

Latino Community Identity and Development: The Case of a Community Museum in Langley Park, Maryland*

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Abstract: This article uses the ideas of New Museology as a model to discuss a planning phase of the Community Museum Project in Langley Park, Maryland. It considers that a community museum is an agent for managing change that links education, culture, and power. The methodology is based on educational and psychological concepts of lifelong learning and life-stage development, which seeks to establish conditions to enable communities to learn about themselves and their needs, and to act upon that knowledge. The community museum concept establishes a role for the museum as a mediator in the process of cultural transition .

Key Words: New Museology, Langley-Park, Latinos, Immigration, Immigrant Life Course Research Program, Integral Museums, Ecomuseum, CASA Maryland

The significant Latin American immigrant population of Langley Park, Maryland embodies a unique set of challenges and strengths, obstacles and tools as their members establish their lives in a different country and culture. A number of community-based organizations address the social, economic, political, and cultural needs of this community through a variety of means. In support of and collaboration with these ongoing efforts, the Community Museum Project team proposed to establish an institution to develop and maintain the cultures of the area's Latino and Latin American populations. In this paper, we will explain the theoretical basis of a community museum, the steps we took to initiate such a museum in Langley Park, and the results of our work.

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Community Museums

The term “New Museology” is a translation of the commonly used French and Spanish terms “nouvelle muséologie” and “nueva museología.” It is an idea of the museum as an educational tool in the service of social development. The center of this idea of a museum lies in people rather than objects. There are three parallel developments, independent of one another and in separate social contexts: neighborhood museums in the United States, integral museums in Latin America, particularly in Mexico, and ecomuseums in France and Quebec (Hauenschild, 1989).

A crucial element in the structure and organization of the “new” museum is that it offers the population an active role in shaping and participating in the museum. This form of museum work, which is distinguished by public participation, is described by representatives of new museology as “people’s museography.”

“Through his knowledge and his living forces he is called upon either to participate in the museum adventure itself or to involve himself in the sociocultural and even economic development of his territory. He is no longer a visitor; he becomes a decision-maker, an actor, a museographer and an agent of multiplication” (Hauenschild, 1989).

In this article, we will use the ideas of New Museology as a model to discuss a planning phase of the Community Museum Project in Langley Park, Maryland. A community museum¹ is an agent for managing change that links education, culture, and power. The methodology, based on educational and psychological concepts of lifelong learning and life-stage development, seeks to establish those conditions that enable communities to learn about themselves and their needs, and to act upon that knowledge. The community museum concept establishes a role for the museum as a mediator in the process of cultural transition (Fuller, 1992).

The Community Museum Project in Langley Park, Maryland

In this paper, we will describe an experience starting a community museum in a low-income urban enclave contiguous to the University of Maryland campus. The Community Museum Project in Langley Park, Maryland was initiated to contribute to the Immigrant Life Course Research Program. Through its various activities, the

Program seeks to provide policy makers and community leaders with more complete information about the immigrant population and cultures in the area.

A community museum recognizes the importance of culture in the development of self-identity and its role in helping a community adjust to rapid change (Fuller, 1992). This relates to the experience of Latin American immigrants to the United States, as the New Americans are introduced to a different culture and environment. Often, this transition involves a loss of cultural foundations and social connections to the country of origin. Similarly, the Latinos' new fellow citizens may be largely unaware of their traditions and cultural practices. For these reasons, the proposed idea of a community museum would help to preserve the Latino heritage in Prince Georges and Montgomery Counties, the area it serves.

Planning and Preparation

In 2002, the Program received funding from the Center for Heritage Resource Studies at the University of Maryland to start a Community Museum Project to portray immigrant, specifically Latin American, populations. To initiate the project, team members sought out Latin American immigrants in Langley Park to voice how they would represent their own cultures to the general public through stories and objects.

The project team consisted of a collaboration of individuals from a variety of academic and professional fields. Judith Freidenberg, the founder of the Immigrant Life Course Research Program, is a professor in the University of Maryland, Department of Anthropology. Marcia Bebianno Simoes, Alejandra Colom, Daniel Reyes, Amanda Richie, and María Walsh were members of the Department of Anthropology, as well. Melissa Carillo and Magdalena Mieri were museum professionals who worked at the Smithsonian Center for Latino Initiatives in Washington D.C.

A community consultation was one of the first steps in the Community Museum Project, an event which we will describe in detail below. Team members sought the input of Latin American immigrants in Langley Park regarding the viability of such a museum. However, this population varies greatly in terms of socio-economic status, gender, age, national origin, and documentation status. This demographic diversity thereby affects several factors in instituting a museum: 1) Notions of culture, museum, collaborative processes, and cultural "self-esteem"; 2) Considering knowledge a desirable value in the community; and 3) Valuing museums as sites to connect to the larger society.

