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Against the rugged landscape of Marfa, Texas, architect Carlos Jiménez gives his sprawling CROWLEY HOUSE a plainspoken beauty

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Marfa: far from everywhere, in the high desert of West Texas, where the altitude deepens the blue of the sky, and the shadows of the land stretch improbable distances at dawn and dusk; where industrial and farm buildings along the railroad appear as dignified as they are worn, simple but no two the same. It was here, in 1978, that the late New York Minimalist sculptor Donald Judd chose to acquire and upgrade several utilitarian buildings to house his own art and collection, and in which to work and live. The town has been transforming itself ever since. Judd died in 1994, but with his Chinati Foundation at its cultural base, Marfa has become a high-art pilgrimage destination and settlement for artists, writers, architects, and art patrons entranced by the mix of sparseness, sophistication, serenity, and extraordinary qualities of light.

Two such patrons, Tim and Lynn Crowley, longtime friends and previous clients of architect Carlos Jiménez, asked him to design a house for them in Marfa. The Crowleys--a lawyer and a gallery owner--had been "commuting" here from Houston by private jet for several years. Owners of a good deal of land in the area, they also operate the Marfa Book Company, a wonderfully urbane bookstore and coffee and wine bar, that has become the meeting place, message station, and gossip-exchange center for the local art set and visiting pilgrims.

The 8,000-square-foot house they built spreads out on the highest rise of a 3,000-acre, antelope-crossed desert plain outside of town, but seems remarkably modest, almost fragile, on approach. The

impression continues as one comes closer. With pale, concrete-block walls almost disappearing into the landscape, the low, flat-roofed building responds to the arid climate with slender shading roofs and slatted walkway coverings, recalling elements added and adapted in an as-needed way. The plan (exclusive of outbuildings and shaded areas) extends into three wings, each one-room wide in the ranch-house tradition. As both clients come from large families, the layout reflects a need to accommodate visitors for weeks at a time. Sunlight enters major rooms on at least two sides, and every window can open to the breeze.

This one-story home will remain accessible as the owners age. Unlike the traditional ranch house, however, its plan has almost no radial component, no center, no attempt to minimize circulation. The building's rectilinear S-footprint creates two courtyards: an inner, private one, and an outer, public one. The outer yard must be crossed to gain access to both the front and kitchen doors. Around the two courts, all movement happens, inside and out. The house's corridor--its outdoor passageway--and high pool-house porch shelter the pool and garden of the inner court on three sides. Without such protection, a vulnerable garden could not survive the area's brutal wind storms. This inner realm provides a refuge: paradise.

The living room, on the other hand, looks out rather than in. Blocky, unapologetic in scale, it juts into the barren landscape at its own powerful angle, offering an untoppable view of the Davis Mountains. A terrace over the carport provides another view outward--up to the heavens for stargazing. (The region's dry, clear, and intensely dark night sky also provides the setting for an important observatory nearby.) The upper deck, framed with steel columns and beams, but not enclosed, hovers above the house as a lightweight, almost ethereal element.

Marfa's remoteness made it difficult to obtain work crews and materials, "which is why the house took three years to build," says Jiménez. The architect tailored certain construction and material decisions to the skills of available builders. (Since wood framing, for example, was not an option, he specified aluminum-stud walls.) In plan, the house's exterior walls look thin relative to the scale of the rooms. In reality, they are remarkably thick: 16 inches almost everywhere, with the concrete-block exterior given a terrazzolike finish. Inside, the walls show off their dimensions with deep sills and hefty aluminum window sections. One can see why Jiménez gave the building's envelope such depth. A spatially extended building with a visually modest roof and delicate shading appurtenances needs thick walls to establish its seriousness, its strength against the desert and time.

For all its size and spread, this project remains modest, costing far less than it could have. Standing-seam, galvanized-aluminum roofs meet the observatory's local restrictions on reflectivity. Floors are pine, and walls gypsum board, ready for art. (The Crowleys have begun to install their collection, but given the setting, it's hard not to see almost every window as framing a work of art.) With cabinetry of painted, medium-density fiberboard; windows of commercial-grade aluminum; bathrooms sleekly compact; and hardware and appliances tasteful, but not the absolute best, the house exhibits an economy of materials and means. This modesty did not result from any budget problem but was motivated by a preference, on the part of both the architect and his clients, for simplicity, a desire to avoid pretension. As a result, the Crowley House is a Modern home consistent with Jiménez's earlier work: trim, spacious, economical at its core, sharply composed, poised, and urbane. Minimalist? Yes. But painlessly so.

