



“The Restoration of the Norwood Tower & Motoramp in Downtown Austin”

Regina Lauderdale
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1929

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Preservation-student, class of Professor Wayne Bell, The University of Texas
at Austin, Architecture Library, Battle Hall, December 1991



1957



1981

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Introduction and Description

The Norwood Tower and Motoramp comprise a commercial office complex on West 7th Street, half a block from Congress Avenue. The Norwood Building, as it was originally called, was the first skyscraper in Austin. Along with the Motoramp, which provided a service station and garage to the Norwood tenants and other customers, the Norwood Building was the pride of a growing Austin.

The fifteen floor Norwood Tower is neo-Gothic in style, and is easily recognized on the Austin skyline by its Gothic parapets, stepped-back terraces, and, at night, lit elevator and clock towers. The elevator tower, located above the center core of the penthouse, is adorned with triple lancet windows, adding to the Gothic character. Quatrefoil tracery and a gilded canopy (housing a light fixture) can be seen on the exterior of the building, just above the entrance.

The rather complex arrangement of terraces and towers contrasts with the relatively simple interior plan. A shaft housing three elevators occupies the central core, with a surrounding corridor leading to the various offices. The lobby provides access to the first floor of the Motoramp which, for most of its history, has housed a bank.

Early History of the Norwood Building and Motoramp

The Norwood Building and Motoramp were built by Mr. O. O. Norwood, a visionary entrepreneur from East Texas. He was born in Macune, San Augustine County, on August 16, 1837, and moved to Austin in 1919, after having served in the army during World War I. In 1922, he built his home

at 1012 Edgecliff Terrace, which is now northwest of Riverside and IH-35. The estate, with its tennis courts, swimming pool, and terraced gardens, soon became an Austin landmark.¹ In 1925, Ollie Norwood bought the property on the corner of 7th and Colorado Streets which included the historic Litten Building. Dr. Frank Litten had had his office there and he and his wife had lived adjacent to the building. Another building on the lot had professional offices on the first floor and apartments above.²

By 1927, the Motoramp building had been constructed at a cost of \$250,000. It was probably the only garage in town where cars would be driven into parking spots rather than being hoisted into place.³

In January 1928, the Litten building was demolished to make way for the new skyscraper being designed by the architectural firm of Giesecke and Harris.⁴ Both of these men had been social acquaintances of Norwood, he and Harris having been members of the same bridge club. While Bertram Giesecke took care of the engineering and public relations work, August Watkins Harris was the firm's designer.⁵ Harris was said to be "crazy about the Gothic", referring to the neo-Gothic style popular at the time for use in commercial buildings, especially tall ones.⁶ The firm was to receive free rent in the building in lieu of the \$30,000 fee. Unfortunately,

¹ Austin-American, May 11, 1961.

² Austin Statesman, December 18, 1951.

³ Martha Doty Freeman, "Motoramp, Austin Club, Norwood Building Chronology."

⁴ Martha Doty Freeman, "Motoramp, Austin Club, Norwood Building Chronology."

⁵ Mrs. A.W. Harris and A.W. Harris, Jr., interview by Martha Doty Freeman, December 10, 1981.

⁶ Allwyn G. Gannaway, interview by Martha Doty Freeman, December 16, 1981; and D. Blake Alexander, lecture on commercial buildings for ARC 388R, Fall 1991.

Norwood lost the complex in the years following the Depression, and the agreement was not honored.⁷

Norwood's vision was to build a professional office building which catered to lawyers, doctors, and other professionals. A law library would be available to all law firms in the building, and a band of professional emblems would adorn the exterior at the thirteenth floor. The building would have all the modern amenities, including an attached garage (the Motoramp was already in place, and the new building would accommodate direct access to the parking levels); zoned air conditioning; modern, high speed elevators; and custom designed offices. By the summer of 1929, the fifteen story "skyscraper" was completed at a cost of \$750,000 with over 85% of the office space pre-leased.⁸ By financing such an ambitious project, Norwood provided an economic boost to the expansion of the city.⁹

Special Features of the Complex

Air-conditioning was an especially attractive feature of the Norwood Building. With it, the temperature inside the building could be kept at 70 degrees year round.¹⁰ Lewis Hamby, who was employed by the firm of Giesecke and Harris during the Norwood Building construction, believes it to have been the first air-conditioned structure in Austin other than the theaters.¹¹ More importantly, it was the first building in the world to

⁷ Mrs. A.W. Harris and A.W. Harris, Jr., interview by Martha Doty Freeman, December 10, 1981; and Allwyn G. Gannaway, interview by Martha Doty Freeman, December 16, 1981

⁸ Martha Doty Freeman, "Motoramp, Austin Club, Norwood Building Chronology."

