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Courtesy of the Reed Family (enlarge photo)

Richard Dyke, left, Jack Wilder, Virginia Wilder and Ruth Reed lounge with an unidentified friend on a porch at the Byrne-Reed house circa 1930. Reed's family bought the house in 1915.



Austin Public Library Austin History Center (enlarge photo)

In the 1930s, the Byrne-Reed House still retained its original appearance and tile roof and faced Rio Grande Street, above. By the 1970s, the house had been covered in an institutional stucco facade, reoriented toward 15th Street and divided into offices, below.



Courtesy of Humanities Texas (enlarge photo)

Byrne-Reed House in 2008

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STYLE

The manor reborn

Humanities Texas is restoring the 1905 Byrne Reed House at Rio Grande and 15th streets to its original, eclectic splendor.

By Michael Barnes AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Thursday, November 19, 2009

They slipped a page from "The Great Gatsby."

As preserved in a Reed family photograph, the five young friends, in ruddy health, lounge on the spacious terrace of a home on Rio Grande Street. They dress in summer whites that dip down to swallow necks and backs. Their imperturbable leisure bespeaks the status of privilege in small-town Austin of the early 20th century. (Austin population in 1900: 22,258 — about the size of Seguin today.)

Were they on their way to a picnic? Tennis? An afternoon social?

We might never know. Their world is gone. And, for a long time, their house was gone, too. Or, rather, chopped up, twisted to face West 15th Street, hidden under a nondescript sheath of modern stucco and used for offices.

Now the Byrne-Reed House, built circa 1905, will be restored to its original glory, thanks to its current occupant, Humanities Texas, which fosters the study of history, literature, philosophy, ethics, language, art and related disciplines across the state. Aided by a \$1 million challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Texas group undertook the \$4.6 million project, \$2 million of which paid for the property. Humanities Texas expects to complete the renovation by July 2010 and to occupy the building the following month.

With its art nouveau frieze, mission-style roof tiles, Romanesque arches and Prairie-style porches, the Byrne-Reed House — named for its most prominent residents — fits no particular style. Yet the materials used by architect C.H. Page Jr. are all local: Elgin brick, Hill Country limestone, Austin-fashioned iron and Texas pine.

So besides the leading families who lived there, the house deserves special attention as an example of Texas eclecticism executed in native materials.

According to Humanities Texas, the first occupants were Edmund and Ellen Sneed Byrne. He was a cotton broker, she the daughter of an influential family. They lived on Rio Grande until Ellen died in 1915.

For 33 years, it belonged to David Cleveland Reed and Laura Moses Reed. Ruth Reed, pictured above with her bob-haired

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friends, was one of their children. David, a civic leader and philanthropist, ran an export business, invested in cattle ranches and oil and served as a partner in the Driskill Hotel.

The Reeds remodeled the house, adding, for instance, ornate gold ornamentation to what is now the "dining room." This clashes somewhat with the original dark stained wood, simple clean lines and squared details, as shown in historical photographs of the living room, says respected architect Emily Little of ClaytonLevyLittle.

"We plan to restore the living room back to the original stained-wood condition, and currently plan to leave the dining room as is," Little says. "The rest of the interior restoration will be detailed similar to the original design."

Page built other Austin homes, including the Gilfillan House at 603 W. Eighth St., which Little and her team studied to learn more about the architect's thoughts.

Virtually no one remembers how the Byrne-Reed House actually looked when the Reed children grew up there because ownership changed hands and the neighborhood's character changed.

After World War II, 15th Street was widened and eventually bridged Lamar Boulevard and Shoal Creek, creating a commercial thoroughway where residences once ruled (and cutting off the neighborhood from Judge's Hill to the north). The Byrne-Reed House was converted into offices. Then in 1970, the building's origin as a family home was muffled under white, stucco arcades. For almost 40 years, commuters sped by on 15th Street without guessing that a historical treasure lay beneath an exterior more appropriate for an insurance office, which is what it was for a while.

"For 30-plus years, I had been averting my eyes," Little says. "It has not been exactly a beautiful architectural feature of Austin since its 1970s remodel, although very indicative of the style of that time. Once I saw the historic photos, I began to look more closely and saw the hipped roof peeking over the east stucco façade, and hints of the ornate cornice still visible at the north entry. It is a remarkable structure in its own right. The fact that most of it still exists beneath this stucco shroud makes it even more remarkable."

In recent weeks, the stucco exterior has been shorn and more original elements have been uncovered.

"We have been fortunate to find existing elements intact of the most significant feature, particularly the plaster cornice on the exterior of the building," Little says. "Original windows and wood screens have been found intact, but covered up. We have yet to find an original door, so we will use historical photographs of the home for reference."

Humanities Texas began examining the building five years ago.

"As a statewide organization, we needed a visible presence near the Capitol," says executive director Michael Gillette. "Our office condominium, which was located five miles south of downtown, had the visibility of a post office box and lacked suitable program space for events.

"A series of discussions in 2004 led to the board's decision to sell our condominium and purchase a large, centrally located building. Its 'mausoleum' design discouraged us from taking it seriously. We didn't know the building was historic."

What tipped them off about the building they had just purchased? Touring Byrne-Reed with distinguished architect Larry Speck, Downtown Austin Alliance executive director Charles Betts and philanthropist Jo Anne Christian, Gillette was able to assess its full potential. Speck was concerned with finding the correct tiles to replicate the original roof, bricks to match those that were cut out to make room for the 1970s windows and how to deal with botched air-conditioning and wiring.

"Charlie Betts was unrelenting in his disgust at the '70s redo," Gillette wrote in his notes at the time. "He and Larry agreed that the architect, if there had even been one, should have been shot. The photograph of the original house brought into focus the property's potential for Larry. As we stood on the sidewalk, he declared with great emphasis that if we can take the building back to its original mansion, we would be real heroes. He added that doing so would be a huge accomplishment for

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Austin, one that would put Humanities Texas on the map."

The organization will use the living room, dining room and other downstairs areas for public spaces; upstairs for private offices. A third floor, built within the attic, also will be used for offices, and the basement will become space for exhibition preparation and storage. The project, now under way, will restore the enormous porches and terraces — perfect for parties.

"As a statewide nonprofit that advances culture, heritage and education, Humanities Texas is an appropriate steward to restore and occupy this grand historic building," Gillette says. "In contrast to the restoration of a private residence or place of business, this endeavor is historic preservation with a public purpose. Local residents and Texans generally will be able to use, appreciate, and enjoy this landmark."

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*Update: This story was updated on Monday, November 23 to correct the spelling Mr. Richard Dyke's name in the photo caption.*

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**Ydnar** wrote:

I've noticed this eyesore for years. I could always tell that it had at one time been a house. I had no idea that it was such a beautiful house. I'm glad to see that this is being re-done.

# Posted on 11/20/2009 7:54:11 AM

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**mkdb1405** wrote:

15th Street wasn't widen and bridged across Lamar until the 1960s.

# Posted on 11/18/2009 6:36:55 PM

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