

Smithsonian Names First Director of Museum of the American Latino

Jorge Zamanillo, the chief executive of a community-based Miami history museum, will lead the new institution, which Congress authorized in late 2020.



By Sarah Bahr

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The National Museum of the American Latino, a new Smithsonian institution, is at least a decade away from opening. As of yet, it has no budget. No building. No collection. But it now has its first permanent director, Jorge Zamanillo.

“I’m excited to lead an institution that will present a complete picture of diverse Latino communities,” Zamanillo said in an interview on Thursday. “By sharing those stories and narratives, people will learn American history — that Latinos are a part of American history. And it’s one that’s been left out.”

Zamanillo, 52, comes to the job from Miami, where he grew up, the son of immigrants from Cuba. Since 2000 he has been with the community-based HistoryMiami Museum in various positions, most recently as executive director and chief executive. He will begin his new role on May 2.

Financing for the physical building, which is expected to open in 10 to 12 years, on or near the National Mall in Washington, has not yet been allocated. The same is true of money for the acquisition of objects for the collection. It was only recently, in December of 2020, that the Latino museum was approved by Congress, along with a national museum of women’s history museum.

The project comes at a time when museums are discussing how to prioritize narratives that have historically been excluded from accounts of the nation’s history. There had been disagreement over whether the best remedy was to integrate the history of Latinos into existing Smithsonian museums or to dedicate a separate museum to the representation and recognition of the achievements of 60 million Americans.

In Zamanillo's 22 years at the Miami museum, which had a \$6.2 million annual budget, he worked as curator of object collections, helping to build a repository that now includes more than 40,000 objects and more than two million images and held other curator and executive positions. (He said he did not know how large the new museum's acquisitions and operating budgets might be.)

Zamanillo has a bachelor's degree in anthropology from Florida State University and a master's in museum studies from the University of Leicester in England. He started at Miami Dade College as a music major, a passionate trumpet player and self-proclaimed "band geek." But a trip to Washington when he was 19 changed his life forever, he said.

"I was there for four or five days on my own, and all the museums were free," he said. "There was like two feet of snow, and I was wearing my jeans and denim jacket, so I bought a hat and scarf from one of those vendors on the street for, like, \$5 and just hopped from museum to museum."

When he got back, he broke the news to his parents: He was changing his major — to anthropology — and transferring to Florida State. He ultimately worked in archaeology for about a decade before he joined the Miami museum.

"I saw firsthand that museums have the power to change lives," he said. "They can be transformational in the way they engage communities."

Under his leadership, the exhibitions and events at the new museum won't serve only to celebrate the accomplishments and resiliency of Latinos, he said. The programming will examine the whole story of the arrival of Latinos in what would become the United States, discrimination, lynching, stereotypes and the ongoing struggle for inclusion.

"You want to make sure that you do it right," Zamanillo said. "And that means reaching out to Latinos and communities across the nation to make sure their stories are being captured."