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Partly cloudy, High 93, Low 73

Lighter, brighter style gives Bellaire family room new life

Look draws inspiration from throughout home

By Alyson Ward

At first, Sharon and Bradley Rauch just needed help choosing furniture. They'd lived in their Bellaire home since 1995, and they wanted to replace a couple of uncomfortable sofas in the family room. But when they met with Houston designer Ben Johnston, one thing led to

another. Two years later, the Rauches' 20-year-old house has a 21st-century family room, a space that's been completely reimagined, from the lighting to the texture of the walls.

"I don't think we ever envisioned that we'd do as much as we did," Sharon says. But once the Rauches' three children had grown up and moved out of the house, the home's primary gathering space "just didn't look right."

The more the Rauches talked to Johnston and his partner at Avondale Design, Kathryn Berardo, the longer their wish

list of changes grew.

They thought the family room was too dark, and they wanted someone to organize their built-in bookshelves.

The challenge of designing just one room, Johnston says, is making the new look blend with the rooms nearby: "We didn't want the room to

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**HOUSTON
DESIGN**



Ben Johnston

Designer Ben Johnston improved the Rauches' family room proportions by adding a limestone mantel to the fireplace and hanging floor-to-ceiling drapes.

Family room takes on a more contemporary feel

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feel foreign to the rest of the house.” The Rauches had built their three-bedroom, 4,400-square-foot Mediterranean-style home and selected the materials and finishes, so Johnston tried to echo some of those elements, from darker bronze fixtures to limestone accents.

For the décor, he took inspiration from a wood-framed accent chair the Rauches already owned, that had long been relegated to a corner. Johnston pulled it out and made it a key part of the room’s conversation area. The chair’s fabric is “kind of a contemporary twist on a tribal pattern,” the designer says, which made it classic and, simultaneously, current and trendy.

That tribal feel is repeated elsewhere; it shows up in artifacts from the couple’s world travels, in the basket weave of the fireplace inset and in metal side tables reminiscent of African drums.

To make the room brighter, Johnston didn’t merely add lights; he got rid of the white walls. That might seem counterintuitive, he says, but “just because walls are white, it doesn’t mean that a room will feel bright.” When a room has high-contrast colors — in this case, white walls and dark trim — it can feel darker and oppressive, Johnston says. So he covered the walls with a truffle-colored grasscloth to eliminate the stark contrast and “help the room to kind of settle down.”

To let in more light,

Custom drapes stretched the windows vertically, and a Kravet “Holden” sectional allows for plenty of seating without taking up too much space.



Designer Ben Johnston took inspiration for the entire family room from this chair, which has belonged to the Rauches for 20 years. The pattern is “kind of a contemporary twist on a tribal pattern,” he says.

heavy Roman shades gave way to custom-made drapes that cover less of the windows. Two double sconces now hang above the fireplace, giving the room a warm glow; they’re mirrored by two more on the opposite wall.

The original fireplace, Johnston says, felt too small for the wall: “It was almost like a little mouse hole.” To give it a more proportional visual presence,

Before and after

» See pictures of this home prior to the redesign at houstonchronicle.com/wilchesterreno.

he added a large limestone mantel with an inset made of herringbone marble tile.

The generous built-in bookshelves have been rearranged to include a mix of books, art and travel souvenirs. The shelves had never looked quite right to Sharon — but after

Johnston’s handiwork, she says, “I couldn’t believe how fabulous it looks.”

And the Rauches’ new sectional is, indeed, more comfortable. Bradley, an attorney, will now spend evenings in the family room working or answering emails.

In the meantime, Johnston already has redone the lighting in the kitchen and helped the Rauches select some décor for the formal living room. The next project, Sharon says, will likely be converting an upstairs playroom into a den the two empty nesters can enjoy.

“This room is so beautiful, we want the other rooms to look as great as well,” she says.



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