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A Live-In Deconstructionist At 510 Holmes Avenue

David Bowman

Before I moved to the Arkansas Ozarks, in the fall of 1996, to grapple with my parents' medical problems, I lived for 16 months at 510 East Holmes, in the Old Town Historic District. In those days I was writing editorials and commentaries for the *Huntsville News*; equally fun, or maybe more, was moonlighting as a live-in deconstructionist.

My deconstructionist labors began this way:

For a year I lived one block south, at 526 East Clinton, in a delightful Victorian house owned by Hall Bryant. On my nightly walks around the Old Town neighborhood, I kept circling the forlorn finery of the L-shaped house that turned the corner at Smith and Holmes, and very possibly the house kept circling me.

I had tackled two preservation projects before—an 1885 house at 285 Mill, north of Memphis' downtown business district, and a farmhouse in Giles County, Tennessee, with its oldest portion a log house circa 1820—but this deserted house in Huntsville really beckoned to me.

Its last avatar was as the Cummings Chiropractic Clinic, converted from a residence to a doctor's office in 1968, back when non-residential uses were being allowed in this aging neighborhood, and a few years before the historic preservation revival of the 1970s.

After Dr. Lloyd Cummings' death, the house was for sale, but stubbornly remained unsold, during the first half of the 1990s.

As all preservationists know, there is a tension between the best price for the property, and the sometimes-hopelessly-low price at which the property must be sold, given the considerable burden of renovation costs piled on top of the sale price. That is why cities like St. Louis are still offering brick rowhouses for \$1, as we speak, gambling on the immense value-added benefits a successful renovation will offer that neighborhood.

One sunny day in May 1995, I saw that a wisteria vine had insinuated itself inside the storm window, above an air-conditioner unit on 510 Holmes' Smith Street side (see fig. 1, page 20). I marked that as a sign I should grapple with the back-to-nature forces bent on pulling it down.

I consulted the neighbors on the south, David and Sandra Ely, both passionate preservationists active in HHF, and they gave me all the encouragement they thought I needed.

My approach to the owner, Effie Cummings, was a leap in the dark for both of us. I drew up an agreement to provide sweat-equity labor, 30 hours a month arbitrarily valued at \$10 an hour, plus \$100 a month in cash, in exchange for my occupancy. Like any good agreement, perhaps, both parties secretly felt we were being taken advantage of.

Ceremonially, I celebrated my move into the house on July 1, 1995, with a housewarming party, capped by ripping up the Astrograss green plastic carpeting from the front steps. Assisting me was Harvie Jones, preservation architect extraordinary, rather like the bishop who kindly comes to bless the neighborhood's new gas station or convenience store.

Actually, the house had already beckoned to Harvie too. On or about April 1, 1995, he had drawn up a conjectural "preliminary restored view" of the house, if the deep front porch's ugly brick-veneer-and-plywood coverings (see fig.2, page 20) were removed and porch columns were re-installed.

In my deconstructionist ardor, I had pulled up the wall-to-wall carpeting, and its foam rubber underlayment, the night before the ceremonial BR (pronounced "beer" but meaning "before-renovation") party on July 1. Harvie and others were pleasantly surprised to see that the six-inch-wide flooring planks, in the first two of four "Greek-T" rooms, argued an original portion many decades older than its pre-clinic transformation, which had given it a thoroughly modern look circa 1905.

Several days after our Astrograss eradication, Harvie sent over a sheaf of Sanborn maps, showing the house footprint every few years, plus a blown-up portion of the wonderful "Bird's Eye View" of Huntsville, arguing the house was there virtually intact before 1861.

His conjecture was confirmed by Linda Allen, preservation planner on the City's planning development staff, in a July 11 memorandum saying: "We had dated this house to c. 1859 based on the maps and deeds with a later, undated, remodeling. The deed history shows a sale of three acres (lots?) in 1859 for \$1700 and a resale about one year later for \$1989 for a one-half interest, which could indicate the construction of a house."

