

No Longer BEST

A short while back, finding myself in the proximity of Almeda and I-45, I decided I wanted to show the old BEST Products Company Showroom to some of my colleagues.

I knew that BEST Products had fallen out of business in the late 1990s, but remembered getting a quick glance of the abandoned or re-utilized store from the freeway on my way to the beach every so often. After driving in circles for a while, I was able to locate the building. My fears became founded when I discovered it had been modified, and had lost its original character.

It's not that I had ever considered the BEST Products Company Showroom a great piece of architecture. However, I remembered how moved I had been as a young architecture student to see this, and other buildings designed by James Wines' SITE (Sculpture In The Environment) architecture firm, published. It was not so much the architecture of their buildings that I found intriguing as it was their expressive character. It was through SITE's work that I accepted the notion that a certain type of building did not have to follow prescribed typologies. The options could be multiple. To me, this was the first clear built expression that the box could be "broken or exploded."

BEST Products contracted with SITE to design nine unusual retail facilities, but the one in Houston was arguably the most striking. (All were out of the ordinary, however, which you can see for yourself at www.siteenviroidesign.com/proj.best.php.) Wines titled his Houston building The Indeterminate Façade, and it was, as Stephen Fox described it in his *Houston Architectural Guide*, "an attempt to subvert the banality of the American suburban landscape." Built in 1975, the showroom soon became one of the most familiar images in American architecture. According to writer Diebold Essen, one survey found that photos of the showroom had appeared in more books on 20th-century architecture than photos of any other modern building.

After BEST Products went bankrupt, the Houston showroom became home to an electronics retailer and a furniture store when it wasn't empty, which it often was. Then in July 2003 the building's owner took down Wines' distinctive crumbling façade, and what had been memorable became ordinary.

The building is still there, but the spirit of it has gone. Its departure is consistent with local attitudes toward architecture in general, and the disregard for the collective memory of the built environment in particular. We are left with the notion of the high volatility of the built project in comparison to the power of the dictates of the real estate market.

All that remains of the building's original image is the box that once supported that magnificent "cascade of bricks." After the façade was removed, and before the new tenants took over, the ghost of a banner advertising its availability as a real estate commodity could dimly be seen. That same shadow screamed of an opportunity lost, an opportunity that is no longer available. — *Fernando L. Brave*



The BEST Products building at three stages of its life. **Top:** With original façade intact. **Center:** After façade's removal. **Bottom:** As it is today.