

Museo del Norte – Press Kit

November 2012



History/Background

In 2009, the Latina/o Studies Program at the University of Michigan - Ann Arbor, in partnership with *Fronteras Norteñas*, a Public History non-profit in Southwest Detroit, applied for and received funding from the U of M Arts of Citizenship Program to explore the possibility of creating a museum and cultural center that could document the historical presence of Latina/os in Michigan and thereby establish their key role in the life of the State. This exploration involved visits to cultural institutions coupled with a year-long community conversation about the role of museums in public life and the centrality of history/storytelling to cultural citizenship and belonging. Given the financial realities of the current economic downturn in Michigan, and the consequent reduction in funding for arts and humanities initiatives statewide, project participants decided that undertaking the design, construction, and management of a major museum seemed unlikely in the near term. However, we felt strongly that models did exist for a long-term strategy that could build community interest across the state and lay the groundwork for a future institution.

The interim vision we developed for the *El Museo del Norte* project is a “museum without walls” that will perform the functions of a traditional museum without the benefits (and liabilities) of owning a building. In a “museum without walls” the community develops and curates exhibits, and teaches and shares with its members their history, art and culture. Oral history projects, speaker series, art walks, movie nights, musical performances and co-curated exhibits with established institutions that are eager to diversify their content and audiences are just some of the events and first steps that can be coordinated by a board or supporters seeking to establish a “museum with walls.”

The greatest benefit of the “museum without walls” strategy for *El Museo del Norte*, is that it enables us to develop an identity for the project, even as we raise awareness about the need for a permanent museum documenting the lives and legacies of Latina/os in Michigan and the Midwest. We believe a successful “museum without walls” program stands at the center of any future capital campaign for a permanent museum.

“The museum will create a place crafted from our stories, a place where our multiple histories in the Americas and in the Midwest can take center stage, a place where young people can learn from their elders, and where our arts, culture, and linguistic traditions are revealed and celebrated as things of beauty, is so very important” – Maria Cotera, Museo del Norte Committee Leader



A Mobile Museum of Latin American History

***La Carpa* Mobile Memory Museum: A Project of El Museo del Norte**

A central element of our “museum without walls“ strategy will be the design and construction of a mobile display we are calling: *La Carpa* Mobile Memory Museum. The content of *La Carpa* will be created from photos, letters, documents, oral narratives and more, both in Spanish and English. *La Carpa* may take the form of a self-contained “museum” (on wheels) that can be parked anywhere, or it may involve a free-standing display that can be easily assembled, broken down, and stored. *La Carpa* will travel the state to raise awareness about the need for a permanent museum documenting Latino history.

Extending Our University Community Collaboration

We are currently collaborating with a graduate design studio at the University of Michigan’s A. Alfred Taubman School of Architecture and Urban planning to develop the design for our mobile exhibit. On October 23rd, University of Michigan graduate design studio students presented 11 proposals for the traveling display’s design at an *El Museo del Norte* event held at the Mexicantown Mercado and International Welcome Center in Detroit. The *El Museo del Norte* task force is reviewing the students’ ideas and will decide on a final design by mid-November. In early January, the architecture students will present a second round of concepts for the design of a brick and mortar museum in Southwest.

Why a Latina/o Museum in Detroit?

We do not see “museum without walls” as a substitute for a more traditional museum, rather, we envision it as an important first step in a process that will eventually lead to the construction of a museum in Southwest Detroit. We remain committed to the idea of a “brick and mortar” museum, because we believe that once it is up and running, *El Museo del Norte* will offer residents of the state and the region an important and quite unusual museum-going experience. While there are several institutions, particularly in the Southwestern United States, which document Latino culture and history, *El Museo del Norte* is unique in that its mission is to highlight the histories, communities and cultures of Latina/os in the Midwest. We imagine it as an important “site of conscience” that will not only highlight the stories of Latina/o immigrants who established thriving communities in northern cities like Detroit and Chicago in the early 20th century, but also remember the hardship these early immigrants endured, particularly those experienced by the tens of thousands of Mexicans who were unjustly deported in the 1930s. Moreover, *El Museo del Norte* and *La Carpa* will bring to light the complexity and heterogeneity of the Latina/o experience by documenting the hidden histories of multiple Latina/o communities including Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Central and South Americans.

A Grassroots Mission

El Museo del Norte is committed to remaining a grass-roots museum, a place where Latina/os from Detroit and surrounding Latina/o communities have a voice and feel at home. We hope that the museum can be a site for the production of culture and the sustaining of community, as well as a training site for future generations of Latina/o curators, archivists, artists, performers, and museum professionals. The *El Museo del Norte* task force benefits from the insights of various

Latina/o organizations including *Fronteras Nortenas*, a Detroit-based public history organization, CLAVE (Community of Latino Artists Visionaries and Educators), Peoples Community Services, and the Mexican Patriotic Committee. The University of Michigan Latina/o Studies Program administers the project, under the direction of Maria Cotera (Associate Professor of American Culture, Latina/o Studies and Women's Studies). Jennifer Peacock, a Ph.D student in the Program in American Culture (Latino/a Studies) manages the day-to-day operations of the project, and Elena Herrada, Director of *Fronteras Norteñas*, manages community relations and administers the curatorial elements of the project.

Mission Statement

We want to document a history of Latina/os by Latina/os for Latina/os in a space where the stories of our grandparents are honored and new stories are generated from the old. We want a site for the production of art, music, literature, and performance that gives voice to our experience and leads to new ways of imagining our world. We want, most of all, a place of community, where the various paths of our lives can come together in mutual support and respect.

Queremos documentar nuestra larga historia en esta región. Deseamos un espacio en dónde podamos reconocer y celebrar las historias de nuestros abuelos y crear nuevas historias. Queremos crear un sitio en dónde nuestras artes plásticas, música, teatro, y poesía, el "flor y canto" de nuestra comunidad, puedan dar voz a nuestros antecedentes y realidad para generar nuevas formas de imaginar nuestro mundo. Sobre todo, queremos una comunidad, en dónde los diversos caminos de nuestras historias intercalan en un ambiente de respeto y honor.

Visit us at www.elmuseodelnorte.com

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Articles about El Museo del Norte:

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