As per our agreement, I filed monthly reports to Mrs. Cummings as to my labors, and in the first month, obviously, I went off the deep-end, totaling up about 110 hours (or \$1,100 worth of labor):

"JULY: Labor task description: Remove carpet and foam underlayment, Rooms 1 and 2. Remove plywood paneling and furring strips, Rooms 1 and 2. Remove room divider partition and doors, Room 2. Clean out thicket of brush west of house. Saw off limbs overhanging roof and remove limb debris. Inspect sills and floor joists for structural condition. Construct new picket fence gate to replace rotted one. Photograph entire house for before and after comparisons. Materials: 3 rolls of film and processing: \$68.70. Gate latch and nails (Lewter's): \$7.65."

You need to see that the six big rooms of the old house had been divided into approximately eighteen little rooms or cubicles, for secretarial staff, examination and treatment rooms, X-ray processing labs, supply closets, restrooms, and other office-related uses (see fig. 3, page 24).

So a good portion of my struggle was to pry off the plywood paneling on the internal wall dividers; remove the electrical circuits within these walls; pull out the doors, trim, and 2 by 4s making up these add-in walls; then strip off the linoleum tiles, and pry off the plywood subfloor underlying the tiles, in all the rooms that lacked carpeting.



Fig.3 Examining rooms, dropped ceiling,
asphalt tile floor in central hall.
Courtesy David Bowman.

Crawling underneath the 3,200 square foot house to inspect its structural condition posed a special challenge. I am a raving claustrophobe, utterly panicked by closed-off spaces, but I discovered I could take a small electric fan under there with me, plugged in to the 50-foot orange cord of my work light, and blow small quantities of air in my face, to suppress the natural and physiological urge to get the hell out of there. This quick-fix allowed me to spend about four hours below the house one Sunday morning and to confirm to my satisfaction that the house was in remarkably solid shape below its floors and walls. I also discovered down there that mechanically the old house was a real mess, with rusted-out vent pipes on the gas floor furnaces, kludged together plumbing, etc.

Inspecting the attic was not so pleasant, because of the decades of choking dust accumulated, but that too confirmed that the roof structure was basically solid, despite its periodic re-configurations.

The new gate was fun to do, using the furring strips I removed as pickets to build a new gate in order to replace the old gate that was rotting away (see fig. 4, page 27). This was the first of many examples of recycling materials removed from the 1968 clinic; other stuff (2 by 4s, molding, plywood, conduit, etc.) I gave away to anyone who would come get it, including set-builders for Theatre 'Round the Corner, the new professional theatre downtown, also on Holmes, four blocks west of my house.

“AUGUST: Remove the doors and partitions of Room 3. Pry up the linoleum and plywood flooring of Room 3. Remove nails from Room 3 floor. Remove paneling from Room 3.28 hours=\$280. Materials: 5 gallons of Benjamin Moore (MoorGard HC-82) from Huntsville Decorating: \$123.25.”

The task of separating the solidly nailed-in plywood from its wonderful pine flooring was maddeningly slow and averaged about one hour per 4-foot by 8-foot sheet.

The paint color (HC-82 = historically correct?) was already ordained by the Huntsville Historic Planning Commission, in an *ex cathedra* ruling handed down on December 23, 1992. Mrs. Cummings had asked the commissioners for permission to repaint her property, which her husband (according to the painter I discovered had done it in 1968) had paid to be doused in the “cheapest possible paint,” a vile yellow-green bile that for years had been peeling off, to the neighbors’ dismay.

“SEPTEMBER: Remove drop ceiling from back porch area. Remove drop ceiling from Room 5. Remove paneling from back porch covering clapboard. 15 hours (see fig. 5, page 27).”

The drop ceiling removal was fun, as were a lot of my deconstructionist labors, since you could pull out the 2-foot by 4-foot acoustical panels, pull apart the sheet-metal gridwork, and then snip off the iron-wires suspending the ceiling grid below the old plaster or wood tongue-and-groove ceilings.

