

A Visit to Boyd House

by Carol J. Burr
Photos by Robert Taylor

After nearly a year of discussion and planning by the experts, 18 more months of actual construction by the craftsmen, endless sidewalk superintending, speculation and anticipation by the public, the grand dame of OU buildings once again commanded the entrance to the University of Oklahoma.

Suddenly, as they resumed entertaining in the magnificently restored, historic home of presidents, David and Molly Boren found themselves issuing the hottest invitations in town, perhaps in the entire state. Everyone wanted to see the new Boyd House.

Try as they might since November 1996, the Borens have not yet greeted

everyone at Boyd House's front door. But 15,000 visitors passing between the towering white columns in the last 22 months is a pretty good start.



The general fascination with this \$2 million, privately funded project is not surprising. Only the library and the administration building surpass Boyd House as an architectural symbol of the University. Its abandonment as a presidential residence in 1969 never sat well with alumni; David Boren's insistence on returning there was roundly applauded.

Enter Hugh Newell Jacobson, an internationally acclaimed architect known for his historic restoration of both public

*The historic home of OU presidents
is once again a gleaming tribute
to graciousness and tradition.*



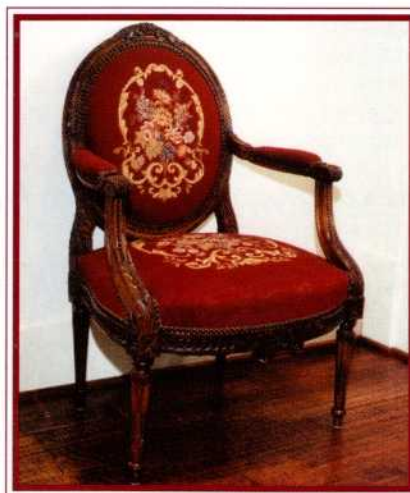
Beginning with holiday open houses in December 1996, David and Molly Shi Boren have greeted an estimated 15,000 guests at the front door of the magnificently restored Boyd House.

and private buildings. The Borens had become admirers of Washington, D.C., resident Jacobson during David Boren's years in the U.S. Senate. The architect quickly found that the presidential couple's love for the 90-year-old Boyd House was contagious. A formidable partnership was born.

Originally built in 1906 by OU's first president, David Ross Boyd, as his private home and later deeded to the University, Boyd House underwent its first major renovation—including the addition of the giant front columns—between 1915 and 1922. Even while planning massive changes in the old structure, Jacobson insisted that the result would not be a "new" house but rather would evoke the spirit of this earlier neoclassical revival-style make-over. In this undertaking, the architect certainly succeeded. At first glance, the façade is the Boyd House of old; only then is it evident how much has been added and how vast the improvement.

Jacobson's most startling decision was to remove the one-story

east wing—the music room—replacing it with a raised terrace on the east and north sides of the house. The most dramatic change in the building is a two-story addition at the back, providing a 1,000-square-foot multi-purpose room on the first floor—named for OU's former first lady, the late Cleo Cross—and a master bedroom/sitting room, two



baths and a study on the second.

The reconstructed first-floor interior of the original structure is true to its former plan—entry hall and stairway straight ahead, dining room to the left, living room to the right, opening onto the new terrace. The kitchen and breakfast west wing has been completely reconfigured, however, resulting in a catering facility that would be the envy of any commercial restaurant.

The completely redesigned second floor bears no resemblance to the original. A sitting room at the top of the stairs opens onto the front balcony with its stunning view of Parrington Oval and the class memorial arches. Three spacious guest bedrooms, each with its own bath, occupy the remaining space.

When the presidential inn is truly full, a short climb to the third floor—once a full attic—reveals auxiliary guest space. The basement floor is devoted to an informal lounge/meeting room, storage and mechanical areas, hanging space for hundreds of visitors' coats and space for large laundry and commercial dish washing machines.

