

THE JULIA IDESON BUILDING



BILLY SMITH II PHOTOS / CHRONICLE

HISTORY, OUTSIDE AND IN: The Julia Ideson building was completed in 1926 to house the city's central library.

The building housing the city's collection of historical documents is too cramped, but a project aims to change that

Where the past is imperfect

By MIKE SNYDER
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

IN the early 1920s, Houston's leaders yearned to create elegant public spaces for their young city. They developed plans for a downtown complex of five municipal buildings, including a City Hall and a public auditorium, in an ornate Spanish Renaissance Revival style.

But the Great Depression intervened, and the only part of the plan that survived was the Julia Ideson building, completed in 1926 to house the city's central library. Even that building was incomplete, as a shortage of funds forced the city to scrap plans for a southern wing facing Lamar Street.

The legacy of that shortfall is still being felt more than 80 years later in cramped corridors, overflowing bookshelves and other problems in the rooms housing the city's primary collection of state and local historical documents, including millions of vintage photographs chronicling city life in Houston.

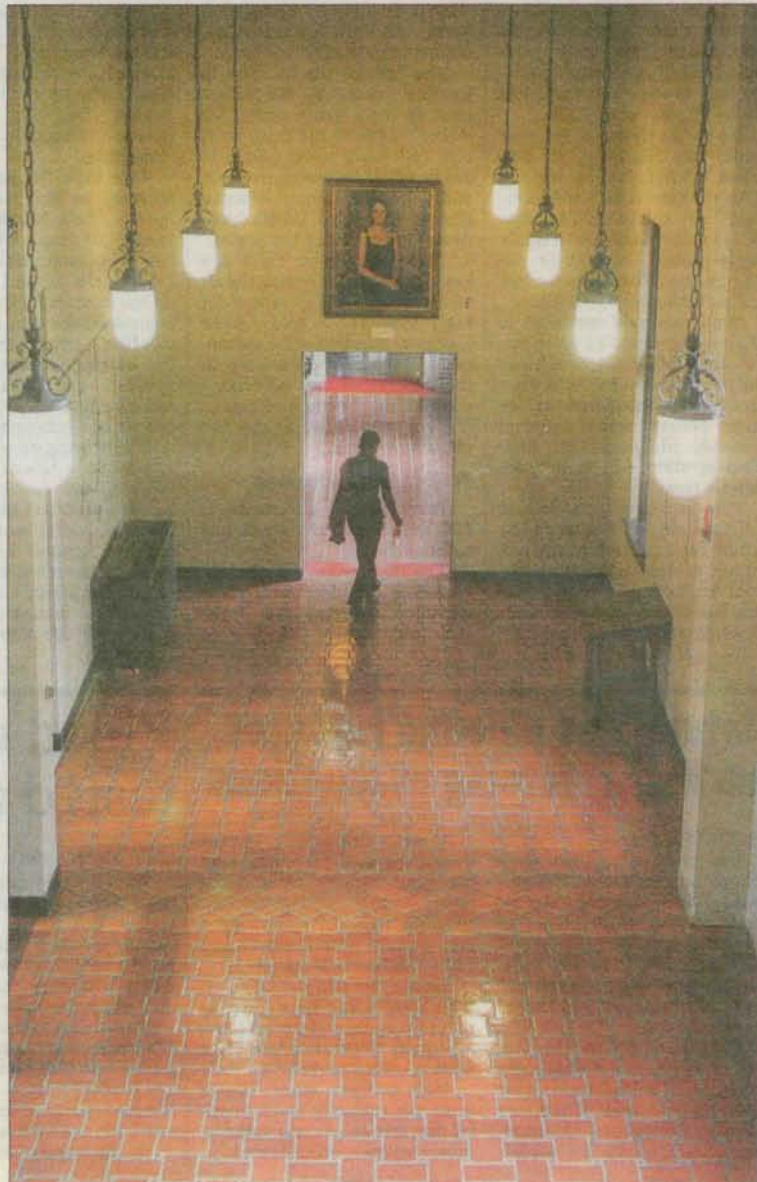
"Every time we add something, we find we are already bursting at the seams," said

Please see IDESON, Page B5

MAKING SPACE FOR HISTORY

Goals of the fundraising project include:

- **A new wing:** Build originally planned southern wing to add space for historical collections
- **New technology:** Install technology to control temperature, light and humidity to protect old documents
- **Public amenities:** Add amenities such as a coffee shop or space for historical exhibits



ORNATE: A patron walks in a corridor of the Julia Ideson building, which is named after the city's first professional librarian.

★★
TUESDAY
JANUARY 30, 2007

HOUSTON  CHRONICLE
chron.com

CITY & STATE

COMING WED

■ HISD's Las Ar school is looking home for next s

ENVIRONMENT, SCIENCE & SPACE | TRAFFIC | OBITUARIES | EDITORIALS | OUTLOOK

CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1

Steve Hill, manager of the library's Texas Room, where students, writers and history buffs pore over old documents that staffers retrieve from the stacks.

At Mayor Bill White's request, a group of preservationists has launched a fundraising campaign to expand and enhance the Ideson building, which has been the primary repository for local historical documents since 1976.

The group, Julia Ideson Library Preservation Partners, hopes to build the originally planned wing and to make other improvements. A key goal is to add modern equipment to maintain temperature, humidity and light levels to preserve fragile old documents.

Private funds sought

The cost has not been determined, but "it's going to be really expensive," said Phoebe Tudor, who chairs the organization. White has agreed to provide some city funds, she said, but the bulk of the money will have to be raised privately.

The organization is seeking ideas from the public through a questionnaire posted on its Web site, www.ideson.org. It will incorporate those ideas in proposals to foundations for the project, Tudor said.

The Ideson building, named after Houston's first professional librarian, housed the central library until 1976, when a new facility was built across McKinney Street. Since then it has housed a growing collection of historical documents that now includes more than 125,000 architectural drawings and 3.5 million photographs from Houston's origins in the 1830s to the present.

Struggling to find space

The stacks are so crowded that archivists struggle to find space for new collections. Some books are inserted haphazardly on overcrowded shelves; framed posters lean against walls.

Sally Reynolds, a writer working on a book about local artists' recollections of the city, came to the Ideson building Monday to review photographs that would give her a sense of what Houston was like in the 1950s.

"This is a little treasure trove for Houston," Reynolds said. "These are our roots right here, and we've got to water them."

The goal of the restoration project is not just to create more space, Tudor said, but also to provide amenities that will make the building and its resources more accessible to the public. This could include exhibit space for historical artifacts, a coffee shop, improved wireless Internet access and other features, she said.

mike.snyder@chron.com