

Checking Out The Branches

BY MARGARET CULBERTSON

The Houston Public Library's 34 freestanding branches are as diverse as the neighborhoods they serve. They represent the work of 30 architects, the styles of six decades, and the philosophies of four library directors. Several are worthy of note for their design, while others are more pleasant or serviceable than exciting.

Even during its earliest years, the Houston Public Library made efforts to extend its services into the city's neighborhoods. When funds were barely sufficient for a central library, the library's then-director, Julia Ideson, still organized numerous outreach projects. From 1908 to 1921 the library placed book deposit collections in schools, churches, businesses, and clubs.

In addition, from 1910 to 1912, the Library operated a separate branch for African-Americans in rented quarters while funds were raised for a permanent building. That temporary branch was replaced in 1913 by a building designed in a classical revival style by prominent African-American architect William Sidney Pittman. The branch stood at the corner of Frederick and Robin Streets until 1962, when it was demolished. The existence of that branch, only a few blocks from the central library, as well as its official name, the Colored Carnegie Library, reflected the times.

A major turning point for the library came in 1921 with the approval of a library tax that provided the funds needed to operate a network of branches. Money was still needed for construction, however, and while that was being sought the library built two identical temporary buildings for the Heights and the area north of Buffalo Bayou known as the North Side. Designed by city architect W. A. Dowdy and completed in the fall of 1921, these bungalow-style branches matched the appearance of much of the housing in their neighborhoods, but could not hold many people or books within their 28-foot by 40-foot spaces. In 1922, when the city passed a bond issue to build a much needed new central library, the sale of the original downtown library's site funded construction of two permanent branches to replace these temporary buildings.

The permanent North Side branch — named the Carnegie Branch in recognition of the Carnegie grant that had funded construction of the original downtown

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Heights Branch, 1302 Heights Boulevard, J.M. Glover, 1926; renovation, Ray Bailey Architects, 1979.



Looscan Branch, 2510 Willowick, Harvin C. Moore, 1956.



Oak Forest Branch, 1349 West 43rd Street, Goleman & Rolfe, 1961.



Kendall Branch, 14330 Memorial Drive, Alexander, Walton & Hatteberg, 1968.



Moody Branch, 9525 Irvington, Chan Knostman & Webster, 1969.



Bracewell Branch, 10115 Kleckley, Neuhaus & Taylor, 1969.



Melcher Branch, 7200 Keller, W. Norris Moseley, 1974.



Pleasantville Branch, 1520 Gellhorn, W. Norris Moseley, 1974.



Smith Branch, 3624 Scott Street, John S. Chase, 1974; renovation, Ziegler Cooper, 2001.



Frank Branch, 6440 West Bellfort, Barry Moore, 1982.



Carnegie Branch, 1050 Quitman, Ray Bailey Architects, 1982.



Flores Branch, 110 North Milby, Molina & Associates, 1982.



Freed-Montrose Branch, 4100 Montrose, conversion of William Ward Watkin's 1941 Central Church of Christ, Ray Bailey Architects, 1988.



Clayton Library Center for Genealogical Research, 5300 Caroline, conversion of Birdsall Briscoe's 1917 William L. Clayton House, 1966; renovation and addition of new building, Brooks Associates, 1988.



Robinson-Westchase Branch, 3223 Wilcrest, White Budd Van Ness Partnership, 1991.



Meyer Branch, 5005 West Bellfort, Charles S. Chan, 1962.



Lakewood Branch, 8815 Feland Street, Joseph Krakower, 1963.



Ring Branch, 8835 Long Point, Hamilton Brown, 1964.



Walter Branch, 7660 Clarewood, Harvin C. Moore, 1965 (presently under renovation).



Vinson Branch, 3100 West Fuqua, Clovis Heimsath Associates, 1969



Hillendahl Branch, 2436 Gessner Road, Pitts, Phelps & White, 1971.



McCrane-Kashmere Gardens Branch, 5411 Pardee Street, Don J. Tomasco & Associates, 1971.



Dixon Branch, 8002 Hirsch, A.A. Joffrion of Stran Steel Corporation, 1972.



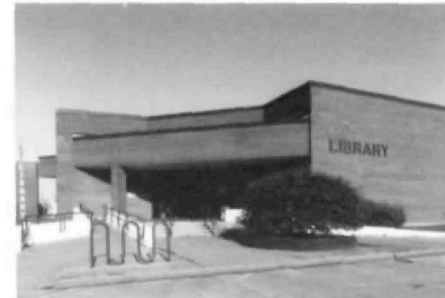
Jungman Branch, 5830 Westheimer, W. Irving Phillips Jr. and Robert W. Peterson, 1975.



Acres Homes Branch, 8501 West Montgomery, Haywood, Jordan, McCowan, 1976.



Tuttle Branch, 702 Kress, W. Norris Moseley, 1978.