About this time, Mrs. Cummings expressed dismay that I was not altering the exterior, so as to improve its appearance for the neighborhood's benefit. I agreed, and began (for me and most other people) the obnoxious process of scraping, sanding, and painting over the old coats.

“OCTOBER: Scrape and remove loose paint from west side of the house. Paint west side with three gallons of HC-82. Repair or replace damaged or rotted clapboard on back side. Uncover passage opening for french doors between Rooms 1 and 3. Replace glass in transom between Rooms 1 and 2 and re-hang. 33 hours.”

The pay-off proved almost instantaneous. Passersby cheered me along. I was starting to clean up the neighborhood's problem child.

For restoring the french door passage, outlined rather clearly by shadows of old trim removed during the 1968 conversion, I employed two wallbusters. One was my youngest son (Shaw Bowman). The other was a family draftee (Ethan Couch); he eventually took away a lot of plywood panels to paint on them. I captured the moment of them soccer-kicking through the already-scored 1968 wallboard to lend some excitement to the deconstructionist cause (see fig. 6, page 28).

Deconstruction, by the way, is a *tres-chic* scholarly buzzword applied to the process of taking texts apart to squeeze out hidden or additional layers of meaning. I am so ancient the term didn't even exist when I got my Ph.D. in 1969, from the University of Chicago, so I may be defining it incorrectly. Anyway, my labor report for November simply continued the painting circumnavigation with 38 hours expended. By the time it was too cold to paint, when the thermometer dipped below 56 degrees or so, I had completed my snail-circuit around the house. The fellow who painted this house in 1968 dropped by one day to say he wouldn't have touched the house for less than \$4,000 in cash; he implied, quite rightly, that I was a fool for doing it for free.

“DECEMBER: Remove wallpaper from ceiling and board walls of servant quarters southernmost room. Remove nails, tacks, and remaining wallpaper paste, same room. Remove wallpaper from ceiling and walls of servant quarters north room. Paint ceiling and walls with interior white (donated paint) of servant quarters north room. Total labor: 24 hours.”



Fig.4 Handcrafted gate from recycled materials.
Courtesy David Bowman.



Fig.5 Drop ceiling frame and conduit
Courtesy David Bowman



Fig.6 “WallBusters”: Shawn Bowman and Ethan Couch.
Courtesy David Bowman.

As much as I liked the four generously proportioned Greek Revival rooms, each about 20 feet on a side, with 13-foot ceilings, arranged in a T, it was the two small servant-quarter low-ceiling rooms extending along the Smith St. frontage that were my favorites in the house. Their carpentry was solid, though none of the walls were plumb, and none of the corners were terribly square. Equally interesting, during one afternoon’s crawl through the attic, I discovered a gable end, showing the two servant quarters rooms were originally a detached building, bridged to the main house, perhaps in the 1890’s, over what was now the kitchen.

Underneath the wallpaper, tacks, and paste of the southernmost room, was a splendid age-darkened pine wall, and ceiling, all unpainted, that I decided would become my office. Its northern twin, when the sagging, torn, and soiled wallpaper was removed, showed that the board walls had already been painted, a cuspidor-stained brown, so I re-painted it a bright ceiling white for a guest bedroom. And, of course, I saved a good square of wallpaper samples I had removed, here, as I did elsewhere in the house.

Winter kept me working indoors. Slowly and surely, however, I was stripping away 1968, to show the older generous geometries of the rooms, and re-exposing the L-shaped porch that connected all the rooms on their back latticed gallery side.

“JANUARY (1996): Remove stud wall around clinic’s X-ray photo darkroom in southwest room (Room 5). Remove asphalt tile flooring from entire room. Prepare room’s board ceiling for painting by removing wallpaper, tacks, paste, etc. 21 hours.”

“FEBRUARY: Remove fluorescent fixture from Room 5 and paint ceiling (see fig. 7, page 30). Remove over-counter cabinet and paneling from porch passage to expose original tongue and groove walls. 15 hours. Labor cost: plumbing frozen pipes under house—H.C. Blake, \$81.36, 2/9/96. Ceiling white paint: \$19.11.”

