-made thank-you note crafted especially for Koelsch after Rex was born.





FACING PAGE The brick wall is composed of bricks from demolished houses in the neighborhood and matches the exterior walls of the house. Even the open space between kitchen and dining room provides coveted space for display, this time of some of the folk art jugs and objects the couple collects. **THIS PAGE** An antique desk topped with metal subs for a kitchen island in the middle of the well-lit and durable room.



FACING PAGE Bettie Ward's "Cycle of Life Divine" hangs above the bed. The pattern in the blanket shows the terror threat warning code. **THIS PAGE** Another painting by Cisco Tucker Kolkmeier comes with a long title: "If I Ever See a Cow Step on a Cat You Better Watch Out or Your Moss-eating Tree Goat Might Get Heartworms."





The couple's design was also adaptable, as Koelsch and Bowen found out. When they built the house, they were childless and not planning to have children. "At the last minute I said we should add another bedroom, just in case," Koelsch says. Sure enough, one year later, Rex was born. Friends feared that the concrete floors might not be child-friendly, but Koelsch says she and Bowen were determined not to overdo the precautions. So, while they didn't exactly toss Rex into the pool to teach him to swim, they did let him learn to navigate the concrete floor without excessive parental supervision. And Rex does navigate it all, with élan: as the door opens from outside, the six-year-old enters, fresh from the pool and wrapped in a towel, and zips through the open space that connects the gathering room to the kitchen.

"There are lots of ways to live with art," Koelsch notes, watching her son in motion. Space, natural light, and the unusual use of common materials create an environment that encourages expression. "I've used architecture to make clients and potential clients feel comfortable with art," says the gallery owner and art collector. She also encourages her clients to collect art that reflects who they are. In the case of Koelsch, Bowen, and Rex, that means that both the art and its surroundings are eccentric and inventive, encouraging spontaneity. It's a good climate for collectors, but it also happens to be the kind of place where a child can thrive. Or maybe it's just all that concrete... "Who knew," muses Bowen, "that we were building our son's dream house? Our house is great for displaying art, but it's also the perfect indoor basketball court for a six-year-old boy." ■

Continuing in a green mood, the bathroom's concrete counter is a muted shade of green and the tile is a more vibrant tone. A vintage lamp and little planter share the same palette, Rex's toy dinosaur guards the window.