Executing Culture
Musée, Museo, Museum

THREE COUNTRIES, THREE LANGUAGES, three major museums slated to open in the early 1990s—that was our research project. As of this writing, all three are kaput.

The Musée Régional in Cayenne, part of a larger program of modernization and development for the French Overseas département of Guyane, was to be an ultramodern ethnological museum in the French mode. The Museo de América in Madrid, a from-scratch rehabilitation of a Franco-era monument, was drawing on the latest postmodern museological theory to portray Spain’s historical legacy in the New World. And the Museum of Belize, in the new capital of Belmopan, was constructing the largest single building in the country and equipping it with the very latest high-tech devices to project a dynamic image of this young Central American nation. Our plan was to observe the development of each institution, to attend each opening, and to assess public reaction through interviews with visitors and analysis of press coverage.¹

Madrid, February 1991. The building has been renovated and the exhibition plans completed in detail. In the wake of a public letter protesting Spain’s entry into the Gulf War, the museum’s powerful patron in the ministry of culture is fired and the museum project abandoned.

Cayenne, September 1991. The collections have been constituted and the site is being terraced by bulldozers. A corruption scandal rocks the local government, and all funds for construction projects are frozen for the next five years.

Belmopan, June 1993. Exhibition plans have been worked out, and ground is being broken for the building itself. Suddenly, national elections are called, the opposition unexpectedly wins, and the museum project is shelved.

Our intent here is to conduct an autopsy of each museum, tacking back and forth between questions of exhibition content/presentation and interactions with larger historical/political realities. We begin with the French Guiana case—in rather summary form since our full analysis is available elsewhere (Price and Price 1994, in press)—and then move on to the museum projects in Belize and Spain.

The Creole bourgeoisie of Cayenne conceived the Musée Régional as part of a sweeping project of modernization that involved defining a true Guyanais identity, engineering the rapid francisation of the more “primitive” segments of the population (Amerindians and Maroons), and either assimilating or expelling recent immigrant groups such as Haitians, Brazilians, Hmong, and Surinamers. In the process, Guyane’s colonial notoriety as a penal colony was to be replaced by a futuristic image as Europe’s Space Center and home of the Ariane rocket (see Price and Price 1992).

The Musée Régional’s location in an upscale suburb, its modernistic glass-walled architecture, and its state-of-the-art museological facilities provide the setting for a thematic conceptualization that takes visitors from the myth of El Dorado and early European visions of the Guianas, through materials on Amerindian, Maroon, and Creole history and culture, and finally to exhibits on immigrant groups and contemporary realities.² The abstract statements of intent by the museum organizers are thorough, intellectually sophisticated, and politically aware (see Price and Price 1994). The final two exhibit spaces may serve to suggest the difficulty, however, of celebrating, while cradled in the bosom of the Jacobin state, both multiculturalism and a unified “national” identity.

Transplanted Cultures is intended to represent that part of the present-day Guyanais population “who are

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bearers of cultures radically different from those long established on this soil, and who face the double challenge of socio-economic integration into a for-them foreign milieu and the maintenance of their cultural identity; it focuses on “the example of the Hmong” through displays of their ironwork and costumes. This is followed by The Guyane of Today, represented by “a genuine piece of an Ariane rocket,” exhibits of Cayenne’s carnival (featuring recent Brazilian costumes), and “arts with foreign cultural influence: locally made Haitian paintings, Saramaka woodcarvings, and Brazilian crafts.”

As we read the museum’s goals, the decision to spotlight the Hmong is particularly revealing, for this choice effectively sidesteps what may be the most pressing social problem facing Guyane today: massive illegal immigration, largely by Haitians, Brazilians, and Surinamers. During the past decade, as the wave of immigrants crested, Creoles have become increasingly apprehensive. Nearly all the new arrivals are poor, barely literate, and non-French-speaking—the antithesis of everything Creoles are taught to idealize—and there is a strong sense, both in Cayenne and in outlying communes, of a loss of control. The Hmong, though immigrants, are different. Brought to Guyane “benevolently” as part of an international resettlement program in the late 1970s, they live communally in two new rural settlements isolated from other populations, confining their interaction with Guyane’s elite largely to the marketplace, where they provide them with the finest in fresh fruits and vegetables. And their “picturesque” cultural traditions and colorful ethnic dress enhance even further their suitability to museum vitrines in a land de Gaulle dreamed of making “France’s show-window in America.”

The Guyane of Today then highlights the recent contributions to Guyane’s cultural life by Haitians, Brazilians, and Surinamers—the very populations passed over in the exhibit on transplanted cultures. But the artifacts chosen for display, rather than reflecting the lived experience of these groups, project an image of harmony and cultural enrichment. There are pretty Brazilian crafts and carnival costumes, colorful Haitian paintings, and decorative Maroon woodcarvings, much in the vein of exhibits elsewhere in the museum such as that on plantation/slave society (which features musical instruments and pottery but not whips or chains) and that on the penal colony (which focuses on the convicts’ handicrafts).

Within the broader process of modernization and development in contemporary Guyane, the projected museum would become the politically progressive stage (or cage or cemetery) for the celebration of colorful ethnic difference just at the moment when the state is bringing its full force to bear on the elimination of such difference through the militantly assimilationist program of francisation. It offers those Creoles who are uncomfortable with the idea of Maroons, Brazilians, or Haitians living next door (or entering their living rooms, except as servants) a way to promote the cultural contributions of these people to Guyane’s multietnicity. And it provides a supremely elegant resting place for ethnic and cultural difference (see Price and Price 1995).

