



Preservation vs. Modernization: The Houston Heights Public Library

by Jason P. Theriot

Unless otherwise noted, all photographs are courtesy Heights Branch, Houston Public Library

Just before seven o'clock on the evening of March 1, 2001, more than one hundred residents of the Houston Heights community gathered outside of the historic Houston Heights Public Library for a monumental town hall meeting. The group closed ranks and marched into the library's community center where a public hearing on the library's future had just begun. Three library administrators and three consultants sat at the head of the meeting table and welcomed their unannounced guests. Recommendations from the "Library 2010 Strategic Master Plan" highlighted the opening discussion. As the Houston Public Library director laid out the recommended plans to "replace the Heights neighborhood library," shouts and angry comments burst from the agitated assembly.¹ The well-motivated, well-informed, and well-organized petitioners made clear their intentions to preserve their current historic structure and keep it a functioning library. In a jarring

display of community action, preservation won a small victory over modernization. "Community action," the *Houston Chronicle* declared, "has ended worries [that] the Houston Heights Library could be closed."²

The Houston Heights community has a unique and prestigious heritage dating back to its development at the end of the nineteenth century. In the post-Civil War period, Houston and Galveston became the two major cities along the northwest Gulf Coast. By the 1880s, the railroad came to southeast Texas and connected Houston to the rest of the growing industrialized nation. Within a decade, the population of Houston nearly doubled (from 9,332 in 1870 to 16,513 in 1880).³ However, a terrible outbreak of yellow fever prompted many inner-city residents to move further north to a tent city that had been erected along White Oak Bayou. This track of land, twenty-three feet higher in elevation than downtown, with rich fertile soil and illustrious vegetation, became known as "Houston Heights."

In 1886, Oscar Martin Carter, a self-made millionaire from Nebraska, came to Houston with an inspiring vision to build one of the nation's first "planned communities" along the outskirts of the growing metropolis city. Improvements to the ship channel, a rise in downtown construction, and a growing population fueled Carter's ambitions for developing the "ultimate neighborhood." The

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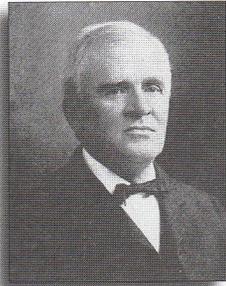
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entrepreneur set his sights on the Houston Heights.⁴

Carter, who foresaw the future need for a well-developed, middle-class community to support the emerging commercial city, convinced investors from the Omaha and South Texas Land Company to endorse his idea. In 1890, he purchased the existing trolley system—two mule-pulling carriages—that brought workers four miles from the Heights to downtown, and replaced it with a state-of-the-art electric streetcar operation—the first of its kind in Houston. The following year, Carter and his investors purchased 1,765 acres of land from Sarah Brasheur for \$45 an acre.⁵ Construction soon began on two bridges spanning White Oak Bayou, as workers cleared a track of land for the future Heights Boulevard. Carter not only influenced his partners to invest in the development of the Heights, including utilities, streets, parks, schools, and waterworks, but he also encouraged them to purchase lots and build homes of their own. In 1893, Silas Wilks, a carpenter for the Omaha and South Texas Land Company purchased the first lot in the Heights. That same year, the company's treasurer, D. D. Cooley, built the first home and the first two schools in the Heights. Other prominent businessmen within the firm followed suit: C. A. McKinney, N. L. Mills, David Barker, and John Milroy. These gentlemen and their families became the first citizens of the Houston Heights.

Within a few years, these real estate powerhouses turned an overcrowded tent city into a booming urban community. Business developments added to its appeal: a textile mill, a railroad station, a mattress factory, an electric company, a commercial strip with a grand hotel, and ice plants provided an economic boost to the new neighborhood. On July 1, 1896, the Houston Heights village became a municipality, and the community leaders elected William G. Love as their mayor.⁶ By the turn of the century, the Houston Heights had a post office, a volunteer fire service, and 800 residents, according to the U.S. Census of 1900.⁷

Community activities bustled down the beautiful Heights Boulevard with its plush scenery and grand Victorian-style homes. Civic clubs, such as the Heights Woman's Club, began holding regular meetings. Children and nature lovers flocked to Coombs



*Oscar Martin Carter,
Founder of the Houston
Heights.*

Courtesy Christopher Luke

Park—a 50-acre park along the White Oak Bayou—to swim and visit the zoo. A new theater opened and held frequent performances. The first local newspaper, the *Suburbanite*, went into print, and Reverend Fred Huhns founded the Baptist Temple Library—the precursor to the Heights Branch—in 1909.

Although the Heights flourished at the turn of the century, community and governmental leaders could not appropriate and collect the necessary taxes to fund all of the community's growing needs. It was therefore decided that the residents of the Heights would be best served under the municipal jurisdiction of Houston. In 1918, the city of Houston annexed the Heights.

