

Houston Philosophical Society
Minutes of 621st Meeting, January 17th, 2008

CALL TO ORDER: 7:52 P.M.

President Newell Boyd called to order the 621th meeting of the Society in its 87th year. Prior to introduction of the speaker he recognized the five new members: Logan Browning, Neal Carlson, Robert Catlin, Randal Hall and Michael Young.

After the introduction of guests, Dr. Boyd introduced the speaker: Barry Moore, speaking on "Restoring the Julia Ideson Library." Mr. Moore is a senior associate at the Gensler architecture firm, where he specializes in historic preservation. He holds a BA in History from Rice University, a B. Arch. from the University of Pennsylvania, and a M. Arch. from the University of California at Berkeley. He is a former president of The Houston Design Alliance, an adjunct professor at the University of Houston where he teaches design studio and is the founding director of the Workshop for Historic Preservation. Mr. Moore spoke on the founding

In 1854, the Houston Lyceum was organized to select and buy books and have a public library. In 1893 the Women's Club of Houston was founded, which was instrumental in obtaining a \$50,000 grant from Andrew Carnegie for a new library. Then, in 1902, following receipt of the grant, the City of Houston passed bonds to start a library at Main and McKinney. Julia Ideson, who had enrolled in the new library course at the University of Texas, was hired in 1903 to access, catalogue, and classify the collection, a position she was to retain for 42 years.

In 1904, the Carnegie Library opened with 10,000 books and 4,000 documents on a small lot. By 1910, 10,000 of Houston's 50,000 people had library cards. The Public School League had bought a Venus de Milo sculpture for the public schools, which was deemed inappropriate and given to the library. The librarian's desk was in the central rotunda. A children's library endowment was funded in memory of Norma Meldrum, who had died of scarlet fever at the age of eight. In September, 1911, a dinner was given for Booker T. Washington. His secretary subsequently wrote to Andrew Carnegie, who gave funds for a new library. By 1920, the building was in bad shape, crowded with 120,000 volumes. Bonds were passed to build the new library.

The Houston Public Library at the corner of Smith and McKinney, funded by Andrew Carnegie, was built in 1925 by Rice Institute architects Ralph Adams Cram, of the Cram and Ferguson architecture firm of Boston, and William Ward Watkin. The building is similar to a Spanish renaissance building that Cram had just seen on vacation in Spain. It was designed for cross-ventilation and very well insulated. Cram took a modest program and turned it into an expression of civic pride. The building was dedicated on October 17, 1926. In 1951, the original library building at Main and McKinney was renamed the Julia Ideson Building in honor of the first librarian, who had died in 1945. The Julia Ideson Building is an example of the library as a social institution as well as a center of scholarship.

On October 25, 1927, a visionary plan for a civic center for Houston was generated, all in the Spanish Renaissance style. The timing, however, was unfortunate. The land needed to realize

the plan was in private hands and would have called millions of dollars to purchase. The only part of the plan completed was the library.

In the 1930's three WPA murals were added. In the 1950's the library was renovated and a partner of William Ward Watkins added an addition that created additional collection and office space. In the 1970's, the loggias were enclosed for more circulation and office space, the City of Houston's first commitment to adaptive reuse of a city landmark.

Today there is no real civil center, and the Julia Ideson Building is very crowded, with poor air conditioning for the preservation of materials. But a massive project is now afoot to restore the Julia Ideson Library building to pristine 1910 historical condition. The historic interiors, reading rooms, and meeting rooms are being restored as public event space for the use of the City of Houston; the Texas Room, for example, will become the official "chamber of state" for the city. The building has wonderful moldings and fixtures, the Norma Meldrum children's room, an atrium, and, in the Texas Room, an art nook behind wooden gates whose case work is still there. The third floor has clerestories and a coffered ceiling, and wrought iron and glass vitrines. Three chairs from the Carnegie Library are still there and will be honored and dedicated. The Venus de Milo statue is still there.

Drawing from the myriad of historical drawings and photographs of the original building, the finished project will be a jewel for the city, and one of the most important restoration projects in decades. The Texas Room will become a reception hall for the City of Houston, which the City otherwise does not have, and the building will be available for special events. There will be a new conservation laboratory; the stacks will become an exhibition hall; and there will be both 20,000 square feet of linear shelves and an electronic library space. The library's rare books and excellent photo archives will have much better space than currently. Loggias will be added when there are enough funds.

Digitizing, archiving, and preserving of the collection is now ongoing. Digitizing of the collection should slow down the process of growth of the collection outstripping the building. Many things will not need to be kept on-site after digitization, but not everything will be digitized.

The project has a budget of \$25,000,000, including an \$8,000,000 commitment from the City. Construction will start in 1908.