

LASA's Property History



The decision to purchase a LASA property

From 2002 to 2010, as LASA grew from 3,000 to 10,000 members, its activities also expanded. The decision was made to publish the Latin American Research Review (LARR) as an open access publication and other new initiatives were established. Given this exponential growth, it became apparent that there was a need for physical space to accommodate the growing LASA staff. At the same time, the LASA Executive Council (EC) made it a priority to take actions that would ensure LASA's logistical effectiveness and independence, or at the very least to ensure the organization would have suitable physical space for its current and future needs.

On July 25, 2011, at the conclusion of a long conversation about LASA's growth and future, the LASA Executive Council approved the following action:

LASA will take \$500,000 from the Endowment Fund to create a contingency/building fund and add \$25,000 per year from operations to build the fund.

Participants at that meeting were:

President Maria Hermínia Tavares de Almeida, Vice President Evelyne Huber, Past President John Coatsworth, Treasurer Cristina Eguizabal, EC members Roberto Blancarte, Gwen Kirkpatrick, Kimberly Theidon, Rosalva Aida Hernandez Castillo, Maxine Molyneux, and Gioconda Herrera, LASA2012 Program Co-chairs Timothy J. Power and Gabriela Nouzeilles, LARR Editor in Chief Philip Oxhorn.

The rationale was that this fund would be developed to 1) purchase a building that would constitute LASA's headquarters and 2) to serve as a contingency fund, should the need arise.

The search for a suitable property began, and in 2011, past presidents John Coatsworth and Evelyne Huber took time out of their busy schedules to visit Pittsburgh on different occasions to evaluate a few properties that seemed potentially suitable for LASA's needs. At that time, however, none of the available properties were considered suitable. The consensus was that any building purchase should also constitute a wise investment for the organization. The property should not only solve the existing and pressing physical needs for space but also have the potential to generate income and experience strong future market appreciation.

The search continued throughout the years, moving forward in 2016 – 2017 in conjunction with the development of the 2016-2020 Strategic Plan under President Gil Joseph. "Managing Growth" was one of the pillars that resulted from said plan among three other areas. That strategic plan can be consulted at: https://lasaweb.org/uploads/2016-2020-lasa-strategic-plan_002.pdf.

The purchase of the building

The need for space resurfaced dramatically as a serious problem hindering LASA's growth. While LASA maintained the highest membership to staff ratio in the industry, LASA's team had grown from the original three permanent and two part-time staff (in 2001) to six permanent and seven part-time staff members in 2017. Also, the execution of the strategic plan required the implementation of additional initiatives. While LASA has maintained strong ties with the University of Pittsburgh since 1986 and there has been desire by both parties to maintain the relationship, the University has also faced its own serious lack of physical space, and therefore could not make additional space available to LASA.

At the end of 2017, a suitable property for LASA became available in the Pittsburgh market during Aldo Panfichi's presidency. As due diligence, comparative properties were examined in two other cities so LASA could compare and contrast the alternatives. **The LASA team prepared a very detailed analysis of the alternatives and the EC ultimately decided to pursue the Pittsburgh property.**

The Executive Council (EC) unanimously approved pursuing the purchase of the Pittsburgh property at its meeting in December 2017. Participants at this meeting were:

LASA President Aldo Panfichi, Vice President – President elect Lynn Stephen, Past President Joanne Rappaport, Treasurer Patricia Tovar Rojas, Incoming Treasurer Diego Sánchez-Ancochea, Executive Director Milagros Pereyra. Executive Council members: Jo-Marie Burt, Claudia Ferman, Daniela Spencer, Angela C. Araújo, Barbara S. Weinstein and Ginetta E. Candelario. The co-editor of LARC, Philip Oxhorn, the editor of LARR: Aníbal Pérez-Liñán; Strategic Plan Oversight Committee members: Gil Joseph and Tim Power.

Negotiations began in early 2018. During negotiations, which took longer than expected, the Executive Council held its mid-term meeting in Pittsburgh in December 2018. Those members who were able to travel to Pittsburgh (some joined remotely) had the opportunity to visit the property. At that meeting were:

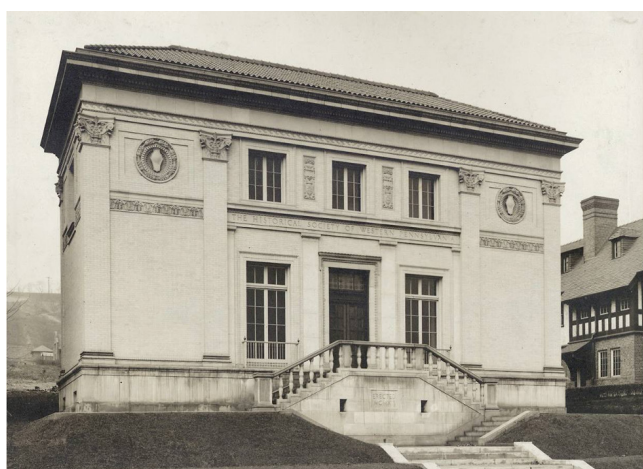
Lynn M. Stephen, President; Mara Viveros-Vigoya, Vice- President; Diego Sánchez-Ancochea, Treasurer; EC members: Barbara Weinstein, Ginetta E. Candelario, Emiliana Cruz; Vivian Andrea Martinez-Diaz, Student Representative; Ex-officio members: Tim Power, Oversight Committee, Strategic Plan; LASA2019 Program Co-Chair; Carlos Aguirre; Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, LARR, Editor-in-Chief; Phil Oxhorn, LARC Co-Editor.