Mancuso Branch, 6767 Bellfort, Charles Chan and Philip Chang, 1980.



Collier Regional Branch, 6200 Pinemont, MRW Architects, 1985.



Scenic Woods Regional Branch, 10677 Homestead Road, James. L. Marshall Associates, 1986



Henington-Alief Branch, 7979 South Kirkwood, White Budd Van Ness Partnership, 1985; addition, Lo & Associates, 1995.



Stanaker Branch, 611 S. Sgt. Macario Garcia, Molina & Associates, 1986.



Park Place Branch, 8145 Park Place, Farrell, Sumdin + Partners, Architects, 1995.



Johnson Branch, 3517 Reed Road, Ferro-Saylors, Inc., 1996.



Stimley-Blue Ridge Branch, 7007 West Fuqua, Stoa International, 1999.

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library — opened in November 1925. W. A. Dowdy designed the branch in a style derived from Monticello, using red brick and featuring a white neo-classical portico. The building was demolished in 1982 when the current Carnegie Branch opened.

The Heights Branch opened in March 1926 and has survived to the present day with a thoughtful renovation and expansion by Ray Bailey Architects in 1979. The original Heights Branch was designed by J.M. Glover, who created a building constructed of hollow tile and stucco with cast stone Italian Renaissance details. The arched entrance clearly indicates the significance of the building's purpose, and the generous proportions of the interior spaces are in keeping with the scale of the entrance. However, the building remains welcoming, perhaps because of a recessed door within the projecting entrance that presents an open archway to the public.

When Park Place was incorporated into Houston in 1928, the Houston Public Library assumed responsibility for its branch library, which was then in a rented building. Money for new construction was hard to obtain during the Depression, but representatives of community organizations seeking to build a more permanent home for the branch successfully applied for a Federal Public Works Administration grant in 1938 that was matched by contributions from individuals, the City of Houston, and the Houston Public Library. Designed by Houston architects Ainsworth and Irvine, the new branch represented the restrained simplicity of much New Deal architecture. However, as in the Heights Branch, a projecting arched entranceway communicated both the significance of the building's purpose and an invitation to the public to enter.

One final pre-World War II branch opened in February 1941 on Washington Avenue at Roy Street. Named the West End Branch, it was an early example of adaptive reuse. Louis A. Glover designed the renovation of a one-story structure that had been the Water Works Building for Camp Logan during World War I.

When construction of new branches became feasible again after World War II, the library began by planning or updating branches in well-established neighborhoods that demonstrated strong interest and support. Central Park Branch on 69th Street at Canal opened in 1950, the Heights Branch was enlarged in 1951, and the Park Place Branch was enlarged in 1953. Also in 1953, then-library director Harriet Dickson Reynolds, along with the city planning department, produced a study discussing the library system's growth. Planning documents and studies continued to be produced over the years as the library grappled with the issues involved in providing service to a constantly growing city. Politics, as well as the studies, contributed to the decisions about where and when branches would be built. Four branches were built in the 1950s, 11 in the 1960s, nine in the 1980s, and four in the 1990s.

Several interesting branches date from the period when David Henington, who was library director from 1967 to 1994, headed the library system. It was a time of significant growth, with 25 new branches and branch additions built. Henington demonstrated a particular interest in working with architects to obtain good designs. He remembers having to answer city officials who felt that all new branches should be designed alike, as if they were fast-

food franchises. But, he says, the people running the library "wanted distinctive buildings that could become focal points for their communities." When Henington hired Len Radoff as his chief of branches in 1971, a well-balanced team for encouraging inventive designs, while still ensuring functional libraries, was formed.

The Vinson Branch in 1969 was one of the first to be built under Henington's direction, and it clearly presented a different approach to branch design for the city. Designed by Clovis Heimsath, the Vinson Branch features a curving street façade with serpentine windows and dramatic spatial progression through a low entrance to a high central space lit by clerestory windows. Natural light pours into the interior from a number of different levels and directions. Unfortunately, the exterior did not wear well, and problems with leaking skylights led the library to limit their use in future branches. Still, the Vinson Branch made an impact; when it opened, the *Houston Chronicle* greeted its arrival with a story headlined, "A Library Doesn't Have To Be Stodgy."

Other highlights of the Henington years included the Jungman, Acres Homes, Carnegie, and Freed-Montrose branches. In the Jungman Branch, 1975, architects W. Irving Phillips Jr. and Robert W. Peterson created a visually arresting exterior to stand out in the branch's busy Westheimer setting. Architects Haywood, Jordan, McCowan Inc. designed a particularly strong interior for the Acres Homes Branch, 1976, where open timbers of light-colored wood support the high roof. A cooperative arrangement with the Houston Independent School District and Houston Community College enabled the library to make the new Carnegie Branch, 1982, an unusually large building. Ray Bailey Architects designed angled glass walls to face the two schools served by the branch; the side facing a commercial area was given a brightly colored stucco entrance wall. Ray Bailey Architects also designed the adaptive renovation of the 1941 William Ward Watkin Central Church of Christ into the Freed-Montrose Branch, 1988. Stained glass in the west rose window graces the upstairs reading room with its colors, but clear glass in the other windows and in the original openings for the west doors provide views of the library's collections and users to those outside, visually confirming the building's new identity.

