

A National Latino Museum: From Myth to Reality

Proposed Strategies in the Development of a National Latino Museum

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Executive Summary

Our nation's history is rooted in a diverse blanket of cultures. It is our obligation and duty as citizens of this nation to record and preserve those accomplishments. The Smithsonian Museums are designed with the purpose of educating the general public about particular events and facts in society. Immigrants from around the world have settled within the United States and contributed to the economic and social development of our nation. In keeping in line with our tradition, we must not forget these accomplishments and contributions of our nation's history. Ignoring this would not only undermine the hard work of our people, but it would certainly do an injustice to our children's future.

How do these facts build a case towards the creation of a National Latino Museum? The tremendous growth of the Latino community, the lack of opportunity for people to be exposed to Latino traditions as well as the apparent interest in mainstream society in Latino culture are factors contributing towards the creation of a National Latino Museum. Furthermore, under-

standing why Latinos do not have a museum on the National Mall is as equally important as finding the most practical and capable strategy to pursue under the directive of a counsel or advisory board of some kind. The time has come to act, rather than speculate about such an idea. For these and a myriad of other reasons, this policy paper will explain why it is important to build a National Latino Museum and explore proposed strategies.

[Throughout this policy paper, the terms Hispanic and Latino are used interchangeably. The decision to use one or the other will have to be resolved when the museum is officially named. For our purposes, no real distinction is made as we sifted through the layers of proposed strategies.]

The Rise of a Museum Purpose of National Latino Museum

The primary objective of a National Latino Museum would be to organize the contributions and achievements of Hispanics as pioneers of American culture. The museum would serve as an invaluable resource to the Smithsonian Institution and to our nation as

a whole. By highlighting the accomplishments and contributions of Latinos, the museum would do the following three things:

1. Provide insight into the nation's history
2. Provide an opportunity to correct stereotypes about the nation's fastest growing group
3. Enhance cross-cultural communication

The absence of such a museum would only undermine the important role that Latinos have played in the creation and development of the United States. For as we already know, what has reigned in popular culture and even in the teaching of history for more than a century is a stereotypical vision of Hispanics as less than desirable neighbors and citizens. Thus, by recognizing and accepting Hispanic contributions as part of American history and culture, we provide the world and ourselves an opportunity to have a clearer insight to the diversity of American culture and the interpretation of our nation's history. Archiving the many influences immigrants have had over the years will bestow

Table 1. Population by Race and Hispanic Origin for the United States: 2000

Race and Hispanic or Latino	Number	Percent of Total Population
RACE		
Total population	281,421,906	100.0
One race	274,595,678	97.6
White	211,400,626	75.1
Black or African American	34,658,190	12.3
American Indian or Alaskan Native	2,475,956	0.9
Asian	10,242,998	3.6
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	398,835	0.1
Some other race	15,359,073	5.5
Two or more races	6,826,228	2.4
HISPANIC OR LATINO		
Total population	281,421,906	100.0
Hispanic or Latino	35,305,818	12.5
Not Hispanic or Latino	246,116,088	87.5

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Redistricting (Public Law 94-171) Summary File, Tables PL1 and PL2.

credit where credit is due, while at the same time educating the general public about Latino issues.

The creation of a Latino Museum would not only provide an insight to our nation’s history, but more importantly it would service the needs of our nation’s fastest growing group. Providing such an opportunity would only strengthen and open the lines of cross-cultural communication amongst the different groups of our population. More importantly, a museum would provide an opportunity for society to be exposed to Hispanic cultures and help dispel any stereotypes.

Growth of Hispanic Community

The burgeoning Hispanic community’s need of further resources is escalating at an alarming pace. However, it will only become a threat if resources are not provided—resources corresponding to a National Latino Museum.

According to the 2000 Census, the Hispanic population has grown by nearly 60% since 1990.¹ Even though at least 80% of Latinos live in California, Texas, New York, Florida,

Illinois, Arizona, New Jersey, New Mexico, Colorado and Nevada, they are establishing themselves in communities ranging from Dalton, Georgia to Lexington, Nebraska.²

The results of the 2000 Census launched a much-awaited political response to the needs of Hispanics in the United States. Table 1 clearly reveals Hispanics as the largest minority, and as such the expanding Hispanic political playing field is gaining momentum.³ Even though Puerto Ricans are citizens by birth yet not included in the U.S. Census count, should speak volumes of the exclusion that Hispanics face in U.S. mainstream society despite the fact that the current population growth reveals that Hispanics account for 12.5% of the total population.⁴

Only recently has the U.S. government increased the number of political appointees with prominent figures such as Leonard Rodriguez in the White House and Rosario Marin as the U.S. Treasurer. High-ranking Latinos are sprouting roots in Washington, D.C., yet it is important to acknowledge that under George W.

