



Laurie L. Ward / The Press-Enterprise

Former YMCA at the corner of University Avenue and Lemon Street.

Landmark Riverside building could become community asset

The onetime building of the Riverside Young Men's Christian Association, a Cultural Heritage Landmark designated as Italian Renaissance in style, is trying to develop an active community status.



THE COUNTY'S PAST

Tom Patterson

ed with murals designed by artist Sang Huang. Among its uses are programs called quincineras, a coming-of-age celebration for Hispanic girls.

Altogether, according to Manager Bent Corydon, there are some 25 tenants in the building, mostly artists working in rooms the Y once had available as living quarters. One large meeting space has been created by combining smaller rooms.

The original gymnasium was divided into smaller spaces before the Y moved to its present Jefferson Street location in 1968. The onetime swimming pool in the basement has become a storage place for odds and ends as the renovation continues.

It faces University Avenue at Lemon Street.

It has an auditorium, which combines earlier smaller rooms, available for conventions and other meetings. Its newest portion, the gymnasium built in 1951, has been decorated

In short, although the building's exterior is well cared for and retains its style, the interior is in transition and not exactly the neatest place in the world. Give it time. Reflect meanwhile on its history including the bizarre conflict following the Y's departure in 1968. It could have a long and useful life along with its heritage status.

Actually, the YMCA began in Riverside in 1884. In 1889 it completed and occupied a four-level building facing Main Street on part of the site of the Mission Inn. Frank Miller of the Inn had given the site. He bought it back and helped finance the Renaissance Y building that was completed in 1909. Its size was doubled by an addition along Lemon Street in the early 1920s.

The 1909 architect was Arthur Benton, the original and probably the most prolific of the architects participating in the California Hispanic Revival Movement. Indeed the arched windows and the tile roofing of overhangs on this building may, to some, suggest California Hispanic Revival. If the red brick had been covered with white stucco the likeness would be more complete.

But there is no white stucco. Italian Renaissance it is. Architectural textbooks and my architectural consultant Blaine Rawdon say so.

For six years after the Y moved the building was a "Gheel House," that is, a halfway house for retarded persons.

Next it was acquired by a chartered branch of Scientology, the organization headed by the late L.

Ron Hubbard. The chartered group fell out with the parent organization, resulting in a protracted lawsuit, ended by an out-of-court settlement in 1991. Part of the apparent outcome of the settlement made the dissident group owner of the building. It has taken the name of Life Arts Center, Inc.

Corydon, manager of the Center, was originally a participant in the Scientology organization, but fell out with it and is one of the authors of a book entitled "L. Ron Hubbard, Messiah or Madman?"

A year or more ago there was a study suggesting means and locations under which administration of police work, fire fighting and other functions of the city might be brought together at one location. It didn't mention the Life Arts Building or the old YMCA, but it did contain a map showing the entire block as a possible site, as though it were without any present building.

Nothing has been heard recently of that map. Fiscal problems have postponed if not ruled out such a development.

The Cultural Heritage Landmark status of the building will help to bring about its continued existence. The careful preservation of the interesting exterior will also help. The further development of the building as a site for civic, community and art activities would help still more.

Tom Patterson, a former Press-Enterprise reporter and editor, has published three books and numerous articles on Riverside County history. His column appears occasionally on Sundays.