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OPINION // LISA GRAY

Penguin Arms gets the owners it deserves



Lisa Gray





Arthur Moss's 1950 Penguin Arms Apartments at 2902 Revere St., the newest addition to Dan Linscomb and Pam Kuhl-Linscomb's design-shop complex. (Michael Paulsen / Houston Chronicle)

Photo: Michael Paulsen, Staff

On the phone, Dan Linscomb sounded worried. He asked if I'd seen the photos from the shoot he and his wife, Pam Kuhl-Linscomb, did outside the Penguin Arms. "We may have been too wild," he said.

I laughed. "What do you mean, 'too wild?'"

The possibilities were fun to consider. Dan and Pam own **Kuhl-Linscomb design store. It's a department store like nothing else I've ever seen**, with a highly curated, beautiful and often strange selection of everything from greeting cards to European designer rugs. And the **Penguin Arms, the building they recently bought to add to the store's campus, is one of the most astounding buildings in Houston**: the giddiest thing built in the city's giddy 1950s.

What, in context of the Penguin Arms, could "too wild" possibly mean? "Like something Frank Lloyd Wright designed for George Jetson," I called the sixplex apartment building a few years ago, the last time I wrote about it. Designed by Arthur Moss, **it's one of the nation's best surviving examples of Google architecture**, the whacked-out, anything-goes style of mid-century exuberance.

I suspect the Penguin nickname came from the giant down-pointing triangles of green terrazzo tiles on the building's side: From the street, if you squint, they look ever-so-slightly like stubby wings. The even-harder-to-believe windows angle in and out like pleats in a glass accordion held sideways. At any moment, the two-story building looks ready either to stretch four stories tall or squish itself flat to the ground.

That time, I was writing about the Penguin Arms because I was afraid it was about to disappear. **Houston Mod had featured it in an exhibit called "Endangered Modern"**, and the bells seemed to be tolling. The building looked neglected. Its owner was an elderly woman everyone described as frail. Preservationists worried that the excellence of the middle-of-everything location - 2902 Revere, near the Whole Foods on Kirby at Alabama - spelled doom. How could the nutty building not be razed to make way for a clump of townhouses? How could it possibly find owners who'd get its goofy Google charm?

Evolving

In Dan and Pam's world, things evolve in complicated, surprising ways. Dan, a welder's son from small-town Louisiana, somehow grew up to be a lawyer, and in 1971, he and a partner started Linscomb Williams, a successful financial-planning firm. But these days, Dan spends almost all his time at the store. Design got into his blood.

He'd caught the bug even before he met Pam, who studied fashion and textiles at the University of Texas, then worked as a department-store clothing buyer. She planned to spend her life in fashion retailing. But after Foley's transferred her "kicking and screaming" to its home-furnishings department, she found that she loved furniture and housewares more than clothes. She became an interior designer, and on the side, ran an antiques shop known for its unusual pieces - "the weird stuff," she laughs. That shop eventually evolved into Kuhl-Linscomb.

And **Kuhl-Linscomb evolved into something so unique that it's hard to describe.** In 2003, Pam and Dan combined two Kuhl-Linscomb locations into a single nothing-special commercial building at 2424 Alabama. And as brick duplexes and fourplexes on adjoining Steel Street came up for sale, the couple bought them, gave them matching clean-lined modern trim, and renovated them as showrooms. The resulting five-building campus, without a single architecturally significant building, manages to feel special: an unusually cohesive place in Houston, one whose pieces fit together without being matchy-matchy. It's obvious that the place has a history. And it's even more obvious that it's full of vivid, interesting life right now.

The campus's vibe reflects Kuhl-Linscomb's eclectic stock. As always, there are the eccentric antiques: a dining table salvaged from a prison; chairs whose legs end in cypress knots; a vintage weiner-dog sign with a waving arm. And to those, they've added new European kids' toys, cheerful Jonathan Adler vases, sleek Bulthaup cabinetry and groovy Panton chairs. They display Tom Ford sunglasses in antique showcases. Bandit, the store cat, naps where he pleases.

It is, cheerfully, a work in progress, the displays always changing, the mix not allowed to get stale. And on Oct. 3, they made one of their biggest acquisitions ever. That morning, Pam spotted a for-sale sign in front of the Penguin Arms around the corner from Steel Street. That evening, she and Dan signed a contract to buy it. It was their kind of place: The eccentric antique that would set off the rest of their collection.

Old and new, solemn and funky

In about a year, after a round of renovation and restoration, they plan to open the Penguin Arms as a showroom. Maybe, Dan says, they'll reserve a little piece as an apartment, so they can literally live above the shop. They'll link the Penguin Arms to their other buildings through its backyard, tearing down the decrepit parking structure and adding some sort of link through the unused alleyway so customers can walk in air-conditioning. It'll be tasteful, Dan promises: "This sounds overblown, but like the Guggenheim or the Louvre additions - the addition its own contemporary thing, but not overpowering, not obtrusive."

A few weeks after Dan and Pam bought the Penguin Arms, Houston Mod saluted them with a little formal ceremony at the store. Architect Steve Curry presented them with **historic artifacts: A copy of a 1951 Houston Chronicle page with a photo of the building under construction; and an original, collector's-item issue of the February 1952 House + Home magazine, including the article that first described Google architecture.** Looking at the magazine photo of the Penguin Arms, Dan beamed.

He and Pam like the idea that, **by saving the building, they're not just doing something good for their store; they're doing something good for Houston.** The city, Dan thinks, ought to be more like their store: a thoughtful mix of old and new, solemn and funky, with plenty of things you'd find nowhere else. A building like the Penguin Arms adds depth and spice to the gumbo.

A week after the little ceremony, Dan was on the phone with me, explaining that possible excess of wildness. For the Chronicle's photo shoot, he said, he and Pam had decked out the Penguin Arms with some giant vintage penguins.

I took a minute to process that.

Giant! Vintage! Penguins! The Penguin Arms had found owners who happened to have at their disposal ... Giant! Vintage! Penguins!

I was so happy, I thought I'd burst.

"Dan," I said, "I'm sure whatever you and Pam have done will be fine."

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