⁹ Austin-American, May 11, 1961.

¹⁰ Laurie McClain, "The Norwood Building", p. 1.

¹¹ Lewis Hamby, interview by Martha Doty Freeman, January 8, 1982.

have air conditioning ducts in individual offices. Though the Milam Building in San Antonio already had an air-conditioning system, air was not introduced directly into the offices but rather poured in from the hallways.¹²

The zoned system in the Norwood Building was designed by L. D. Royer, a mechanical engineer in San Antonio.¹³ It included a heating and cooling system in the basement and on odd floors from 3 to 13. The basement unit served the first and second floor, and the units on odd floors served the floor they were on and the one above. The compressors were located in the basement and the cooling tower was at the top of the building. Because offices were custom designed to suit the clients' needs, duct work was laid out differently on each floor.¹⁴ According to Mrs. Harris, Dan Moody, former Governor of Texas and a founding director of the Capital National Bank¹⁵, had a habit of keeping the windows in his office open, throwing the air-conditioning system out of kilter and eventually leading to the windows being sealed shut.¹⁶ Lewis Hamby also mentioned that the air-conditioned system wasn't always adequate and that some window units were later installed.¹⁷

Another innovative feature of the building was the modern elevators. The three elevators in the Norwood Building were of the newest signal control

¹² Austin-American, May 11, 1961.

¹³ Martha Doty Freeman, "Motoramp, Austin Club, Norwood Building Chronology."

¹⁴ Allwyn G. Gannaway, interview by Martha Doty Freeman, December 16, 1981.

¹⁵ Janet Hatterman, "History of Texas Commerce Bank."

¹⁶ Mrs. A.W. Harris and A.W. Harris, Jr., interview by Martha Doty Freeman, December 10, 1981.

¹⁷ Lewis Hamby, interview by Martha Doty Freeman, January 8, 1982.

type manufactured by the Otis Elevator Company. They were not automatic, but were operated by women, under the supervision of Roscoe Moore.¹⁸

Contributing to the elegant character of the Norwood Building were the terraces at the upper floors, which were described as being landscaped in a style similar to that of the Santa Fe Building in Dallas.¹⁹ Terraces occupied the corners of the fourteenth floor (so that the interior space formed a Greek cross), and the North, South, and East ends of the Penthouse.

All of these features, in addition to the full service²⁰ attached garage and custom designed offices, made the Norwood Building an impressive building which was able to attract prominent professionals as tenants.

Use and Character of the Complex

The Norwood complex, in addition to providing professional office space, accommodated commercial conveniences such as a lunch counter, barber shop, and drugstore. In August of 1929, J. F. Renfro of Brownwood opened the second Renfro Drugstore on the first floor of the Norwood Building.²¹ That same month, an advertisement in the Austin Statesman welcomed new residents of the Norwood Building to the Nelson Sandwich-Shop

¹⁸ Martha Doty Freeman, "Motoramp, Austin Club, Norwood Building Chronology."

¹⁹ Martha Doty Freeman, "Motoramp, Austin Club, Norwood Building Chronology."

²⁰ According to Will Shepherd, gas, oil, lubrication, and a car wash were available in the Motoramp. Will Shepherd, telephone interview by author, December 3, 1991. The American Statesman of August 11, 1929, refers to the Motoramp as "one of the finest garages and service stations in the entire Southwest."

²¹ Martha Doty Freeman, "Motoramp, Austin Club, Norwood Building Chronology."

located "in the New Norwood Building".²¹ Nearby lunch counters were also advertised, including the Texan Cafeteria and Coffee Shop located "Across from Norwood Bldg."²²

Another restaurant, the Austin Club, was designed by Giesecke and Harris and built above the Motoramp during the construction of the Norwood Building at a cost of \$50,000. It was an exclusive businessmen's club whose membership would be limited to 150. The club was set back, allowing for an outdoor area, landscaped by Ramsey Austin Nursery of Hyde Park. The club was further decorated with regional motifs, including custom made tiles. A sophisticated ventilation system was used instead of air-conditioning.²³

Another exclusive space was the penthouse which Tom Butler had had developed for himself and his wife.²⁴ The Greek cross plan which was carved out by the fourteenth floor corner terraces continued up to the fifteenth floor penthouse. The penthouse was further cut into by terraces at its North, East and South ends. The terraces contained "flower beds, tropical plants, gaily upholstered garden furniture, and boxes of cactus."²⁵ The South terrace also housed the clock tower. At one point, the East terrace may have been used as a greenhouse.²⁶

²¹ Austin Statesman, August 11, 1929, p. 46.

