



Reading Room

With its new master plan,
the Houston Public Library
has outlined an ambitious future.
But is the city willing to pay for it?

BY MITCHELL J. SHIELDS



The Jesse H. Jones Building, designed by S.I. Morris Associates and opened in 1976, has served as the Houston Public Library's central branch for a quarter of a century. But it may no longer be up to the job.

THE TASK SEEMED STRAIGHTFORWARD enough: determine a way that the Jesse H. Jones Building, the central core of the Houston Public Library System, could continue to serve the city for a few more decades. So in mid-1999, a group of library officials, architects, and library consultants met in the 25-year-old Jones Building to consider their options. For five intense days they debated a series of possibilities, all designed to solve the same problem — space.

Opened in 1976, the Jones Building had simply not kept pace with the community around it. Too, it had the bad luck of being built just prior to the computer and technology boom of the 1980s and 1990s. Not only was there not enough room for the number of people who wanted to use the library, there also wasn't enough room for the wiring and other services needed to accommodate computer terminals and allow for easy access to the internet.

So what was the solution? The experts began with an apparently obvious answer: Add two floors to the building, increasing its size by 70,000 square feet. But it was quickly discovered that wouldn't work. The Jones Building had not been designed for vertical expansion, and to reinforce its structure to support two additional floors would be prohibitively expensive.

So then thoughts moved to expanding the building horizontally, letting it grow out into the plaza between it and the Julia Ideson Building. But that, too, proved problematic. Some were concerned about losing the public space that the plaza represented, but more practically, the plaza covers two below-grade levels of the library that house the Children's Room, Technical Services, and public parking. Building on the plaza would entail tearing through those structures to create a new foundation. Again, the expense would be immense, and the space gained only some 45,000 square feet, barely half of what was needed.

Another alternative was to build a 15,000 square foot "book box" that would be attached to the Lamar Street side of the Ideson Building. Then the books being stored on the Jones' Building's fifth floor could be moved there, and that floor opened up for public use. But again, the cost measured against what would be gained made the idea less than appealing. And when the negative impact such a book box would have on the Ideson Building, which would lose much of its surrounding green space and be blocked from public view on its south side, was factored in, it was clear this was not a solution anyone would care to live with.

Was there any other space to expand horizontally? Unfortunately, no. The Jones Building was hemmed in on all sides by Sam Houston Park, City Hall, and privately owned commercial property. So why not simply tear the Jones Building down and start all over again on the same site? The difficulty with that idea was that it would require that the central library be relocated to a temporary site for three to five years while construction was underway. At the same time, to meet city parking requirements, the replacement library would have to have at least four levels of below-ground parking, an expensive proposition. And then there was the problem of losing the Jones Building, which despite its various problems is considered by many a handsome work of civic archi-

ture. Designed by S.I. Morris Associates, it has been praised for its striking prismatic design. Even if it had been outgrown as a central library, the argument went, the Jones Building still retained value for other purposes.

And that left only one option — a brand new central library building in a new location, a building that could be constructed not only to meet current needs, but also with expansion in mind, a building that could be designed to respond to the demands of a new century. At the end of the five day gathering, as they packed up their pads and pens, the library officials, architects, and experts knew that starting fresh was the best way to give Houston the sort of central library it needed. The only question was, would the city agree?

It has been nearly two years since the meeting to debate the fate of the Jones Building was held, and in that time the administrators of the Houston Public Library have talked little about the need for a new central library building. It's not that there's been any attempt to keep the discussion secret; to the contrary, library officials are happy to list all the advantages a new central library would bring. But the public hasn't exactly been clamoring for that information. Instead, the public has seemed much more interested in the future of its local branches.

A discussion of that future, along with the call for a new central library, was part of *Library 2010*, a master plan for the Houston library system that was released in its initial form in early 2000, and has since slowly wended its way through presentations to local officials and the public review process. The primary purpose of the master plan was to address what had been a long period of neglect. As the plan notes, though the library system prospered in the 1970s, in the 1980s it suffered severe budget reductions, so much so that for close to two decades the system was in what was essentially a holding pattern. By the time the master plan was developed, the library system was viewed as both overburdened and underequipped. When compared against library systems in other major cities, it fared poorly. Where the national average for the total size of neighborhood branch libraries was .24 gross square feet per capita (GSF/capita), in Houston it was .18 GSF/capita. The national average for central library com-

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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 Heimath, 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



Rem Koolhaas' design for a central library in Seattle has created a stir in library circles, and offers suggestions for new ways to look at what a library should be.

Courtesy Seattle Public Library

they once did," says Gubbin. "Yes, there are those who still see libraries as book depositories, as simply quiet places to sit and read, but there are others who see a library as much more of a community center, a media center, and who aren't into being shushed. So we have to figure out how to deal with both types, to provide a place for quiet study, but to have places for more robust activities as well."

The last decade has seen a number of cities replace their aging central libraries. Chicago recently opened a new central library, as have Denver and Phoenix. Nashville will unveil a new central facility later this year, while Minneapolis has passed a bond issue for a library and discussion is underway about building something new in Kansas City.

In many cases, the new libraries have simply been bigger versions of their predecessors, with the printed word dominating. But some communities are wrestling with the evolving notion of what a library should be. One of the most notable is Seattle, whose new central library is being designed by Rem Koolhaas. Composed of five discrete volumes perched one on top of another, Koolhaas' library contains a square spiral of books that creates a continuous flow that starts at the beginning of the Dewey Decimal system and continues uninterrupted to the system's end. But more crucially, Koolhaas has envisioned his library as something more than a repository of the written word. A modern library, Koolhaas insists, "must transform itself into an information storehouse aggressively orchestrating the coexistence of all available technologies."

