

FORWARD

The Newsletter of the UH
Department of English



Exterior view of the Roy G. Cullen Memorial Building, Houston, TX, 1946. (Photo/ University of Houston Archives)

Message From The Chair

"Forward"

Best foot first just in case
When we made our way 'til now
It's time to listen, it's time to fight
Forward
Now we're going to hold doors open for a while
Now we can be open for a while
Forward

Houston native Beyoncé's "Forward" from the album "Lemonade" speaks of a relationship changed from merely getting by—"mak[ing] our way 'til now"—to putting "best foot forward just in case," a shift that invites a new openness and the possibilities that may follow. Our department news report, to the "Forward" by the Department of English mission statement, we "educate new year and our new buildings—the beautifully renovated Roy G. Cullen, where we now officially reside. "Forward", I hope, captures a sense not only of the new—as in looking and purposefully moving ahead—but also of enduring yet responsive intention. In our corporate planning and in our relationships within and beyond the (newly painted) hallowed halls, we re-define our commitments, responsive to our changing world. Our daily operations and endeavors should align with our larger commitments—to social justice, strong ethics, excellent scholarship and creative work, and anti-racist pedagogy. For the Department of English mission statement, we "educate students to be active, innovative citizens in an information age defined by cultural diversity, interconnection, and boundless interactive possibilities." Because our fields are evolving and our faculty's research and pedagogies move in different directions, we "hold doors open" with courses and projects that both respond to and involve our intellectually curious and brave students.

With them, and with you, we can move always forward, never straight. (And also, sometimes be still as we appreciate the view.)

On behalf of everyone here in the new RGC, I thank our donors and boosters, our new Dean, Dan O'Connor; Page architects, and the various UH supporters about whom you will read in these pages. A special thanks to Valeria Gonzalez, who added "project manager" to her list of talents over these last two and a half years. PLEASE come by and have a look around!

Ann Christensen

Architect of the Roy Cullen Renovation and Department Chair on a Project Years in the Making

"Forward" spoke about the extensive Roy G. Cullen (RGC) renovation with lead architect, Justin Winchester of Page Southernland Page Inc., and Department Chair Ann Christensen. The University decided RGC needed an extensive renovation after fire and hurricane damage. "They did right by us," Christensen said.

The oldest building on the present-day University of Houston Campus, built in 1939, RGC is surrounded by the other buildings of the Cullen Plaza. It was important to architect Justin Winchester that the renovation respect the architectural style of striped classicism. This was challenging because previous renovations had not been respectful of the historical nature of the exterior or interior. For instance, archival photos of the original design showed a huge atrium; one of the renovations had in-filled that space to add offices. The integrity of this heritage building was respected thanks in part to the dedication of University Architect, Jim Taylor. In collaboration with Taylor, Page analyzed the window systems to restore the proportions of the original 1939 drawings. A photo from the period showed that the casements within those large windows were operable before the subsequent renovations. "The task at hand was to consider the design intent from the original drawings and interpret that into a modern system," said Winchester.

Respecting the Art Deco aesthetic of the building required creative problem solving at times. For example, the metal railings of the period were not up to current safety code; a similar design had to be recreated with proper materials. The preference for geometrical designs in the Art Deco period led Page to echo the diamond pattern of the lower windows in the selection of everything from the restroom tiles to the banquettes for student seating. The original building materials—the limestone and glass exterior and clay tile roof—were preserved as much as possible. Amazingly, the original suppliers of the clay tile, Ludowici Roof Tile, had the catalog from 1939 and were able to match the composition of the clay and the style of the tile so that the original roof could be restored. The limestone that extends into the entrance and central staircase was preserved and the new glass features inside the building are framed in a way that references the original exterior window design.

A vital aspect of the renovation was bringing the classrooms up to the current university's standard. The original classrooms were smaller which did not meet the university current standards, nor did they align with the current ADA accessibility standards and were not utilizing current AV standards. Bringing the classrooms up to par would require more space. Christensen explained that the original plan for the renovation called for only the first and second floors to be renovated, but before the plans were finalized an anonymous donor stepped in and generously funded the renovation of the third floor. This support allowed UH funds to focus on the classroom updates and enabled the English Department to devote an entire floor to graduate students.

Winchester added, "The design allowed for more windows. An important aspect of learning is making sure that students have access to daylight." In designing the classrooms, the architect consulted with the chair and department stakeholders, those who know how the space will be used, as well as with the registrar Scott Sawyer. Christensen described Mr. Sawyer as "a great leader who was with us every step of the way in the classroom is being augmented with active learning and inquiry. For example, the importance of not having fixed desks that face the front of the class, allowing the instructor to configure the class seating. The design process took a year—it was collaborative from the beginning." She also recognized Dean Dan O'Connor's intimate involvement in the project and advocacy when things went awry.

