Situated just three miles from the cypress-lined horseshoe bend of the Guadalupe River which Frederick Law Olmsted described as the prettiest place in Texas in his 1857 *Journey Through Texas*, lies a serene sanctuary for music and wellness treading lightly above the land.

Crafted from a simple palette of meaningful materials, architect John Grable FAIA strived to design a structure worthy of its surroundings — an area documented for its beauty by the world-renowned American landscape architect behind pioneering urban projects including Central Park.

“The driving force in this project was about celebrating the beauty of the land and trying to cohabitate with it in a very respectful way,” says Grable of the structure erected on a family ranch in Sisterdale, Texas.

Near Twin Sisters Creek, a tributary to the Guadalupe River, the Music Box marks the end of a line of seven buildings Grable designed to form a compound on the family ranch utilized by five generations.

Sited within the flood plain, the Music Box floats above the land on oil rig steel pipe pilotes yielding an elevated perspective that provides an intimate relationship and panoramic view to the nearby river bank and tranquil waterfall dam. The central function of the single volume space was two-fold: to serve as both a yoga studio and music room for the daughter of the ranch matriarch.

A metal hip roof slopes like a tent on all four sides above the elevated structure. The open plan is defined by reclaimed cypress floor planks and sinker-cypress wall panels that feature an array of specialty wall plates for yoga poses and stretches. It’s an ideal space for the daughter, a yoga instructor and piano player. When the family is together on the ranch, she often teaches some of the grandchildren in the serene, park-like space. Dual corner windows flanking the lone steel column bathe the space in natural light while two solid walls define an intimate area for personal musical reflection. Housing a Steinway & Sons piano, impeccable acoustics are achieved thanks to the solid cypress walls and floor which direct and amplify the performance along the cypress-fringed creek.

“It was very respectful,” says Grable of the design. “It knew it needed to claim its sense of place among the trees that surrounded it. It is soft on all four sides and folds back from the landscape rather than piercing into it. It tries to be insignificant and avoid upstaging Mother Nature. We never wanted to do that.”

Custom folding glass door walls made out of welded tube steel door frames hang like barn door tracks, folding up like curtains to allow the structure to remain completely open or appear transparent when closed.

“Even though the folding doors are made from glass and steel, a wonderful feminine quality results from their softness as they fold up like curtains,” Grable says. “It is poetry at this point. Everything has to work together. It is symbiotic, the relationship to every one of these decisions.”

The geometry of the two solid cypress walls and two gaping openings reflect the sounds of the piano out onto the landscape like a megaphone, giving the project its name — the “Music Box.”

“If you are sitting on the piano and strike little ‘c’ you feel like you are in the center of the universe,” explains Grable. “But when you are out on the dam, looking back in and someone is playing the piano, it sounds like you are right next to it. The acoustics are perfect.”

The total area of the 20- by 20-foot structure is less than 400 square feet, but it doesn’t feel that way — especially when
the glass walls remain open allowing the space to expand out to the cantilevered porch and grab an additional eight feet. When the glass walls are closed, the space contracts without hindering the view.

“That’s the neat thing about it –– it can be small one moment and then large the next, taking you beyond the boundaries of the building and into the landscape,” says Grable. “There are a lot of emotions that go on in that little space. In essence, this space allows you to lose yourself in the music in the same way you can lose yourself in a good book.”

Just like a book, the design tells the story of the family’s legacy in the oil and gas industry through the use of thoughtfully selected materials. Grable says the combination of the materials utilized in this project are truly representative of the oil and gas industry that has sustained this family over the years.

Oil field pipes of varying sizes make up the main frame. Reclaimed sinker-cypress logs which were submerged underwater and drew up river silt for decades now display gray, golden and red variations.

“Metaphorically, the different stained boards create a stratus just like a land cut one would see on a highway, and the idea of it was that it recalled the boring logs for mapping of the holes in oil wells,” says Grable. “We did it consciously, but we tried to do it unconsciously in the sense that we were trying to borrow from nature by cohabiting with it. We weren’t trying to be pretentious and replicate it artificially, but rather we wanted to recall all of the attributes of Mother Nature by using materials Mother Nature shaped or stained and not using any man-made material.”

But that was no easy feat to do, he explains. First, you have to find the right materials — ones that hone the attributes of the wonderful story the design wanted to tell, he says. Throughout the project, Grable worked alongside his colleague for the past eight and a half years, Matthew Martinez, in order to stay true to the original program by establishing a continuous dialogue with the clients from the time of the first meeting until the end of construction.

Despite the limitations that often accompany them, projects such as this one often provide the challenges an architect like Grable thrives on.

“We love it when clients want to take something small and do big things with it,” he says. “The thing about working on small projects is that you are not allowed to cover anything up. You can’t hide anything — you have got to think it through and make sure every detail and material you use complements the composition and the solution to the design problem.”

Sometimes that road to simplicity can be a complicated path, but Grable says it is one that leads to the firm’s design philosophy.

“Whatever material one chooses to build with, you want to make sure it is something that is low maintenance,” he says. “You want the building to take care of itself. It is like raising a child. A successful project is one where you work yourself out of the job. A good parent is someone who doesn’t have to be there at some point of time. You have to allow things to take care of themselves.”

And, sitting respectfully among its beautiful surroundings, that is exactly what the Music Box does.

JOHN GRABLE ARCHITECTS, INC.
210.820.3332 | Johngrable.com