Approximately thirty immigrants were recruited from the programs of CASA de Maryland, a community-based organization initially established to provide services to Central American refugees. Today, CASA offers a variety of programs addressing Employment, Housing, Health, Legal, and Women’s needs for the Latin American immigrant populations in Montgomery and Prince George’s Counties.

The group’s diversity, in terms of sex, age, occupation, national origin, knowledge of English and literacy, contributed to the reliability of the results of the consultation, as we received input from a variety of perspectives. We conclude that our sample is therefore illustrative of the general Latino population and culture that will be represented and served through the proposed community museum.

Table 1 June 13, 2002 Community Consultation Program

<i>Time</i>	<i>Activity</i>
11 a.m.	Participants are helped in filling out an informational page.
11:15-11:30 a.m.	Judith introduces the members of the team, asks participants to introduce themselves, and thanks participants for attending and sharing their opinions.
11:30-12:30 p.m.	Judith and Magdalena coordinate the consultation. Participants are assigned to four groups. Team members Magdalena, Marcia, Maria, and Judith conduct participant observations of each group and write field notes. The four groups hold two workshops, twenty minutes each, followed by a ten minute general discussion.
12:45 p.m.	Presentation from “Inside Out...,” Judith’s virtual exhibit with the Smithsonian about Latino elderly.
12:45-1 p.m.	Lunch is served.
1-1:30 p.m.	Open discussion over lunch about the possible museum.

The program for the two-hour meeting included time for participants to fill out an informational page, introductions to the members of the Community Museum Project team, group consultations of various issues brought up by two workshops, and then discussion over lunch (See Table 1). This agenda was planned to provide structured time for participants to address community, culture, and identity issues, as well as the idea of the proposed museum itself, but also the flexibility for free conversation and discussion.

Implementation: The Day of the Community Consultation Meeting

In total, eighteen community members attended the June 13, 2002 meeting: six men and twelve women from nine different countries of origin and ranging in age from 21 to 78. The consultation was held in a meeting room of a CASA office in Montgomery County. Chairs were arranged in a “U” shape so that participants were facing each other and the front of the room, where team members delivered their introductions and instructions.

The consultation was conducted entirely in Spanish, because it is the native tongue of the participants and the language they felt comfortable speaking. One of the team members used a video camera to record the session while the others conducted the workshops and discussions.

In opening the meeting, the team members stated that their goal was seeking the participants’ opinions for a museum about immigration. In her introduction, Freidenberg posed the question of how an individual can be an immigrant living in the United States, with one’s mind partially on the country of origin while one’s body is in the new country. She also explained that the purpose of the museum would be to maintain the Latin American cultures not only for the immigrants’ children, but also to share with the general population.

Freidenberg then introduced the discussion questions for the groups: 1) “How do we show our culture to Americans living in our neighborhood?” 2) “Why is it important for Americans to learn about Latino culture?”; 3) “What can we say about Latino culture? How is it similar to United States culture? How is it different?” and 4) “What are the cultural traits of Latin America? How do immigrants conduct themselves in the United States?”

Next, Mieri introduced the two sections of the meeting: a workshop with group discussion questions, then another workshop with stories about actual objects. Describing the first workshop, Mieri explained, “All these questions point to, or emphasize, the value that our culture has. Also, why community centers or museums are important places to express and share our traditions so that people who don’t share our language or traditions can understand them.”

Table 2: Demographics of Langley Park Latino Residents Participating in June 13, 2002 Community Museum Consultation

Sex	Age	Country of Origin	Casa de Maryland Program
Male	21	Mexico	Center for Women's Employment
Female	55	Venezuela	Women and Health Program
Male	35	Dominican Republic	Employment
Male	40	Honduras	Employment
Male	78	Guatemala	Employment
Female	55	Guatemala	Women
Female	59	Bolivia	Women
Female	47	Bolivia	Center for Women's Employment
Female		Nicaragua	Health and Employment
Female	42	Nicaragua	Health and Employment
Female	29	Peru	Housing
Female	58	Peru	Women United
Female	35	El Salvador	Employment
Female	36	El Salvador	English classes
Female	33	El Salvador	Employment
Male	60	El Salvador	Employment
Male	35	El Salvador	Employment
Female	23	El Salvador	Center for Women's Employment

Team members collected participants' informational pages, which asked for their name, contact information, country of origin, age, and the CASA program in which they participate (See Table 2). Participants then broke up into four groups. Each group would consider the discussion question assigned to them and select a spokesperson who would present their comments to the rest of the room.

Workshop I: Responses to Discussion Questions

At our request, the groups gave themselves names and designated a spokesperson to take notes and later present their deliberations during the general discussion. In what follows, we summarize the questions each group discussed and their answers.