As of this writing, however, none of this is to be. Today the vast bulldozed site of the future Musée Régional stands forlorn and bare.

Bidding adieu to Reason, Science, and Order, we move on to the second museum in our tripartite comparison, on the western rim of the Caribbean.

“Zap! Wham! Boom! As you go up the grand staircase, the whole chaos of Belize explodes in your face, Bam!” Artist Joan Duran, who has been described as “a kind of transvanguardist of abstraction, setting alight the arsenal of modern forms and gestures, immolating mind and body in the pyrotechnics that will give birth to a new uniqueness” (Fox 1991), is the indisputable creative force behind the projected Museum of Belize. “Every tourist book,” he goes on, “says ‘Belize is a nation the size of the state of Massachusetts, a land of perfect harmony among its ethnic groups—Mayans, Creoles, Mestizos, British, Hindus, Garifunas, and Mennonites.’ I say, ‘Fuck the size of the state of Massachusetts!’” And he launches into an impassioned defense of why the notion of ethnicity will have no place in his exhibits: “It’s fine to know that people have different ways of doing things,” he argues—“Some people shoot each other from the back and others do it from the front”—but it’s counterproductive to constantly label people by ethnic identity. That kind of “tribalism” works against the national good, he insists, and this museum is being put together in the interests of tolerance and nation-building.

Belize has much in common with Guyane: less than 200,000 people, one of the lowest population densities in the world, an extraordinarily rich ethnic and linguistic mix, a sizable and diverse set of recent immigrant groups, abundant forest and marine resources, significant potential for eco-tourism, an important role as conduit in the international drug trade, and a strong colonial heritage. But this young nation, independent from Great Britain since 1981, differs sharply from Guyane not only in its political status but in its relative poverty, in its lack of “development,” and in its strong cultural ties to both the Central America–Caribbean region and the United States. While Guyane’s thick umbilical cord to France effectively precludes relations, whether economic or cultural, with its neighbors in the Americas (other than the French islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe), Belize is proudly oriented toward the New World. Bombarded with North American mass culture, from satellite-dished television to all the consumer products that can be driven down through Mexico, Belizeans have made the United States their primary destination abroad.
The Museum of Belize is profoundly informed by Joan Duran’s artistic vision. During the first hours of our visit in the future museum’s headquarters, as we were led through tours of the architectural models and blueprints by a young Harvard-trained landscape architect and a senior Cuban museum designer, exhibition content was hardly mentioned. Instead, the discourse pivoted on volumes, colors, textures, and high-tech (and sometimes deliberately low-tech) wizardry, communicated with an almost religious fervor. And when Duran described his dream, veering from movie and video and comic book metaphors (panning, zooming, fast-forwarding, zapping) to the re-creation of the social warmth of the casinos of his native Cataluña—where, in his youth, he’d go to relax, play dominos, or drink a coke with friends—the idea of “collections” rarely came up. His vision is unblinkingly non-elitist: just like the Mexico City subway, where many people are not literate, symbols would be used more than labels to help visitors find their way. Indeed, in his more radical moments, Duran contemplated banishing all texts from the museum, leaving only images. Because he hated collections, he’d made a separate building across the road to house the mostly Mayan pieces the government owned.

Duran first broached the idea for a national museum to the minister of education, he told us, only a week after independence. At the time, he and his wife Montserrat (also Catalan by birth), who ran Belize’s major publishing company, were involved in the complete reconceptualization of schoolbooks on the new nation’s history and worked closely with the ministry. With government encouragement, Duran began exploring museological ideas with colleagues in Mexico and Cuba. But within three years, the project stalled—Duran blames his naive willingness to “do things the Belizean way: committees, compromises, consensus.” (“Sometimes a little Mussolini can be a very good thing,” this refugee from fascism remarked with a smile.) And in any case, the People’s United Party—which had led Belize to independence and was Duran’s political support—was voted out of office shortly thereafter, at the end of 1984.

During the subsequent United Democratic Party administration, which lasted five years, Duran waited in the wings, working on publishing and his own paintings, while a British consulting firm was engaged to develop plans for a national museum and botanical garden, and a young Creole archaeologist was sent to London to be trained as its future director. Meanwhile, the Durans published a nationalist history book that helped bring them back into favor with the People’s United Party, whose 1989 election victory they then helped engineer. Although the British-trained archaeologist had already been named as head of a department of museums, Duran’s mandate for the Museum of Belize was renewed with enthusiasm by the new government. The two of them went their separate ways, he working on contract to develop his ambitious museum plans, she presiding over the government’s collections and her small civil service department. As Belize’s ambassador extraordinaire, Duran made a number of trips abroad, raising funds and support for his project through his international contacts.

The 4,500-square-meter building (almost twice the size of Guyane’s Musée Régional), set in a 50-acre park in Belmopan, was designed by Mexican architects. “Playful yet severe, [the building] shuffles visual references like a Postmodern caper. . . . Isolated features swing between otherness and affinity: the Byzantine dome is shamelessly foreign, whereas the columns, particularly on the facade, while nostalgic for Functionalist durables also remind us that the Belizean stilt long predated them” (MBPCGPO 1992:10). The two-story structure, built around a glass-covered patio and attached to a 600-seat outdoor amphitheater, also houses a plush 300-seat auditorium. Except for selected air-conditioned areas (the reception area, museum shop, restaurant, director’s office, contemporary art room, and indoor auditorium), natural lighting and ventilation are built into the architectural design via high ceilings, strategically placed openings, and central skylights. Much of the interior design was created by José Linares, whom Duran chose in part because of his imaginative work with limited resources in revolutionary Cuba. Now, with a projected budget of some U.S.$7 million, they would have the freedom to give their artistic flair full rein. At the same time, Duran constituted an international advisory committee of scholars, specialists on the archaeology, anthropology, and history of Belize, to work on content and narrative.