In addition to renovated classrooms, RGC is home to administrative spaces, and the office environment has changed dramatically since 1939: people work more collaboratively today. As Winchester explained, "When you go into a building that doesn't have enough conference spaces or enough huddle spaces, you look for every inch that you can reasonably find to make sure you're able to create those facilities." Christensen explained that the library is in fact three rooms designed to open into a single larger space, enabling the Department to host small meetings and seminars and larger literary events for the first time. Historically, the Department had to use other campus venues or off-campus sites for larger readings and panels.

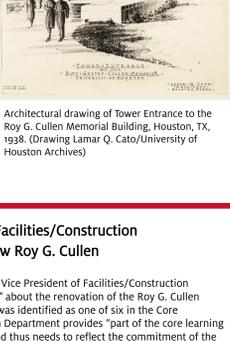
The free exchange of ideas was an important consideration in every area of the renovated space. The corridors feature banquettes that can accommodate three or four people. Page's design was intended "to facilitate engagement even in passing," according to Winchester. "People can say, 'let's sit down here and talk about this.'" There are also student lounges that open from the corridor and encourage collaboration, as well as a stunning light-filled graduate student lounge. For Christensen these study spots, event spaces, and common areas housed in the Department's bright, beautiful building will promote community. "We crave opportunities to collaborate. Between COVID and our dispersal across campus, these last few years have been very challenging. We have new faculty members and students who've not yet met everyone in person. So many have been isolated, and I know there is a strong desire to be a part of department life. This couldn't be a more beautiful and conducive space for that."

UH prioritizes campus sustainability, and the renovated RGC is LEED-certified, designed to conform to the LEED Silver building standard and currently tracking to achieve LEED Gold certification. Although the 1939 design did not have energy efficiency in mind, the building systems now take advantage of cutting-edge campus utilities including the UH central plant, which provides steam heating and hot water, as well as the chilled water system, and the waste management and recycling system. Design choices encourage efficiency and waste reduction: all light fixtures are LED; restrooms use touch-free hand dryers; and a wellness room with a shower was installed for cyclists who commute to campus. The building is also equipped with new bike racks.

Christensen explained that the staff, faculty, and graduate student kitchens will also no longer be stocked with single-use plastic cutlery or Styrofoam cups, and catering choices will be greener. "It's an important culture change. We want to be worthy of this great building. A model for the campus."

Sustainability is not just about the building's efficiency but how it creates a healthy environment. Winchester explained that bringing natural light into the corridors as well as the offices and classrooms was a priority for sustainability. Previously, the interior corridors and common spaces relied on artificial light. "Many people don't realize the impact that light has on the place you learn affect your mood and that affects how well you work." He is proud that the building is both efficient and self-sufficient. "No one is going to worry about water coming in the ceiling or about having to reserve space to hold an event in a different building on campus."

He said, "I look forward to visiting in a year to see how the space has changed how students learn and how faculty work."



Architectural drawing of lower Entrance to the Roy G. Cullen Memorial Building, Houston, TX, 1938. (Drawing Lamar Q. Cato/University of Houston Archives)

Senior Associate Vice Chancellor of Facilities/Construction Management David Oliver on the New Roy G. Cullen

The Senior Associate Vice Chancellor/Associate Vice President of Facilities/Construction Management David Oliver spoke with "Forward" about the renovation of the Roy G. Cullen Building (RGC). He explained that the building was identified as one of six in the Core Learning Initiative. He added that the English Department provides "part of the core learning experience for every student on the campus, and thus needs to reflect the commitment of the University to provide an environment that promotes student success. The modernized classrooms and faculty offices reflect the goal of maximizing the student learning environment."

One of the goals of the renovation was to upgrade the technological capacity of the building. Senior Associate Vice Chancellor Oliver explained that one of the key initiatives of the University is to address the change in pedagogy. He said, "The old standard of fixed seating with the instructor at the front of the classroom is being augmented with active learning and interactive classrooms, all of which can be supported through the technological upgrades in the modernized RGC."

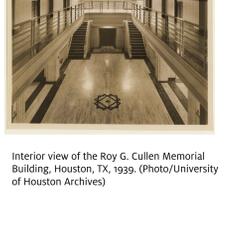
Prior to the renovation, the building had sustained fire and hurricane damage, but it also required maintenance which had been deferred. Some of the aesthetic and functional upgrades are highly visible, but the renovation also addressed the less visible mechanical systems that provide cooling and heating to the building, which are vital to supporting the learning environment. UH takes its sustainability goals very seriously and this is reflected in the renovated space. Senior Associate Vice Chancellor Oliver told Forward, "The new modern systems use high efficiency motors, digital controls and cooling coils. Lighting systems are high efficiency LED systems which provide a low maintenance and consistent lighting solution for the building."

