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Showcase

The bumpy road to Chicago's home show

By Elaine Markoutsas

ONCE THE fourth annual City House exhibition gets past the setup stage next week, its organizers may breathe a collective sigh of relief. Just two months ago, there were rumors that the show, to be held Friday through Sunday in Donnelley Hall at McCormick Place West, might not go on.

From its beginning, City House had the mark of a winner. The boom in rehabbing inspired this home-improvement fair, originally sponsored by the Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks. City House developed a national reputation among renovation enthusiasts. It was lauded for its emphasis on preservations and its well-rounded approach: not only could the public learn the fine points of restoration if houses in a near-authentic state, they also could obtain information on forming neighborhood groups, getting mortgages and loans and utilizing tax breaks and reserve home-repair demonstrations.

But after last year's show, rain clouds began to appear. The show was criticized for being elitist, and squabbles erupted over its focus: the management of the show changed twice, and one sponsor dropped out. Planning fell months behind.

City House's air of disorganization soured many some exhibitors, and there's no way to by drawing cards—Old House Journal editor Clem Labine and "This Old House" TV host Bob Vila—will not return this year, partly because they were contacted too late.

BILLED AT its inception as "a marketplace of renovation ideas for old houses," City House reportedly drew 30,000 visitors to Navy Pier in 1979. Commercial and neighborhood interests were represented in that first show; speakers included local architects, interior designers, realtors, bankers and contractors. The neighborhood groups' main activities were to promote themselves to potential home buyers and to upgrade their public images. Some of the local groups primarily sell products and services aimed at renovators; others do so incidentally as possible.

The show moved to McCormick Place in 1981, when it gained a cosponsor, the Chicago Department of Housing, which had a new role in federal grants. Because City House was a public show aimed at educating people about renovating neighborhoods, the department could apply some $30,000 of a community block development grant to need money. And it began to broaden its guidelines for appropriate exhibitors.

"The show had started to attract attention," explained a former City House booker regarding the housing department's involvement. "It had money-making potential. Everybody wanted a piece of the action."

Despite a perceived change in emphasis away from architectural authenticity, Ed Jenks said he still believed in the value of the show and was committed to the 1981 City House. Jenks, a City House volunteer since its first year, joined the housing department payroll in October, 1980 at an annual salary of about $23,000; his qualifications were a background in administration and organizing meetings.

"I'm an organizer—that's what it takes," Jenks said. "I was very excited."

SOON HE became disillusioned. "I was ready to start planning [for the 1982 show] in May. There was no desire to get this [show] off the ground. All summer I wanted to get the mailing list together, print up the prospectus. Nobody said 'Let's go with it.' I could decide myself such issues as what price the booths were going to be or whether to remove the Landmarks Commission from the masthead [because of differences with the housing department].

"It was a typical bureaucracy. They got ahold of something good and screwed it up."

Jenks quit Sept. 1.

Although three firms with expertise in convention and trade show planning were contacted to present proposals on producing the show, Gilbert J. Calaldo, commissioner of the Department of Housing, turned to former newspaper reporter and self-employed publicist Robert Billings.

"Bob was selected because he was imaginative and creative," Calaldo explained, though others say that Billings got the job because of his political connections.

By the first week in January, Billings was hired.

"After a month, Billings had sold only 33 booths," Calaldo said. (Last year's show had more than 200 exhibitors.) "I was getting concerned. I had to make a change."

BUT BILLINGS claims to have had the commitments, and says he was fired at the mayor's request, ironically, for political reasons.

With Billings' firing less than three months before the show was to open, the future of City House again was in limbo. The housing department, now the sole sponsor because of differences with the Landmarks Commission, needed a miracle worker.

Enter Festivals Inc. and the team of Tom Drilias and his marketing director, Joe Power, who have organized the Taste of Chicago and Chicagofest events.

"They were confident [they could pull it together]," Calaldo said. "They knew it was going to be rough, hard work."

Festivals Inc. began work the first week of February, with a contract that a spokesman said is "less than $40,000," plus a percentage of profits—if there are any.

"OUR GOAL is to make the show self-sufficient," said Peror. "We've sold three times as much advertising [for show publications] as last year. And this is a terrible economy for exhibitors."

Most of those involved in City House who were queried said that if anyone could save the show, it would be Festivals Inc.

"This may be the first year we're going to make money," Calaldo said.

That may be so, but in order to do so, City House is rallying a different sector of the public from the one that supported it in the past.

LAST YEAR some participants complained of the shift in ideology. They said the show was becoming too commercial and was drifting from a theme of "restoration" toward "remodeling." Others, like architectural "purists" involved with the Jenks era, was a totally different animal. A general housing fair, they said, was fine in its own right, but it was not City House.

The concept of restoration (or renovation) focuses on duplicating as closely as possible architectural and period details of a home. Purists distinguish this from rehabbing or remodeling, i.e. merely painting a house, sometimes with materials that may be out of character with the original design.

For example, restorationists would consider it inappropriate to replace double-hung windows with a modern picture window or to replace the slate roof of a Chicago bungalow with cedar or aluminum siding. These are the types of exhibitors that some participants of City House were objecting to.

