

MTV series 'The Real World: New Orleans' makes over an Uptown mansion as the set of its new season

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Dave Walker, The Times-Picayune

"The Real World: New Orleans" production company scouted three homes, including one in the French Quarter, before settling on the Uptown mansion of former New Orleans Hornets star Baron Davis as its set.



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PHOTOS COURTESY of MTV's 'THE REAL WORLD: NEW ORLEANS'

Big beads and other elements of Mardi Gras mischief loom large in one bedroom. 'Every store we went into, it was just so easy to find unique pieces,' says production designer Charles Aubrey.

It's a departure from recent seasons, in which the pioneering reality-TV series has housed its cast of young people and the cameras that document their every move inside a movie-set-style apartment built inside an industrial space.

"My last few seasons, the show has always been shot in a large commercial space which we actually create, " said Charles Aubrey, freelance production designer for Los Angeles-based Bunim/Murray Productions, which created the series in 1992. "We actually create bathrooms, bedrooms, kitchens, all that."

Not so for the upcoming New Orleans season, the series' 24th, set to debut at 9 p.m. Wednesday.

"This one we did a little light remodel and kind of redecorated, " Aubrey said.

And that bit of understatement is the only understated thing about the "The Real World: New Orleans" house, located in the 1600 block of Dufossat Street.

Or rather, it was. All of the colorful-unto-dizzying decor was stripped, salvaged for re-use or discarded immediately after

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filming wrapped in late April.

But a tour of the house a few days before shooting concluded showed it to be a New Orleans tourist's fever dream of themed rooms dedicated to voodoo, cemeteries, food and Mardi Gras misbehavior.



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No need to earn these beads: Freelance production designer Charles Aubrey filled the stair rails with them before MTV's 'The Real World: New Orleans' guests arrived.

'The Real World: New Orleans'

9 p.m. Wednesday

MTV

Garish? Unreal? A cliche-perpetuating pastiche?

Yes. Of course. Why not?

It's the set of a television series targeted at teenage and young-adult viewers (the show has more than 230,000 Facebook

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friends), intended to deceive and please and frame the hijinks that are sure to occur.

In this "Real World, " good taste comes from a keg, bro.

Local artists showcased

One of the most striking elements in the house was a scaled-down facsimile of a St. Charles Avenue streetcar, located in the entry area and built to spec to tie several rooms together, its front end a light box displaying a photo of the interior of a real streetcar.

"We were trying to figure out what we could do in that narrow little space, " Aubrey said. "We talked about maybe doing the pool table there. We talked about putting a steamboat in there.

"At first we tried desperately to find actual streetcar parts to use to build this thing ... but we hit a dead end, and we built it all from scratch.

"Thinking outside the box, we wanted to try to cram as much of New Orleans into this house as possible."

Mission accomplished, and then some.

The house's front door opened onto a staircase with a railing layered with Mardi Gras beads. Following it, one rose past a wall decorated with Dr. Bob signs ("Be Nice or Leave") to meet a female mannequin removing her shirt, presumably to entice bead-tossers.

"Her name is Ravishing Rachel, " Aubrey said. "She's available online."

In the basement was a kitchen, dining area and lounge decorated with weathered, reclaimed window shutters (a nod to Hurricane Katrina damage), a chandelier made of brass instruments, a player piano, tom-tom drums serving as end tables, a pool table and a fish tank. The latter two, ready-made for post-production editing cutaways, are fixtures in "Real World" houses.



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A chandelier made of brass instruments is the focal point of a lounge; reclaimed window shutters over the fireplace provide a nod to Hurricane Katrina damage.

An upstairs sitting room held a vintage fortune-telling machine. A first-floor sitting room carried a sportsman's paradise theme, strung with fishing net and accessorized with plush-toy renditions of local wildlife.

The first-floor "confessional" -- where cast members could retreat to record first-person testimony about whatever drama had just occurred elsewhere in the house -- was packed with voodoo stuff.

Walls of a food-themed bedroom held giant silverware and framed plates of artificial food.

Work by local artists -- including Peter Briant watercolors, Jerome Holmes photos and more than 20 pieces by Lionel Milton - were displayed throughout the house.

The occupants of these spaces will shame themselves and defile the city. It's what they do on this show.

But at least a few local artists and artisans will get some exposure in the background of scenes showing the cast hoisting shots of hangover fuel and primping for a night on the town.

The long set-up

Preparing "The Real World: New Orleans" house took several weeks, not counting pre-production research and preliminary site visits.



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JOHN MCCUSKER / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE The Uptown mansion of former New Orleans Hornets star Baron Davis hosted the 24th season of MTV's 'The Real World.' Usually, the show is shot inside a movie-set-style apartment built in a commercial space.

On location, the process included stringing and hiding cables and cameras (the show is shot with a combination of fixed and hand-held cameras), and installing a full upstairs bathroom from scratch.

"It was more of a challenge for the tech team than the art department, " Aubrey said. "We had to go in and make sure all their junk looks decent.

"At the end of the day, it's more a challenge for them. In a commercial space, they can just run their camera lines along

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rafters and cover it up. For this house, we had to be very creative to hide things.

"We don't want the cameras to be noticeable. We don't want the cast to feel like they're constantly being watched, even though they are."

Final dressing of the rooms -- hanging artwork, installing furniture and decor items procured from shops around the city -- took about two more weeks.

"In every shot, it's important you know where you are, " Aubrey said. "In New Orleans, we got to spend a lot more time decorating and sourcing unique items and little pieces of New Orleans to put in this house."



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A scaled-down facsimile of a St. Charles Avenue streetcar sits in the entry area.

As is typical for a "Real World" house, some of the interior items were purchased, some rented, some obtained in trade for the exposure the series provides. The New Orleans house was the sixth Aubrey has done for Bunim/Murray, and the first without using a single item from Ikea.

"Every store we went into, it was just so easy to find unique pieces, " Aubrey said.

A week's worth of technical rehearsals using stand-ins in place of the cast allowed Aubrey and his staff to fine-tune the house's look.

"It's a whole adjustment period to make sure it all works out, " Aubrey said.

And then the cast arrived and cameras rolled.

"It's my favorite day and my worst day, because by the end of the night, it's destroyed, " Aubrey said. "There's no housekeeper. There's no one keeping the house up. It's all on the housemates to keep it clean and tidy. They don't."

And then it all went away, including the virtual streetcar.

"It's all been struck, " Aubrey said. "I think it ended up in the dumpster. I don't know exactly what happened to it.

"Most of the key signature pieces end up in our (Los Angeles) home office."

Aubrey doesn't usually claim much of a "Real World" house's decor for personal use -- "I used to do that, then I realized I have a whole house full of junk, " he said -- but he did keep two wing chairs from the New Orleans season.

"I'm looking forward to putting them right by my fireplace, " he said, "and having a little piece of New Orleans in my house."

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