Jacobson began with 11,561 gross square feet in the building. His plans called for the demolition of 1,114 GSF for renovation purposes, then the subsequent addition of 2,592 GSF for a new total of 13,039 GSF. But the numbers do not begin to tell the story.

Within the house, only the living room and dining room fireplaces, the entry hall and stairway and some of the wood trim are original. Every other piece of old finish material—including plaster, trim and wood floors—every piece of electrical conduit and wiring, every piece of plumbing was removed.

This needlepoint chair, purchased in New Orleans by Mrs. William Bennett Bizzell when she lived in Boyd House in the 1920s, was returned to the home by her granddaughter, Barbara Bizzell Barry.

The Borens made sure that this was not just 'their house' but that it was a house designed for future presidents.

The puzzle master charged with dismantling and then putting this jigsaw together again was Bill Gumerson, who attended OU in the late '60s. His 25-year-old Oklahoma City design and building company, Bill Gumerson and Associates, had considerable restoration experience—but nothing of the complexity of the Boyd House project.

Gumerson anticipated the asbestos abatement necessary before the house could even be occupied for construction, but several previous major renovations and the absence of blueprints presented him with a number of hidden structural and construction surprises he never could have foreseen.

"When we started removing plaster and wallboard from the interior walls," he says, "we found steel and framing that would never have been anticipated on first review. Most unique, we found that they had plaster on the exterior of the building that we had never seen before—underneath the wood siding. We had to remove all of that.

"In essence, you could stand at any point in the attic and look through the framing all the way to the basement floor," Gumerson says in reference to the project's motion picture set appearance. "To have built a new structure from scratch would have been a far easier task, but it would have been less significant in the end because of the need to preserve the feel and the history that this house had."

In reframing the original sections of the house, Gumerson used wood, but the framework for the new addition is steel. He describes the structural and mechanical aspects of the project as "impeccable."

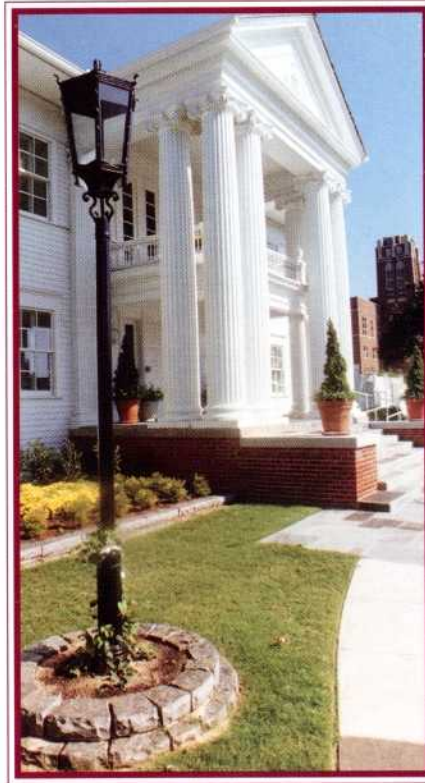
"It has a very state-of-the-art heat and air conditioning system, fire alarms and zone shut-downs, humidity control," he says, adding that making the facility disability accessible was also a major consideration. "The new addition—particularly the (Cleo Cross) room with its entertainment function—was done on a com-

mercial basis in terms of construction and fire protection and exits.

"This is a very unique structure from the standpoint that even though it serves as a single family residence for the president of the University and his family, it also serves as a meeting place and entertainment center for various functions for the University. And quite frankly, the Borens made sure that this was not just 'their house' but that it was a house designed for future presidents."

Molly Boren continually makes this point to touring visitors. She refers to the new upstairs master suite as "an apartment that can be closed off for privacy, and everything else is a public building."

The Borens' pride in the new Boyd House is matched only by their gen-



From the front, facing Boyd Street, the new Boyd House is still the historic home of OU presidents well remembered by Sooner alumni and friends.



The skillfully blended original house, on the left, and the new addition, on the right, open onto a raised terrace on the east and north sides of Boyd House, overlooking masterfully landscaped gardens.