Our walk-through of this second musée imaginaire follows the script of its latest incarnation, which we reviewed with Duran and his team in Belize in April/May 1993, just weeks before the scheduled groundbreaking. In the spacious entrance hall, visitors are surrounded by banks of TV monitors, offering up-to-the-minute information on events and exhibits. This hall provides access to the restaurant and the museum shop, “stocking goods of a quality and stylishness that will convey the spirit of the museum into homes, offices and wardrobes” (MBPCGPO 1992:12), and to the super-modernistic restrooms where, Duran boasts, “the sinks and toilets are Modigliani-designed.” Here and there, as elsewhere in the museum, are life-size cutout figures—a cleaning woman, a security guard, a curious visitor. And on a curved wall in front of visitors, all the surnames of Belize, a total of about 2,000, are listed alphabetically so that people can find their own names and feel that they are part of the museum.

Then through the turnstiles, up the broad staircase, and into the top of the dome. Duran explains the effect: “Belize Today hits you with light, sound, images—the whole chaos. . . . Zap! Busy streets, deforestation, Chinese immigrants, crack dealers, Belizeans abroad. Contradic-
tions between what politicians are saying and what they're doing. Wanted posters for pot-hunters, some archeological fakes." The tip of a phallic Maya stela projects up into this space, and visitors can peer down into the tomb-altar on the lower level.

This postmodern vision is not just an artist's conceit. One of the more serious books about Belize City alludes to "Dickensian London on the shores of the Caribbean; monuments to Coca Cola, armoured store windows; Rastas on street corners" (Foster 1992). And a guidebook for tourists, written by an admirer of the country, reports in a Naipaulian register that the city

is mostly a shanty town. Built in a swamp and on sand dunes, allegedly on a foundation of rum bottles, its houses are falling-down affairs of decaying bare wood, propped up on stilts above the dust and dirt of the streets, and the waste that sits in drainage canals until a rainstorm washes it out to sea. The city is known... not for its historic buildings or for the bustle of its streets, but for the resourcefulness, daring, and success of its thieves. [Glassman 1991:100-103]

Duran's chaos dome assaults visitors with statistics, floods them with demographics (a giant fiber-optic map flashes population figures through time), and shakes up their certainties with a barrage of misconceptions. "We love to believe our own lies," says Duran's friend and fellow intellectual Assad Shoman, and this undergirds their decision to foreground communication and the production of knowledge—telephones from different decades, disorderly piles of theses and government reports.

Two quieter rooms flank the dome and hold the more permanent parts of the Belize Today exhibit. Outdoor terraces leading off these rooms are also conceptually tied in: visitors stroll outside and look out over the non-virtual forest, mountains, and the rest of Belmopan, as well as the museum's "more massive objects—remnants of an old sugar mill rubbing shoulders with a centuries old stela, a 1920s logging tractor beside a sculpture looking towards the 21st century" (MBPCGPO 1992:23), with, Duran noted, Mennonite buggies and farm implements scattered about. Indeed, we noticed that on those occasions when Duran or Linares did speak in terms of objects or collections, Mennonites figured prominently. Might these well-behaved, prosperous immigrants, with their orderly citrus orchards, play a role in the Museum of Belize similar to that of the Hmong in the Musée Régional?

Two mezzanines running the length of the building allow visitors an aerial view of the main ground-floor exhibit spaces or "lungs"—one devoted to the environment and the other to society. Positioned above a large-scale forest mockup in the environment exhibit is a bank of binoculars; visitors don't have a clear view of all the birds from that angle, but, reasons Duran, that's the way real bird-watching in a tropical forest is. Also visible from this mezzanine are scale models of Belizean dorries and other boats and ships, hung from the ceiling, which constitute part of the marine environment module, below. This play on perspective is deliberate: the mezzanines are designed to "lead visitors between the two levels, enabling them to find a new eye-level, creating a different perspective on things; one of the Museum's interests is the relativity of points of view" (MBPCGPO 1992:12).

The second mezzanine, over the right lung, is devoted to the (randomly chosen) Class of '79 at St. Mary's School. Beginning with yearbook pictures, it follows up on each student's life since graduation, painting a devastating picture of the ways the lack of productive opportunities in Belize have led to migration to the United States, involvement with drugs and crime, and a shockingly low survival rate. Within the more general framework of a museum devoted to the celebration of Belizean nationhood, Duran isn't afraid (in selected contexts) to play with political dynamite.

Downstairs under the dome, in archaeological silence and splendor, lies the museum's most traditional exhibit, the Ancient Maya Gallery. With the museum building "laid out much like a church... the first inhabitants of Belize are assigned altar-space" (MBPCGPO 1992:10). Planned by Maya specialists from the Royal Ontario Museum, this exhibit, using a culture-history framework, features a glass floor over the reconstruction of a sunken, half-excavated tomb.

The two lungs are intended to answer the myriad questions implicitly raised by the "chaos" of Belize Today. For example, how did we get to the point that our forests are mostly owned by foreign companies? Where did all these different kinds of people come from to make up the Belizean population?

