

## WHERE'S THE FRONT DOOR?

**Best Laid Plans: Buildings and Projects by Houston Architects and Designers**  
Lawndale Art and Performance Center,  
20 May – 1 July 1994

Reviewed by William Howze

Visitors to the exhibition *Best Laid Plans*, jointly sponsored by the Rice Design Alliance and Lawndale Art and Performance Center, stepped through the door in the Art Deco façade of Joseph Finger's 1931 Barker Brothers Building, now Lawndale's home, into a freshly refurbished white space filled with poster-like 30-by-40-inch panels. At first glance, *Best Laid Plans* seemed to be an exhibition of posters, 76 of them, that lined all four walls and two free-standing screens in the large, high-ceilinged main room, as well as the walls of a smaller adjacent room. But these were not posters. Though many featured bold typography and bright colors, the panels did not project their messages across the room like images of chocolate-dipped cones in a Dairy Queen. Each one required close scrutiny.

As design objects, many of the panels displayed an ingenious graphic exploitation of the limited format, even whimsy. Common to the group was a tendency toward didacticism, a desire on the part of the artists to explain themselves as much as their work. Plan, elevation, and section, after all, are implicitly instructive, and when the designers felt the need to be explicit they added text, in some cases several dense paragraphs. The combination expressed genial openness in some cases, condescension in others. Where do so many designers learn to write project descriptions that are both stuffy and coy? It would be refreshing to read how clients express their wishes, to get some idea of the sort of person who would occupy the spaces depicted.

In the catalogue published in conjunction with the exhibition, Leslie Barry Davidson, president of RDA, and MaryRoss Taylor, executive director of Lawndale, convey the admirable enthusiasm, generosity, and spirit of collaboration that produced *Best Laid Plans*. In his foreword, Joel Warren Barna suggests that a relatively limited audience might share the enthusiasm of the organizers, while calling the exhibition a "significant step" toward including more people in the process of building our city. Stephen Fox's lucid historical survey of architec-



Volunteers from the Rice Design Alliance and Lawndale Art and Performance Center transformed the Lawndale gallery space for the exhibition *Best Laid Plans*.

tural exhibitions in Houston documents the need for the "confrontations that exhibition can offer."

The catalogue, designed by graphic designer Craig Minor, presented the exhibitors with another challenge: to squeeze the essence of their 30-by-40-inch boards into a 5-by-5-inch space, and whatever they had to say into 50 words. Minor's sly wit, evident throughout the catalogue, is most evident in the out-of-register second color on the cover that visually completes the aphorism in the title.

The participants have retrieved their boards to decorate their offices and added the catalogues to their bookshelves. Many who submitted boards – and others who did not – sustain the hope that *Best Laid Plans* will become an annual or biennial event providing, in Davidson's words, "a forum for architects to get together to share ideas, show new projects, and discuss new design concepts." According to Taylor, architects, designers, their clients or prospective clients, architecture students, "the RDA crowd," and middle-school students made *Best Laid Plans* "most successful in terms of attendance." In spite of the hurdles, to use Barna's term, that plan, elevation, and section might present to the general public, Taylor observed that visitors did not hesitate to examine the

boards and models closely enough to ask "Where's the front door?"

If there are to be future exhibitions like *Best Laid Plans*, the organizers can continue to challenge architects and designers, perhaps by revising the format or calling for submissions on specific themes. To engage a larger public, however, they need to take into consideration people for whom plan, elevation, and section are hurdles. They need to bring before the public a sense not simply of the architects themselves, but also of the "community of clients" (another one of Barna's useful terms); and they need to reveal, and promote discussions of, how architecture is practiced and purchased, and how it affects the community. ■

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