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TOP STORIES | 7/25/2005

'REAL WORLD' SET WILL BE RESTAURANT, STORE SET WILL BE MEXICAN-FOOD RESTAURANT DESPITE MANY EXPENSIVE RENT OFFERS

By Adrienne Lee 232-2220

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The newest, well-known Austin landmark is an 18,000-square foot red brick building on San Jacinto Street in downtown's warehouse district. While it was there, a neon "Austin" sign on the roof served as a beacon for all those curious about the seven strangers to the city.



The house used for MTV's the Real World Austin sits at San Jacinto and Third Streets. Owner Will Houston has rented out the building to a Mexican food restaurant and Thomas Repographics.

On television and in photos, the Real World Austin house showed a giant Big Tex statue greeting guests at the front door, green beds against bright walls, clear spherical swings and an overall hip design.

Since filming for the 17th season of the show is over, and the first episodes have aired, the building is relatively empty. The only things reminiscent of MTV's venture down south are an indoor, salt-water swimming pool and a hot pink wall with turquoise stripes.

The building's owner, Will Houston, has already re-leased both wings of the tourist stop.

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The west side, where Real World cast members lived, will be transformed into a Colorado-based Mexican food restaurant called Rio Grande. The east side will be leased to a local company, Thomas Reprographics, to house another of their stores.

Because Houston owns the building, the city told him he can do whatever he wants with the space.

According to Ted Kenney, who is a producer with Bunim/Murray, the company in charge of "Real World's" production on MTV, previous shows' houses have been rented out to citizens for thousands of dollars a night. He said houses in Philadelphia, San Diego and Las Vegas internally and externally look the same as they did on MTV, to be used by people with thick wallets and the desire to be associated with the reality shows.

Kenney said he thinks the "Real World: Austin" building could have had leasing success in the city and would have been a good idea for events like charity fundraisers or galas because of the Austin community's giving nature and its location downtown.

Molly Alexander, of the Downtown Austin Alliance, said people are attracted to Real World houses not only because of the show but also because of the design and set up of the houses.

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However, Houston made his decision despite the overwhelming number of phone calls to the DAA asking if and when anyone could rent the Real World half of the building.

Alexander said that for a while, she was regularly receiving phone calls from people asking to rent. She said people don't care that all of the decor is gone, they just want to be able to spend time in the famous house.

"I don't think the owner or broker realized the popularity to a certain demographic," Alexander said. "It's a hot property."

Houston said he was aware of the interest in the building and said it could be 150 degrees on a Sunday afternoon and people would still be in front taking pictures. For a time, he said, tourists visited all day, every day. He said many people talked to him about the possibility of renting, but he doesn't think he would be able to manage something like that.

"We're not in the hotel business here," Houston said.

As each episode airs, the Austin building becomes a party house, not only for "Real World" cast members, but also for Austin residents. Mayor Will Wynn said the show brought \$22 million in advertising for the city and does not believe the show gives a negative image of Austin despite the college-aged cast's antics, which include under-age drinking and public intoxication.

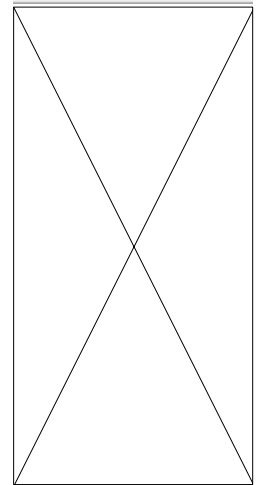
"The 'Real World' television show has had 16 seasons of kids partying and sometimes acting irresponsibly," Wynn said. "Anyone who thought the kids would act differently because they were in Austin, isn't living in the real world."

Kenney said he hopes the show brought all positives to the city and recognized the incidents where cast members and Austinites did not mesh together well. Although, he said that overall and realistically, the cities come out on positive notes.

"It's a huge draw for a city to the younger generation," Kenney said.

While Houston said he thinks both companies will add a lot to the downtown feel, a certain group of people, those willing to pay thousands of dollars to stay in the "Real World" house, were disappointed.

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And soon enough, as renovations are currently underway, an important and must-see tourist site will be masked by a Mexican food restaurant and a reprographics store.

Even though the Austin flavor has been moved out of the building, the lasting effect of MTV's "Real World" in the Texas capital seems to be the attraction of the city, which, Kenney said, is part of the show's goal. Wynn said his experience working with MTV producers to bring the Real World to Austin, was great.

"What attracted MTV here was our people and our way of life," Wynn said. "They saw what we know. Austin is a vibrant, energetic and creative city."

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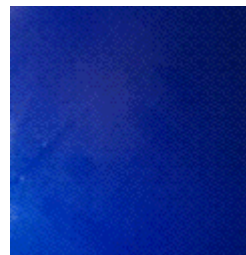
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