While modernization was clearly necessary, as the oldest building on the present-day University of Houston Campus, built in 1939, it was important to UH that the architectural character of the Roy G. Cullen building be maintained. It has historical significance to the University of Houston campus, both as a namesake of the founding Cullen family and as a part of the core of campus.

Senior Associate Vice Chancellor Oliver detailed efforts to maintain the character of the building on the exterior while ensuring the exterior window system was recreated, lighting fixtures were duplicated and that the iconic stone veneer was repaired. On the interior, even though modernized, the team was able to keep many key architectural features that defined the building such as the central staircase and railing system. Overall, the building maintains the historical look of the campus and incorporates modern systems to maximize usability and continue the iconic appearance of Cullen Plaza."

The renovation of RGC helps UH meet its institutional priorities while improving the physical complexion of our campus.

Senior Associate Vice Chancellor Oliver summarized the importance of the project. "While there are historical features that the University needs and wants to preserve, these buildings ultimately serve as the backbone of the learning environment on campus. Therefore, renovating is critical to continue the success of our students and ultimately to promote the University as a top tier institution."



Interior view of the Roy G. Cullen Memorial Building, Houston, TX, 1939. (Photo/University of Houston Archives)

Creative Writing Program Director Discusses the Uses of New Spaces in RGC

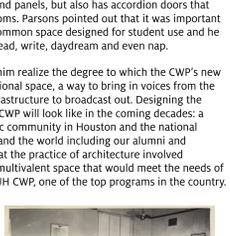
The initial renovation plans for Roy G. Cullen (RGC) didn't include a re-opening of the third floor. "Forward" spoke with Creative Writing Program Director Alex Parsons about the process of securing a home for the CW program and working with the architect, Justin Winchester of Page Southernland Page Inc., on the design of the new space. Parsons explained that in the initial planning meetings it became apparent that the third floor had been written off, but he and Chair Ann Christensen couldn't let it go. He joked, "It looked like a strange crypt up there: newspapers from the 1980s were scattered as if students had had to flee, which is not that hard to imagine as Roy Cullen has caught on fire and flooded. It had fallen out of use, but it had previously been a space used for instruction."

The extra space was needed but the cost of extending the elevator shaft and renovating an additional floor was prohibitive, that is, until a generous anonymous donor stepped in to help fund the project. This allowed the renovation to prioritize a library as well as office space for professors and graduate students, especially as the Creative Writing Program had worked to secure this funding. Parsons said, "The library was a priority because what kind of writing program wouldn't have a core space that revolves around books? When you hold a book, and you know that one of the professors fifteen years ago wrote it, and others have read this book, you feel you're connected to them because you, too, have dedicated your life to this art. Books are touchstones." The collection will feature titles from faculty and alumni as well as dissertations—which will no longer be kept under lock and key. The book-lined space will be large enough to host readings, literary salons, and panels, but also has accordion doors that will allow for the ad-hoc creation of seminar rooms. Parsons pointed out that it was important to anchor the Creative Writing suite around a common space designed for student use and he hopes to see grads and undergrads using it to read, write, daydream and even nap.

Parsons also stressed that the pandemic made him realize the degree to which the CWP's new teleconference-ready venue was also an aspirational space, a way to bring in voices from the broader literary world while also having the infrastructure to broadcast out. Designing the space encourages faculty to think about what the CWP will look like in the coming decade, a program tied to our community, both the artistic community in Houston and the national scene; connected to writers across the country and the world including our alumni and prospective students. Winchester mentioned that the practice of architecture involved constantly learning, and he enjoyed creating a multipoint space that would meet the needs of writers and would help recruit students to the UH CWP, one of the top programs in the country.

In designing the third floor, other priorities included editorial space for [Gulf Coast](#) and [Glass Mountain](#) that allow grads and undergrads to work alongside each other, a meeting room that will serve faculty, as well as office space for administrators, faculty, and teaching fellows. The area is a hub where people can naturally mingle while also having dedicated space for focused work. "Not all learning experiences occur in class; some are fortuitous or random in nature."

Parsons said, "Someone might mention a book and you may realize how relevant it is to your own work, and it may even change the trajectory of your creative life. It's important to have a free-flowing space." Parsons hopes that discussions will be happening constantly, that the space will be the opposite of the dark hallway of yesteryear, where there was no space to gather.



Library within the Roy G. Cullen Memorial Building, Houston, TX, March 1945. (Photo/ University of Houston Archives)



Tower entrance of the Roy G. Cullen Memorial Building, Houston, TX, 1939. (Photo/ University of Houston Archives)



Construction of the Roy G. Cullen Memorial Building, Houston, TX, 1940. (Photo/ University of Houston Archives)

The Language and Culture Center's New Home

"Forward" spoke with Dr. Jodi Nelms, director of the [Language and Culture Center \(LCC\)](#), about the recent renovation of Roy G. Cullen (RGC), which includes six dedicated classrooms and administrative space for the program. The LCC offers intensive English language training to international students in preparation for post-secondary coursework in the U.S. These students enroll in 20 hours of classroom instruction per week.