In the late 1910s, as millions of barrels of crude oil gushed out of the rich Texas soil, and the population of the Heights increased accordingly, so too did the need for a fully functioning public library. Funds for such a project, while not available before the oil boom and the annexation period, began to surface in 1921. Soon thereafter, the Trustees and the Heights Committee decided to purchase a 150-by-150 foot site on the corner of 13th Street and Heights Boulevard for \$7,000. Centrally located in the heart of the Heights, this site would become the cultural center of the community—as it remains today. J. M. Glover was chosen as the architect and the Universal Construction Company received the contract to build the Houston Heights Public Library. In November 1925, the library moved from its vastly outgrown location at Heights Senior High School on 20th Street and Heights Boulevard (where it had been located since moving from the Baptist Temple Church in 1918), to its brand new building in the neighborhood's epicenter. The following year, on March 18, 1926, the Houston Heights Public Library received a formal dedication from the community in a grand ceremony.

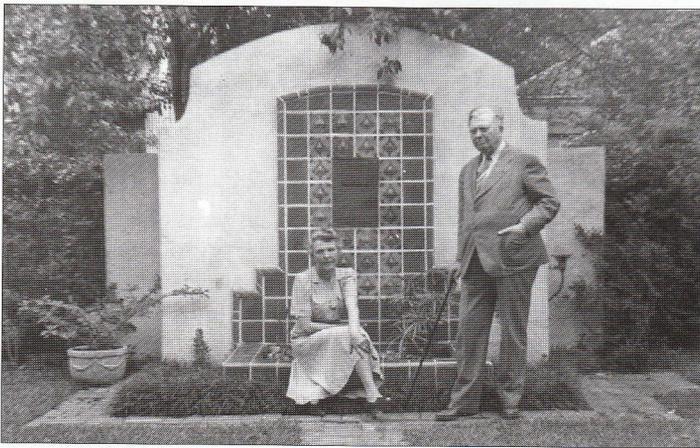
Built in an Italian Renaissance Revival style of pale pink stucco, high ceilings, and beautifully arched windows and doors, the Heights Branch—one of the first libraries built in Houston—became an instant hit with the community. A 1926 dedication summary reported, "Good advertising resulted from the move as evidenced by the first day's circulation, when 674 books were circulated, and from the first month's registration, when 215 persons became holders of library cards." During that same period, the branch circulated well over six thousands books from its collection. "Visitors come to the Library to inspect the new building," Branch librarian Harriet Dickson noted in the summary report, "and many of them express pride in its beauty to the desk assistant."⁸



South (above left) and north (above right) section of the library, c. 1920s.

In its first fifty years of service to the public, the Branch acquired numerous gifts from the community and allocated many improvements to the facility. In 1939, the Heights Woman's Club created a reading garden at the rear of the building. The club raised money and purchased a wrought iron fence to enclose the lush area. The women sought to pay tribute to the Heights' founder, O. M. Carter, by attaching the Victorian veranda railings from his demolished home to the latticework overgrown with vegetation in the north corner of the garden. That same year, Thomas B. Lewis, a Heights resident, donated a fountain in memory of his son, Sam Houston Lewis. Neighbors brought in plants and ferns, while the Heights Theater staged a benefit to raise money for the garden's new furniture. "The garden stands as a monument to the civic cooperation of scores of Heights residents," a local newspaper of the time stated.⁹ This "civic co-operation" became a driving force in preserving the Heights Library throughout its longevity.

In the early 1940s, the Houston Heights Public Library boasted more than 20,000 volumes in its collection. The library



Librarian Jimmie May Hicks and Mr. Thomas Lewis in front of the Sam Houston Lewis Memorial Fountain built in 1939.

lived up to its label as "the focal point of the Heights' cultural and civic life."¹⁰ It became a special place, not just for its beauty and as a center for learning, but also for community gatherings. Here local groups met to discuss important civic and local governmental issues. The first renovations came in 1951, which added a second floor to the north side of the building. Six years later, Mrs. A. A. Lesikar, a well-known library patron, began a campaign to have the Italian Renaissance building air-conditioned. When the city denied such an expensive upgrade, "civic co-operation" and community action made the addition a reality. Lesikar collected thousands of signatures and petitioned the city to act on the community's request. In the summer of 1957, the city approved more than \$86,000 for the Heights Library air conditioning project.¹¹

