



SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW, SOMETHING BORROWED

- THE CLAYTON LIBRARY REHABILITATION -



BY NICOLA SPRINGER

It seemed a modest house, small even, and as I slowed to a walk, I marveled that on my looping jaunts around the Museum District I had never fully noticed or stopped at the house before.

But there it stood in humble grandeur, a simple two-story Georgian Revival house with repointed red brick, dark green shutters, and bright white window sashes. Lit by the morning sun, the house proudly presided over its expanse of manicured lawns and variegated flora. Commissioned in 1917, the city residence of William L. Clayton and his wife, Susan Vaughan, was designed by Birdsall Briscoe, who at the time was the most prominent residential architect in Houston. The austerity of the Georgian Revival style is a reflection of the changing trends in residential architecture, as ornament and ostentation in building were being replaced with the luxury of expansive grounds. The Clayton House asserted its functionality and reflected the industrious nature of its owner. Will Clayton, who would become the second-wealthiest man in Houston (after Jesse H. Jones), was the veritable King of Cotton when cotton was king. In the 1940s, Clayton would enter the political arena and extend the international influence he had achieved in cotton. As undersecretary of state for economic affairs in the Truman administration, he played an instrumental role in drafting the Marshall Plan in the 1940s. Susan Vaughan was a patron of the arts and worked very closely with Briscoe on the design of the house as well as the grounds.

The Clayton House, guest house, and garage together create a compound, with the main house at the center; they occupy an entire city block, with Oakdale and Prospect to the north and south, respectively, and San Jacinto to the west. The front entry, framed by palm trees, looks toward Caroline and the morning sun. The guest house and garage flank the main house toward the rear and west of the site. The boundaries of the property are delineated by a white iron picket fence and Houston's ubiquitous live oak trees. The gardens share the simple, formal geometry of the house: brick pathways and gravel drives gently divide lawns and shrubs, like sashing in a neatly stitched and comfortable quilt. The property was designated a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark.

In 1958 the Clayton family deeded their residence and grounds to the City of Houston. In 1968, after the death of Will Clayton and at the behest of his daughters, the buildings became a public library. In

the last three decades, 5300 Caroline has become the home of one of the largest municipal centers for genealogy. In 1983 the Houston Genealogical Library for Research was built, expanding the complex to four buildings and two Houston city blocks. Sitting to the south of Prospect Avenue, the added library building made minimal gestures to the historic landmark across the street; it was a simple municipal response to the need for additional library space for an ever-growing collection.

In 2004 the architecture firm of Glassman Shoemaker Maldonado Architects (GSM) was selected for the restoring, updating, and adding of much needed meeting space to the complex. Ernesto Moldanado, principal at GSM, notes that much of the preservation work is unseen. Over 140 piers were placed under the main house to level the foundation. The structural skeleton of the house, an atypical hybrid of masonry and steel, proved partially responsible for the house's longevity. Windows

stripped of their lead paint were found to be in good condition due to the durability of the cypress wood from which they were constructed.

Most of the rooms in the house have been altered to support the functions of a library. Reading rooms and meeting rooms, which long ago had been living rooms, were rehabilitated in keeping with the restrained detail of the original house. Muted paint colors join walls and paneling together, bringing a cohesiveness and modernity to the whole space. Enhanced by the natural



Aerial rendering of Clayton House, guest house, and garage showing rehabilitation and additions.



LEFT: Garage, original design by Birdsall P. Briscoe, addition (white) by Glassmann Shoemaker Maldonado. **BELOW:** Clayton House.



light that washes these rooms, the spaces provide a perfect canvas for the colorful life stories that genealogical researchers uncover here. One room, however, has been returned to its original aesthetic. On the first floor a room that had been originally a porch and later was remodeled into Mr. Clayton's study has been completely renewed. Wood paneling has been restored, the floor refinished, and some original furniture reinstalled. A striking element in this room is a large fireplace that uses a cotton plant motif (executed by the Austin woodcarver Peter Mansbendel) in its decoration, a subtle reminder of what brought the Claytons their great wealth. Here the story of the Clayton family and their contributions to the City of Houston will be preserved.

A simple color and material palette defines the Clayton estate. The original buildings are distinguished by their red brick. Green shutters at full-height windows complement the dusty gray-green of the slate tile roof. White accents in wood and cast iron define the porches and remodelings performed by Briscoe during the Clayton's occupation of the house. GSM used the rule of white elements when making their architectural additions. The interventions are functional and minimal, seeking in their simplicity to stand apart from the historic buildings. The decision to go "modern" with the additions was immediate and agreed upon by the client as the best

way to showcase the original architecture. Where the additions departed in plan from the strict geometry of the box, efficiency and minimum space requirements became the organizing rule. The guest house addition, hardly visible at the rear of the building, provides an accessible entry and elevator. The original red brick wall slips past the white tower and remains visible on the interior, while a tall slot of glass demarks the junction between the old and the new. This building will be the home of the Clayton Library Friends Foundation, and the elevator makes the second floor viable, adding two meeting rooms to the inventory of spaces in the complex.

The more obvious addition is at the garage. The white box of the meeting room, which also separates itself from the historic façade with slim vertical windows, preserves the integrity of the original building by sitting just below the eave of the pitched slate roof. On the southern face, three blank recesses in the glazed white brick act as mute reminders of the carriage doors that are no longer there. Where the envelope of the meeting room box is windowless, the vestibule that fronts this space is fully glazed to mimic the porch of the guest house to the north. This addition, with its meeting space for one hundred, in

many ways will become the heart of the complex, allowing the library to fulfill its role as a major genealogical research facility, able to support regional and even national events and conferences.

Where the original buildings and the additions share a restraint and formality, a certain whimsy in the design of the gardens belies the geometry that organizes them. Like living ornaments that accent the architecture, Texas roses and perennials, oleanders and ferns, orange trees and elms are a few of the many plantings that attract butterflies and humans alike to wander through the grounds. Without original landscape drawings to guide him, Keiji Asakura of the landscape architecture firm Asakura Robinson Company describes the design of the

gardens as an interpretation rather than a restoration. With the help of horticultural guides from the 1920s, old photographs, and family memories, he recreated the gardens to reflect the popular plantings of the time. As a Heritage Garden, the grounds will serve an added function, educating

visitors about the local flora.

While the Clayton House inside its walls holds the history of families, it is the hope of the Library Foundation that the gardens will celebrate families' futures. The Library Foundation intends to rent out the grounds for parties and weddings. One can easily imagine the formal west garden as a wonderful outdoor chapel where vows may be exchanged and the front lawns an elegant setting for receptions.

The Clayton House and grounds represent a breath of fresh air with their gentle marriage of the old and the new. As I turn west down Oakdale and mentally recap my morning run, I am grateful for the coming together of private and public entities to create such great new public spaces in Houston. Cautiously picking my way across the light rail tracks at San Jacinto, I chuckle to think that eighty years ago nearly a hundred miles of streetcar tracks crisscrossed our city. And as I look up, the residential blocks of Venue Museum District rise before me, overlooking the Clayton House below. I wonder... what will the trend in city living be in a hundred years, and will they stand the test of time as well as the Clayton House? **c**