²² Austin Statesman, August 11, 1929, p. 45.

²³ Martha Doty Freeman, "Motoramp, Austin Club, Norwood Building Chronology." and American-Statesman of August 11, 1929

²⁴ N. T. Barron, interview by Martha Doty Freeman, January 29, 1982.

²⁵ "Sky Terrace," Gossip, June 30, 1931, p. 8.

²⁶ Victor Eberly, telephone interview by author, December 3, 1991.

The penthouse apartment had a combination living room and study, a dining room, a small kitchen, one bedroom and a bathroom. The interior was decorated by Mrs. Butler, who used a combination of styles to highlight the lancet windows, inlaid floors sloping ceilings.

Materials Used in the Buildings

The Norwood Building was of steel frame construction with an exterior of pre-cast concrete. A wooden construction tower was built on the front side of the building and steel beams were lifted with a steam engine hoist. The Motoramp had been constructed of concrete and brick, with a facade of ashlar limestone masonry.

According to N.T. Barron, the son of Frank Barron, who was the general contractor for both buildings, the imported Italian travertine marble used for the lobby walls was supplied by the Vermont Marble Company.²⁸ Marble was also used on other floors, particularly for bathroom stall partitions.²⁹ The ornamental "gold leaf" lobby ceiling was made of cast plaster and was probably not fabricated locally.³⁰ Much of the terrazo tile flooring in the Norwood Building remained until the renovation in the early eighties.³¹ The elevator doors were decorated with tooled brass panels. The old letter box and vertical chute were also trimmed in brass.

²⁸ N. T. Barron, interview by Martha Doty Freeman, January 29, 1982; and Martha Doty Freeman, "Motoramp, Austin Club, Norwood Building Chronology."

²⁹ Victor Eberly, telephone interview by author, December 3, 1991.

³⁰ Lawrence Speck, "TSA Headquarters"; Jack Morgan, telephone interview by author, November 26, 1991; and N. T. Barron, interview by Martha Doty Freeman, January 29, 1982.

³¹ N. T. Barron, interview by Martha Doty Freeman, January 29, 1982; and Laurie McClain, "The Norwood Building", p. 3.

The Austin Club was constructed by Frank Barron. Lewis Hamby recalls having designed the bluebonnet and possibly the cactus tiles, and that both types were made up in San Antonio, but according to Mrs. Harris, the tiles were made up in Laredo, where her husband had many contacts.³¹ The Club's furniture, draperies, and kitchen equipment, adding up to \$25,000, were all purchased from local suppliers.³²

Post-Depression and mid-Century: Capital National Bank

Ollie Norwood took a great loss during the Depression and lost Norwood Building soon after. It went through a variety of owners until Capital National Bank acquired the building around 1944. By 1951 the bank was occupying the Motoramp, the Austin Club, and the first floor of the Tower.³³ The architectural firm of Page, Sutherland, Page had been hired to make several changes to the buildings, including the redesign of the lobby. The entrance was narrowed and opened up just in front of the elevator doors. In addition, a bank vault, four to five feet thick, was installed.³⁴ A permanent awning was attached to the front of the Tower and Motoramp, providing continuity between the two facades.³⁵ The arched windows of the Motoramp facade were torn down and a plain masonry wall put up.³⁶

³¹ Mrs. A.W. Harris and A.W. Harris, Jr., interview by Martha Doty Freeman, December 10, 1981; and Lewis Hamby, interview by Martha Doty Freeman, January 8, 1982.

³² Martha Doty Freeman, "Motoramp, Austin Club, Norwood Building Chronology." and American-Statesman of August 11, 1929

³³ Martha Doty Freeman, "Motoramp, Austin Club, Norwood Building Chronology."

³⁴ Will Shepherd, telephone interview by author, December 3, 1991.

³⁵ Laurie McClain, "The Norwood Building", p. 3.

³⁶ Will Shepherd, telephone interview by author, December 3, 1991; and Chris Carson, telephone interview by author, December 9, 1991.