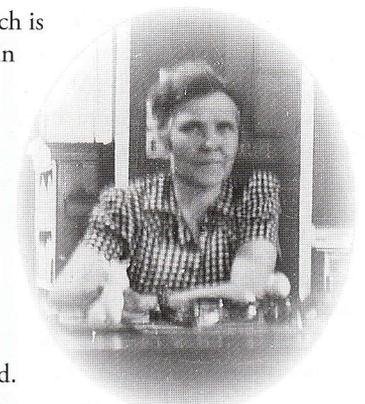
For more than three decades, one person helped the Heights Library evolve into a neighborhood cultural center: Miss Jimmie May Hicks. Hicks, an Irish Catholic born in southern Georgia, began her tenure as the Heights Branch Director in 1931. This extraordinary librarian had a special passion for books. "She was the most beloved member of the staff, both by the public and the other staff members," one librarian stated in a 1964 *Houston Post* article. "Her great talent was working with people. She had a real flair for understanding their needs."¹² As a leader, Hicks took great pride in educating and elevating her staff to a status that transcended their own capabilities as librarians. "We train them in the essentials

of taking care of the public—which is our main purpose," Hicks stated in an article, "then we expect them to carry on in their own way. I believe in every tub standing on it[s] own bottom."¹³

In 1946, as the Heights community celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, Hicks organized a committee to collect rare documents and photographs relating to the history of the neighborhood. Much of the research for Sister M. Agatha's 1956 book, *History of the Houston Heights*, originated from Hicks' undaunted determination

to preserve the history and the story of the Heights. According to friends and library patrons, Hicks personified leadership with a "warm and charming personality and [a] manner [that] came naturally to her in showing courtesy, consideration, kindness, compassion, affection and love for others."¹⁴ In the beautifully preserved entry vestibule of the Italian Renaissance building hangs a bronze plaque that commemorates the life and work of the Heights' most beloved librarian, Jimmie May Hicks.

During the 1940s and 1950s, major additions to citywide infrastructure in Houston had a reciprocating effect on the Heights. A massive increase in the Houston population, spurred by the region's booming oil, natural gas, and petrochemical industries, necessitated the expansion of the city's roadways. The opening of major highways in Houston allowed for an increase in mobility throughout the city and facilitated the rise of suburbia. As a result, the Heights suffered a sharp decline in residents, as a new class of Houstonians raced to the 'cookie-cutter' neighborhoods that popped up along the outskirts of the city. This period saw the Houston Heights go through its second major transformation: first from wilderness to development at the turn of the century, then to low-income housing that began invading the Heights district by the mid-twentieth century. Age-old Victorian-style homes that dotted Yale, Harvard, Oxford, and Tulane streets were left dilapidated and vacant, and many of them became low-rent apartment complexes.



Miss Jimmie May Hicks, Heights Branch Librarian, 1931-1964.

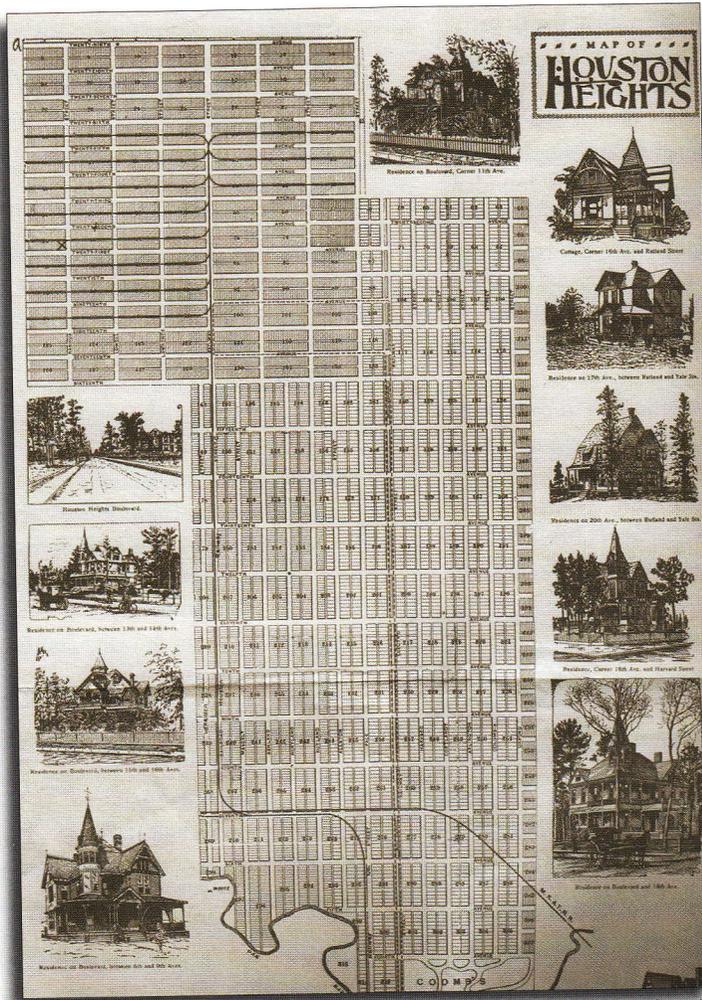


Children's Room at Heights Branch Library, 1961.