In theory, at least, Houston library director Gubbin tends to agree with Koolhaas. Any new central library that might be built in Houston, she says, not only has to be able to cope with a variety of media, from books to videotapes to CDs and DVDs and whatever else might follow, it must also be flexible enough to accommodate both existing and emerging computer technology. Equally important, it has to balance between being a research facility and a public amenity.

"Inevitably, the Starbucks issue comes up," says Gubbin. "We are actually saying, radical thought, why not let people drink coffee in the stacks? Why not have a coffee shop, or a café, in the library? Why not a large auditorium

where we could partner with a theater group, letting them use it for performances while we use it for lectures and other public gatherings? Or for that matter, why not a copy shop instead of scattered copy machines? The library, we've come to realize, is a public space with a variety of public uses, and to attract people we have to determine the best way to accommodate those uses."

But that, of course, presupposes that a new central library will be built, something Gubbin acknowledges is very far from certain. Indeed, in the latest bond issue proposed to be placed before the public in November as part of a five-year capital improvement plan, the library system is allocated only \$56 million — enough for some continued renovation of branch libraries, perhaps, but hardly enough for any substantial new construction.

If a new central library is to be built, it may well require a special bond issue, and to build public support for such an initiative the first wave of improvements would likely have to be out in the neighborhoods, not downtown. But eventually, Gubbin hopes, people will realize that a library system can't survive without something strong at its core, and that something is no longer the Jesse H. Jones Building. Though plans are being developed to renovate the Jones Building's interior — a renovation that would not only deal with problems that have developed during years of deferred maintenance, but also radically reshape the way services are provided by making the first floor into the equivalent of a neighborhood branch for downtown — that is at best, Gubbin notes, a stopgap measure.

"It's possible for the library to go on doing the piecemeal renovation it has been doing," Gubbin says, "but I don't think the city deserves that. Because once it's done, even after we've spent a lot of money, we'll still have inadequate facilities. What I've heard in the meetings we've held is that people don't want that. They want something revolutionary."

Revolutions, though, don't always come easily, and they rarely come cheaply. So in the end the question remains, how much does the city think its library system is worth? And how much are they willing to pay for it? ■

Though no decision has been yet made on when — or, for that matter, if — a new central library might replace the Jesse H. Jones building, it's still not too early to begin thinking about where such a library might best be placed. Some might argue for a location near the current site, close to, if no longer quite in the heart of, the civic center downtown. But as Jane Jacobs has noted, lumping civic institutions together in mock-imperial arrays undermines their potential to enliven multiple parts of the city. Better, she advised, to station these components independently, like "vital chessmen," at judiciously chosen sites.

In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs points to the New York Public Library — originally deposited as a stand-alone civic ornament at Fifth Avenue and 41st Street — as an exemplar of her ideal of "the mingled city." Such a mingling is possible in Houston as well. Just as Houston's civic center spun off the business of its site-bound Albert Thomas convention facility in favor of the George R. Brown Hall on the east side of downtown, perhaps the main branch of the Houston Public Library might be relocated to similar advantage. In replacing the current central library, the city could do worse than to shop for an address on Main Street somewhere between downtown and the museum district. As it happens, the city already owns two blocks on the west side of Main just north of Holman; the library's collections might well find a hospitable venue there, near the main branch of Houston Community College, capitalizing on not just the land the city currently owns, but also the availability of several more undeveloped blocks nearby (to grow on). Aside from Metro's recently begun light rail line, which is to include a Holman Street station, the site is easily accessible from the freeway system via Spur 527 and Travis Street.

The development of a public library in collateral support of nearby educational activities has a precedent just north of downtown, where the library's Carnegie Branch is used not only as the neighborhood branch for the Near North Side, but also as the primary library for Davis High School and Marshall Middle School.

Main Chance

A library can help more than just minds to grow

BY DREXEL TURNER

A new central library on Main Street at Holman would relate not only to HCC's Main Street academic building, but to the other buildings of the HCC central campus, clustered several blocks east in the same latitude of Midtown, as well. Apart from its prospective town-gown synergy, a central library at Main and Holman would also advance the efforts of the Main Street Coalition to restore Main Street to its once prime position in the life of the city.

For the library to reach its full potential, however, a congenial location is not enough. The architecture needs to be a persuasive advertisement for what lies within, hospitable to the library's surroundings and indicative of its importance to the cultural life of the community. The building should also accommodate a range of activities conducive to institutional vitality and the enjoyment of its patrons, blending some of the elements of an athenaeum — lecture halls, dining and club rooms — with the customary features of a public library.

To maximize the potential of a Main Street site, a new Houston central library might provide for shops and cafés at ground level, as does Gunnar Asplund's Stockholm Public Library. It could build partnerships with, and provide generous accommodations for, organizations such as Writers in the Schools, Inprint, and Nuestra Palabra.

Vincent Scully has observed without exaggeration that "a free public library ... is by far the most important monument a city can build to itself and its people." As such, the new central library should be accorded the same level of architectural talent engaged for the city's museums, which since the mid-1980s have included buildings by three Pritzker Prize winners — Rafael Moneo, Renzo Piano, and Robert Venturi, the last of whom famously pronounced the American "Main Street almost all right" as a setting for public life. The right library in the right place could go a long way toward making Houston's Main Street more than all right. ■