Negotiations continued throughout 2018 and finally concluded on September 5, 2019 when LASA was able to secure the purchase of the property. It was a lengthy and exhausting process for all involved but LASA was finally able to make it happen. The negotiation was worthwhile; LASA was able to purchase the building at a reduced price in cash (from the original price of 3.95 million to the final price of 2.35 million), using only a fraction of the contingency fund it had established. A portion of the savings from the purchase price will be used to prepare the property for offices, cultural center and rental space. Furthermore, the property—given its prime location and highly favorable acquisition price—has the potential to become an investment that can pay for itself in the long term by providing a much higher rate of return than traditional investments.

The LASA property

The property was designed by the architectural firm Ingham and Boyd of Pittsburgh and built in 1912 for the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, which used it as a library and

museum. In the 1990's, it was sold to a private owner who invested a significant amount of funds to renovate the property and restore it to its former glory. A few years ago, the renovation of this property obtained the "Historic Preservation Award" by the City of Pittsburgh Historic Review Commission. Its location is superb, situated only one block away from the University of Pittsburgh's Cathedral of Learning. Its proximity to the University, the hospitals of UPMC, and several outstanding museums ensure that it will always be a very desirable property.



A new opportunity

In keeping with LASA's mission "to foster intellectual discussion, research, and teaching on Latin America, the Caribbean and its people throughout the Americas, promote the interests of its diverse membership, and encourage civic engagement through network building and public debate," LASA began exploring the possibility of utilizing part of its new headquarters as a space (physical and virtual) that will be open to the wider public for art and historical exhibits, film screenings, performances, lectures, etc. Because the building had previously been designated as a museum/cultural center, LASA realized it could simultaneously save money, time and

other resources, as well as fulfill the outreach component of its mission, by using the current occupancy permit to develop a museum/cultural center.

In December 2019, a meeting was held in the new building and attended by the following members of the Executive Committee (EC):

President Mara Viveros-Vigoya; Vice-President Gioconda Herrera; Past President Lynn M. Stephen; Treasurer Diego Sánchez-Ancochea; Executive Director Milagros Pereyra; Incoming Treasurer María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo; EC Member Clara Arenas; Suyapa EC Member Portillo-Villeda, Emiliana EC member Cruz; EC Member Maria Victoria Murillo; Student Representative Vivian Andrea Martinez-Diaz; and Ex-officio member Timothy Power, Oversight Committee, Strategic Plan.

Dr. Bill DeWalt and Sylvia Keller, senior museum advisors and consultants retained by Executive Director Milagros Pereyra, presented a vision for a new Latin American Cultural Center to be developed and implemented at the new headquarters. The project was approved unanimously, and work on the Latin American Cultural Center began.

The Latin American Cultural Center (LACC) becomes a reality

By March 2020, a new Assistant Director/ Curator/Exhibit Designer, Sandra Budd, had been hired to spearhead the formation of the new Center along with Dr. DeWalt and Ms. Keller, to develop content for the exhibits and assist in raising funds to support the effort. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in the United States. While most people were sequestered at home, the LACC team found, organized, scheduled, and

oversaw countless plasterers, painters, roofers, electricians, plumbers, carpenters, carpet installers, elevator inspectors, and others to complete the extensive repairs and renovation needed prior to LASA's move into the building and the museum installation. The design and preparation of the LASA offices and potential rental spaces in the building were completed by the first quarter of 2021, and with the headquarters building ready for occupancy, LASA moved into its new offices in March 2021.



Concurrent with the ongoing renovations was the development of exhibit content, writing of exhibit label text, selection of photographs and objects for the displays, and design of the exhibit presentation. As renovation work slowly wound down, the efforts to create a beautiful, informative exhibit ramped up. Plans were also established for a changing exhibits gallery on the third floor and for the renovation of the 100-seat auditorium to accommodate programming such as lectures, symposia, film series, performances, etc. LASA/LACC also wanted capabilities for live streaming of programs and hybrid meetings when appropriate to ensure reaching the widest audiences possible.

Much of the building renovation work was completed with savings from the purchase of the building. Active fundraising efforts led to a \$150,000 grant from the Hillman Foundation for auditorium upgrades and another \$125,000 for outfitting the new changing exhibit galleries

with a moveable wall system and lights. The team also realized that the additions of touchscreen interactives would allow far more information to be presented in the permanent exhibits while also introducing an interactive element. A \$20,000 grant was obtained from the PNC Charitable Trusts, which helped fund the design of the presentations and the purchase of the screens.