To combat the decline of the neighborhood, the Houston Heights Association (HHA) formed in 1973 to preserve the integrity of the Heights and to help restore the community to its former self. In 1974, the Heights Branch Library was named one of the bicentennial beautification projects. As the oil boom of the '70s caused an unprecedented increase in the local economy and population, it became apparent to the Heights community and to the Houston Public Library System that the 7,000-square-foot library facility on 13th Street and Heights Boulevard had outgrown its services. The first major confrontation with modernization emerged in 1977.

According to an article in *The Leader*, a local newspaper from the 1970s, "severe structural problems" led to the library's first major renovations, which took almost three years to complete.¹⁵ Len Radoff, chief of branch services of the Houston Public Library System in 1977, stated that heavy annual rainfall caused water damage to the walls, leaks in the roof, and flooding in the basement floor. With a price tag of \$800,000, the monumental renovations sought to restore and enlarge the historic building. Once finished, the improvements more than doubled the library's square footage, but it also drastically altered the allure of the handsome Italian Renaissance design. Nearly thirty years later, Heights' residents still question the unusual design scheme and why it was chosen.

"The Heights Library needed more space," stated Laura Thorp, former HHA president. "What was approved and built was a modern structure in total contrast to the original building. Not all in the community were pleased with the outcome, but that was the architectural trend of the times."¹⁶ The "modern structure" in question was a 3,000-square-foot addition along the north side of the building designed to enhance library functionality. The low profile backdrop encased in glass to promote "openness" is in sharp contrast to the library's handcrafted stonework, staccato roof, grand columns, and arched windows from the original 1920s design. The three-foot webbed steel trusses hover just over the tops of the added bookshelves in the new area. The entire wing is separated from the original building by a skylight. In continuing with the north wing addition, the architects designed three unique circular window frames to replace the original arched windows. On the east side of the library, architects designed a second modern wing to perform as a community-meeting center, which the Heights lacked at the time. For Ray Bailey and Associates, the architects of the 1977 renovation,



Courtesy Christopher Luke

this contrasting style characterized the cornerstone of their design concept.

The architects stated their mission at the outset of the project: to maintain and enhance the integrity of the building and to provide much needed floor space and shelving to the library. "We wanted to maintain all the nice features of the old building and yet meet the requirements of the new library programs," Ray Bailey remarked in a 1977 newspaper interview.¹⁷ Prior to receiving the job for the '77 renovation, Ray Bailey had been involved in the renovation and restoration of several older buildings in Houston. With a completely renovated facility on 13th Street and Heights Boulevard, the architects aimed to have the Heights Branch meet the standards for library safety and function.

City funds for this project, however, limited the scope of the design and eventual construction. It was not economically feasible to design and build an addition that mirrored the 1920s craftsmanship of the existing building. Additionally, the designers from the

Ray Bailey firm expressed the concern that designing the addition in the same style as the existing building would disrupt its vibrant architectural symmetry. According to Sims McCutchan, former Heights Branch manager, it was possible that the later National Register listing might have been compromised had such an addition been made.¹⁸

The decision was based largely on the amount of funds available for the project. The bond's funds allotted for the renovations were not sufficient; therefore the library turned to the community development programs to cover the remaining costs.¹⁹ An estimated \$650,000 became available from a municipal bond, with the extra \$150,000 coming from community development funds.²⁰ Unable to match the style of the original building given the enormous cost of building materials, the architects developed the modern "adjoining building" concept. The architects hoped that by updating the old library building with modern adjoining buildings, they would achieve a harmonious balance that would not detract from the beauty and the essence of the Italian Renaissance look.

According to McCutchan, Ray Bailey's team made "informal efforts" to solicit ideas and advice from the staff and the community.²¹ The architects gave presentations on the design scheme to the Heights Association and its Restoration Committee.

Unfortunately, one of the long appreciated features of the Heights Branch had to be replaced in order to accommodate for the east wing addition. The architects designed the much-needed

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community meeting center in place of the existing reading garden. The Heights Library archives are rich with articles, stories, and photographs of the garden's past. For many years, annual Easter egg hunts in the botanical oasis brought in dozens of neighborhood children and their parents. A handful of residents from the area complained about the garden's replacement, however, a transition to a large community meeting center became necessary. With seating available for seventy people—plus a smaller conference room,



The Heights Woman's Club raised funds to build a wrought iron fence for the Heights Library Garden in 1939. Many Heights residents were sad to see the library's garden be replaced by the new community meeting room nearly four decades later.

Photograph by Damon D. Hickey, c. 1956.

modern wheelchair accessible restrooms, and a projection booth (for watching movies out on the lawn)—the community center not only provided a buffer between the library and the adjacent property, but it finally gave the Heights residents and civic groups a location to hold monthly meetings. Great care was taken to preserve and relocate the memorial plaques that once graced the garden grounds.