The Johnson Branch, 1996, is one of the most interesting built under the leadership of current library director Barbara Gubbin, who succeeded David Henington in 1994. The building manages to look both monumental and inviting. Ferro-Saylors Inc. designed a large-scale building in which exterior color is a major design element. A green metal roof crowns walls of standard buff bricks interrupted by square ceramic tiles of red and orange. The colored tiles animate the façade and highlight the building's windows and corners. The high, vaulted space of the entrance continues through the length of the building to the far wall, where artist John Biggers' spectacular mural "The Birth of the Sea" is dramatically placed.

Since the library under Barbara Gubbin's leadership has not succumbed to the cookie-cutter approach to branch design, there is hope that as the system continues to expand, it can do so in buildings that will visually please their users and contribute to the appearance of their neighborhoods. ■

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plexes was .30 GSF/capita; in Houston, it was .20 GSF/capita. Rating resources, funding, staffing, and facilities, the Houston Public Library System ranked in the lower fourth of public library systems serving cities of similar size.

Obviously, more was needed than just a new central library. "We wanted to determine what the services should be, the staffing, the resources," Barbara Gubbin, director of the Houston Public Library System, says of the research that led to *Library 2010*. "And what became very obvious was that once you look at services, you realize the services are delivered from buildings. So a big part of the question became, what should the buildings look like? And how many should there be?"

The master plan's answer was that the city needed to build three new neighborhood branches and replace 14 existing branches with new facilities, all ranging in size from 22,000 gross square feet to 30,000 gross square feet. Four existing branches were recommended for renovation. It was further suggested that to strengthen the library system's regional structure, five regional libraries of 32,000 to 65,000 gross square feet be established, either by expanding or simply replacing the existing regional libraries. The result would be more than a doubling of the size of the neighborhood branches, at a cost of nearly \$154 million. Added to that was the proposed new central library, a 400,000 gross square foot structure (the Jones Building, in contrast, is 244,000 gross square feet) that would cost in the neighborhood of \$137 million.

It was, Gubbin admits, an ambitious plan. But it was also one that, as the master plan was presented at public meetings in early 2001, generated considerable support. "We found that people were very, very committed to their neighborhood branches," says Gubbin. "We had recommended that some branches be closed and consolidated, and there was a lot of objection to that. But when we asked if people would be willing to pay more for larger branches and better service at their branches, they almost always said yes."

When it came to the central library, though, it was a different story. "We very clearly got the message that some people thought that not much needed to be done downtown," Gubbin notes. "And even among those who felt the downtown central library needed work,

they wanted attention paid to their neighborhood branch first. That's one of the challenges with a central library — it's everybody's library, but it's nobody's library at the same time. It could be that, five years from now, as more and more people move downtown, that will change. Within five years we anticipate 40,000 people living within two miles of the central library, and when that happens, attitudes may be different. But for now, we've been told to pay attention to the neighborhood branches first, and then come talk about the central library."

Over the years, Houston has had three central libraries. The first, built with a gift of \$50,000 obtained from Andrew Carnegie, was erected in 1904 on Main Street. Called the Houston Lyceum and Carnegie Library, the building, as described in *Lyceum to Landmark: The Julia Ideson Building of the Houston Public Library*, was a "miniature temple decked with neoclassical porticoes and a central dome." It soon proved too small for a growing city, however, and in 1926 was replaced by the Julia Ideson Building, designed by Cram & Ferguson, William Ward Watkin, and Louis A. Glover. In an echo of what would be decided nearly 75 years later during the gathering at the Jones Building, the Ideson Building was not built as an extension of, or an on-site replacement for, the then existing central library. Expansion of the Houston Lyceum and Carnegie Library was prevented by a nearby church and escalating land values along Main, and so the Ideson Building was located instead on McKinney Avenue, then a relatively undeveloped part of downtown. The Ideson Building served as the city's central library for 50 years, before being supplanted in 1976 by the Jones Building.

That the Jones Building should have outlived its usefulness in barely half the time of its predecessor is less a testimony to any problems with its design — though some who have worked there complain that by having the service core rise through the middle, effectively breaking each floor into four separate wings, the flow of both patrons and staff has been made problematic — than it is to the explosive growth of Houston since the mid-'70s, as well as the dramatic changes in recent years concerning what libraries are expected to be.

"People don't view libraries the way