ZEST

Dusting off the archive

Houston's first library building is set for a major face-lift

Meeting of t h e Houston Lyceum Committee": Was there ever such a title to stir the soul? And was there ever a subject so riveting as the 1854 founding of our city's library system? Could anyone fail to be moved by the pale book lovers convened on and around a living-room couch?

Ruth Pershing Uhler's mural cracks me up, but she appears to have been dead serious when she painted it, in the mid'30s, above a stairway in the downtown Julia Ideson Building. The combination of

Ideson Building. The combination of "Houston" and "Lyceum" seems not to have tickled Ms. Uhler, who rendered the library's genesis with absolute earnestness.

There was a time when civilizing our swamp was a serious business.

The marvelous, strange Julia Ideson Building, home of Houston's first city-run library, dates back to that unironic era. Built in 1926, it was designed mainly by Ralph Adams Cram, the Boston architect who set the tone for Rice University's campus.

Like Rice's early buildings, the Ideson drips with architectural, European-ish details: red-tile roofing, cast-iron light fixtures, columns and pilasters, medallions and arches, skinny sculptural cherubs amid palm fronds and flowers.

Crembs amid paim fronds and flowers.

Cram drew inspiration for the library from Renaissance Spain, a time and place laughably removed from 1920s Houston.

But the results spoke for themselves.

The three-story building seems a little



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STATELY STRUCTURE: The Julia Ideson Building on McKinney is the home of Houston's first city-run library. The building was built in 1926 and was designed by Ralph Adams Cram.

small for its grand treatment, in part because Cram designed a back wing that the city couldn't afford. But wing or no wing, the library's aspirations soared as high as its coffered ceilings.

You didn't have to see the Venus de Milo knockoff to know that you were in the hallowed presence of Culture.

Until 1976, the Julia Ideson Building was the downtown library. But Houston outgrew it, and after the big, strenuously modern Central Library opened across the plaza, the Ideson was relegated to housing the city's archives.

Hardly anybody went there anymore. In our casual age, when adults wear shorts and ballcaps in public, the building's effort to civilize its city seemed quaint, about as relevant to daily life as the Lyceum ladies' hoop skirts.

But that might be about to change. With the backing of a group as earnest in its way as the old Houston Lyceum, the building is preparing for a comeback.

Old building, new life

Barry Moore, the Gensler architect in charge of the plans, lights up when he enters the Ideson. As a kid, he discovered the Oz series in the library's downstairs children's room. The room, he notes, still has the child-size chairs that were built into its massive bookcases.

For the new Julia Ideson Preservation Partners, Moore is drawing plans to add an updated version of the wing Cram envisioned but couldn't build.

From the outside, Moore says, the new wing will look as much as possible like the rest of the building, but inside, it'll be designed with all the modern archival stuff that the Ideson sorely needs: digital copying, tighter security and the temperature, humidity and light controls needed to preserve things made of paper.

That frees the grand old part of the building to become, once again, a thoroughly public space, open to all comers as a reading room, exhibition hall and the official reception hall for the city of Houston. (City Hall is only a short stroll away.)

The price tag? Around \$33 million, about a third of which has already been raised. (The city will kick in around \$8 million, and Phoebe and Bobby Tudor have committed \$2 million.)

The work could begin as soon as June, after renovation of downtown's Central Library is finished.

In October, Mayor White spoke at a fundraising dinner on the library's second floor. He urged the heavy-hitting potential donors to look up at the building's high ceiling and to think about how high Houston once set its sights.

He made an old-fashioned call to civic duty. And in that old-fashioned, high-minded space, it was possible to take the notion seriously. □

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