Before beginning the three-year renovation project, a temporary home for the library needed to be found. The library staff and two-thirds of the branch's volumes relocated a few blocks away to a vacant building in Merchant's Park at 11th Street and North Shepherd Boulevard. With all the design plans finalized and details carefully smoothed over, the general contractors, Volume Builders, began construction. In a 1977 article announcing the renovation project, McCutchan poignantly stated, "The old building served the people well for more than fifty years... With the new building we're getting ready for another fifty years—or more."²²

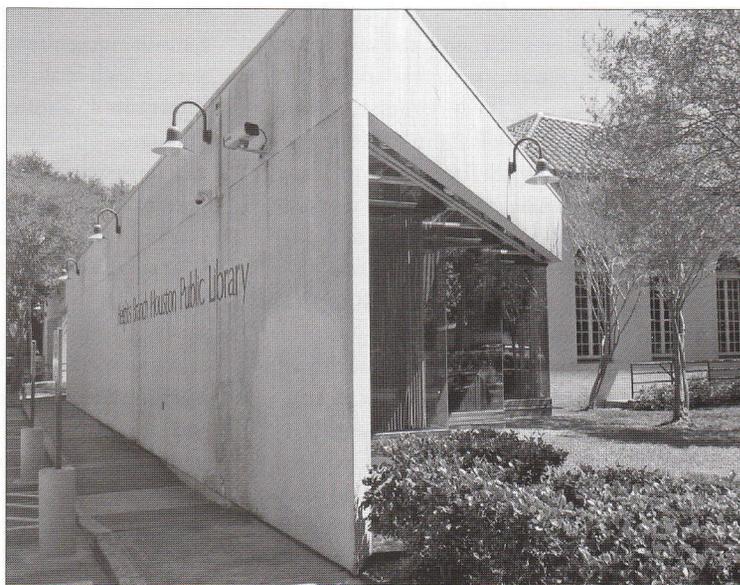
Other improvements to the library during this remodeling included correcting some of the botched renovations made during the 1950s. For example, the original skylight over the foyer, which had been covered over, was restored; a huge stairwell, which led to the second floor balcony, was removed from the foyer and rebuilt near the librarians' work area; fluorescent lighting installed in the library during the 1950s was replaced with incandescent lighting in the hopes of recapturing and recreating the warmer, visual essence of the original building from the 1920s. The builders also reapplied

molding and repainted the interior to match the colors used in the Italian Renaissance design of J. M. Glover.

The new and improved Houston Heights Public Library reopened in 1980. Twenty-five years later, opinions of the late 1970s modernization efforts still vary among the individuals involved in the Heights Branch. According to one librarian, the new modern additions on the north and east side keep the library balanced. Another, however, noted how unpopular the new look has been within the community. Laura Thorp remarked, "Adding the space in 1980 was a good thing, but unfortunately, in my opinion, and in many people's opinion, it distracts from the library building. That was the thought at the time. If it were done today, it would probably be done differently."²³ Sims McCutchan commented, "It's the only thing they could have done; they didn't have much choice. Once we returned to the facility, I personally enjoyed the aesthetics of the restored 1920s portion the most, but it was nice to have a meeting room and we needed more space to better serve our clientele."²⁴ In the end, the architects achieved their goal to enlarge the library while preserving its integrity.

Although the Houston Heights Public Library had not been registered as a historic landmark prior to the late 1970s renovation, the architects and the library system looked to the state's preservation agency for guidance and informal approval. David Henington, former director of the Houston Public Library System, stated that it is indeed appropriate to have a completely different architectural style added on to a historic building, rather than try to mimic the original 1920s design.²⁵ And according to John Fokkie, an architect for Ray Bailey Associates during the project, "We did, to a certain degree, acknowledge the Texas Historic Commission's criteria," in designing the 1977 renovation.²⁶

By the mid-1980s, the Heights Library contained state-of-the-art amenities and services that could not be found at other Houston-area libraries. Screen projectors, GED courses, and classes in English as a second language became available at the new and improved library. The Heights Branch received the first caption recorder television set of any library in the city. The new library also came equipped with the Kardex Automated Kompact system for shelving, which, according to a 1980 brochure, "cuts the storage space by more than half in the workroom."²⁷ With experience in



The modern additions to the north and east side of the library received mixed reactions from Heights residents.

designing children's playgrounds, Ray Bailey architects included in the design of the children's section a life-size kiosk structure where kids could play, climb, enjoy puppet shows, and read at their leisure.

In 1984, the Heights Library building was added to the National Register of Historic Places. For the next two decades the Houston Heights Branch Library enjoyed its "celebrity" status as a Texas Historic Landmark. It remained the cultural center of the historic Heights district, which received that distinguished designation the year before.

By the turn of the century, however, radical improvements proposed on the entire Houston Public Library System threatened the Heights Branch's very existence. Residents, community leaders, and civic groups banded together to fight for the library's rightful place at the corner of 13th Street and Heights Boulevard. Led by a determined and politically powerful Houston Heights Association, the library entered its second confrontation with modernization. Yet this time, there would be definite winners and losers.

