



Roadside Attraction

by MICHAEL REY, AIA

PROJECT 222 Austin Highway, San Antonio

CLIENT Los Tres Dos Heights

ARCHITECT John Grable Architects

DESIGN TEAM John Grable, FAIA; Juan Martinez Diaz; Luis Vargas; Jessica Shapiro

CONTRACTOR Jeff Truax Construction

CONSULTANTS Jack Harrison (structural); RKL (lighting)

PHOTOGRAPHERS Chris Cooper; John Grable

IN the early 1940s, the strip of asphalt known then as Austin Road served as a lively portal to the city that many San Antonians fondly recall for its many amusements. Lined on both sides by diners, motor courts, and nightclubs, Austin Road was a place where families enjoyed chocolate malts on a hot summer day and young couples danced the night away. Now called Austin Highway, visitors and locals alike headed there to lose themselves in the simple pleasures that San Antonio is still known for today.

The Austin Motel, built in the 1930s, was one of those places along the highway that catered to tourists, offering plenty of the charm that gave San Antonio its appeal. Established around the time of state-funded improvements to Austin Road—originally a country road labeled the Texas 2—the motel was among the local businesses that anticipated the announcement that San Antonio would be chosen as the site for the Centennial Exposition of 1936. However, that honor went to Dallas and it wasn't until the early 1940s that the enterprises along Austin Road really began to flourish. The motel eventually closed and the building subsequently housed various other businesses, including an antique store whose shopkeeper erected a clock on the exterior wall closest to the roadway. Even before its eye-catching clock was installed, the two-story building at 222 Austin Highway had become an identifiable fixture for the surrounding community—a roadside icon that also marked the passing of time as it slowly decayed in full view of everyone driving by.

On the brink of collapse in 2005, the building was purchased by a group of local investors. One was an architect, John Grable, AIA (now, as of this year, a Fellow). Sensing an opportunity to pay homage to Austin Road's glory days, he and his three business partners set about tackling their first major project by extensively renovating the old Austin Motel. According to Grable, the investment partnership works this way: "Each partner serves a role in the operation based on their skills or capacities—Truax is a contractor, I am an architect, and the others have faith, money, and patience."



After 18 years as a partner with Lake/Flato Architects, Grable left the firm in 2004 to practice on his own. The 222 Austin Highway project gave him a chance to combine his 30 years of experience as a designer, builder, developer, and teacher. Grable describes it as a “miniature thesis” that represents all of the themes that he deems fundamental to the creation of quality architecture—history, community, restraint, materials, reclamation, and continuity. Another important element—discovery—soon surfaced as the group began working on the old motel and found numerous conditions that explained the building’s structural precariousness. Its walls were bowing from lack of lateral support; the ground-level floor was asphalt (because motel guests parked their vehicles below their second-story rooms); the building’s structural foundation was merely a brick perimeter stem wall; and years of flooding had rotted sole plates along perimeter walls.

In most cases, a building with such cumulative problems would be deemed unusable and demolition would be scheduled, but the partners of Los Tres Dos Heights pushed ahead. They stripped out all of the interior walls and shored up the foundation with a new perimeter concrete beam. As they proceeded with the renovation, Grable says, support flowed continuously from the community of Alamo Heights, the municipality located between San Antonio’s downtown and Loop 410 that encircles the city. Strangers driving by would honk their horns and give the workers an optimistic thumbs up. Officials with the City of Alamo Heights also expressed their encouragement for the project which represents a counterpoint to the ongoing trend of teardowns. “This is a fine example of re-using an old building to its full potential rather than demolishing one and constructing an out-of-place/out-of-character building,” says Leslie McMahan, the town’s assistant public works director. In recognizing the project with a 2006 AIA San Antonio Honor Award for Design, the jury responded to the simplicity of the renovation. Jurors noted in particular that they “loved that he saved the building and improved it.”

(opposite page) The rejuvenated building is subdivided into three two-story offices. Louvered light boxes on the new metal roof hide mechanical unit. (above) Long-leaf pine reclaimed from a nineteenth-century textile mill warms the interior spaces.

RESOURCES RAILINGS AND HANDRAILS: Triple S Steel; ARCHITECTURAL WOODWORK: Truax Construction



(above) Built in the 1930s as a motor court, the building required extensive renovation and replacement of structural elements. By the 1950s the downstairs bays were enclosed to accommodate additional lodgings. (opposite page) A deep roof overhang and landscaping help temper the direct sunlight along the western elevation.

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ZINGRAFF COLLECTION, UTSA'S INSTITUTE OF TEXAN CULTURES, #Z-6599-6823, COURTESY JOHN AND DELA WHITE

To match the building's original wood, Grable and his partners reclaimed long-leaf pine beams and lumber from an old textile mill in North Carolina. Almost all the wood products needed on the project came from that single source. In fact, remainders of the same recycled timbers supplied material for three different parts of the project. First, the 24x28-inch mill beams were cut for floor framing. Second, the remainder was milled into two-inch structural planking for the floor or to construct bookcases installed along the stairwells. Finally, the leftover rippings from the door and window trim were assembled and planed down for butcher-block workstation surfaces. Also, reclaimed pine comprises the three-inch-thick treads used in a carbon steel frame staircase that joins the upstairs and downstairs spaces. Upon completion last year, Grable moved his architectural firm into one of the three two-story units.

Clearly, 222 Austin Highway is a different sort of office building. Landscaping is minimal, but well-placed to shade the building's long western exposure. Soft groundscape transitions visitors from their vehicles to a stone path that leads them along the row of large, custom-designed wood doors that front the building's multiple units. Adjacent sidelights at each entrance emit western light tempered by custom-designed plantation shutters. The building feels casual but gently controlled. The facade is composed with a series of operable windows on the second level and a new metal roof shades the western elevation with a gracious overhang. Louvered light boxes on the roof hide mechanical units.

By combining the essence of the old motel with the fragments of a historic textile mill, Grable and his partners have created a new place that promises to yield more fond memories of Austin Highway for generations to come. ■



Michael Rey, AIA, practices with Overland Partners Architects and teaches architecture at UTSA.