Bush’s administration, only 6% of political appointees are Hispanic, whereas African Americans make up 9% of the total 300 appointees.⁵

Addressing these shortcomings will have to be attended to by the federal government. Furthermore, in carrying out the task of creating a National Hispanic Museum, it is vital to understand that our federal government must and will play a vital role in this process.

Establishing the need for a Latino museum is important, but equally significant is to understand who will push the agenda for such a museum. One solution is the creation of an Advisory Board comprised of individuals from the business sector, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, the art industry, as well as those with a museum background especially from the Smithsonian Institutes. The Congressional Hispanic Caucus should be at the forefront of this endeavor mainly due to their access to vital resources such as federal funding and institutional resources like that of the Smithsonian.

The Advisory Board will have the authority to channel the types of strategies used in creating a National Museum and would be responsible for organizing our current resources and putting them into action. The fundamental idea behind an Advisory Board would be to create unity amongst the multiple stakeholders involved in the fruition of a museum.

Proposed Strategies

The proposed strategies are classified under the subsequent two categories: overarching strategies or development strategies. Consequently, it is strongly recommended to adopt the two pro-

posed overarching strategies with any of the development strategies. Indeed, the overarching strategies are needed in order to ensure proper implementation of the development strategies. The overarching strategies include the creation of an Advisory Board and understanding and learning from the experiences of Native Americans and African Americans in their quest for a National Museum. On the other hand, the development strategies are defined in the ensuing manner:

- Expand on current Smithsonian initiatives
- Build partnerships with existing Latino museums
- Develop partnerships with international museums
- Cultivate relationships with potential donors

Overarching Strategies

Considering that an Advisory Board is designed to digest the suggested approaches to developing and building the museum, clearly creating any plan would have to be in line with the current guidelines and policies of the Smithsonian Institution. Prior to the African and Native American museums being built, the Smithsonian had provided other means for exposing and highlighting the contributions and cultures of these two groups via exhibits and displays from around the country.

The Advisory Board is positioned as an entity to govern the actual planning and development stages of a museum. The existence of the Advisory Board should not be indefinite but rather their goal is to create a museum so that their presence would not be needed. In as much as the Advisory Board should strive to reach its goals, the Board must also seek for neutrali-

ty via their members. In theory, the members should channel the most effective strategies to bring about the most effective change. The initial stages will include drafting an action plan, exploring the proposed development strategies, as well as investigating where the funds will originate.

One of the biggest reasons that Latinos today do not have a museum is due to their lack of aggressiveness in this agenda. Finding the appropriate location and the monies to fund its development will be the most challenging objectives. Accordingly, learning from past efforts made by the Native Americans will give us an advantage. To date, African Americans do not have a museum. The plans and the desire exist, as do their political cohesiveness. Armed with the knowledge that pushing a political agenda takes more than just political pull, the Advisory Board can find the most effective strategy that will bring about the construction of a museum. The diversity of the Advisory Board can deliver the interests of everyone. Consequently, avoiding the mistakes of African Americans and following the direction the Native Americans took will be one possible strategy. Although the Native Americans' museum stands as a testament to their persistence, it took ten years to get approval for its construction.

The Native Americans were very insistent in their goal to create a museum. It was a long-held vision by many and supported by key players. Key lessons to take away from their experience are:

- Use lobbyists on the Hill to promote a Latino agenda
- Create alliances with current owners of art collections

- Integrate different sectors of stakeholders
- Remain patient despite the tedious work involved in the process

Unfortunately, the African-Americans are currently in the process of lobbying for a museum. Nevertheless, they must remain persistent because their success is also our gain. As history teaches, minority groups pave the way for other minority groups in the succeeding generations.

The Native American and African Museums provide examples of the experiences of other minority groups in developing and building their own museums. Any effort to build a Latino Museum should learn from their experiences—what worked and what did not—and could perhaps enlist their support in the process. Any proposed strategies would involve understanding the political climate of the Smithsonian museums and investigating the history of the development of museums in general.

Development Strategies

One of the simplest ways to bring about change is to expand from the current programs in place, therefore eliminating the roadblocks that are associated with recreating a plan or model, which are very costly and time consuming. This first strategy proposes that such programs inclusive of the Center for Latino Initiatives at the Smithsonian Institute, current art and cultural museums, as well as other programs aimed at providing insight into the nation's history should be expanded. A first step in a long-term strategy might be to find several well-known champions of the museum who can promote it.

By incorporating exemplar models of success into a development strategy, the building of a Museum becomes that much more feasible. It is inherently important to know where others have failed and have succeeded in creating museums and centers of cultural importance to the Latino community.

Creating these links of communication should prove fruitful if diligently followed. However, as intelligent minds come together to create a museum, they must remember to remain innovative, artistic and resourceful in creating a functional museum. One of the drawbacks during any planning process is to think only inside the box. The challenge within this first strategy will be to follow the guidelines set forth by the Smithsonian Institution while remaining true to Latinos' heritage and history.