Dr. Nelms explained that there were several special considerations for language instruction that were integrated into the design of the newly renovated space. Language teaching and learning in diverse classrooms that are conducive to collaboration. "We were exposed to interactive classroom designs at a Classroom of the Future conference so when it came time to order furniture, we were able to procure student desks that look like jigsaw puzzles and are perfect for our purposes. Student seating can be arranged in multiple ways; and reconstructing tables for individual or group work will be highly beneficial for LCC students and instructors."

The renovation has also made classrooms more easily accessible. The new classrooms have built-in audio-visual devices and are equipped to offer distance learning opportunities for students. This is an important feature because it has been extremely difficult for the majority of the LCC's applicants to secure a visa to travel to Houston. Embassies and consulates worldwide were closed and are now experiencing serious backlogs, mostly due to Covid. Travel restrictions placed on several countries also made it difficult for students to attend the program in person. "The silver lining is that those students are able to attend LCC classes virtually until they can join us on campus."

Technology is central to the mandate of language instruction; in fact, the LCC has a position titled Director of Assessment and Technology. Dr. Nelms explained that the program's mission is to prepare students linguistically and culturally for undergraduate or graduate study in the U.S., which often involves familiarizing students with the technology they will need to succeed: from email, to word processors, to virtual learning tools like Blackboard. There is also specialized technology that the LCC uses, "including a computer-on-wheels (COW) cart that actually allows us to use a number of licensed language learning software programs in any of the six classrooms. Innovation in the technology sector changes rapidly, and LCC instructors continually experiment with new tools to propel student language learning forward. The new LCC classrooms are equipped to support that."

These design considerations will have a significant impact on each LCC student's learning experience. Dr. Nelms added, "with these attractive and well-designed classrooms, our students will certainly feel like the RGC facilities match their expectations, especially in terms of the tuition they are paying." The LCC has always prided itself on having the best faculty in the field and Dr. Nelms is pleased the classrooms now reflect the value of the education that is being provided.

Dr. Nelms is delighted with the open concept of the main office, which includes instructor workspaces. She believes this design will allow for more frequent collaboration and will foster a positive and harmonious atmosphere.

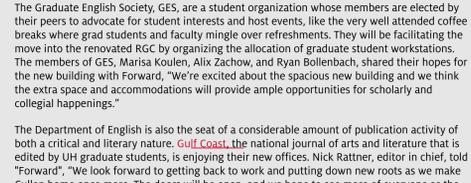
She is also thrilled about the student lounge in the newly renovated Roy Cullen building. She explains that LCC students, especially during the pandemic, are isolated from the rest of the UH community as they do not share classes with UH students. The student lounge presents a space for LCC students to co-exist and mingle with UH students. Most LCC students enroll at UH after they complete their language training at LCC. They will relish the chance to learn about the American collegiate experience from their soon-to-be UH peers.

Since moving back into the newly renovated building, Dr. Nelms has started something of a ritual. First thing every morning, she takes a moment to step into the student lounge, which houses a display of original doorknobs from the "old" Roy Cullen building.

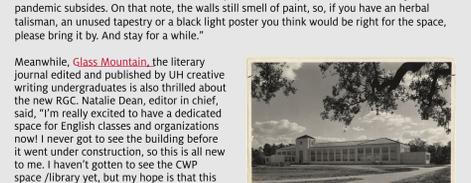
This display connects generations of UH students, and she touches one of the doorknobs to bring her program good fortune for the day. She feels grateful to be included in the return to the "new" Roy G. Cullen building and she hopes she feeds cohorts of LCC students will flourish here.



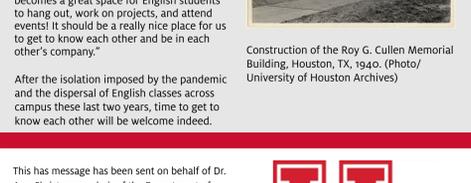
Tower entrance of the Roy G. Cullen Memorial Building, Houston, TX, 1939. (Photo/ University of Houston Archives)



Construction of the Roy G. Cullen Memorial Building, Houston, TX, 1940. (Photo/ University of Houston Archives)



Construction of the Roy G. Cullen Memorial Building, Houston, TX, 1940. (Photo/ University of Houston Archives)



Construction of the Roy G. Cullen Memorial Building, Houston, TX, 1940. (Photo/ University of Houston Archives)

This message has been sent on behalf of Dr. Ann Christensen, chair of the Department of English. If you have any questions don't hesitate to call: (713) 743-3042, or write: enl@news@central.uh.edu.

