



Central Library soon after opening in 1926.

PRESERVATION

THE LIBRARIAN RETURNS

Rehabilitating Houston's beloved Julia Ideson building.

THE 1901 DISCOVERY OF OIL AT SPINDLETOP AND THE opening of Houston's port resulted in the trebling of the city's population between 1900 and 1920. Consequently, by the early 1920s conditions at the 1904 Carnegie Library were "almost intolerable . . . where everyone gets in the way of everyone else," reported librarian Julia Ideson to the local press. With support from Mayor A. E. Amerman and other city leaders, Ideson led the charge to construct a new central library. By 1925 the library was under construction and a new Civic Center, designed by the Kansas City landscape architects Hare and Hare, had been proposed, its building keyed to the Spanish-style architecture of the central library.

Designed by the Boston architectural firm Cram & Ferguson, the Central Library, renamed the Julia

Ideson Building in 1955 to honor the city's first librarian, served as the Central Branch the Houston Public Library until 1976. In 1978-79 it was sensitively rehabilitated by S. I. Morris Associates for the Houston Metropolitan Research Center (HMRC), housing the public library's collection of archives, photographs, architectural drawings, rare books, and manuscripts. New glass-and-steel partitions were inserted for closed stacks and archival storage. Morris' work, following established preservation standards, was gentle to the historic fabric of the building and is easily removed.

In 2006, the Julia Ideson Library Preservation Partners (JILPP), an independent nonprofit corporation that Houston Mayor Bill White asked to take on the job, began fundraising to expand and rehabilitate the library for continued use by the HMRC and to showcase the building's ornate interior spaces through exhibitions and event rentals such as receptions and weddings. The project—a new wing closely following the footprint of Cram's original and the restoration of compromised rooms and spaces—is led by architects Barry Moore and Paul Homeyer of Gensler. It will include a state-of-the-art, climate-controlled archival storage area and a new public research and reading room. The design of the wing will be differentiated from the historic portion of the building, following professional historic preservation standards. The restoration phase of the project will include reopening one of the original second-story loggias and constructing an outdoor reading garden (an idea conceived by the original architects but never carried out), as well as restoring one of the two original second-floor reading rooms currently filled with three levels of steel book stacks as an exhibition hall. Plans for the building, listed on the National Register of Historic Places and as a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark, will follow the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and seek a silver LEED certification. Most of the building will simply be preserved, as many of the original reading and stack rooms and associated furniture, fixtures, and finishes remain intact and unaltered. A paint analysis of the interior decorative plaster elements—coffering, cornice, and friezes with roundels of the great libraries of the world—will be conducted.

As a testament to the rediscovered love of this city landmark, the library's current director, Dr. Rhea Brown Lawson, has requested that her office be relocated to Julia Ideson's namesake, where it was housed during the first 50 years of the building's life.

—Anna Mod