

THE TEXAS ROOM

Stephen Fox

The Texas Room, as everyone calls the Texas and Local History component of the Houston Public Library's Houston Metropolitan Research Center, is my home away from home in downtown Houston. It is located on the second floor of the Houston Public Library's Julia Ideson Building, in what was the principal reading room of the Central Library Building from 1926 until 1975.

It's a tall rectangular room, lit by arched windows along both sides that admit views of the downtown skyline, the greenery in front of City Hall, and a big pink parking garage. Even when the vibrations of passing trucks shake the floor and sirens pierce its calm, the Texas Room remains an oasis of tranquillity. It's where I escape the grinding sensation of downtown sidewalks. Perhaps it's the cool putty-gray color that the walls are painted and the way they contrast with the white plaster decoration, the bright red carpet, and the lustrous oak furniture.

When Eugene Aubry and Sally Walsh designed the restoration of the Julia Ideson Building 20 years ago, they compensated for the overcrowding that the building had endured before construction of the present central library in 1975 by

emphasizing spaciousness and quiet. Amazingly, despite two decades of subsequent growth and the incorporation of new technologies, the Texas Room preserves Aubry and Walsh's arrangements: long parallel rows of library tables and chairs, which were installed in the building when it opened in 1926; the vista from what was once the delivery hall, separated from the Texas Room by a transparent glass partition; even the vista through the closed stacks to a distant window facing Smith Street and the green reflections on the Allied/First Interstate/Wells Fargo tower.

The open volume — an unwitting spatial pun — establishes the Texas Room as a place of clarity and calm, an imaginative space where researchers can embark on long journeys through place and time. But the Texas Room is not only a place of escape, it's a place of engagement and discovery. It's where I go to track down historical information on communities and buildings throughout Texas that I can't easily visit.

My Texas Room bible is the *Texas General Contractors Association Monthly Bulletin*. It lists buildings in the process of being designed by architects and construc-



The Texas Room, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library. Photo © 1997 Hester + Hardaway

tion contracts awarded, and it covered the entire state from 1922 to 1937. The Texas Room possesses the only copies known to exist. What its original subscribers considered a throwaway is now a resource of statewide significance.

The Texas Room also has lists in many different forms. My favorites are the old city directories and telephone directories from throughout the state. A close second is the collection of hundreds of maps and photographs, old and new. The Sanborn fire insurance maps, published for insurance purposes and updated at intervals, show building outlines for Texas towns beginning in the 1880s. One can trace the spatial evolution of many towns for nearly a century, since the Sanborn Company continued to revise the maps until the early 1970s.

Then there is supporting evidence for the seriously bloody-minded — like newspaper clippings going back to the 1920s, or ad valorem tax rolls for Texas counties from 1836 until, in some cases, the early 20th century. Sounds like a snooze? Not if you're trying to track the date of a building by ascertaining the year that the valuation on its real estate experienced a noticeable increase. You do find yourself

wishing that those who entered the information wrote in a clearer hand with fewer scriptorial flourishes. And why did the microfilers reproduce handwritten records in such a small format?

U.S. Census schedules are another Texas Room resource. More mind-numbing tedium? Well, yes, but you wonder what motivated an enumerator to categorize a householder as "insane." No matter how perfunctory or bureaucratic the records, you keep stumbling across all these human-interest enigmas that draw you in and make the past seem a lot less remote.

In the Texas Room you can lay hands on the disparate threads that lead to a connection between here-and-now and there-and-then. This search for continuities does not seem critical to the daily lives of most of my contemporaries, which makes the Texas Room even more special to me. It's where I go in the hope of recovering lost truth and forgotten memory. ■