A second proposed strategy is to build partnerships with existing Latino museums around the country. Through their assistance and collections, they could provide the resources that are needed to create a national Hispanic Smithsonian Museum. By working together and integrating the resources that are already in place at the regional level, it would allow us to service the very diverse needs within the Hispanic community. Even though regional museums reflect the dominant Latino populations of those regions, bringing together these resources is to the Boards' advantage. For example, in Miami, the dominant culture is Cuban while in Los Angeles it is Mexican/Chicano. Having the ability to service those needs will be a key factor to the overall effectiveness and credibility of a National Museum.

There is no doubt that Hispanic history chronicles a myriad of events

from slavery to revolutions to the existence of chocolate in North America. Hispanic history has its place in the United States' historical timeline, yet it is not accounted for anywhere on the national level. The Center for Latino Initiatives is a beginning, but the potential to bring collections from Latin America on exhibit in the United States has its own benefits. Showcasing international exhibits such as collections by Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo found in Mexico City could diversify the existing collections and bring Latino awareness to the national level.

A third proposed strategy is to build partnerships with international museums housing works by Latino artists. The aforementioned international partnerships with museums could drastically shift the negative perception of how society sometimes views Latinos. With over 20 domestic Latino museums, there is no need to reinvent the wheel.⁶ The people behind these museums understand what the public wants to see on display, they know the artists at the local level and they know what it takes to succeed.

Bringing international artists into the picture could broaden the scope beyond the dominant cultures in the United States. One of the primary reasons in building a museum is to enhance cross-cultural communication whether it is with South American countries or those in the islands. The goal is to further educate Latinos and the general public. Likewise, these same museums have networking links with other museums that could house historical artifacts and other heirlooms.

A fourth proposed strategy is to cultivate relationships with potential museum donors. Their contributions

are a key factor into the creation of a National Latino Museum because if the U.S. government receives enough collections, they must be housed at an appropriate location. Likewise, their donation will illustrate the simple fact that information on Hispanic art, culture, and history is a void that must be filled on the national scale.

The bottom line to any project is money. Indebted to the generous donations of private collectors, sponsors, and smaller private museums, the Smithsonian museums today stand on the National Mall. This translates into the need to find willing collectors to donate series of art by Latino artists. Historical precedence has ordained that if donations accumulate to a large enough collection, the government might see the necessity of approving the funds for a National Museum. Nonetheless, this is not a steadfast rule. Appropriations on behalf of the government for any type of museum are a tedious and formidable process. The prospect of a National Latino museum is a long-term project, whereas the opening of a dialogue about the possibilities is the short-term goal.

Conclusion

As with any government-funded project, a museum has the potential to either divide or unite Latino society in relation to themselves and other interest groups. The fact that an African-American museum is yet to be built demonstrates the difficulties and challenges already in place. Funding, location, and politics are just a few of the hot-button issues. Unfortunately, some interest groups firmly believe that the game of funding is a zero-sum game where if one interest group gains, then another must lose. Quite the contrary, the pie expands to

allow for more diversity. Everyone can win. Creating these links of communication and keeping them open are essential for progress and understanding.

Societal division is one drawback that can push everything back to square one. Harmony, unity and agreement demonstrate that as a Hispanic community, we understand our needs and therefore the effectiveness of our effort for a museum is stronger and more potent as an agenda. The conquest and feat of the challenges posed by the political red tape will one day launch the beginning of a culturally, artistically, and historically rich museum. Due to the fact that the swelling Hispanic population will only grow in size and power, uniting our resources today will pave the path for future alliances.

Naturally, the costs of constructing a museum are immense, but the benefits far outweigh any losses. The construction of the Native American museum is testament to the incurring benefits. Understanding the influence of the political and social environment is a vital role in the funding for and approval of a museum.

As one museum director once said,

*Museums are the unique keepers of the past. They act as safeguards for the cultural resources of our human heritage. From the chaos and conflict of today's world, the museum will hold the collections that tell us today and tomorrow who we are and where we come from.*⁷

With these wise words in mind the United States should build a National Latino Museum to preserve all walks of life from yesterday to tomorrow and beyond.

References

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. 2000. "Population by Race and Hispanic or Latino Origin for the U.S.: 1990 and 2000." U.S. Census 2000. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.

² The President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans. 2002. *The Road to a College Diploma: The Complex Reality of Raising Educational Achievement for Hispanics in the United States.*

³ U.S. Census Bureau. 2000. "Population by Race and Hispanic or Latino Origin for the U.S.: 1990 and 2000." U.S. Census 2000. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.

⁴ Ibid, U.S. Census Bureau.

⁵ "Women's Appointments Plummet Under Bush." Women's E-news. July 7, 2001. Accessed on January 25, 2003. Online.

⁶ Smithsonian Institute Online. Accessed January 30, 2003.

⁷ SPJST Library, Archives and Museum. Accessed online. February 10, 2003.