

Cultural Significance

The culture of Latin America is celebrated at a new center located in a historic Oakland building.

BY ANNE TRABANDT

The Latin American Studies Association (LASA), a long-standing presence on the University of Pittsburgh campus, has taken up new residence in the strikingly renovated Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania building in Oakland—bringing a unique cultural experience to Pittsburgh through the launch of its Latin American Cultural Center.

LASA, a group of more than 14,000 scholars across the globe, has increased its ranks exponentially in the past decade, outgrowing its modest headquarters inside Pitt's Bellefield Hall. With the need to move to a larger administrative space looming, executive director Milagros Pereyra-Rojas seized the opportu-



The detailed woodwork on the staircase bannister is an example of the architectural elements that distinguish the building, which was built in 1913.



The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania building on Bigelow Boulevard in Oakland is now home to the Latin American Cultural Center, operated by the Latin American Studies Association.

nity to also expand LASA's mission as a professional organization to include community outreach offerings aimed at celebrating the rich history and culture of Latin America through exhibits, performances, and speakers.

"I thought it would be a beautiful idea to showcase the cultural arts and history of Latin America," explains Pereyra-Rojas.

Her lofty vision came into focus after she set her sights on 4338 Bigelow Boulevard, a strikingly regal Italian Renaissance-style building, just steps from the Pitt campus. "The building is beautiful. It is historical," gushes Pereyra-Rojas of the 109-year-old white brick property with a split-staircase entranceway. "But it wasn't for sale."

Undaunted, she approached the owner to sell it, and in 2019 LASA bought the building, which already had a museum designation from its years housing the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. After conducting an extensive renovation on the three-story structure, the association moved in earlier this year and is now putting the final touches on its new home.

The 15,000-square-foot property not only allows LASA's headquarters to accommodate additional staffers, it also features two halls for permanent exhibits, multi-use rooms, and



Sandra Budd, the center's assistant director and curator.

event spaces—including an auditorium with a stage—suitable for conferences, receptions, or temporary exhibits, and all available for rent.

After procuring the space, LASA brought curator Sandra Budd onboard to conceptualize and execute the organization's vision for its cultural center.

Budd, who formerly designed exhibits for the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, has laid out one of the permanent exhibit halls to take visitors on a walk through Latin American history, starting with the arrival of first peoples—"our preferred term," she says—on the continent 20,000 years ago.

She sees it as "a timeline to introduce people to 'what is Latin America?'" Budd explains, "We realized that in general, [the] U.S. education system doesn't teach much about Latin America or South America, so this is kind of a CliffsNotes to the history."



As part of the renovation of the entire building, this second-floor foyer was restored to its original grandeur. It is one of a number of spaces available to rent for private events.

The exhibit includes an interactive display that explores the region's vast geography and details which countries and dependencies Latin America encompasses. It also examines how the region quickly became so culturally diverse, starting with the Spanish Inquisition.

"The early mixing of people started as soon as the Spanish arrived. Other European colonies started establishing themselves, trying to attach themselves to America," explains Budd. "There was a really complex mixing of African slaves [who were brought over] with indigenous people and Europeans."

The history lesson continues with photos depicting the slow fight for independence in many Latin American countries, while modern-day images reflect struggles for equality, a loss of biodiversity, and the depletion of the region's natural resources.

The second permanent exhibit hall is dedicated to Latin American art and the rich history of the region it reveals. Visitors will find examples of fine art, folk art, contemporary



Among the items on exhibit at the Latin American Cultural Center are photographs capturing the beauty of Latin America, including this image of Vivente Perez Morales National Park in Chile, taken by photographer Bill DeWalt.

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A folk art-style coyote sits in its packing box while museum displays are being constructed.

crafts, music, and film. Among the pieces on display are replicas of paintings by Frida Kahlo, traditional textiles, and a hands-on display featuring traditional instruments hand-crafted by local artisans.

The auditorium is home to the largest piece of art on display—a 24-foot-long, scaled-down reproduction of “The Presence of Latin America,” Jorge Gonzalez Camarena’s two-story high mural at the Universidad de Concepción in Chile. Because this masterpiece knits together themes such as the unity between the different Latin American cultures throughout history, Budd feels it is a perfect fit for the space.



Traditional, hand-crafted, Latin American instruments are mounted and ready to be put on exhibit at the new cultural center.



The auditorium features a scaled-down replica of *The Presence of Latin America*, Jorge Gonzalez Camarena’s two-story high mural at the Universidad de Concepción in Chile.

The permanent exhibits are expected to open by the end of the year, with temporary exhibits slated to open in the near future. LASA hopes to attract both young and old to the first cultural center of its kind in our area.

“One thing I’ve heard time and time again is that North Americans don’t know what Latin America is about,” says Pereyra-Rojas. She’s hoping to change that, while also providing an avenue for Hispanic Americans to explore their ancestral heritage.

Creating this link between scholars of Latin America and the general public, as well as between those with Latin American heritage and those simply interested in expanding their world view, is a vision come true from Pereyra-Rojas.

“It’s so unique,” she says proudly. “I think it’s going to be a really incredible addition to our cultural community here in Oakland.”

For more information about the Latin American Cultural Center or the Latin American Studies Association, visit lasaweb.org.