The story of the 2001 Houston Heights Public Library renovation is one of intrigue and miscalculations, of civic co-operation at its best, and of a city bureaucracy at its worst. At a time when much of downtown Houston and other parts of the city underwent a major transformation and restoration—nightclubs, restaurants, and sporting arenas—the Houston Public Library System became earmarked for re-evaluation of its overall "standards of excellence," which would carry the system into the twenty-first century.

In the summer of 1924, Julia Ideson, the most well-known and influential librarian in Houston's history, set out on a journey to tour libraries across the country in hopes of finding new ideas and innovations in library design. She returned with a wealth of research and information, which may have influenced the planning, designing, and construction of the Houston Heights Library, among others. Nearly eighty years later, a similar process for improving the entire library system involved a plethora of political committees, city council members, and highly paid consultants. According to several library sources, for the biggest most expensive renovation project in the Houston Public Library System's history, the staff members who actually work in the facilities were rarely asked for input on the renovation of their work place.

In planning and preparing for the Houston Public Library System's future, library administrators requested an unusually large sum of money in bond funds to be submitted for voter approval, nearly \$150 million, according to one library source. The city subsequently hired a number of consultants to put forth a "Strategic

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Master Plan," which made specific recommendations for individual libraries to "achieve the Standards of Excellence by 2010."²⁸ The consultants researched and analyzed the demographics of each area to determine estimated population increases by 2010. The team also evaluated each facility's ability or inability to handle large-scale renovations that would bring the libraries up to code with new governmental regulations. Finally, the consultants looked at each facility and determined whether or not that building needed to be added onto or be replaced altogether.

According to one former Branch manager at the Heights,

the consultants and city envisioned creating five major libraries in the most populated areas. The Central Planning Sector, as designated by the Strategic Master Plan, of which the Heights Library is a part, had population increases projected in the twenty to twenty-five percent range over a ten-year period. The consultants listed several technological updates and facility

improvements that would be necessary to keep the Heights Branch up to "standards" in a growing, ethnically diverse community. They placed emphasis on world languages, children's books, and adult collections. However, at only 14,500 square feet, the old Italian Renaissance building and its 1980 addition, could not handle such demands.

The Library 2010 Strategic Master Plan consultants recommended the following:

Due to the historic nature of the [Heights Branch] building, the building layout is inefficient and cannot accommodate current and future library services. The facility is undersized and will be difficult to expand adequately. The recommendation is to replace the Heights Neighborhood Library with a 22,000 GSF building on a new site in the same general vicinity.²⁹

The planners did not single out the Heights Branch for replacement; other "inadequate" and "undersized" branches fell into this category as well, including Smith, Looscan, and Frank Public Libraries to name a few. Given the Heights Library's prominence in the community, the city selected the branch for its initial experiments in launching this transformation. They faced a tremendous uphill battle, however, once word reached the Heights community of the consultants' recommendations.

In response to the report, HHA sprang immediately into action. Members of the organization met to discuss and brainstorm courses of action. These issues were outlined in a memo dated the week prior to the unsettling March 1, 2001, town hall meeting.

Your Neighborhood Houston Chronicle

ThisWeek

Thursday, Dec. 27, 2001
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DOWNTOWN/NEARTOWN/HEIGHTS

Despite size, Heights library to stay open

By VALERIE SWEETEN
Chronicle correspondent

Community action has ended worries the Houston Heights Library could be closed.

Allison Landers, deputy director of Library Operations for the Houston Public Library, said Americans with Disabilities Act renovations are scheduled to begin in early 2002.

Much concern had been voiced throughout the community when the Heights Library, located on Heights Boulevard, was slated to be replaced due to inadequate size. But community input reversed the decision, securing

the library's future.

In late February or early March, the library will be temporarily relocated to Baptist Temple at 20th Street and Yale as renovations are made to comply with ADA codes.

"The ADA renovations for the Heights Library are long overdue," said Councilman Gabriel Vasquez. "I have been working with the Heights Association, the Library Department and the Baptist Temple to ensure a smooth transition. We will continue working together to make sure the needs of students and all library users are being met."

"The Library Department has committed to my office that renovations to

the Heights Library will be consistent with the existing design and historic nature."

Landers said the library will be revised to accommodate patrons.

The temporary location will be able to provide patrons with the same level of service, said Landers.

"We'll have certain materials that are popular to the community. When the T1 line (fast Internet service) is up and the books are on the shelves, we'll be ready to operate at that point," she said. "We are anticipating the same level of service at the building at Baptist Temple. They've been very generous."

Chris Bryan, associate pastor at Baptist Temple Church, said the church is just filling a community need by letting the library move to its old, vacant administrative building.

"What we found interesting is that our church was the original Heights library," he said. "When the library was built, our church donated some of the original books to open the library. Now in 2002, we'll have the library back here."

The library will also fill a need for the church.

