

Museums: Ideas

On the Mall, homage to the melting pot?

A new bid for coveted territory takes on issues of race and ethnicity

BY MANUEL ROIG-FRANZIA

A Mall tourist itinerary, circa 2050. Here's one way it could look: Day One: Zoom to the top of the Washington Monument, stroll over to the Asian American Museum, then swing by the German American Museum.

Day Two: Take in the Italian American Museum, then the Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders Museum and finish up with a rousing spin through the Museum of the Irish American People.

Of course, other than the Washington Monument, none of these attractions actually exist circa... the present day. But could they? Should they? How many ethnic, racial and national origin museums is too many ethnic, racial and national origin museums? Is it possible to have too many — or too few?

Such are the questions aroused by a provocative museum proposal that is challenging notions of identity and surfacing some subtle tensions about who should get what and who should pay for it when it comes to the area in and around the national lawn. The concept — known as the Museum of the American People — would attempt to tell the story of “all of the people who became Americans, from the prehistoric period through today,” according to its backers. Still in the infant stages of the glacially paced and bureaucratically ornate national museum creation process, the proposed museum has already garnered redneck nicknames, such as the “Immigration Museum” or the “Melting Pot Museum.”



COURTESY MTFA ARCHITECTURE

‘EVERYBODY’S STORY IS INCLUDED’: An artist’s rendering of the proposed National Museum of the American People, showing the view from 10th Street. The organizers want to build the museum on five acres near the L’Enfant Promenade, with views of the Maine Avenue waterfront and the Washington Channel.

“Everybody’s story is included in the museum,” says Sam Eskenazi, a 69-year-old retired federal public affairs specialist who came up with the idea, hit by some bolt of inspiration, while walking on the Mall several years ago.

But wait a minute. Aren’t there already museums — both existing and nearing existence — that tell the stories of some of those people

who became Americans? There’s the National Museum of the American Indian, near the southeast corner of the Mall, and there’s the National Museum of African American History and Culture, set to occupy five prime acres of Mall space by 2015. And there’s the proposed National Museum of the American Latino, which has graduated from infant to toddler stage

after the creation of a presidential commission that generated a report on the proposal.

The specter of these three museums — one operating, one about to be built, one just past the presidential commission stage — could complicate the effort to build an omnibus museum. But, spun just so, the other museums could also be used as an argument to support

the concept of a catch-all attraction.

Think about the possibilities: Anti-all-encompassing museum: It’s redundant!

Pro-all-encompassing museum: Those other museums are proof that one ethnic museum can lead to another and another... and another.

Rep. James P. Moran (D-Va.) is

sponsoring the legislation that would create a presidential committee to study the Museum of the American People proposal and has rounded up about 20 co-sponsors. He realizes that the museum could be a long way off, but he likes the idea of drawing a line now, “before we have any proliferation

NATIONAL CONTINUED ON Q3

NATIONAL FROM Q2

of additional ethnic museums.”

“There may very well be a request for an Asian museum. Then perhaps a South Asian, and a museum of the Muslim peoples. ... I can imagine someone wanting to build an Irish American museum,” Moran, himself of Irish descent, says in an interview. “If we build an Irish museum, then somebody’s going to want an Italian American museum. If we build an Indian American museum, people will want a Pakistani American museum.”

Moran stresses that he’s not trying to stand in the way of the Latino museum proposal or the African American history and culture museum. Yet he worries that an “infinite” number of groups could follow, each demanding its own museum, leading to something Eskenazi and others have taken to calling “Mall sprawl.”

“You’ve got to have some room to breathe,” Moran says. “Eventually we’ll pass the tipping point.” “People are concerned that every ethnic group in the nation would want to have its own museum,” Eskenazi adds. “In a way, it says we’re all separate instead of together.”

But suggesting that some groups might not get what African Americans are getting, American Indians already have and American Latinos are inching toward is a delicate task. And Moran knows it. “It’s difficult,” he says, to make his point without sounding “disparaging.”