It was during the forties or fifties that a sealant was first applied to the concrete exterior of the Tower.³⁷ This was apparently prompted by the severe leakage problems that plagued the building.³⁸ Three coats were used to waterproof the exterior. A base coat of paint was first applied. Then an asphalt based emulsion coating was applied to act as a waterproof sealant. This was covered with an off-white layer of paint.³⁹

Capital National Bank grew into one of Austin's biggest banks, priding itself on the quality of service it provided its customers. In 1969, the Bank opened three drive in windows in the Motoramp.⁴⁰ In 1971, female Bank employees, dressed up as French maids, greeted patrons of the drive in facility and supplied them with pens and other banking supplies.⁴¹ By the mid 1970's, Capital National Bank was occupying eight floors of the tower (see Appendix 2). By this time, the Butlers had moved out of the penthouse, which was being used for storage.⁴²

Rust Properties and Ford, Powell, and Carson

In the late 1970's, Rust Properties acquired the complex with the intent to renovate it. With the imminent move of Capital National Bank to its new headquarters on 7th and Lavaca, the building would be virtually vacant. The prominent San Antonio architectural firm of Ford, Powell & Carson was hired to perform the restoration. Senior Partner O'Neil Ford was a

³⁷ Will Shepherd, telephone interview by author, December 3, 1991.

³⁸ Allwyn G. Gannaway, interview by Martha Doty Freeman, December 16, 1981.

³⁹ Will Shepherd, telephone interview by author, December 3, 1991.

⁴⁰ Austin-American, April 1, 1969.

⁴¹ Austin-American, April 1, 1971.

⁴² Laurie McClain, "The Norwood Building", p. 2.

prominent restoration architect who was recognized for his understanding of regional architecture and native materials.⁴³ As early as 1936, he was put in charge of the restoration of La Villita in San Antonio. Born in 1905, Ford was in his mid seventies during the restoration of the Norwood Tower. It was not he, but rather Chris Carson who worked on the Norwood Tower and Motoramp renovation. Mr. Carson recieved a Bachelor of Architecture from Texas A & M in 1956 and had worked for O'Neil Ford since 1959.⁴⁴

According to Mr. Carson, the object of the renovation was to restore the exterior of the Tower "as faithfully as possible from a practical point of view." The lobby was also to be restored to the original concept. The design of interior spaces would be flexible, in order to accommodate the needs of the tenants. Bathrooms, fire escapes, and mechanical and electrical systems would all be brought up to code.⁴⁵

The original concept of the Motoramp, with its arched windows and renaissance revival detailing, had long since been lost to the modern style of the fifties. The original plans inspired the firm to produce a new design with an arched colonnade that would recall the earlier appearance.⁴⁶

According to Jack Morgan, managing partner of Rust Properties, the company wanted to restore the building to its original styling but still

⁴³ Michael Ennis, "Doing What Comes Naturally", p. 118.

⁴⁴ Ford, Powell & Carson, Ford, Powell & Carson.

⁴⁵ Chris Carson, telephone interview by author, December 9, 1991.

⁴⁶ Chris Carson, telephone interview by author, December 9, 1991.

incorporate current technology.⁴⁷ Will Shepherd, project manager for the restoration, explained that it was necessary to incorporate the requirements of contemporary businesses in the execution of the restoration, particularly with respect to the floor plan.⁴⁸

The Restoration Work

The structural integrity of the building did not prove to be a problem. Datum Engineering, Inc., a local structural engineering firm, was consulted for the restoration of the building. Other than advise on the repair of the fire escape, most of the work they did was for tenants, and it usually involved designs to accommodate heavy loads such as files and safes.⁴⁹

The pre-cast concrete exterior was also in good condition, and the work involved in its restoration was the removal of the previous layers of paint and sealants and the application of a modern sealant. According to Will Shepherd, work being performed on the edge of the Tower where it joined the Motoramp would effect the emulsion layer there. It was decided that the whole exterior would be stripped, then recoated with modern sealants to ensure a watertight seal. Waterblasting and manual methods were used⁵⁰ to remove "years of paint and water sealant without destroying any of the original details".⁵¹ A silicon based pigmented sealant was then

⁴⁷ Jack Morgan, telephone interview by author, November 26, 1991.

⁴⁸ Will Shepherd, telephone interview by author, December 3, 1991.

⁴⁹ Datum Engineering, Inc., telephone interview by author, December 3, 1991.

⁵⁰ Will Shepherd, telephone interview by author, December 3, 1991.