The large People and the Natural Environment lung shunts between the stuff of elementary-school social studies classes and critical allusions to world political economy. A 45-foot-long mural depicting Belize's three ecological zones—the reef, the mangrove, and the forest—includes several embedded video stations providing further windows on each environment, placed randomly to emphasize their interdependence. Graphics also illustrate the interdependence of ecological zones by showing, for example, how a plastic garbage bag dropped in the mountains near the western border with Guatemala eventually finds its way to the sea, where it chokes a fish.

An area on natural resources focuses on production, processing, distribution, and consumption of various products. A video shows a Maya corn farmer performing milpa rituals. A sequence on chicle includes a full-size tree and tools for processing, historical photos of extraction and transport, the social organization of production, evocations via advertisements and other documents of the link to Wrigley's in Chicago, and the environmental consequences of the industry. Logwood extraction provides the background for materials on the buccaneers, the Bay-
men, and 17th-century Belizean society. Likewise, mahogany cutting, which displaced logwood in the 18th century, is treated in terms of the organization of forest camps, unfree labor, resistance to slavery, and marronage. Visitors learn that at the end of the 18th century, Belize's population was 10 percent "whites," 75 percent enslaved Africans, and the rest mainly African and "coloured" freedmen. For all three industries, there is back-and-forth zooming between the tree in the forest and the political economy of the world. More recent crops are treated in similar if more summary fashion: sugar, citrus, bananas, and (illegal) marijuana. The marine environment is explored through exhibits on both fishing and the offshore oil industry.

Throughout, deforestation and destruction of the marine environment are central themes; the (largely foreign-owned) leases to forest tracts and offshore oil concessions are displayed on maps. The environment lung ends with a nostalgic look at Lindbergh's 1927 touchdown in Belize through journalistic photos and a scale-model replica of The Spirit of St. Louis that he was piloting on behalf of PanAm, built specially for the Museum of Belize by the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum.

Passing on to the right lung, People and Society, visitors find themselves in a nostalgic colonial ambiance: an elite housefront with its porch swing, mannequins of West Indian Regiment soldiers and a colonial governor, and a scale model of the Supreme Court building accompanied by telephones playing tapes from famous trials. This leads into The Road to Independence—gazettes, documents, posters, electoral banners, megaphones, microphones, a life-size George Price in plywood on his podium—all this evoking the 1960s/1970s independence struggle (from a People's United Party perspective). Then, The Final Lap toward independence, which runs documents and photos around a race-track-shaped oval.

Along the inside of the oval is an exhibit on historical labor systems: first the ancient Maya, then colonial slavery with chains and other paraphernalia, as well as a seven-minute video in which an actor reads recollections of slavery from Equiano's autobiography. Atop the oval sits a giant cage with cut-outs of slaves trying to break free, an artistic evocation that much pleased Linares and Duran ("We want to be emotional about design when it comes to certain things") but that made the two of us think of King Kong.

In the large section on The Family, panels of mirrors and TV monitors displaying images from hidden cameras elsewhere in the museum encourage visitors to recognize that the museum is about them. Visitors wander among glass cases that hold objects of daily use, in a mixture of "the traditional" and "the modern"—an old tortilla griddle sits next to a microwave oven. The objects themselves carry the message; label texts provide little more than dates.

On grillwork above this area are some 25 black-and-white photo portraits illustrating different Belizean "types." Each is repeated three times elsewhere in the museum, with different juxtapositions ("White" next to "Creole," then "White" next to "Mayan," and so forth) to create a kaleidoscopic effect, with the varying arrangement of faces symbolizing the transcendent unity of the Belizean people.

On the floor, projected from above, is a fragment from the map of Belize City. Visitors walk across it casting shadows, as if they're on the streets themselves. Then a small house "comes alive." As visitors mount the steps to look in the window of this "multi-cultural household," a fan starts whirring, a radio turns on, the alarm clock rings. The chairs are Mennonite, the kitchen utensils Garifuna. "Various household objects from different backgrounds will be decontextualized and juxtaposed... . This section does not seek to convey any specific concept, but rather to serve as a breaking point, to spark the visitor's curiosity."

Behind the house, a mural, painted in "naive" style, depicts family scenes, from rural to urban; it is cut into panels as if strips had been removed, so that visitors have to imagine the missing parts. There's also a photomontage of clotheslines of different population groups.

Three scale models of Belizean habitats—urban, rural, and cay-side—are complemented by video monitors showing typical scenes from each. And then: "A natural size photograph of a grandfather/mother and a grand-daughter/son holding a real kite that will be going from the module over to the central patio... . The kite represents a symbol of what families are or should be: Hope."

The Education area is a multilevel structure that covers formal schooling, vocational apprenticeships, and informal learning within the family. A cinema on the ground floor shows interviews with Belizeans "from self-taught to university scholars." Along a staircase to the upper level there are showcases with historical objects, including textbooks and instruments of discipline. Upstairs, a window gives onto "the future of education—the use of computers in colleges, language schools... . sex education (for example, posters on the use of condoms), and the projected university." And "a life-size picture of a smiling teacher invites visitors to sit down at a real school desk and chair" to answer multiple-choice questions about their own educational experience.