Group One: Grupo Guarisama²

The first group discussed the question, “How do we show our culture to Americans living in our neighborhood?” The participants addressed four topics in their response: language, daily activities, dialogues, and written information. First, they expressed that the unique words and dialects of each individual Latin American country are important representations of their respective cultures.



Two groups discuss their responses to the questions in Workshop I.



Grupo Guarisama considers the discussion question given to them in Workshop I.

Additionally, the group stated that participating in and understanding the background of Latino traditions and customs are central to understanding the people. The spokesperson said, "Participating in daily things and using, like I said, words and language specific to our countries' cultures and ethnic groups can show our very typical customs." The participants highlighted the necessity of dialoging with non-Latino Americans, allowing them to ask questions about Latino culture and being able to respond so that they can understand each other. Finally, the participants determined that written expression, such as books and maps, is an important way to share pertinent information that cannot be communicated through other means.

Group Two: Latinos Unidos³

The second group responded to the question, "Why is it important for Americans to learn about Latino cultures?" The participants highlighted the need for exchanges of ideas and mutual understanding among the various cultures in the United States. As the Latino population is constantly growing, this cross-cultural understanding is becoming increasingly important. By sharing their culture, the Latino participants hoped to forge unity and strength with non-Latino Americans in the United States and help to eradicate racism and prejudice. The participants noted some important aspects of their culture to share with the general population, including their work ethic, education, customs, common goals, worries, and principles. They also highlighted other forms of cultural expression, such as Christian faith, food, music, dance, pride, and history which are central to their identity⁴.

The spokesperson for the second group shared that he felt pride when non-Latinos expressed interest in Latino culture, even if the interest was not specific to his country of origin. He added, "It's very good for both [Anglos and Latinos] to exchange their cultures so that we can learn and understand more." Thus, the participants expressed a desire to share Latino unity and pride with the general population.

Group Three: Grupo Vanguardia⁵

The participants in the third group discussed the question, "What can we say about Latino culture? How is it similar to United States culture? How is it different?" The spokesperson for the group expressed an understanding of and interest in the history of Latin America, highlighting the scientific and artistic advances of the indigenous peoples. He mentioned the invention of the concept of zero and the creation of an accurate calendar as foundations of Latino culture⁶.



The spokesperson for *Latinos Unidos* finishes presenting his group's discussion to the other participants.

The group emphasized the similarities with the culture of the United States, noting a common belief in God, an affinity for music and dance, and a shared work ethic as examples. The differences, which they determined were few, were language, family traditions, and cultural values.

Group Four: Grupo Maya⁷

The fourth and final group addressed the questions, "What are the traits of the countries of Latin America? How do immigrants conduct themselves in the United States?" In response to the first question, the participants from Bolivia, El Salvador, and Nicaragua mentioned the topics of tradition, family, culture, and geography. Specifically, they mentioned colorful traditional clothing as well as traditional dances and fiestas. They emphasized the importance of the family unit, as they described how large families offer mutual assistance and hospitality to one another. Catholicism and appreciation for nature were also central traits of these Latin American countries for the group members.

In response to the second question, the group stated that immigrants show respect for the laws of the United States and make efforts to learn the [English] language. They described the initial fear in

coming to the United States, but expressed that an immigrant's overall desire is to overcome obstacles, improve him/herself, and adapt to the new country. In conclusion, the group spokesperson stated, "We are immigrants wanting to advance and overcome. We want to be together and are very straightforward."

General Discussion

In the general discussion following the group presentations, a participant from the first group offered his opinion. "The best way of showing who we are and of sharing and projecting this image of Latinos is by being ourselves. We are trying not to lose ourselves as we have to learn a new way of life."

Workshop II: Discussion of Latin American Objects

The second exercise was hands-on, as the groups passed around and considered several objects that represent aspects of Latin American culture. The objects were provided by the team members themselves from their personal belongings or collections. Each group was asked to select a few objects and answer the following questions: 1) What is the object? 2) What story does it tell?; and 3) How do you relate to it?

Group One: Grupo Guarisama

An elderly Latina woman presented the first group's responses to two objects: a basket and a shawl. The first is known as mimbre, or wicker, in Guatemala, and the same style of weaving is used for hats and sleeping mats. The spokesperson explained the processes of weaving, dyeing, and shaping the basket. Among various Latin American countries, such a basket serves distinct purposes, including carrying produce, hanging from a ceiling for storage, bringing food to livestock, and being sold as a craft in a city marketplace.

The second object was a deep red shawl with tassels on the ends, known as a manto or a pañuelo, depending on the country. The group members all contributed in explaining its various uses as a head covering for church, an elegant accessory to a party, and a table or window covering. The spokesperson also demonstrated how indigenous Guatemalan mothers use the shawl to carry their children as they work. As the group summarized the stories told by the object, "The use depends on the country, but it's a story of indigenous origin."