"They'll be paying utilities and bringing the building to city code for a library," Bryan said.

See LIBRARY on Page 4.

Houston Chronicle, December 27, 2001.

Those involved agreed on two major points: first and foremost, the Heights community wanted to preserve the historic library building where it stood and second, if a replacement building became a necessity, the community wanted a modern facility conveniently located in the Heights near the schools. The memo took notice that these two ideas may “come into collision with each other.” Moreover, the author of the memo, Laura Thorp, HHA president at the time, warned of the possibility that if HHA stood firm in its decision to save the historic library building “at all costs,” it must understand the repercussions of that decision.³⁰ Thorp cited the Heights Firehouse as a prime example of when modernization threatens preservation. When the city decided to move the firehouse out of the Heights, the community fought to preserve their historic station (it also doubled as a jail house during the turn of the century). Unwavering in its plan, the city built a new station at a location on the outskirts of the neighborhood. HHA ultimately chose to lease the building from the city (for \$1 per year). The association restored the station house and continues to maintain the building’s upkeep into the twenty-first century. Thorp warned that this could happen again. How far would the association be willing to go? She asked in the memo, “Would HHA be willing and financially able to take over the library building, to preserve it and use it?”³¹

But what if HHA could not handle the burden? Or what if the city sold the building to a developer? What was the price tag on preserving their library? In her original correspondence it appeared that the HHA president tried to cover as many angles of the problem as possible, formulate a plan of action, and prepare her civic group for a possible showdown with the city. This memo displayed the initiative, the imagination, and the hawkish determination of a well-organized civic association. They would not let their library go down without a fight.

On March 1, 2001, Barbara Gubbin, Director of the Houston Public Library System, opened the town hall meeting in the Heights community meeting center. Other members of the committee included Gubbin’s Deputy Director, Alison Landers, Councilman Gabriel Vasquez, and three consultants. More than one hundred Heights residents stood anxiously in the meeting room as Director Gubbin read the recommendations to replace the Heights Library.

The director and her entourage had a preconceived belief that the community would embrace and relish the idea. But to their dismay, the townspeople immediately and soundly rejected any proposal to replace the library building. In short, the crowd of supporters from the neighborhood grew distraught and demanded a halt to the proposal. The committee, it appeared, did not expect such a negative reaction from the community, and they were not prepared to deal with such an aggravated situation.

Eleven days later, HHA formally responded. In a letter to Director Gubbin, Laura Thorp came out and stated that HHA had formed a Library Task Force to “evaluate alternatives” and had requested full-blown involvement in each step of the Strategic Master Plan process, including selecting an architect for the eventual renovations. “We want to make it very clear,” Thorp stated, “that we wish for the original building to remain a functioning library because of its historical significance, [and] central location, and [continue] as a focal point for the community.”³²

In the letter, HHA also recommended radical measures of their own, suggesting that the city demolish the 1980 renovations

and rebuild a new 2001-style addition. The letter went even further to suggest that the city purchase the adjacent apartment building to be used as a future site for library additions. In the end, the letter lent “general and conditional support” to the city’s overall master plan.³³

Barbara Gubbin responded two weeks later and stated that “there are no funds available at this time to implement any part of the Strategic Master Plan,” including investigating HHA’s suggestions.³⁴ Six months later, however, the director drafted a letter to HHA and listed final figures for the proposed renovations, most of which would make the library in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA): \$70,000 for the design, \$684,000 for construction, half of which came from a Community Development Block Grant.³⁵

The community uproar in the Heights created a domino effect that spread throughout the Houston Public Library System. All across the city, library patrons and community residents shot down the Strategic Master Plan recommendations. In the end, civic co-operation and public demands outgunned the city’s radical proposals, at least for the time being.

“I’m sure that we probably shook it up a little,” Thorp explained, “because they thought they could just come in and do what they wanted to do and maybe people wouldn’t be concerned. But they found out that Houston Heights is a pretty strong neighborhood.”³⁶ Sims McCutchan, while acknowledging that there are compelling arguments for a more up-to-date facility somewhere in the northwest area, remarked, “As one of the two oldest library structures in Houston, the Heights Branch should have been considered from the beginning in the context of the neighborhood character and historical preservation. I believe both the library, the neighborhood, and the city were better served by keeping the building.”³⁷

One librarian stated that it was an extremely positive gesture for the city to set aside money for the libraries’ future. However, choosing out-of-town, objective consultants, who were unfamiliar with the communities in Houston—and their resources—may have had a diminishing effect on achieving the overall goals of the plan. Most of the consultants involved in the project were not native Houstonians. Moreover, the director, Barbara Gubbin, had come from England where “old” and “historic” in building terms meant that the building was at least a few hundred years old. In addition, Gubbin’s deputy director hailed from California. The administrators and the consultants may have possessed good intentions in their ideas, but they neglected the importance of the Houston Heights Public Library to its community. A prime example of this miscommunication occurred when the consultants failed to understand why the Heights residents did not want a bigger parking lot at the library. One patron from the Heights responded that most people preferred to walk to their library.