The Religions area opens with an interactive computer game asking visitors to match textual passages to sacred sources such as the Bible and the Koran. Then a few "very beautiful" objects from each religion—a colonial crucifix, an ancient Bible... And a little area on "syncretism" as the key to the religion of the Garifuna (Afro-Carib Maroons deported from St. Vincent by the British at the end of the 18th century). A large mural, juxtaposing images of "incense burning, Buddha, a Chris-
tian ceremony, a Dugu (Garifuna) ceremony, human sacrifices, God descending from the clouds, and a representation of hell . . . intentionally mingles symbolic elements and scenes of different religions and belief systems, and profane and holy ritual, to draw the visitors' attention and stimulate their imagination." Finally, perched atop the multilevel education structure, but physically skewed to show it's not part of it, there is a complete (reduced-scale) Hindu temple, donated by a Belize City Hindu association; this would be viewed primarily from the mezzanine.

*Migrations* forms an important conceptual module within this lung. Duran is intent on demonstrating that all Belizeans arrived as immigrants, whether escaping from the ongoing civil war in El Salvador, fleeing the Caste War in 19th-century Yucatan, carried on a ship bringing indentured laborers from India, chained in the hold of a slaver, or walking across the Bering Straits. Therefore, all should be treated with tolerance and respect. Rejecting the idea that Garifuna or Maya are "indigenous," he points out with feeling that his own Belizean passport "is as old as any in the world." Footprints on the museum floor lead visitors into the *Migrations* exhibit, where maps, graphics, and objects chart the movements of people into (and out of) the territory during the past two millennia. There is a simultaneous insistence on physical and ethnic diversity and universal moral values: this exhibit space is topped with angled mirrors reflecting a photo-montage of Belizean physical types, which incorporates the reflected face of the upward-gazing visitor.

Before exiting, visitors can make a stop at a CD-ROM archive where, with the help of devices planned partly by Duran's friend, Francis Ford Coppola, they can create a video souvenir of their museum experience or consult the database for further information. Then, as they leave the building through a long white tunnel, they're encouraged to inscribe their comments, in the form of graffiti, on the walls.

The nation-building purpose of the Museum of Belize has shaped many of the choices about exhibit content. People's United Party ideologues chose to promote national unity through a strategy that soft-pedals the attribution of meaning to ethnic, linguistic, and phenotypic dialectics, which they view as a direct legacy of the colonial policy of divide and rule. This decision contrasts both with the situation in Guyane, where the French model reigns supreme and people living within its borders pretty much have to choose between assimilation and exclusion, and with a plural-society, multiethnic, or multicultural federation model, where tolerance is based on an appreciation of difference. The distinction is subtle: Minister of Education Said Musa has written, "We seek to promote a culture of freedom . . . a culture that stresses national community," and "our cultural diversity should serve as a strength, not a recipe for racial stereotypes" (cited in MBPCGO 1992:4). But his associate Assad Shoman, chairperson of the Belize Arts Council, has cautioned that "the quest for 'unity' can be misleading, can lead to the imposition of uniformity, of conformity. . . . Let freedom ring, let diversity reign, let creation flourish" (cited in MBPCGO 1992:5). Along the hypothetical continuum that runs from erasing diversity to celebrating it (where the Guyanais have chosen the former "on the ground" and the latter in their museum cases), the museum makers in Belize chose a middle path—recognizing its existence and hoping to derive whatever strength they can from it, but at the same time struggling against its divisive potential.

"An essential part of the decolonization process must therefore be the elimination of all colonially inherited prejudices about each other's cultures" (Sunshine Books 1987:73). A gradual and "natural" diminution of difference, as the new nation creates itself through time, seems more in line with the Museum of Belize ideology than the active uniformization taking place in Guyane.

On the same day that Duran explained how the museum would avoid any mention of ethnicity, we asked one of his employees how to find a route-taxi for the several-mile return to our hotel. "You need a Benque-based taxi," he told us. We asked how we could recognize a Benque taxi. "There's only one way," he said. "Look for a driver who's a Mestizo, not a Creole. Otherwise you'll pay three times the price." The next day we told the story to Duran, suggesting that ethnic labeling might be more important in his home town of Benque Viejo, a mestizo community near the Guatemalan border, than he liked to admit. He looked pensive and then thought of a way to put our remark to the test. Calling over his longtime cook, Totita, he asked whether she had felt discriminated against when she first arrived from Guatemala. "Not just then," she replied with feeling, "I still am—especially by the negritos." And she recounted a recent incident in which she and her children had been made to disembark from a bus by some aggressive Creoles. But for Duran and his peers, the emergence from colonialism and the challenge of Belizean nation-building require transcending the phenotypical, linguistic, and ethnic divisions that continue to operate in everyday life. The Museum of Belize supports this soft-pedaling of difference at every turn by constantly mixing, scrambling, and recombining images in a Benetton-like aesthetic.

Today, in the grassy emptiness of Belmopan, the government's department of museums grinds on with its bureaucratic plans for conserving its Maya collections, while the vast site of the Museum of Belize sits vacant. Duran never saw his project as anything but political, in both the strongest and most vulnerable senses. "If the government were to change, chances are the new administration wouldn't go for the Big Papaya," he remarked offhandedly in May 1993. "And in any case, I've already allowed for that contingency," he told us with a smile.
"The architecture permits it to be easily converted, if necessary, into Central America's largest shopping mall."

Moving on, we pass from the frontier postmodernism of the Museum of Belize to the baroque poststructuralism of Madrid's revisioned Museo de América.