"In the proper context," said Walter Johnson, an architect with Holabird & Root who served on last year's City House screening committee, "nobody disagrees with storm and screen doors, aluminum siding and glass block windows [being displayed]. But they are almost universally inappropriate to 19th-Century, early 20th-Century buildings, and, in some cases,

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harmful" to the architectural integrity of older houses.

Then there was the matter of City House's "target" audience. "The housing department IS the show was too elitist, just related to people in Lincoln Park," said Ed Jenks, last year's City House chairman.

A SOLUTION was to broaden the interests of the show. "The mayor felt strongly that because of the economy, people were not able to buy houses," explained Calaldo. "Rehabilitation was the answer; renovation is very expensive. We wanted the show to be for everyone."

Labine and Vila will be absent, although "This Old House" carpentry expert Norm Abram has been elevated to keynote speaker. Labine declined to appear at this year's show for philosophical differences; Vila because of other commitments (both were contacted by City House less than 2 months ago).

"We were disappointed with the turn the show had taken," said Labine. "City House was unique. It focused tightly on sensitive rehabilitation of old homes, something we are in tune with. Basically, it became a come-on, come-all show."

But Vila, who said that he thought last year's show was "super," disagrees with Labine's position. He said it is difficult to be a purist about restoration "in anything other than museum quality work."

Billings agreed that the show had to be broader in order to attract more attendance. "If you want to be a purist, you're going to preach to people."

FESTIVALS INC.'S Perer says that a broader range of commercial exhibits is necessary for economic survival. But he says he sees no compromise in what the show has to offer; he still maintains there is enough noncommercial support for balance. "City House still will be an excellent one-stop source for valuable tips for home improvements," he said.

One of last year's exhibitors suggested that a more commercially oriented, broader-based trade show is good for consumers; trade shows in general are for the trade, not the public. "There's a chance to pick up brochures on windows, doorknobs, fireplaces, plumbing, shingling—and to talk to dozens of people you'd have to head all over the city for," said a consumer who was happy to see expanded products displayed at the show.

But even as broader commercial exhibits join the roster, some commercial organizations have dropped out. As of nine days before the show was to open, about a dozen of last year's 37 participants had dropped out (though new ones have been added). One had dropped out is the Old Wicker Park Committee, even though it received publicity and a booth assignment and has been listed as exhibitor on publicity releases. Other dropouts include the Uptown Park Community Council and the Oak Park Landmarks Commission.

Cost is a significant factor cited among dropouts. In 1979, commercial exhibitors paid $275 for a 10-by-20-foot booth; last year's fee was $90; this year it's $65. Nonprofit organizations and neighborhood groups paid $100 last year; this year they will pay $25.

But that usually is not the only expense: Setup costs are additional. "Last year we had a couple of surprise bills," said Greg Jenkins, chairman of the Old Wicker Park Committee. "Our electrical bill amounted to $200."

Still, projections are optimistic; last week the mayor announced that there would be more than 50 booths. In a letter to prospective exhibitors, City House projected attendance at 80,000, surpassing last year's reported figures, which some former City House workers say have not been entirely accurate.

PRE-1981 attendance [numbers that are crucial to attracting potential exhibitors] was projected to be 80,000, according to City House press releases the show actually drew 30,000.

"Outlandish," said Jenks, who was chairman of that show. "Thirty thousand is a liberal figure."

Jenks and Billings both agreed that numbers traditionally are inflated. "Nobody knows what the gate is," said Jenks. "The only way you can measure is by ticket sales" because of the number of free tickets distributed for promotional purposes.

Billings blames much of the disorganization and his own demise on bureaucracy, city politics and the tug of war between the Landmarks Commission and the Housing Department.

"It was a bad situation," Billings said. "They already were so far behind. Everything had to be started from scratch. They [the housing department] sat around like beached whales."

Billings said that whoever was supposed to be paying the bills apparently wasn't. One of the show's major speakers said that he waited eight months for his fee.

JERRY GIBBONS, the delinquent payment problem, though he says he doesn't understand it. "When I left in September, Greyhound Exposition [the decorators] had not been paid $80,000 for the 1981 show. We should have been in pretty good shape. Last year's expenses amounted to about $225,000. We probably brought in about $175,000. The great was $250,000. There should have been money in the pot to draw from. What happened to it I don't know."

Indeed, even Billings says the city owes him $62,000 for consultation fees and expenses. If he doesn't collect soon, he says he intends to sue.

Calaldo said of their financial differences, "It's being worked out."

Whatever the outcome, City House's future probably is on the line next week. Despite ideological differences, past and present promoters share the hope that it will succeed.

"City House is a great thing," architect Johnson said. "It just got sidetracked somewhere. It must have a theme, otherwise it's just another homewares show."

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Brownbuilder Allan Koenig: engineering for tomorrow in Lombard

Allan R. Koenig, piping design supervisor at Brown & Root's Chicago Engineering Division office in Lombard, joined the company in 1976 as a piping designer. He later served as design leaderman.

Born in Elgin, Al lives in Schaumburg with his wife, Kathy, and their three daughters. The family attends St. Hubert's Catholic Church in Hoffman Estates. On the weekends, he enjoys woodworking and racquetball.

Brown & Root established the Chicago Engineering Division in 1970 to