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TRADITIONAL HOME

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THE
HEART

Decorating

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Joanna Poitier
at home with
her biggest fan,
Sidney

Red Alert

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perfect

A YOUNG AUSTIN FAMILY AND TWO YOUTHFUL DESIGNERS BREATHE NEW LIFE INTO ONE OF THE CITY'S MOST HISTORIC HOMES.



INTERIOR DESIGNERS
MARY AMES AND MARK ASHBY



Pease Mansion is only minutes from downtown Austin—the hip epicenter of one of America's most progressive cities—but it appears just-plucked from a sleepy Southern plantation. That impression doesn't miss the mark by much. Built in 1853, the white brick mansion is a prized vestige of the city's antebellum architecture. With two-story Ionic columns, a wide portico, and floor-to-ceiling windows (the old-timers' cunning way around paying property taxes on doors), the home is a stellar example of Greek Revival architecture and a reminder that Austin's roots run to the Deep South. (Not to say that the Wild West didn't shape the town, too. As late as 1908, a frontier-style shoot-out shattered the peace in downtown's elegant Driskill Hotel.)

Since its construction, the hilltop mansion has captured the imagination of almost everyone who sees it. Interior designer



Mark Ashby was among the smitten. "From 1998 to 2000, I lived in an apartment in the neighborhood while the home was empty," he explains. "I would walk onto the property and peer inside, thinking wouldn't it be cool if somebody would buy and restore the property and bring it back to life?"

Ashby, a Louisiana native who was still cutting his design teeth after moving to Austin in 1995, has a perfectly capable imagination. But in his wildest dreams, he never suspected that he would be the one tapped to give the majestic house CPR. "When I got the call from the new owners, it felt too good to be true," he admits.

Only in their early 30s, Ashby and his design partner at the time, Mary Ames, had not cinched as much experience under their creative belts as had some other decorators in the city. But they possessed an even more valuable commodity: a fresh eye. That's what Austin businessman Jeff Sandefer and his wife, Laura, needed to bring their newly purchased home to life for them and their three youngsters.

"Because they were a young family, they wanted the design to be understated, with nothing too formal or off-limits to small children," recalls Ashby. "Our task was to respect the architecture by creating a design appropriate to its scale and style but still make it family-friendly. That meant no silk settees and no swagged draperies." It also meant not allowing history to intimidate. Neither the designers nor their young clients



Top: In the new great room, semigloss paint on the ceiling reflects sunlight like a calm overhead sea. Ashby "obsessed about the lighting, limiting recessed lights to the kitchen." **Above:** Dignified but youthful, the dining room fulfills Laura Sandefer's intent for her home. "It was meant to have young children running through it again," she says.

permitted their vision for the house to be restricted by the fact that two Texas governors from two different centuries have called Pease Mansion home.

"I remember driving by when it was uninhabited and deteriorating," says Laura. "I would think, 'Don't worry, you'll be loved again.' The idea of breathing life back into an old treasure strongly appealed to both Jeff and me." The idea of living in a museum did not. "We wanted to honor history while embracing an element of modernity," Laura explains. "We knew the house spoke for itself, so we wanted to give it room to breathe. That meant simplifying rather than adorning."

Simplification began by removing 5,000 square feet added in the '50s, returning the house to its original footprint. Project architect Tom Hatch reconfigured spaces in the back to create a sunny family room, kitchen, and breakfast area, capturing space from a library and hall. Structural repairs, including a new foundation, also were required. "The hardwood floors were resting on dirt," recalls Ashby. Even worse, the house was dangerous. "Meeting with the architects one day, I asked, 'Could this house actually fall in?'" Their answer was yes. ➤