The installation of the permanent exhibits, a concise but comprehensive overview of Latin America and the Caribbean—its lands, history, people, cultures, and arts—was completed by November 2021; however, due to the ongoing pandemic, a grand opening was postponed indefinitely. Work began in earnest in 2022 on the content and design of a special exhibit to occupy the Grand Gallery, which would be presented at the time of the opening. A collection of Maya paintings, as well as associated objects and apparel, were identified and became the focus of the first special exhibit. An online exhibit of the Maya collection was created for the LASA Congress 2022 in May. After the design and installation of the walls and lights were completed in the Grand Gallery, the first special exhibit was installed in August, 2022: *Maya Spirituality: Indigenous Paintings 1957-2020*.



During the same time, planning for the future continued, and museum protocols and processes were solidified. LASA hired the architectural firm LGA to conduct a feasibility

study to identify and prioritize future building maintenance needs and improvements. A LACC Local Advisory Council was established to assist with fundraising and to create new liaisons with potential funders and partners, with Council member Federico Ahualli pledging ongoing support from his corporation i4Platform in the amount of \$20,000 per year. Donations of objects were accepted. Conservation equipment was purchased, and protocols for the care of objects were established. A new website was designed and implemented in coordination with the team. A security system was installed, and new safety measures were implemented. Fundraising efforts led to the establishment of a core group of Founders and other individual donors. Perhaps most importantly, it was determined that with the pandemic waning, September 15, 2022, the start of National Hispanic Heritage Month, would be the Grand Opening date for the Latin American Cultural Center.

LACC opens to the public

With a Grand Opening Gala held on the evening of September 15, the Latin American Cultural Center within the Latin American Studies Association's headquarters opened to the public. Sponsors had been procured for the Gala, as well as the Maya Spirituality exhibit, and tickets were sold, both of which defrayed the costs of the opening.



Guests numbered approximately 130, with local and state dignitaries, and several Past LASA Presidents and Executive Council members

attending. It was a festive affair, with Brazilian drumming and Tango performances, a string trio, and a light supper with beverages.

Since opening, the Center has had a steady stream of visitors. Of particular note, visitors from the Pittsburgh Public School's curriculum specialists in History, Social Studies, and Languages have visited and planned in-service sessions for their educators to visit and learn about using the center as a resource for their students. Several school groups have already visited, and more are scheduled.

Fall of 2022 saw continued planning and prioritizing. A subcommittee of the Executive Council (EC) was appointed by current president Margarita López-Maya to ensure interactions between the LASA membership and LACC, and the first meeting took place in the fall of 2022. Fundraising continued, with applications submitted for potential state and local government funds. Building and Visitor Experience operations were fine-tuned. As of the end of the year 2022, LACC is open to the public Tuesday through Thursday and Saturday by appointment only, with tickets being purchased online. The Center operates under the following Mission and Vision:

Mission

The mission of the Latin American Cultural Center is to celebrate Latin America through compelling programs dedicated to fostering a heightened understanding and appreciation for Latin American arts, history, and culture.

Vision

The Latin American Cultural Center will be a cultural hub that will collaborate with local, regional, national, and international organizations to present the importance and vitality of the region in ways that are accessible to the wider community.

LACC's growth and vitality has only begun

Now that the exhibits have been installed and the Center is open to the public, several priorities have been established for 2023:

The completion of the Auditorium upgrade, which has been delayed due to pandemic-related supply chain issues, should be completed in the first quarter of 2023. At that point, programming such as lectures, films, and performances, will begin in earnest. Already, meetings have been held with personnel from the Center for Latin American Studies (CLAS) at the University of Pittsburgh, the University Gallery at the University of Pittsburgh, and other potential partners to discuss collaborative programming. Sponsorships will be sought to fund programs.

The educational aspect of the Galleries will be a strong focus in the coming year. LACC is seeking a temporary part-time educator to construct curricula at appropriate grade levels to help teachers prepare students, guide them through the visits, and assess what they have learned from exploring the galleries. Ancillary activities such as films, hands-on projects, and talks will also be added to the offerings for school groups.

An events coordinator will be hired by MaestroMeetings (LASA's meeting planning unit) to manage events, both rental and self-planned, and all the detail-oriented scheduling

involved. This person will also advertise the LASA headquarters building as a beautiful rental space for individuals and corporations.

Additional special exhibit topics for the Grand Gallery will be selected, and planning and implementation will be scheduled.

LACC will begin the process of creating online versions of its primary exhibits for exploration by members and other interested individuals worldwide.

Conclusion

LASA's purchase of a historic building located near the University of Pittsburgh campus and the opportunities that this acquisition offers are in many ways unlimited. This property is a sound investment that not only houses the main headquarters of the Association, but is now home to an exciting and educational cultural center/museum that holds informative exhibits on Latin America and offers programming to the general public and beyond with appropriate live streaming. The headquarters building offers opportunities to generate other income through the rental of its elegant spaces to members, the general public, and other organizations. Most importantly, the Latin American Studies Association now has an iconic headquarters building that will serve the organization long into the future.

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