



All photos by Eric Hester

Public Architecture

With its new Architecture Center, AIA Houston opens up

In November, when AIA Houston moved into its new Architecture Center downtown, it went public in a way that the organization has rarely done before. The Architecture Center, located on the first floor of the second phase of Bayou Place and across Capitol Street from the Hobby Center, replaces headquarters that had been tucked away on the fifth floor of an anonymous office building on Richmond. At the Richmond location it was almost unheard of for people to simply wander in. At its new home, that's something AIA Houston hopes happens regularly.

"The issue is getting back down to a more public presence, to becoming more of a public institution," says Jeffrey Brown, AIA Houston's 2006

president and a principal in Powers-Brown Architecture. "There's a feeling among some that we don't address design enough, that we're too much a professional organization. Of course, that's something we have to be, but that doesn't mean we can't be more open to the general public as well."

Among the things that the new Architecture Center will offer that the old AIA offices did not is an exhibition area that can be used for the display of architectural photos, drawings, or models, among other things, as well as room for events from lectures to parties. As it happens, the square footage of the new facility is about the same as the square footage of the old one. The difference is that in

the new Architecture Center more space is given over to public space.

Houston AIA's decision to create an Architecture Center reflects a trend among the American Institute of Architect's larger chapters. It's a trend that began in Seattle and, most notably, New York, where the 2003 opening of the Center for Architecture on La Guardia Place in Greenwich Village helped change the image of what had been seen as a relatively staid organization into something more on the leading edge of architecture. The success of the New York venture helped prompt action in Houston, as did the fact that the lease on AIA Houston's Richmond offices was running out.

"New York led the way, finding how to become a more public presence and an organizing influence regarding other professional and affiliate organizations," notes Brown. "But what works in New York doesn't necessarily work in Houston. We'd started thinking about what would work here when our lease came due, and we had to decide if we wanted to stay where we were or try something different."

It wasn't hard to decide that the latter choice was the better one. But implementing it was a different issue. The original hope had been to find a building to buy along the light rail route downtown and renovate that into AIA Houston's public face. That, though, could take a few years to accomplish, and Brown says AIA Houston wanted to move faster. "We didn't want to get caught up in what I term analysis paralysis, which has hampered some other big AIA chapters," he says. "They spend so much time trying to figure out exactly what they want to do that they don't end up doing anything."

At about the same time that AIA Houston began looking for a new home, the second phase of Bayou Place was seeking tenants. The Cordish Company was facing a deadline to get the second half of Bayou Place renovated and open, which meant AIA Houston was able to negotiate favorable terms, and do so in a part of Houston that attracts a large number of visitors.

"Bayou Place is in the theater district, which puts it on the school bus tour route, and Cordish gave us an opportunity to have a ground floor space, which gives us more of a street presence," Brown says. "One of the advantages was that



Opposite Page: Front entrance to AIA Houston's new Architecture Center in Bayou Place Two.

Left: The Architecture Center's back section overlooks Buffalo Bayou.

Below: Part of the Architecture Center's public space, where exhibitions and lectures can be held. Interior design will be by Kirksey and Kendall-Heaton.

we were able to get a very flexible lease, which lets us keep our options open. The new location gives us a chance to learn just how an architecture center is going to work for Houston, and as we learn how to program a center, as we learn what our market is, as all those things evolve, we can still get out and into our own building whenever we want. We've really pushed the idea that this is a way for us to learn how to be a center, so we can evolve into where our final location is."

Though talk of a new Architecture Center began some three years ago, the actual decision to leave Richmond Avenue and move downtown was made barely a year ago, which meant a lot of work had to be done in a short time to get the place up and running. "We had a lot of help from the development, brokerage, and legal community to make this all work," says Brown. "And we've had good input from the contractor community as well. D.E. Harvey is doing the build out, and Randall Walker at Kirksey as well as people from Kendall-Heaton designed the space in the shell building."

The Architecture Center's grand open-

ing will be in January, after which Brown hopes visitors start dropping by. Already an exhibition of photos by Richard Payne from his book *Texas Towns and the Art of Architecture* is up for viewing, and in January another exhibit focusing on maps and models of developments planned for Houston's near future will be on display. Other projects set for the Architecture Center include a high school competition in which inner city students will be brought in for a one-week intensive boot camp on architecture.

"What we hope to do is evolve to become more of a cultural institution," says Brown. "We'll always have our professional services, of course, but this is something we'll be adding. In talking to people at other architecture centers while we were researching ours, we hear over and over again that there were more casual users, more people wandering in to ask about architecture. In our old offices there was never that sort of discovery by the public. If you didn't know where we were, you never found us. But now we're going to have much more of a public identity." — *Mitchell J. Shields*