Latinos Unidos describe their object in Workshop II.

Group Four: *Grupo Maya*

The fourth group selected three objects. The first was a traditional belt made and used by the interior indigenous populations of Bolivia. Participants explained that the same weaving used to make the brightly colored patterns on the belt is also used for caps, bags, and various other objects. The second object was known by different names depending on the country, including *nambira* in Nicaragua. A shallow wooden bowl with a built-in straw, the tool is used in preparing and eating traditional foods such as *tortillas* and corn. The group spokesperson concluded, “It is something that seems insignificant, but its uses are varied depending on where we come from. How we relate to it depends on the country, but it’s something cultural from Latin America.”

The group’s final object was a small bust of the Virgin, again represented by various personas in different countries such as *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in Mexico, *La Virgen de Concepción* in Nicaragua, and *La Virgen de la Paz* in El Salvador. The spokesperson explained the religious significance of the object in representing the Spanish imposition of Catholicism on the indigenous peoples through colonization.

Concluding Discussion

Following the presentations of their objects, Freidenberg asked the entire group how they would structure or use a museum space if given the opportunity. Participants suggested placing objects in glass cases with explanations of their purpose and meaning in both English and Spanish.

Thus, the consultation showed that the experience of appreciating the present's continuity with the past and recognizing the objects' connection with their self-identity is what gave value to the objects for the Latinos in Langley Park. Participants expressed a desire to pass on their traditions to future generations so that children are not cut off from their cultural roots. In addition to forging mutual understanding with non-Latino Americans, the participants emphasized the importance of a community museum in maintaining Latin American cultures within their own families.

Analysis of Community Consultation

The first workshop served as an excellent ice-breaker for community members to learn about each other, their values, and their cultural expressions. The dialogue generated by the questions among group participants speaks to the need and importance of having a community space where members can mold and promote their views of themselves and how they would like to be perceived by the community at large.

During the presentations of the second workshop, group members were chatting and contributing their own information about each object. This eager participation indicates that Langley Park Latinos have ideas to share about their community through cultural objects. The objects served as catalysts for discussion about the immigrants' understanding of their countries of origin, their histories, and their cultures. Such results from the Community Consultation suggest that similar dialogues can occur in the broader community in the context of a museum.

The Role of a Community Museum in Langley Park, Maryland

A community museum can operate as a vehicle and a tool to inform the general public, non-Latinos, as well as younger generations of Latinos about the spirit and evolution of the community. It not only helps connect with the chronological past, present, and future, but could also incorporate the social and psychological changes within the community. It can help bridge the gap between generations, not only between the Latin American immigrants in Langley Park, but among other immigrant groups and the general American people in the surrounding areas (Fuller, 1992).

The first goal set forth by the Community Museum Project team in planning a community museum was to facilitate a forum where community identity and development could take place. Through the community consultation, Langley Park Latinos had an opportunity to share and reaffirm the value of culture in their communities, thus achieving that goal.

During the next development phase of the project, the emphasis will be to identify social, cultural and economic issues that the community faces in daily life. Problems such as language barriers, low socio-economic status, and lack of social respect are examples of obstacles for immigrant incorporation to United States society. A community museum in Langley Park will provide an arena for the community to address those issues, and also create opportunities to forge possible solutions.

The Community Museum Project team plans to continue the work that the Community Consultation initiated. Having engaged in dialogue with the members of the community, we now have a better idea about the needs and interests of the population the museum would serve. From here, we will prepare and submit grant proposals to fund the actual institution of the museum.

The community museum itself will not only be a repository of objects but will also tell stories of how the community copes with everyday life. Such a model of community museum can help bring the community together into a single unit. The museum will also enhance the understanding non-Latino American communities have of Latinos: they will not only have the chance to appreciate the Latino culture represented by the objects, but will also perceive the spirit of the Latino population and the efforts that Latinos as immigrants make to adapt to their new environment.

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Endnotes

¹ Fuller used “ecomuseum” in her article, but since the terms of ecomuseum and community museum are constantly interchanged, and notions of community museum in this article correspond well with Fuller’s definition of ecomuseum, we switch the term into community museum.

² Guarisama is the Spanish word for “machete” in El Salvador.

³ Latinos United Group. This name was chosen by the group to identify itself.

⁴ The participants’ reference to the Christian faith can be interpreted as describing the Catholic religion.

⁵ Vanguard Group. This name was chosen by the group to identify itself.

⁶ The invention of the concept of zero and the creation of an accurate calendar refers to the Mayan culture in Central America.

⁷ Mayan Group. This name was chosen by the group to identify itself.

⁸ An anonymous reviewer of this paper noted that there are connections between the Catholic religion and indigenous traditions, such as the appearance of the Virgin Mary as an Aztec princess to a native at Guadalupe. This interesting observation is, however, beyond the scope of this paper.

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