“MARCH: Remove sheetrock from wall blocking off porch passage. Rework stud wall and frame door opening. Rework five-panel door for large glass panel matching kitchen door. Glaze door with large glass panel and hang as passage door. Labor cost: electrical rewiring in passage—Wilbourn Electric, \$85.45, 3/26/96. Glass for door and putty: \$13.21.”

Re-connecting the two halves of the L-shaped back porch gallery was an exciting moment. It ended the damnable devious circuit, through my bedroom (Room 2), through the kitchen, and out into the latticed-in porch, each time I wanted to access the southern wing of the house. The new door also related stylistically to all the other rooms’ back doors, which had large glass panels in them, obviously valuable for receiving light from



Fig.7 Removal process of light fixture and electrical conduits.
Courtesy David Bowman.

the gallery, beneath transoms that could be opened for ventilation and shut for warmth or acoustical privacy. And, finally, the new door aligned itself visually, in a straight public line for visitors, with the series of doors from the front door opening on Holmes. I was exceedingly pleased by what I had done here. The house seemed to like it too, to have its two halves re-connected, in a straightforward way.

“APRIL: Scrape and paint trim on exterior of house. 22 hours. Moorglo (HC-82): \$80.43.”

“MAY: Finish painting exterior trim. Begin to remove stud wall partitions from interior of front porch enclosure. 28 hours. Labor cost: hauling two loads of un-recyclable building materials to city landfill: \$150 (see fig. 8, page 31). Tipping fee by SWDA: \$32.72.”



Fig.8 View showing deconstruction of interior of porch and room 4.
Courtesy David Bowman.

“JUNE: Continue removal of partitions inside porch enclosure. Remove more of plywood and tile nailed down over Room 4’s six-inch original flooring. Photo-document year-later status for before-and-after comparison. Paint porch passage’s clapboard walls and board ceiling white to brighten space (donated paint). Total: 29 hours. Film and prints developed: \$15.92.” For the July 1 potluck gala open-house, I stuck up photographs taken a year or less before in each room, so guests could do a self-guided tour. I also created in Room 1 a small museum of chiropractic hardware, left behind after the clinic’s closing in 1991, including a wonderful contraption that looked like Dr. Caligari’s Death Ray; it was a carbon arc lamp complete with red-glass goggles and a heavy white ceramic base that suggested mega-amperes flowing forth to create blinding white therapeutic rays. I also hung on the wall the old sign that said

CUMMINGS CHIROPRACTIC CLINIC in large plywood cutout letters. In addition to what looked (to the ignorant layman) like torture chamber racks, there were also lead-lined gloves, X-ray tubes, and old black glass plates. The mini-museum was a hit. So were the BR refreshments.

At the end of one year of deconstructionist efforts, and sweat-equity occupancy, camped out among the debris and dust familiar to every been-there preservationist across America, I was reaching an obvious fail-safe point with the owner, who had remarried and was now Effie White.

Mrs. White made it clear, and a certainly understandable viewpoint it was, that she wanted me to buy the house ASAP.

Unfortunately, we remained about \$30,000 apart in our respective valuations of the property, that seemed to doom any sale. Sad to say, a realistic price for the 510 Holmes property was essentially its land value, about \$80,000, and my appraisal-savvy friends tended to agree.

So as an interim inducement, buying time so as to postpone the fish-or-cut-bait moment, I voluntarily agreed to start paying \$200 a month as my cash contribution, beginning in July, despite getting no reimbursement for material (paint, glass, hardware, etc.) or labor (plumbing, electrical, hauling, etc.) costs I had sunk into the house during my occupancy.

I tried out several alternative scenarios, given my financial balance sheet and post-employment severance package, following the (no joke) Ides of March 1996 shutdown of the morning daily, the *Huntsville News*.

One was to take a chunk of my severance lump sum, and either mortgage or sell my Giles County farmhouse, which I owned free and clear, and buy 510 Holmes at the lowest price possible.

Another was to get at least one, but possibly two, investing partners, since the house laid itself out into either two or three units, which could be virtually self-contained for residential uses, depending on how such a plan could be run through the City's zoning sausage-grinder.