A stone's throw from Franco's Arca de Victoria (a copy of Napoleon's Arc de Triomphe in Paris that celebrates the fascist victory in the Civil War), and adjoining a grandiose statue of Balboa discovering the Pacific (represented by a small reflecting pool), and just a few steps from a Spanish carriage on a pedestal dedicated to Isabel la Católica ("LOS PUEBLOS DE / HISPANOAMÉRICA / Y FILIPÍN-AS A / ISABEL LA CATÓLICA / REINA DE ESPAÑA / MADRE DE AMÉRICA / FUNDADORA DE PUEBLOS / POR CUYO IMPULSO GENIAL / SE COMPLETO LA REDONDEZ / GEOGRÁFICA Y ESPI- RITUAL / DEL MUNDO..."), looms the monumental Museo de América. The anthropologist charged with its ambitious reorganization, Manuel Gutiérrez Estévez, describes its Francoista architecture as "half convent, half palace," explaining that it mirrors the ideal held up to schoolboys during his youth: "half monks, half soldiers." (Or, as Estrella de Diego, head of state museums during the reorganization, characterized it: "half church, half cemetery.")

Explaining that speeches during that period always concluded with a rousing "Por el imperio, hacia Dios!" Gutiérrez said that Franco intended the museum as a straightforward glorification of the Conquest, a lasting monument to Isabel and to Columbus.

But the museum's history long predates the 20th century. Its origin stems, on the one hand, from the early 16th-century orders by Cardinal Cisneros to gather at Alcalá de Henares the "antigüedades y objetos" pillaged by Spain from the New World and, on the other hand, to the 1572 decree of Felipe II to establish a "Museo Indiano." During the subsequent centuries, massive confiscations of indigenous treasures by the Church as well as scientific collecting expeditions and gifts from private New World and Spanish collectors added to the rich holdings. During the late 19th century, the museum existed under the name "Museo Ultramarino" and still later became part of the National Museum of Archaeology. It was finally established as the Museo de América in 1941, and the collections moved into the present building, built for the purpose, in 1962.

The more than 20,000 objects include some of the greatest treasures of American art: the Tro-Cortesiano (Madrid) Codex, the longest of all Maya manuscripts; the gold of the Quimbayas; Moche, Nazca, and Inca ceramics of Peru; an extensive collection of pre-Columbian Peruvian textiles; a magnificent collection of colonial Mexican ceramics; important colonial paintings including the famous Castas series from Mexico and Adrián Sánchez Galqué's depiction of Zambo kings visiting Quito in 1599; the contact-era Malaspina collection of Northwest Coast Indian art; and much more.

When the current building opened in 1965, Gutiérrez told us, the bulk of the museum's space was allocated to various Church offices, particularly foreign missions—and the chapel of the nearby university was also located within its walls. Though the museum had curators and functioned as a resource for scholars, it never had more than an occasional temporary exhibit for the public. Until the late 1980s, little changed in this moribund shrine.

By 1989, Jaime Brihuega, professor of contemporary art, had already served four years as minister of culture under the Socialist government, with special responsibility for cultural patrimony, historical preservation, archives, and museums. During this time, he had concentrated his energies on decentralizing government responsibilities among the new "autonomous regions," and now felt ready to turn to those few museums that remained under his ministry's aegis—the Museo del Prado, the Alhambra, the Museo Naval, the National Museum of Archaeology, and the Museo de América. As he told us, what he found shocked him: "dusty storerooms, rife with irrelevant classifications: Bronze Age I, Bronze Age II, Bronze Age whatever." Alluding casually to Walter Benjamin, he said he was determined to make museums something more than "temples of knowledge" dedicated to "the veneration of the past." A museum, he proposed, should be a dynamic tool, a living thing, something like a good book. Instead of thinking of museums as inert spaces, he wanted to think of them as "machines" or "tools," to make them "political" in the best sense of the world. And with 1992, and everything it symbolized for Spain, looming on the horizon, he decided to throw all the considerable resources earmarked for state museums into a single project: the complete reconceptualization and radical renovation of the Museo de América.

To direct the project he chose Manuel Gutiérrez Estévez, a leading Americanist anthropologist with a French-leaning theoretical bent. Gutiérrez recalls how Brihuega called him in (they didn't know each other) in July 1989 and asked him how he'd feel about directing a renewed Museo de América. "But I hate museums," Gutiérrez protested. "They bore me to death!" "That's exactly why," said Brihuega. "I want to persuade you to take it on."

Brihuega told us how he had stressed that this was to be his "model project" for the remodeling of Spanish museums, with sufficiently generous funds for the most ambitious plans Gutiérrez might develop. The Museo de América would become his ministry's "flagship for change," and together he and Gutiérrez would "revolutionize the museum world." Gutiérrez accepted and formed a coordinating committee from his international academic network: Michael Coe (Mesoamericanist archaeologist), Jorge Flores Ochoa (Andeanist anthropologist), Gary Gossen (ethnographer of the Maya), Alfredo
Jiménez (Americanist anthropologist and historian), Jorge Klor de Alva (anthropologist and historian of Mexico), Miguel León-Portilla (senior historian of Mexico, especially the Aztecs), and Johannes Wilbert (anthropologist of Lowland South America). Two North American scholars, two Mexicans, one German (based in the United States), a Peruvian, and a single Spaniard (whose Ph.D. was from Chicago)—a New World bias that was to cause Gutiérrez political difficulties later on.