In the fallout from the Strategic Master Plan, the city focused its attention on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) renovations throughout the entire library system.³⁸ The city hired architects to work the designs and contractors to remodel the buildings up to code. First on the list was the historic Houston Heights Branch. Following relocation to a temporary facility at, ironically, the Baptist Temple Church (20th and Yale), the Heights Library’s long overdue ADA renovations began in earnest in early 2002.

A year later, having shed a new skin and shaved off a few dozen bookshelves, the Heights Library reopened to the public. The

library now contained new landscaping, sprinklers, carpet, furniture, and handicap railings. Other improvements included new lighting, new computers, a new reference desk, a new circulation desk, a security system, a T1 ethernet connection, and after-school programs. The kiosk where children watched puppet shows was removed to make room for wheelchair access. In the children's area, the designers replaced the colorful arrangement with dark,



drab-colored furniture. The contractors also removed the stairwell in the foyer leading to the balcony citing that if it was not accessible to the handicapped, then it should not be open to the public. The designers made no considerations for storage or closet space. The once enjoyable, relaxing workroom became cramped with cubicles and extra shelving, prompting one librarian to vent her frustration on the radical new changes, especially with respects to the work area.

The \$1.2 million "reconfiguration" of the Heights Library to meet ADA requirements was the result of the efforts made by various individuals, including consultants, architects, and senior project managers from the city's Building Services Division. But apparently, during the eighteen-month renovation period, no one listed above interviewed or asked opinions from any Heights librarian, patron, or community leader. In the Library 2010 Strategic Master Plan, a section of the report listed three resources as the basis for establishing recommendations: demographic analysis, physical assessment, and interviews with neighborhood librarians. Yet not one librarian had the opportunity to share his or her thoughts about the building and environment they would be working in.

Throughout this entire debate, no one argued against the idea of providing public services to all members of the community, including those who are handicapped. However, all the individuals from the "save the library" point of view openly expressed their disdain for how the renovations were handled, and more importantly, what was sacrificed to accommodate ADA spacing regulations. The removal of valuable shelving space to meet ADA specifications resulted in a net loss of more than fifty percent of the children's collection and a large percentage of the adult collections, according to one staff member. In direct contradiction to the Strategic Master Plan's "emphasis on children's collection and adult collection,"³⁹ an estimated 15,000 items were deleted from the library's database, according to the librarians.

From a public service point of view, at what point do governmental regulations exceed their boundaries and infringe upon an institution's possessions? From a public historian's perspective, at what point does this infringement alter the historic nature of a landmark, such as the case with air conditioning Mount Vernon? And at

what point do the rights of a few impede the services to the many. The Heights community expressed their discontent with the new modern renovations of late 1970s, and they combined forces to stop the library's replacement in 2001. There was, however, no compromising with ADA.

In the case of the Houston Heights Public Library, the community fought for and preserved their old neighborhood library, but at a significant cost, financial and otherwise. The original 14,500-square-foot facility could not accommodate all the modern improvements

and still continue to circulate its high volume of materials, including periodicals from the 1920s and '30s and a substantial rare book collection. From a historian's perspective, given the historic nature of the library, would it not have been logical to simply build a new "technological" facility that would provide the community with a modern computer center, leaving the Heights Branch in a position to expand upon its historic collection and originality? From another angle, would purchasing the adjacent apartment building not have provided the Heights Branch with an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for future expansion well into the twenty-first century? The "complex issue" of the land purchase probably never made it past the discussion table at the city council. At the time (October 2001), the planning team may have been more concerned with adapting ADA renovations to satisfy federal mandates. City planners, to their defense, had the library system and the accompanying neighborhoods in their best interest. However, with respect to the Houston Heights Public Library and the surrounding community, the city planners failed to utilize local knowledge, much to their detriment.

As humans, we associate our lives, our culture, and our history with "place." The idea of the neighborhood—the "ultimate neighborhood" in the case of the Heights—is an open door to understanding who we are and where we come from. Remembering our past, as historian Robert R. Archibald stated, "is the underlying premise of historic preservation and of public history."⁴⁰

When it comes to preserving a building or landmark, the community it serves should determine the ultimate fate of such an entity, rather than outside, impartial persons and institutions. But like many historic buildings, such as the Alamo, the Houston Heights Branch Library's fate is yet to be determined. The "standards of excellence by 2010" may again be re-evaluated in the near future. And when the next confrontation between preservation and modernization emerges, the Houston Heights community—with HHA at the helm—will certainly have a distinct advantage over its opposition. The veterans of community justice and preservation may again have to rely on civic co-operation to save their library. Laura Thorp stated, "That's the way we battle for everything in this neighborhood."⁴¹ ◆