This project struggles nobly, and with some success, to emulate the straightforwardness of Marta's sheds--and to respond to Judd's silent, enigmatic sculptures. "In the astonishing, fast-changing light here, a repetitive piece--with just a slight variation--by Judd can become pure music," observes Jiménez. "And those rays can make even the most everyday structure or object poetic." This house inspires us to search through the multiple meanings of the word light--from illumination to nonheaviness to levity to the heavens. Here, a deep and unresolved tension remains between the ordinary and the exalted, the humble and the grand, the material and the immaterial. Bringing all these qualities together, at peace, in a single building is a difficult quest. Its full resolution might require the passage of time.

For more information on this project, go to Projects at www.architecturalrecord.com.

Project: Crowley House, Marfa, Texas

Architect: Carlos Jiménez Studio--Carlos Jiménez, principal; Brian Kelly Burke, associate; Leslie Witt, Cris Ruebush, Brett Zamore, Assoc. AIA, project team

Engineer: Dan Ray

Consultant: Tokerud (furniture)

Trades: R&B Welding, Hendi Enterprises (metal fabrication); Lippe's A/C & Refrigeration (HVAC); Barmore Plumbing (plumbing); Dave Howard Electrical (electrician)

General contractor: Cook Construction

Sources

Roof: Berridge

Windows and doors: Kawneer Cabinetry and woodwork: Alpine Contracting; Silla; Houser Group

Paints and stains: Kelly-Moore

Tile: American Olean

Lighting: Lightolier; Bega; Hubble; Norber Belfor; Neidhardt

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GRAPHIC: photograph, The house wraps around a terrace and pool (this page), forming a protected refuge while addressing West Texas's harsh, high-desert climate (opposite, top and bottom).

PHOTOGRAPHY: © HESTER + HARDAWAY PHOTOGRAPHERS

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addressing West Texas's harsh, high-desert climate (opposite, top and bottom)., PHOTOGRAPHY: © HESTER + HARDAWAY PHOTOGRAPHERS

photograph, The house wraps around a terrace and pool (this page), forming a protected refuge while addressing West Texas's harsh, high-desert climate (opposite, top and bottom). A windmill on the property (opposite) powers the flow of water to the house and its plantings., PHOTOGRAPHY: © HESTER + HARDAWAY PHOTOGRAPHERS

section plan, 1. Pool room 2. Swimming pool 3. Courtyard

photograph, The 8,000-square-foot house stretches out on one floor with access to most rooms from covered walkways, PHOTOGRAPHY: © HESTER + HARDAWAY PHOTOGRAPHERS

photograph, The 8,000-square-foot house stretches out on one floor with access to most rooms from covered walkways, PHOTOGRAPHY: © HESTER + HARDAWAY PHOTOGRAPHERS

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section plan, 1. Main entry 2. Courtyard 3. Pool room

photograph, A viewing terrace sits on the carport, PHOTOGRAPHY: © HESTER + HARDAWAY PHOTOGRAPHERS

photograph, Daylight plays an important role in animating the spacious interiors. For the two-story entry foyer (left and opposite), the architect brought in sunlight from a clerestory, a skylight, and a glass door., PHOTOGRAPHY: © HESTER + HARDAWAY PHOTOGRAPHERS

photograph, A large bathroom window brings a piece of the desert inside, PHOTOGRAPHY: © HESTER + HARDAWAY PHOTOGRAPHERS

photograph, Deep sills reveal the depth of the house's exterior walls, while a palette of simple materials expresses the clients' sense of restraint, PHOTOGRAPHY: © HESTER + HARDAWAY PHOTOGRAPHERS

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floor plan, 1. Main entry 2. Living 3. Dining 4. Kitchen 5. Bedroom 6. Garage 7. Media 8. Library 9. Master bedroom 10. Pool room

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