Meanwhile, within the old Museo de América (which had been closed to the public for years), it was largely business as usual. The longtime director, scheduled for retirement in early 1992, and his curatorial staff were kept largely in the dark about Brihuega's plans. They focused instead on the large-scale architectural renovation already underway in preparation for the quincentenary celebrations—installation of state-of-the-art storage facilities, modernization of the administrative offices, and enlargement of public spaces. Brihuega's original plan was for Gutiérrez and his team to develop their project quietly and then, when the old director (an Old World archaeologist) retired, to replace him with Gutiérrez and spring the new museum, full blown, into public view, just in time for the quincentenary. This plan gained momentum in 1990, when Brihuega's art historical colleague, Estrella de Diego, was appointed head of state museums under his subministry's authority, and threw her full energies into its support. "You name it, you've got it," she told Gutiérrez.

During 1990 and early 1991, Gutiérrez held several weeklong think-tank retreats in Toledo, Segovia, and other places deliberately outside Madrid for his coordinating committee (in the presence of members of the eventual exhibit design firm) to work out museum philosophy and exhibit strategies. Gutiérrez at first pushed hard for a linked museum and institute of advanced studies that would become the center for Americanist studies in Europe. But, in part because education and culture are run by separate ministries, the instituto lost some of its momentum and the museum came to the fore. And this was to be no ordinary museum.

Gutiérrez stressed that it would, in fact, be "an anti-museum—militantly non-authoritarian and non-didactic, designed to inspire doubt and to encourage multiple readings." He wanted something "really incomprehensible, a logic that didn't sit still," a museum that would "incite interaction, trigger intellectual games between complicity adults." "When visitors leave," he told us, "they should feel entertained and stimulated, as if they’d just finished a good novel." U.S.-educated de Diego, acutely conscious of the weight of traditionalism and orthodoxy in Spanish museums, seconded Gutiérrez's stress on planting seeds of doubt.

In a statement of purpose, Gutiérrez summed up the principles that he hoped would vertebrate the new exhib-
from the encounter of 1492. Memory and Invention: Mexicans/Chicanos in the United States (outlined in a 19-page plan conceived by Jorge Klor de Alva, with the assistance of Tomás Ybarra-Frausto and Amalia Mesa-Bains) is intended to surprise, both intellectually and aesthetically. Focused on the interplay of collective memory and cultural invention in the ongoing creation of Chicano identity, it uses films, videos, photos, sculptures, and paintings, as well as everyday objects, to evoke characteristic aspects of Mexican-American life: lowriders cruising the avenues, intimate domestic interiors with their altars, brassy styles of female maquillage, varied genres of verbal eloquence. Throughout, the development of Chicano distinctiveness is treated within the changing context of overarching North American political/cultural structures, including multiculturalism. And resistance, as part of creativity, is emphasized in all its varied forms—appropriation, inversion, subversion, and parody of Anglo norms—always against a background of collective memories from south of the border.

Beyond the introductory space, the second floor is devoted to what Gutiérrez calls an etic perspective on the Americas. Visitors first confront The European Gaze and American Cultures in the Sixteenth Century, running from the late medieval mind-set and techniques of navigation all the way through the origins of modern social science in the works of Sahagún and other early Spanish ethnographer-linguists of the initial encounter. This section’s 28-page plan, conceived by Klor de Alva with the help of León-Portilla, combines museological theory with erudite analysis and bibliography. There are some suggestions about museological realization: the recreation, for example, of a ship captain’s cabin, an Old World spice shop, and Sahagún writing in his study, and the display of various objects from the Antilles—from zemis to maize, tobacco, manioc, and hammocks (“without explanations, in order to evoke for visitors, by analogy, the ignorance/sense of wonder felt by the first Europeans to arrive in the islands”). But overall, the ways in which the re-created rooms and their objects (largely maps, books, and navigational instruments) would communicate the highly intellectualized arguments of this plan (focused on knowledge, ideology, and power as reflected in figures from Columbus and Pané to Las Casas and Acosta) remain unspecified.

The second section of The European Gaze is devoted to the 18th century, El Siglo de las Luces: Scientific Exploration and the Origins of the Museum. The straightforward and relatively object-oriented plan, written by Michael Coe, reflects a long career of work with material culture and museums. First is The World of Carlos III—the Enlightenment project as seen in miniature through the reconstructed Royal Cabinet of Natural History, where the king is seen talking with its director. Next are three sets of expeditions, each viewed through maps, charts, drawings, and the many objects collected: the scientific expeditions sent out under Carlos III’s patronage to document the contact-era Northwest Coast (particularly those of Juan Pérez and Alejandro Malaspina), the world’s first scientific archaeological excavations in the Americas (which in 1787 mapped the Maya site of Palenque and brought back, among other treasures, the Madrid stela), and expeditions to Peru and Chile.

The final and largest section on the second floor is devoted to The Twentieth Century and Visual Communication in the Americas, a plan developed by Coe (with Andean sections supplied by Flores Ochoa). A film on Yanomami storytelling is followed by exhibits on the semiotics of nonverbal communication (body language, iconography of Amazonian basketry and Andean textiles and, especially, the Peruvian quipu), the diversity of American writing systems (the rebus in the Codex Mendoza, Cherokee and Inuit syllabaries, the post-Conquest alphabetic books of Chilam Balam), and finally Maya glyphs and the Madrid Codex, where the history of decipherment, from Bishop Landa through the present, is highlighted. Throughout, emphasis is on “the nature of different problems of interpretation,” and all of the objects—from the humblest Indian garment to the Madrid Codex itself—“will be presented to the visitor as intellectual problems.”

