



A LITTLE HOUSE IN BIG D

IT WAS A RANCH WRECK UNTIL A SENSITIVE RENOVATOR BROUGHT IT BACK TO LIFE.

When designer Mil Bodron spotted this house in Dallas' Highland Park, it wasn't much to look at. At 1,300 square feet, with two bedrooms, one bath and a tacky enclosed front porch, it was priced to be torn down. Explains Robert Dobrient (above), the entrepreneur who bought the house at Bodron's urging: "In today's scorching real estate market, people bulldoze houses like this and put up faux châteaux."

But Dobrient didn't want faux anything—just, in his words, "an honest-to-goodness house." So when he saw this 1939 classic, with its clean lines and cozy, mid-century detailing, he resolved to save it. Bodron masterminded a renovation that played to the building's strengths, burnishing the existing architecture while making it at once lighter and more substantial. On the porch, Bodron created walls of horizontally joined shiplap siding; a mahogany door gives the impression that, this time around, the house is meant to last. By indenting the entry about a foot, Bodron both sheltered the door and helped define a separate dining area—now Dobrient's favorite place to have breakfast and read the paper. Like a restorer working on a painting, the architect moved through the house, detail by detail, giving each a chance to shine.

Produced by Doretta Sperduto and Diane Carroll. Photographs by Grey Crawford. Written by Fred A. Bernstein.



Robert Dobrient (opposite) lounges in his living room. Designer Mil Bodron bracketed the house's extra-tall windows in functional shutters (far left) and built a glass-block entrance. Brick floors set off furniture with an architectural cast—a steel and concrete pedestal in the entry; an antique farm table with leather chairs in the dining room.

In the newly created den (this page), a monochromatic drawing by Otis Jones hangs over a pair of reupholstered mid-century Dunbar chairs. A studded baseball and bat adorn the mantel (opposite); Bodron built television and stereo cabinets into the fireplace's reverse.



When Dobrient bought the house, the living room fireplace was flanked by bookshelves—a charming Ozzie and Harriet detail. But Dobrient wanted his first house to be more spacious—and more spatially intriguing. So Bodron removed the shelves and, in place of a small bedroom behind them, created a large den. The fireplace-as-divider gives Dobrient a flexible zone for entertaining (“It feels like two different environments in one large room.”)—and it gave Bodron as architect a chance to shine. By using old-fashioned shiplap siding to create a crisp piece of geometry—suggesting a sophisticated architectural presence without upstaging the house’s modest, domestic mien.

When Bodron the architectural designer was done, Bodron the interior designer took over. First, he strengthened the rooms’ geometry, using dark-light contrasts to make sure every surface—whether wall, floor or ceiling—commands its share of attention. As for furniture, metal pieces convey solidity without appearing heavy. Indeed, Andrée Putman’s counterweighted lamp (left) suggests metal that floats. Bodron pursued that theme in a zebrawood coffee table supported by slender sheets of blued steel (top and left), and, behind it, a leather sofa resting on nickel “mushroom” columns. Both pieces—microcosms of the room itself—are assemblages of intersecting planes.



Although the master bedroom contains fewer than a dozen pieces, Bodron made every object matter, and the bath is as restful as a womb. Bodron avoided intrusive colors or textures; the backsplash (behind the "floating" sink) is about as thick as a shadow; the same goes for the mirrors.



In Dobrient's bedroom, Bodron again played to the building's strengths—here, a pitched ceiling. His goal: to emphasize height without squandering floor space—or the room's wide-open feeling. That's why all the furniture seems to float; even the bed seems as light as a duvet. Visually, pieces like the slatted chair and the round occasional table take up almost no space. And the two white-shaded lamps seem to reach for the sky. Even the boat in Ann Stautberg's photo appears to rise out of the water.

The master bathroom had to be practical (Dobrient, a soccer player, often arrives home caked in mud) and yet luxurious (after all, the guy's a former CEO). In other words: part lockerroom, part spa—and all in a modest 60 square feet. Bodron's solution? A shower without enclosure, to make the room seem bigger than it is. Dobrient was skeptical but now says, "I could never go back to the confinement of a stall." Overhead, a deluge fixture augments the regular wall-mounted spray. Another space-saver: a shallow cabinet only 15 inches deep, on which Bodron "floated" a full-size sink.

Bodron proved a master of making every gesture count—without overpowering the cozy domestic themes that made the house worth saving in the first place. Sure, his place has been enlivened, Dobrient says, "but it isn't nouveau this or neo-that. It's generic American house. It's me." **MI**

See Resources, last pages.