And there was the intriguing (but possibly remote) possibility that the historical character of the house could be restored and yet allow some benign low-traffic use inside like an architect's studio.

During the summer of 1996, I fell increasingly in love with the great long space that had been three clinic offices and, before that, had been an immense porch, which had been doubled in its depth at the time the gigantic picture windows and the beveled glass front doors were added, circa 1905. Instead of returning the space to an open porch, which few people would use now that Holmes is used as a major collector street and gets heavy vehicular traffic all hours of the day and night, I fantasized its reincarnation as a solarium.

I consulted with two architects about the feasibility of putting in large panels of glass, with the glass expanse cleverly screened, behind sections of lattice, between the appropriately fabricated and restored columns. Preservation purists may gasp audibly, at the preceding sentence, and say knowingly that the historic commissioners would never approve such a design solution.

I don't know about that, and never will, since fate handed me an eviction notice, on October 16, in the form of a parent medical crisis that impelled me to Arkansas. Mother's death a week after surgery underlined the impossibility of my 85-year-old father living by himself; their 62 year partnership was terminated by her death October 23, and it seemed likely he could not survive long living by himself.

Nevertheless, because of periodic returns to 510 Holmes, to reach closure there with a house I had come to be devoted to—and I fancied it had come to be devoted to me too—I continued to invest in a house that could never be mine:

“JULY: Remove acoustical ceiling from porch and expose original board ceiling. Begin serving as board member of Historic Huntsville Foundation (nominated for 3-year term) representing preservation issues in Old Town Historic District

where 510 Holmes is located. Anniversary open-house pot-luck for showing one year's work to preservationists. Voluntary increase of rent check to \$200 per month effective July 1. Total: 12 hours."

"AUGUST: Sawing off five large tree limbs from dying maple tree over Smith and Holmes sidewalk. Yard clean-up and trimming. Supervise least-disruptive placement of cable TV installation for servant quarter room. Total: 10 hours."

"SEPTEMBER: Consult with two architects on alternatives for front-porch restoration so as to retain it as enclosed solarium-type room; this would involve removing brick veneering facade, replace appropriate porch column structural elements, in-fill between columns with 8-foot-tall glass modules, screen exterior with lattice, and still meet historic preservation commission guidelines. Donated professional services by architects (two hours @\$100): \$200."

"OCTOBER: Repair cracked cement front-porch steps (cement donated). Paint porch steps and brick foundation course dark green all the way around the house. Paint exterior doors and window muntins dark green. Total: 26 hours. Moorglo: \$28.70."

"NOVEMBER: Sorting and bundling of reusable building materials (see fig. 9). Total: 6 hours."

"DECEMBER: General clean-up of interior before vacating premises. Total: 12 hours. Donated furniture and appliances: 8-foot chrome steel office table (\$50), swivel chair (\$20), working refrigerator (\$80), two 6-foot stepladders (\$30)."

It's hard to express how horrible I felt leaving 510 Holmes behind; it was a house I had studied and worked on as hard as I had toiled on my Ph.D. dissertation at Chicago back in 1967-1969.



Fig.9 Materials piled ready to be recycled.
Courtesy David Bowman.

And yet I have great memories, including help from a whole lot of good folks, who feel as passionate about bringing new life to old houses as I do. It might be termed community sweat-equity. *Pro bono civitatis*. No neighborhoods can thrive without that generous pot-luck cooperative spirit. Fortunately, for everyone concerned, there's a happy ending to my tale. In the spring of 1997, a young couple living across Smith Street, Robert and Lauren Hash, decided to buy 510 Holmes, and contracted with the right craftsmen to do the appropriate restoration and mechanical refurbishment that the house desperately needed.

What you see today at the southwest corner of Smith and Holmes is undoubtedly a house smiling again.

David Bowman
Rush, Arkansas
August 1, 1998



Fig.1 August 1998, 501 Randolph Avenue in Twickenham.
Courtesy Margaret J. Vann.