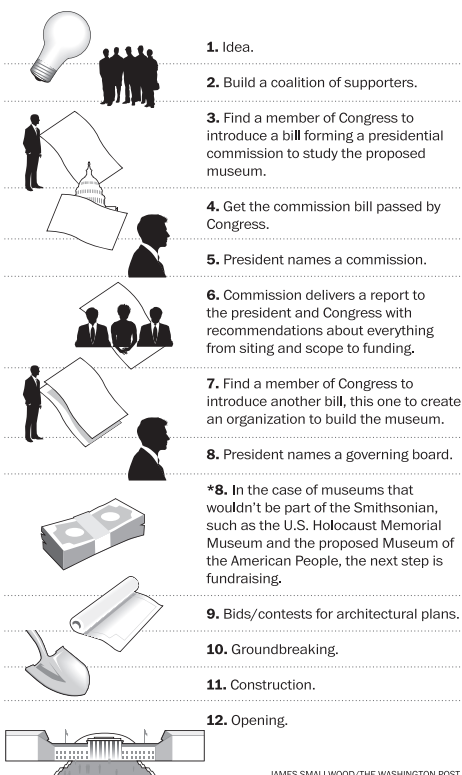
Lisa Navarrete, vice president of the National Council of La Raza, an influential Latino civil rights organization that enthusiastically supports the Latino museum proposal, worries about discouraging future proposals. Other communities that feel underrepresented should feel encouraged to speak up, she says.

“We have a disagreement with Congressman Moran on this,” Navarrete says in an interview.

A complete rethinking of the process is in order, Navarrete says. “I think the ultimate solution is to reevaluate the entire system and

Birth of a museum

It can take decades to create a museum on the Mall. As shown in this chart, the journey from inspiration to installation is thick with speed bumps.



JAMES SMALLWOOD/THE WASHINGTON POST

make sure it is truly reflective of all communities.”

Mindful of how delicate all this can be, Eskenazi has set about signing up an array of groups willing to support forming a presidential commission to study his idea.

He’s got the Chinese American Citizens Alliance. He’s got the Creole Heritage Center and the Irish National Caucus, the Slovak League of America and the Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies — 144 organiza-

tions in all. But even though he has lined up two Hispanic organizations, he’s missing — glaringly — two heavyweights: La Raza and the League of United Latin American Citizens, or LULAC.

They both took a pass. “They indicated they needed to hold off because of the efforts to have the commission for the Museum of the American Latino,” Eskenazi says one afternoon. “The only group that’s held back to any extent is the Hispanics because of the effort to build that museum.”

Navarrete remembers the Museum of the American People pitch as “interesting. But we really, sort of, couldn’t get our heads around it.” La Raza was already deeply involved in the Latino museum proposal, which sprung from an impression among many Latinos that their story was not being told in museums. Navarrete says the group’s leaders decided they didn’t have the public relations “bandwidth” to get behind another museum proposal, especially one they didn’t fully grasp. LULAC took a similar approach. “There’s nothing wrong with having a Museum of the American People,” LULAC spokeswoman Paloma Zuleta says, but “we don’t need another museum that doesn’t have a Latino focus.”

The parallel quests for these two museums highlight a schism in how to pay for a museum in this era of deepening budget woes. The Latino proposal has the museum joining the Smithsonian system and calls for a 50-50 blend of public and private financing, with no federal funding in the first six years.

“We are cognizant of the environment,” Cid Wilson, a member of the Latino museum’s presidential commission, says in an interview. “We also want to be treated fairly in comparison with other museums. At that point, we would ask for our fair share consistent with the construction of a Smithsonian Institution.”

Moran gives such an approach a slim chance of succeeding. “I think in this environment any new funds are going to be difficult,” he says. Eskenazi puts it more bluntly: “Asking Congress for money

these days is a non-starter.”

Which is why he isn’t. The Museum of the American People would instead rely entirely on private donations, Eskenazi says, including donations from foreign governments. It’s an approach that Eskenazi says will most likely require special legislative approvals to address the foreign donations and a per-country cap on gifts so that no individual nation would have undue influence.

Despite the reliance on private money, Eskenazi is seeking congressional support because the imprimatur of the U.S. government would be invaluable in fundraising and in helping to find a suitable location. By relying on private donations, he’s following the hugely successful model of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which was sprung from a Carter-era presidential commission and was built with private funds on land donated by the federal government.

Eskenazi, who was public information director of the Holocaust Museum for six years before it opened and for two years after its public unveiling, envisions a “Colin Powell-type or Madeleine Albright-type” jetting around the world persuading foreign leaders to contribute. The dream is to see the museum rise at the end of L’Enfant Plaza, overlooking the Maine Avenue waterfront and the Washington Channel. Eskenazi imagines foreign heads of state flocking to the opening.

By then, many years from now under the most optimistic scenario, perhaps headline writers will have gotten over calling it the Melting Pot Museum — or maybe not.

“I don’t use that term myself,” Eskenazi says. “There’s certainly melting that took place. I see it more as a stew where there’s melting and chunks and carrots, a rich broth that simmers.”

Of course, there’s another thing that tends to simmer when race and ethnicity melt with money and politics: That would be controversy.

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Sam Eskenazi, who proposed the National Museum of the American People