The country garden at the northwest corner of Boyd House memorializes Mary Ellen Monroney, widow of U.S. Senator A.S. Mike Monroney and a principal donor to the Boyd House project. Mrs. Monroney was known for her West Highland terriers, recalled by the little bronze sculpture at right.

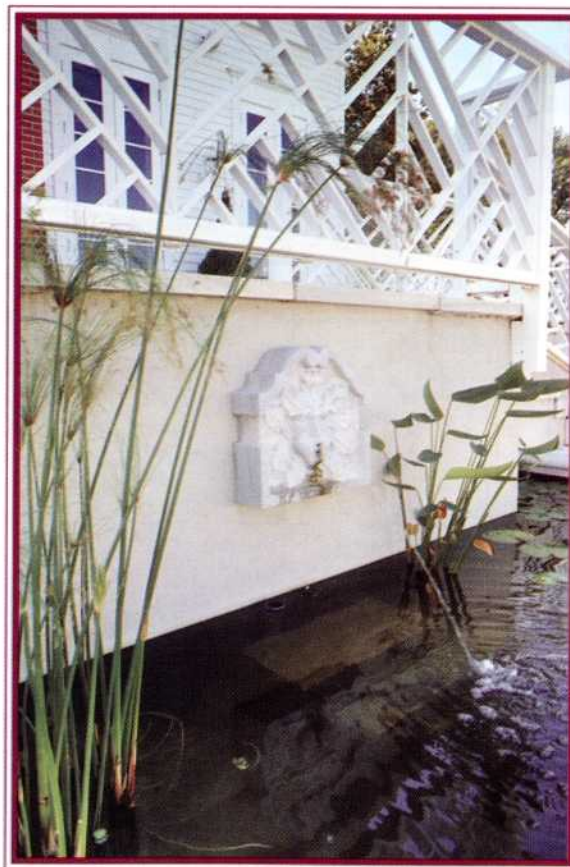


The late Mary Ellen Monroney willed this 18th century Chinese porcelain tureen to her friend Mary Beth Busby, who felt it belonged in Boyd House. Not trusting commercial shipping, Mrs. Busby drove the tureen from Washington, D.C., and hand delivered it to Molly Boren.

erosity in opening it for official and other special functions. The first to be entertained there in November 1996 were the private donors whose enthusiasm for the restoration was backed with their contributions to the University of Oklahoma Foundation.

With scarcely time to wash the punch cups, the Borens then invited the entire faculty and staff—5,000 in all—to four days of staggered holiday open houses, complete with guided tours by well-schooled presidential staffers.

From OU family in the ice and sleet of December to OU moms on a sweltering Saturday in April to the gamut of student groups throughout the year, Boyd House is seldom idle. George Bush, Henry Kissinger and the Chinese ambassador have slept there. Donor groups dine there. Visiting scholars hold roundtable discussions over evening dessert and coffee in the great room where international scholarship winners were honored earlier in the day. House guests relax on the terrace and stroll the gardens.



The limestone fountain below the north side of the raised terrace of Boyd House provides a shaded, cool resting place, accompanied by the tranquil sound of running water.

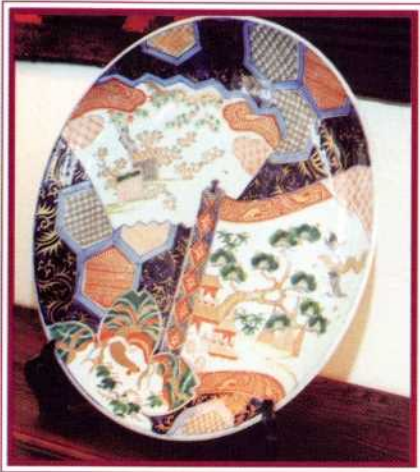
And over all this carefully managed chaos presides Molly Shi Boren. While her husband is fascinated by the history of the home they occupy, relishing the details of its restoration, expounding at length on the project and the people who made it possible, Molly Boren seems to have a personal relationship with each piece of furniture, each decorator item, each garden plant.

