



MIAMI'S HUGE LEAP

By Eduardo Díaz, director Smithsonian Latino Center
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"Miami is the capitol of Latin America!" I'm hopeful that this boastful statement by Javier Souto, Miami-Dade County Commissioner, resounded clearly with the civic and cultural leaders present at the December 4 ribbon-cutting of the new Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM). A quick demographic scan of Miami-Dade County easily validates Mr. Souto's energetic pronouncement. The Hispanic population of Miami-Dade is 64 percent. If you add the Brazilians, for a more complete look at the Latino population, I'd bet the percentage needle moves. Of the 1.1 million Brazilians living in the U.S., more than one-half reside in Florida, mostly South Florida. In Miami, Spanish is the lingua franca, and I've heard more Portuguese here than anywhere else in this country. Tellingly, Miami is not just a Cuban city anymore. The presence of Colombians, Venezuelans, Central Americans, Brazilians and others is palpable, and growing. Miami is the principal pot for this rich and tasty Latin American stew.

And, the stew is more than tasty. From a cultural development perspective, it is clear that Miami is emerging as an important Latino arts and cultural laboratory and destination. The opening of PAMM coincided with ArtBasel, a massive international arts encounter and Art Miami, a more focused, localized showcase. While there, I also visited the trendy Design District and the more down-to-earth Wynwood arts scene. One cannot help but be impressed and hopeful. The arrival of the PAMM is a monumental achievement and a harbinger of good things to come.

I'm hardly an architecture critic, but I am entitled to say that I love the building. Designed by the Swiss firm Herzog & de Meuron, PAMM is nicely tucked into its spectacular bayside location, and its dominant natural light design is perfect for the sun-drenched environs, which does wonders for celebrating the artwork inside. The hanging mini-gardens that surround the building remind one of the region's signature Banyan tree. I've never been in a museum that has so carefully created specific spaces for diverse genres and content. I was delighted to find spaces that dramatically envelop large-scale sculpture, that are perfectly sized and lighted for

small-scale drawings and archival documents, intimate galleries that either flood-in light for artwork that thrive in it or, conversely, permit limited natural light to create an intimate setting for more sensitive content, and the two abutting grand galleries suitable for lead exhibitions that, for the opening, housed the major retrospective of renowned Chinese dissident Ai Weiwei. The multi-purpose, split-level amphitheater is a stroke of functionality genius. Herzog & de Meuron did their homework. I would, however, quibble with the museum store inventory (if you're going to sell clothing where are the guayaberas?!), and the selection of the restaurant operator. Respecting the latter, while I wouldn't necessarily argue for Miami's beloved La Carreta or Café Versailles, both Cuban culinary institutions, I earnestly believe they would do better with a Latino Fusion contractor, one that reflects Miami today and tomorrow.

The day before the opening I heard an NPR story on the museum opening that confused and concerned me. Instead of comprehensively focusing on PAMM's design and functionality and its role in advancing cultural development, the reporter facilely dwelled on the initial controversy surrounding the naming of the new museum. Jorge Pérez, the successful real estate developer and prodigious art collector, endowed the museum to the tune of \$40 million in cash and artwork. What I find ironic and troubling is that the Pérez is located directly across the street from the Adrienne Arsht Performing Arts Center and right next to the Patricia and Phillip Frost Museum of Science, opening in 2015. When interviewed for the story, Pérez intimated that perhaps the critics were not ready for a civic museum carrying a Spanish surname. Next question? Mr. Pérez is both visionary and generous in a way that easily entitles him to the naming, period.

I was also disturbed to hear an interview snippet of a representative of unnamed local collectors who are apparently holding off on supporting the museum out of dissatisfaction with the collection. I would hope that the responsible collector would rally to this new civic museum and help build the collection rather than play keep-away.

Led by its inspired director, Thom Collins, and artistically steered by its skilled lead curator, Tobias Ostrander, the Pérez Art Museum Miami is well positioned to help secure Miami's emerging position as the transnational cultural capitol of Latino America. Miami should be proud, follow the lead of the museum's intrepid board of directors, and support this foundational civic endeavor. Equally importantly, the rest of the country should take notice and explore this new orbit of cultural influence, soon and often.