⁵¹ Austin American-Statesman, November 25, 1982, p. B6.

applied. In addition, the windows were recaulked with modern caulking material, which is far superior to that used in the twenties and thirties.⁵²

With the exterior and structural elements in good condition, most of the \$5 million budget could be spent on the interior. The lobby was enlarged thirty percent to its former configuration as per the original plans. The terrazo floor tiling present before the restoration was thought to have been a later modification and was removed.⁵³ The floor was redone in travertine marble to match the walls. The original marble was used for the walls and floors, and was supplemented by marble obtained from Aquorium, Mexico.⁵⁴

The hung ceiling that had been installed in the lobby earlier was removed, revealing a few patches of the original cast plaster ceiling. A skilled plasterer from Dallas was hired to simulate the original ceiling, and art students from the University of Texas did the gold-leaf.⁵⁵ According to Will Shepherd, the original molds were used for the crown detailing in the lobby ceiling.⁵⁶ The original tooled brass elevator doors were retained, but the cabs required renovation. Since the cab interiors had been redone several times and no photos of the original interiors were available, a contemporary style was used.⁵⁷

⁵² Will Shepherd, telephone interview by author, December 3, 1991.

⁵³ Chris Carson, telephone interview by author, December 9, 1991.

⁵⁴ Tom Elliott. "Putting On a New Face."; and Will Shepherd, telephone interview by author, December 3, 1991.

⁵⁵ Austin American-Statesman, November 25, 1982, p. B6.

⁵⁶ Will Shepherd, telephone interview by author, December 3, 1991.

⁵⁷ Will Shepherd, telephone interview by author, December 3, 1991.

In order to meet fire code, all the bathrooms and corridors were redesigned. According to Victor Eberly, most of the original marble bathroom partitions were discarded or sold. Those which were not too badly stained or cracked were cleaned and used in the thirteenth floor bathrooms.⁵⁸ The original corridors apparently had marble as well. According to Will Shepherd, the wainscot and crown molding in the hallways today recall the style of the period.⁵⁹

As part of the renovation of the interior, the electrical and mechanical systems were overhauled. This included the rewiring the building and replacing the air-conditioning and heating units.⁶⁰

Until the restoration of the Norwood Tower, when it was turned into an office, the penthouse had remained a quaint, though neglected, apartment. The Butlers had lived there until around 1963 and the unit had been used for storage after that.⁶¹ The bathroom still had the old bathtub and bright colorful wallpaper that the Butlers had installed.⁶² The penthouse, currently vacant, is now an exclusive office space with a extensive terrace on its East side.

In order to accommodate more parking, the historic Shot Tower, which Rust Properties had acquired, was demolished. Transport to the asphalt parking lot was provided by the newly installed Bradford Alley elevator,

⁵⁸ Victor Eberly, telephone interview by author, December 3, 1991.

⁵⁹ Will Shepherd, telephone interview by author, December 3, 1991.

⁶⁰ Tom Elliott. "Putting On a New Face."

⁶¹ Laurie McClain, "The Norwood Building", p. 2.

⁶² Victor Eberly, telephone interview by author, December 3, 1991.

The fifth floor is an exception to this scheme. The City of Austin has unfortunately redecorated the reception area and offices in the light gray contemporary style common to corporate work places. There is no relation between the decor found on this floor and the detailing found elsewhere in the building. One hopes there is decorative continuity between this and other City of Austin offices.

Conclusion

The work performed on the tower cannot be considered a strict restoration. Although an honest attempt was made to restore the exterior to its original appearance, the interior was essentially gutted and renovated. There were various reasons for this. First of all, the restoration was primarily an investment by Rust Properties. The downtown location combined with a demand for office space made the investment attractive. In addition, the company was eligible for a twenty or twenty five percent investment tax credit. Rust Properties chose the less restrictive twenty percent option.⁷⁰

Furthermore, the building's interior had been modified over the years and the expense to restore it to the original would have been prohibitive. The focus was instead placed on creating a commercial space that could compete with newly constructed edifices, all with the most modern amenities, in order to attract successful and stable clients.

⁷⁰ Candace Ord Manroe, "Preserving Texas' Architectural Grandeur."

Although the restoration did not follow the original concept to the "letter of the law", it could be argued that the "intent of the law" was upheld: Norwood himself wanted to provide his tenants with the most modern amenities. Like those involved in the restoration, Norwood left the plan and design of office spaces up to the client.

The redesign of the Motoramp has historical references as well. The current style ironically recalls two periods in its history. The arched colonnade is reminiscent of the elaborate arched windows of the original design, while the ashlar masonry walls above recall the plain facade of Capital National Bank days.

The restoration of the Norwood Tower seems to have combined the goals of the preservation purist with the economic realist. While preserving the appearance of the exterior and public areas, the building at the same time provides, in the spirit of Ollie Norwood, the elegance and convenience of today's finest commercial spaces.

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