Boyd House is beautifully, uniquely decorated. From the rugs on the floors to the chandeliers hanging from the ceilings and everything in between, each element has been skillfully selected and placed for maximum effect. The first lady's hand is evident everywhere.

Comfortably upholstered contemporary sofas and chairs are interspersed with antiques, some resurrected from Boyd House's past. Lamps fashioned from antique porcelain jars shed light on decorator items gleaned from the Borens' international travels. Gorgeous screens, wall hangings, carvings and statuary can be found in every room.



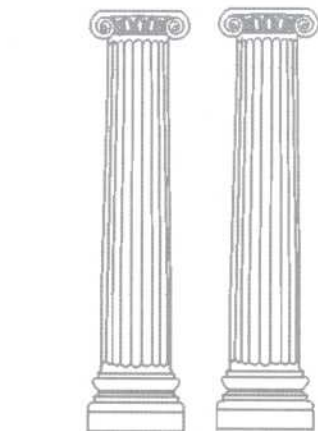
George Bush slept here—in the southeast guest bedroom of the new Boyd House—as did Henry Kissinger and other notable University visitors.



This antique Japanese charger, circa 1800, which is displayed in the Cleo Cross Room, is a gift to Boyd House from Joan Neustadt Weil.

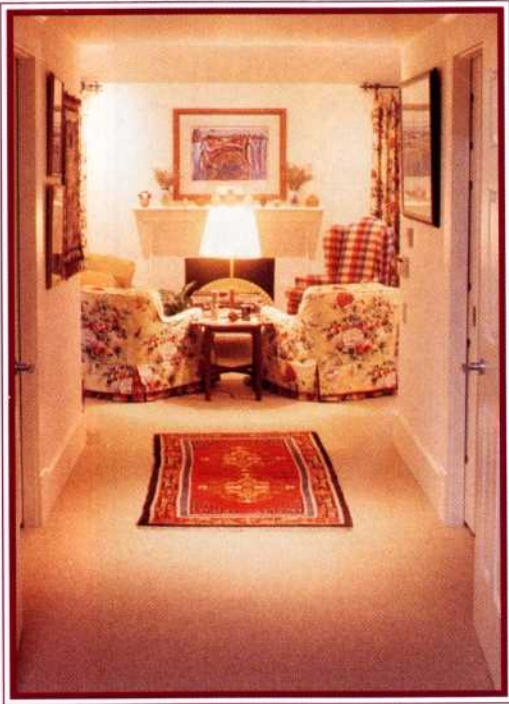


White benches are placed strategically among the flowers and shade trees that border the high, white privacy fence surrounding Boyd House on three sides.



It is not unusual to find First Lady Molly Boren in her sweatsuit, sitting cross-legged in the Boyd House gardens talking plants with members of OU's landscape crew. *Continued*

Whether it is more pleasant to be entertained inside the new Boyd House or outside is a close call, dictated only by the weather.

