

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Julia Ideson Building
OWNER: City of Houston
APPLICANTS: Barbara A. Gubbin, Library Department
LOCATION: 500 McKinney

AGENDA ITEM: IV
HPO FILE NO: 96L001
DATE ACCEPTED: Jan-17-1996
HAHC HEARING: Mar-14-1996

SITE INFORMATION

Being Lots 1 through 12, Block 147, SSBB, City of Houston, being bounded by Smith (East), Lamar (South), Bagby (West), and McKinney (North) Streets. The Julia Ideson Building on the site is three story and L-shaped in design with buff-colored brick and concrete which is enhanced with limestone and marble trim. The main entrance fronts McKinney Street.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Julia Ideson Building, one of the finest examples of Spanish Renaissance style of architecture in Houston, was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on November 23, 1977, under criterion "A" and "C" (reference #77001447).

The Julia Ideson Building is significant in four different areas: 1) The building was part of pre-depression Houston city planning. A plan that called for a complex of municipal buildings in downtown with this type of architecture. The Ideson Building was the only building constructed in the overall plan. 2) It is distinctive in its architectural design. Built in 1926 from designs of noted architect, Dr. Ralph Adams Cram of Cram and Ferguson, Boston, it was a style prominent in early twentieth century American and Texas history. There are only a few remaining examples of this type of architecture. 3) Since the Ideson Building's construction, its interior has been decorated with eight P.W.A. murals, a type of art that is an important part of our heritage. 4) The building is significant because the Houston Public Library has designated it as the home of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, a prototype of research institutions for the study of the urban experience and for the dissemination of that knowledge.

RESTORATION HISTORY/CURRENT CONDITION

In 1956, the west wing was expanded and original sections of the library were altered according to plans prepared by Louis A. Glover, architect.

In 1977 the City of Houston applied for and received a federal emergency local Public Works grant and combined with library bond funds was able to accomplish the restoration and renovation.

Undertaken by S.I. Morris Associates, the restoration and renovation marked the city's first commitment in many years to the adaptive use of a significant urban landmark. Most of the building's principal public spaces were returned to their original condition, a process which involved the undoing of many alterations made during the previous remodeling and expansion. Renovation and landscaping were completed in 1979.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend designation of the Julia Ideson Building as a Landmark to the Planning Commission since the application complies with the applicable criteria of Section 33-224.

APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION

According to the approval criteria in Section 33-224 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance:

The Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission shall recommend to the Planning Commission with respect to designation of a Landmark upon finding that the application satisfies the following criteria, as applicable:

- (1) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is identified with a person who, or group or event that, contributed significantly to the cultural or historical development of the city, state, or nation.

As early as 1920, Julia Ideson, the librarian of the City of Houston, issued concern that the old Houston Lyceum and Carnegie Library, built in 1904 to house the city's public library, was "almost intolerable." The library had greatly outgrown the present facility which could not be remodeled or expanded on its present site. Ideson traveled to other cities to tour public libraries and received good advice from other librarians, including "build something that will fit into your daily life and be part of it and build with as few partitions as possible so that with the needs of the library changing, your floor space can be adapted to them." She also noted that the new libraries were included as parts of recently planned or completed civic centers. The library board selected Ralph Adams Cram of Boston with William Ward Watkin and Louis A. Glover as associate architects. Not only was Cram an architect of national prominence, but he was well known in Houston for his buildings for the Rice Institute. Ideson prepared for Cram a detailed plan which reflected an increasingly widespread tendency to regard public libraries as social institutions and centers of community activity as well as preserves of scholarship. On the suggestion of then mayor, Oscar Holcombe, the building was to face Martha Hermann Square and McKinney Street, which permitted the subsequent use of the Square as a common element about which other municipal buildings, including the future city hall, could be grouped to form the semblance of a civic center. In 1955, the City of Houston Public Library was renamed the Julia Ideson Building, in honor of the city's librarian who dedicated her talents and time to its existence.

- (2) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area exemplify a particular architectural style or building type important to the city;

When Cram was chosen as architect, he had just returned from Spain where he became enthusiastic about the Spanish Renaissance architecture there. Cram's choice of the Spanish Renaissance style for the building was in part conditioned by his distaste for the more erudite monumental architecture of the Renaissance in Italy – an attitude which placed him at odds with the main current of public buildings in the United

States during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the so-called “American Renaissance” led by McKim, Mead and White. In the flamboyant (literally “silver-work-like”) architecture of the early Renaissance in Spain, Cram discerned “a style of exceeding beauty” rescued by its naiveté from what he viewed as the aridity and intellectual over-determination of most Renaissance buildings. Whatever the merits of Cram’s analysis, the choice of the Spanish Renaissance was supported not only by its visual appeal but by its indirect association with the colonial past of the southwestern United States, for as William Ward Watkin noted, it was the “very style that explorers and priests had reembodyed in their missions of Spanish America.” Moreover, the design yielded a building whose dignity and repose were at once congruent with the aspirations of Houston’s City Beautiful movement.

At the dedication ceremonies on October 17, 1926, Watkin reminded the assembled public that although “the problem of the architect in modern civilization embodies a wider complexity than in the past,” it did not obscure the essential goal “that the architectural character of so unique and distinctive a public memorial shall possess that first, last and single measurement of architecture which is beauty.” The Ideson Building, today as more than fifty years ago, still sets a standard against which the city’s public architecture and civic commitment must be measured.

SITE LOCATION MAP

