**Main Building**

When the OAS Building located at Seventeenth Street and Constitution Ave., N.W., Washington D.C., was completed in 1910, it was considered the architectural wonder of its time. Ninety-three years later, the building's tropical patio, marbled staircases and galleries, and monumental halls continue to delight the thousands of tourists and diplomats who visit the elegant structure every year.

The building was designed and constructed to serve as the headquarters of what today is the world's oldest regional organization, the Organization of American States (OAS), an association of nations formed by 35 countries from the Americas and the Caribbean.

Bearing in mind the many cultures and societies that comprised the institution to be housed in the structure, its architects, Paul Cret and Albert Kelsey, set out to make the building an architectural symbol of the unity of the hemisphere by employing a harmonious combination of the major cultural influences found in the Organization's member states. While at first glance the building appears predominantly Spanish colonial in design, upon further inspection the visitor will perceive Native American, French, Portuguese, and English influences.

The Director General of what was then known as the Pan American Union, John Barrett, said of the building: "This monumental intention is to give visible expression to the ideas of unity, of solidarity, of amity that found realization in the Union of American Republics... This is not only a palace, but the spiritual home of the citizens of the 21 American republics" that founded the Organization on April 14, 1890.

A statue of Queen Isabella of Spain is the first sight to greet the visitor to the OAS Building. Located in front of the building on 17th. Street, it serves as an artistic introduction to the history of the Americas before the visitor enters the structure, described by Washington tour guides as one of the most beautiful to be found in the nation's capital.

On the marble facade of the building, flanking the three monumental bronze gates that decorate the arched portals, are two friezes depicting North and South America. Here, the bald eagle of the north and the condor of the south gaze at each other, standing watch over the principles of international relations that guide the actions of the OAS.  The words "Organization of American States" are carved on the marble wall above the sculptured groups.  The name "Pan American Union" is inscribed on a reddish-gray panel above the doorways leading into the House of the Americas.

Upon entering the building, one is first struck by its magnificent proportions and, above all, by the remarkable tropical patio, enclosed by a sliding glass roof, that serves as a garden spot for rare tropical plants all year round. Here can be found rubber, fig, coffee, and banana plants, as well as other tropical plants bearing exotic flowers. The floor of the patio is made of red tile decorated with black figures copied from Maya and Inca ruins.

Prominent among the lush vegetation of the patio is the historic "Peace Tree", a hybrid of fig and rubber, planted by President William Howard Taft during the building's dedication ceremonies in 1910.

The patio's focal point is a pink marble fountain adorned with Native American figures, including snakes with flashing eyes and mouths that spurt water. Surrounding the patio from above are the coats of arms of the original 21 member nations, interspersed with the names of important persons from the region's history.

Passing through the patio, the visitor enters the OAS Art Gallery, where the works of young artists from throughout the Americas are displayed on a temporary basis.

Beyond the Art Gallery is the Simon Bolivar Room, where the Organization's Permanent Council meets. The Council is the political arm of the OAS and is comprised of the ambassadors of the OAS member states. Modern in design, the chamber is equipped with simultaneous interpretation facilities for the four official languages of the OAS, Spanish, English, French and Portuguese.

Having climbed the two marble staircases at either side of the patio, the visitor finds himself in the Hall of Flags and Heroes. Here one may view the colorful flags of all the OAS member states arranged in Spanish alphabetical order, as well as busts of many national heroes, including George Washington, Simón Bolivar, José de San Martin, Benito Juarez and others.

Adjoining the Hall of Flags and Heroes is the elegant Hall of the Americas with its impressive columns, Tiffany chandeliers, and ornate stained glass windows. This room is where the highest ranking meetings of the inter-American system take place. This is also where numbers heads of state, including Pope John Paul II, have addressed the Organization and where the historic Panama Canal Treaties were signed in 1977.

Looking beyond the Hall of the America's stained glass windows, the visitor can appreciate the beauty of the Aztec Garden below. The garden, with its statuary, reflecting pool, and greenery joins the OAS Building with the OAS Art Museum of the Americas, which used to be the official residence of the Organization's Secretary General.  The magnificent Hall of the Americas is 100 feet long, 65 feet wide, and 45 feet high, with stately white columns with Corinthian capitals, 24 of which correspond to the five entrances from the Hall of the Heroes. The glittering crystal chandeliers are by Tiffany.

In the basement of the OAS Building used to be until late '80 s the Columbus Memorial Library, one of Washington's best information centers on the Inter-American System, on Latin America and the Caribbean, and on the inter-American relations in general. In the basement is a tunnel connecting the OAS Building with its Administration Building two blocks away. The tunnel is decorated by a 200-yard long mural title "The Root of Peace". Painted by the Uruguayan artist Carlos Páez Vilaró, the mural depicts various themes of peace and development in the Americas.

An outstanding feature of the grounds of the House of the Americas is the formal Aztec garden, reached from the broad terrace at the rear. The theme of the building continues here with Xochipilli, the Aztec God of Flowers, guarding a blue-tiled pool.

As Secretary of State Elihu Root observed when he laid the OAS Building's cornerstone in 1908: "Temples of religion, or patriotism, of learning, of art, of justice, abound; but this structure will stand alone, the first of its kind - a temple dedicated to international friendship... May all the Americas come to feel that for them this place is home, for it is theirs, the product of a common effort and the instrument of a common purpose."

And so it has. The OAS Building, known throughout the region as "The House of the Americas", has become more than a beautiful architectural statement. It has truly become a lasting symbol of inter-American unity and understanding.