HOUSE OF THE AMERICAS TURNS 100
Paul Philippe Cret (1876-1945) was born in Lyon, France, to lower-middle class parents. By the age of sixteen, Cret demonstrated artistic talent and enrolled in the architectural program at the École nationale des Beaux-Arts in Lyon, winning the Prix de Paris four years later. The award provided him with the income necessary to study at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, the world’s leading school of architecture at the time; Cret placed first on the school’s entrance exam and distinguished himself during his tenure there.

At the École, Cret met students from around the world and through connections found employment in the United States. In 1903 he accepted an assistant professorship at the School of Architecture of the University of Pennsylvania, among a handful of relatively new architecture schools that were making it possible for students from the United States to be academically prepared for the profession without traveling abroad. Cret played a seminal role in the development of architectural education in his adopted country (he became a U.S. citizen in 1926). Among his many students to have accomplished careers was Louis Kahn. As both an educator and a practicing architect, Cret profoundly shaped the development of grand civic architecture in the United States. Cret’s work consistently reflected his deep understanding of the forms and principles of Classical architecture, as well as of the Modern French Style, disseminated at the École des Beaux-Arts.

At the age of twenty-seven, Cret established a private practice in Philadelphia; he maintained it throughout his lifetime, including during the First World War when he served in his native country’s armed forces. Cret designed and built a wide variety of building types in his adopted country, including civic buildings, libraries, museums, monuments, bridges, parks and parkways. Among his most significant works, in addition to the Pan American Union Building, were: the Indianapolis Public Library (1913); the Detroit Institute of Arts (1927); the Hartford County Building and Courthouse (1926); the Folger Shakespeare Library (1932) and the Federal Reserve Board Building (1937), both in Washington DC; and the Main Building at the University of Texas at Austin (1937). Cret also designed the Delaware River Bridge (1926) now known as the Benjamin Franklin Bridge, which was at the time of its completion the world’s longest suspension bridge.
One-hundred years ago, in 1910, the completion of the Pan American Union Building helped to establish the reputation of its young architect, Paul Cret, and constituted a major contribution to the development of a robust yet flexible architectural vocabulary for the nation’s growing civic realm. The building, the design of which was selected in a highly publicized national competition, housed a diplomatic organization (now known as the Organization of American States), voluntarily upheld by twenty-one independent nations in North and South America. How fitting, given the organization’s mission, that in the hands of Albert Kelsey & Paul P. Cret, Associated Architects, with Cret taking the lead role in the initial design, the Pan American Union Building became a casebook study in an architecture based on the concept of dialogue.

The building, widely known as the House of the Americas, presents a series of dialogues—between function and aesthetic, artifice and nature, and perhaps most memorably, between the Classical architecture that defines much of the nation’s capital and the architectural traditions, both ancient and colonial, of Latin America. Ultimately, each of these dialogues serves as a metaphoric expression of the Organization of American States’ core values: exchange, negotiation, and cooperation.

Expressing the nature of the institution and activities it houses, the building celebrates architecture as a narrative art. As the architectural critic C. Matlack Price wrote in 1913, “There are other good buildings in Washington, but where is there one that has so much to say, that commands so much attention, that exerts such an influence? Where is there one that tells such a continuous story...?"
This year, the Organization of American States (OAS), the world’s oldest regional organization, along with its Member States, is marking the centennial of its emblematic building, the House of the Americas. This is a momentous occasion in which we celebrate one century of work improving the lives of the peoples of the hemisphere. On April 26, 1910, leaders of the nations of the Americas came together to dedicate this building. On that day, as a symbol of good faith and solidarity, President William Howard Taft planted a “Peace Tree” in the center of our magnificent headquarters. The House of the Americas stands as the embodiment of peace and prosperity in the Western Hemisphere. The mission of the OAS is to secure a better existence for the citizens of our region by promoting democracy, human rights, justice, security, and development for the peoples of the Americas.