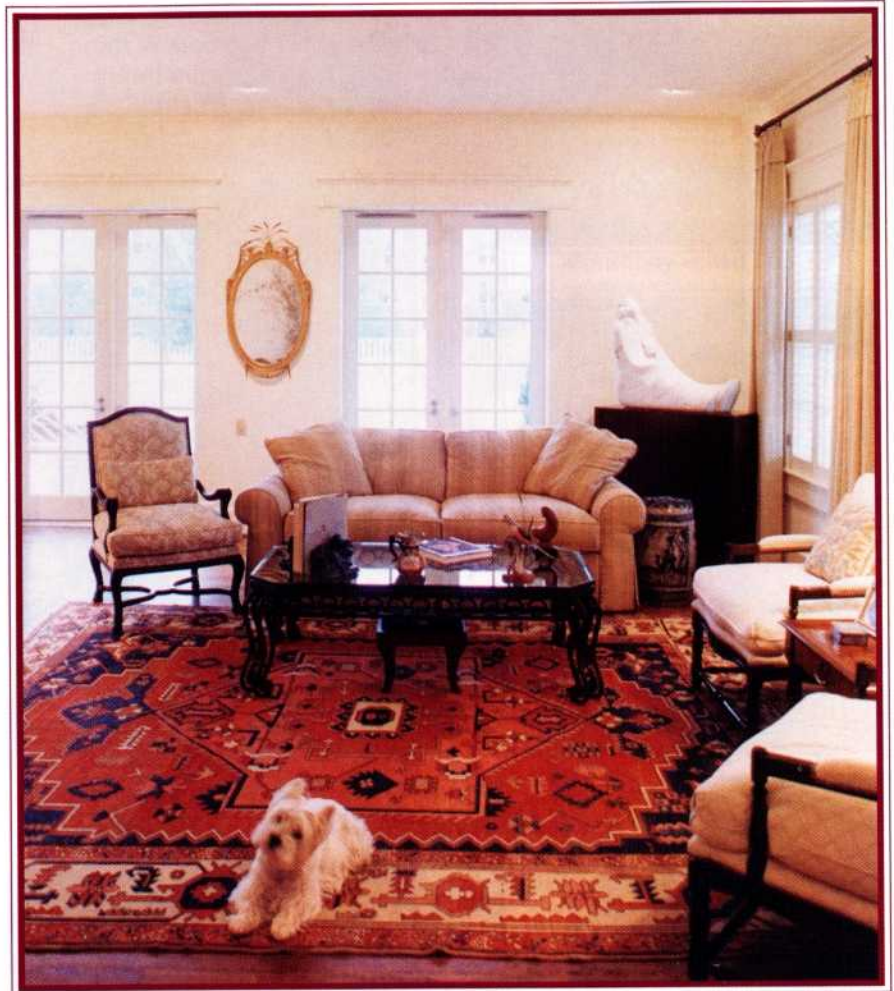


This hallway leads to the family quarters that occupy the second floor of the new north-side addition—a bedroom/sitting room with efficiency kitchen, Molly Boren's study and two baths and dressing rooms—furnished largely with items from the Borens' Washington, D.C., townhouse.

Many of the pieces in the house came from the estate of Mary Ellen Monroney, the widow of U.S. Senator A.S. Mike Monroney, and from Clara Rosenthal Weitzenhoffer of Oklahoma City. Relics of the William Bennett Bizzell era were given by his family, while other University friends contributed treasures from their own homes.

The University of Oklahoma Foundation holds title to all the furnishings that are not the Borens' private property. But even as she enumerates the origins of their personal possessions throughout the house, Molly Boren notes that this item and that item will go to the Foundation for Boyd House when her husband leaves the presidency or as part of their estates.

No tour of the presidential home is complete without a visit to the gardens, where the first lady's involvement is no less evident. She is a hands-on gardener, on a first-name



The Boren dog, Bailey, comfortably awaits visitors to the living room. The doors in the background lead to a raised terrace where the old, east-wing music room once stood. At right is an Alan Houser sculpture.

basis with each plant, shrub and tree. Finding her in sweatsuit and tennis shoes, sitting cross-legged under the trees conferring with one of the landscape crew is not at all unusual.

The west-side garden features David Boren's hammock, two old curved stone benches from the Cross era and a picnic table. Particularly poignant is the Mary Ellen Monroney Memorial Garden at the northwest corner of the house, a "cottage garden" with a statue of a little West Highland terrier, representative of the breed she raised with such loving care.

The yard is enclosed by a high,

white privacy fence, its length bordered by flower beds, with white benches strategically placed under young trees. Just below the north side of the terrace is a gurgling water fountain, while the terrace above is dotted with potted plantings.

Whether it is more pleasant to be entertained inside the new Boyd House or outside is a close call, dictated only by the weather. In either case, the restored historic home shows the University of Oklahoma at its best—well-planned, beautifully executed, gracious and welcoming. No wonder everyone is clamoring for an invitation.