

The Preservation and Expansion of the Julia Ideson Building

by Barry Moore



The Ideson Library, as it appeared upon completion of construction in 1926.

The Julia Ideson building, located in downtown Houston at 500 McKinney and opened in 1926, is one of the most important historic buildings in Houston. By the criteria established by the Secretary of Interior, the building meets the most important standards: it is a superb example of Spanish Renaissance style; it was designed by one of the most prominent architects of the early twentieth century; as the Houston Central Library, it was one of the most important public buildings in Houston; and its long time director, Julia Ideson, was one of the most prominent citizens of her generation. For these reasons, the building is on the National Register of Historic Places, is a Texas Historical Landmark, a Texas State Archeological Landmark, and a City of Houston Protected Landmark.

In 1924, with the assistance of Julia Ideson, the Houston Library Board selected Architect Ralph Adams Cram of the Boston firm Cram and Ferguson to design a new central library. Houstonians were already familiar with his work, which included the Rice Institute campus and Trinity Episcopal Church. William Ward Watkin, head of the architecture department at Rice, was chosen as Associate Architect. Cram selected a Spanish Renaissance style for the building, and, in the words of architectural historian Steven Fox, “he stretched a modest program into a scenic expression of civic pride, with cross ventilation.” The Houston Metropolitan Research Center (HMRC), housed in the building since the 1970s, owns an incomplete set of preliminary drawings, including a site plan, floor plans, two

elevations and two building sections. These historical records show that the building was realized substantially as originally designed. Due to shortage of funds, however, several notable features in the original plans were not included in the library as built. Missing were a south wing and loggia, as well as a fenced reading garden on the corner of Smith and Lamar Streets.

The Ideson served as Houston’s main library until 1976, when the much larger Jesse H. Jones building opened across the plaza. At that time, the newly created Houston Metropolitan Research Center was housed in the Ideson building, which was altered to accommodate archival and historical materials. For more than thirty years, the Ideson has served as an important repository for records and photographs documenting Houston’s history; highlights include the Texas Room—where historians conduct research aimed at recapturing the region’s past, a center for oral history, and the home of the *Houston Review of History and Culture* (the predecessor of the *Houston History* magazine).

Throughout these years, the building has been well-maintained by the city, but the stacks had become badly crowded, the air-conditioning systems detrimental to an archival collection, and the security of the collection badly compromised. Acting on the initiative of Mayor Bill White, in 2006 Phoebe Tudor, Margaret Skidmore, and Minette Boesel formed the Julia Ideson Library Preservation Partners, a 501C3 organization charged with raising funds

for restoration and addition to the Ideson. With the City of Houston contributing \$10 million to the project, the Partners are raising the additional \$28 million required by the project budget in private funds.

The Ideson project is part of a thirty-eight million dollar campaign; the Partners have raised more than half in a little more than a year. An early decision was made to relocate the bulk of the archival collection to a new south wing, using the original Cram drawings as a starting point. A public reference room, replacing functions now offered in the Texas Room, will be located on the first floor, with high density archival shelving on the three floors above and a new rare book vault located on the second stack floor. An appropriate climate control system will be installed, as well as separate elevators for staff and the public.

The original building will have a renewed life as a multi-purpose public library. On the first floor the Auditorium, the Meldrum Room, and the Reynolds Room will be upgraded for continued use as meeting rooms. A selection of the original children's furniture will be installed in the north alcove of the Meldrum, and old, but not rare, children's books from the collection will again inhabit the shelves. In the space where the stacks begin, a new photo lab will be provided, with enhanced capability for scanning and digitizing the image collection.

The floor between the first and second floor on the west end of the building will be renovated to house the conservation lab, with appropriate equipment and mechanical systems. The second floor, the piano nobile in Cram's original

scheme, will enjoy enhanced public amenities: the existing Texas Room will again be a public reading room, with the alcove on the north side dedicated to objects and memorabilia from Houston's original 1904 Carnegie Library.

Across the central atrium, in the vacated stack space, a large exhibition hall will be made available. The Partners and the City anticipate that the reading room, the atrium, and the exhibit hall will be popular sites for all types of public and private events. The offices of the Director of Libraries and the Library Foundation will occupy the west end of the floor. The floor between second and third, on the west end of the building, will be dedicated to a volunteer's lounge and HMRC staff.

The third floor will house the architectural archives in the space currently occupied by special collections, with the same environmental systems that will be provided in the stacks. A restored conference room, additional staff workspace and break room occupy the remainder of the floor. The original decorative features, almost totally intact, will be restored. Original light fixtures will be rewired and reconditioned. For the first time, WPA artwork from the 1930s will be lighted. The existing Texas Room will be furnished with refinished



Left: The Central Reading Room (currently the Texas Room) as it appeared when completed in 1926.



The new Exhibition Hall, located where six levels of stacks now stand, in an architectural rendering.



The Restored Central Reading Room, in an architectural rendering.



The new south wing, loggia and reading garden, in an architectural rendering.



Groundbreaking on January 12, 2009; Mayor Bill White, Partner Chair Phoebe Tudor, Gensler Project Manager Barry Moore, HMRC Director Kemo Curry.

original furniture. Art original to the building up to the 1940s will be relocated from the library vault, restored and rehung, in most cases, in original locations.

The exterior of the new south wing will match the existing building as well as Cram's design, with brown brick, cast stone trim, red tile roofs and cast decorative elements. A new south loggia will be added, providing direct access to the outdoors from the existing Reynolds, Meldrum and Texas Room. The new reading garden, a quiet landscaped square, will be realized, inspired by the Cram design. It will be surrounded by a black metal fence supported by stone gate posts. The resulting public space in the center of downtown will be open to the public during the day but closed at night and for special events.

Although the completed building will recapture the spirit and look of the original plans from more than eighty years ago, it will also incorporate one important aspect of modern construction, an energy and environmentally friendly design.

It will be among the first Texas Historic Landmark projects to qualify for LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification. It also will seek to qualify for a "Silver" designation from the U.S. Green Building Council. An efficient air conditioning system and the use of indigenous plant materials along with recycled and low-emitting materials during construction are among the key components needed to achieve LEED certification. When completed, the new Ideson will combine the best of the old and the new.

For the library department, the non-profit board, the mayor, and the architects, a great sense of satisfaction arises from the opportunity to complete an eighty-three year old architectural concept, but to enhance the interior with a state of the art archival and research facility that can be enjoyed by Houstonians for generations to come.

A sense of promise floated in the air at the formal ground-breaking for the construction of the new south wing on January 12, 2009. On this cool, crisp day, hundreds of Houstonians came to watch Mayor White, Houston's Director of Libraries Dr. Rhea Brown Lawson, and prominent members of the Julia Ideson Preservation Partners celebrate the beginning of construction. There was good cause for celebration. Sustained by a private-public partnership of a sort so common in Houston's past, this project marks a turning point in historic preservation in Houston. It will produce a beautifully restored and expanded facility to serve as a repository for historical records that will help students, citizens, and scholars alike explore our region's history. The restored Julia Ideson building will become a symbol of the debt we owe to those who came before us; it will also be a message to those who come after us of the value of history and the logic of preserving and adapting historic buildings for current and future uses.

☛ **Barry Moore**, Houston architect and historian, is a member the Gensler architectural firm, a Houston-based, internationally active firm with a strong commitment to historic preservation. He took the lead in the design for the preservation and expansion of the Julia Ideson building. He has been an Adjunct Associate Professor in the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture at UH for twenty-one years.