As visitors ascend the staircase, they pass (according to museum plans) from etic to emic. The five sections on this floor deal, in various combinations, with Body, Space, and Destiny.12 The order of these sections, in Gossen’s words, “is neither chronological nor geographical nor thematic but rather epistemological. . . . In short, the logic of this exhibition space goes from the body, to the physical and social space inhabited by the body on this earth, and finally to the life the body can attain in the imaginary space of the cosmos and death.”

The first room, American Bodies, contains “three streams: Amerindian, Transplanted European, and [the much smaller] Encounter, Conflict, and the Reconstruction of Meaning.” The first stream is conveyed by Andean ceramics and masks, Mexican jewelry, Amazonian “tattooing,” and various representations of the body in architecture. The second displays colonial paintings, jewelry, clothing, and wax figures. And the third includes paintings, a Mexican codex, Guatemalan Indian blouses, Amerindian masks, and—as a climax—a depiction of “la mestiza americana por excelencia,” the Virgin of Guadalupe.

The second room, much smaller than the first, is devoted to Domestic Space and the Cosmos and is intended at once to “fill certain ethnographic holes” in the museum’s presentation and to demonstrate how “human consciousness uses domestic space in the construction of that which is beyond the individual—community, society, cosmos, and destiny.” It consists of three mini-monographic exhibits, one on the Iroquois (planned by Dean
Snow), one on Haitian vaudou (by Norman Whitten), and one on the Tukano (by Johannes Wilbert).

The third room "consists of four large exhibits unified by the theme of human space seen from various perspectives: the household (a Tzotzil house as social and cosmic model), regional ecology (Andean space and ecology), the city (colonial urban spaces), and death (social space and death)."

The full-size Tzotzil (highland Maya) house is surrounded by a sweatbath, a patio altar, and a ritual tower with mannequins of an alferez and his wife. The house altar is repeated in several incarnations—for example, dressed for a curing ceremony and for the Day of the Dead. "Satellite models" explain the house as symbol of person-in-time (as seat of the patrilineage and in relation to the ancient vigesimal and solar calendrical systems still in use, as well as the animal-companions who live in nearby sacred mountains) and as symbol of person-in-space (domestic space as gendered and positioned according to cardinal points, Chamula cosmological drawings, the sweatbath, altar, and tower as different "readings" of the individual's place in the cosmos, and the place of supernatural beings). Then a color photomural of the Chiapas countryside, and a mini-exhibit on the milpa (and crop-storage areas in the house) as gendered space. This exhibit ends with an interactive panel demonstrating the disparate provenances of the objects in the Tzotzil house—the potato from Peru, the machete from Connecticut, the embroidery thread from Germany, the plastic pitcher from Guatemala.

We pass through the Andean and the colonial urban areas, whose installations had not yet been worked out, and into the small fourth section of this vast hall, The Space of Death. There we find Andean mummies, Jivaro shrunken heads, a painting depicting Christian conceptions of death, Christian ossuaries and reliquaries, a Bribri ossuary from Costa Rica, Andean ceramics depicting death, Andean textiles as mortuary offerings, popular Mexican arts related to the Day of the Dead, and pre-Columbian turquoise funerary objects from the Andes.

The next room, Gold, Death, and Shamanism, planned by G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, displays the museum's famous collection of the gold of the Quimbayas, "whose artistic value," boasted a Madrid daily, "exceeds that of the pieces on exhibit in the Museo de Oro in Bogotá" (Busquets 1990).

The large first exhibit on this floor is Wilbert's Cosmic Thresholds, designed to disabuse visitors of their "negative notions" about drugs and to demonstrate "that stimulants and hallucinogens shuttle the Indians on ecstatic journeys across cosmic thresholds . . . and that ecstatic journeying assumes deeply religious meaning that justifies their human existence and ordains their destiny." Carefully researched and museologically imaginative, it covers the cactus of San Pedro (Peru), peyote among Huichols and in the Native American Church, ayahuasca in the Amazon, and tobacco. (Gutiérrez's plan was to include coca as well.) The baroque volumes of the museo are converted into a series of psychedelic spaces. The ayahuasca exhibit, for example, has "soft walls and broad hanging bands both of fluorescent cloth . . . [across which move] in slow motion projections of 60 color representations of ayahuasca visions. The projections sweep over the walls, the bands, the exhibited objects, and the visitor." There are plumed cosmic serpents rising up through house interiors, four-headed anacondas pointing in the cardinal directions, shamanic voices chanting softly as visitors move through the exhibit, and much else—including careful maps of the distribution of smoking, chewing, sniffing, drinking, and licking tobacco.

Along the second- and third-floor cloisters surrounding the courtyard are exhibits devoted to animals in the Americas (based in part on a detailed plan by Flores Ochoa). Though various more complex organizations had been considered, the final plan calls for a tripartite presentation: animals of the tropical forests, cameloids (llamas, alpacas, and vicuñas), and the horse—permitting, via the diverse animal representations owned by the museum, an exploration of key themes in American culture-history. And, added Gutiérrez with a grin, it would be a special pleasure to evoke "pagan" fantasies about animals in this cloister, desacralizing the medieval space.

In a Spain that emerged only yesterday from franquismo, and that still bears the weight of its five-century presence in the New World, the museo could hardly help but become entangled in a special politics of representation. The message of cultural relativism, so embedded in many of the exhibitions about native peoples of the Americas, is in itself a radical departure from the traditional Spanish museum. But in what ways do the exhibits challenge visitors' received wisdom about Spain itself and its place in the world—or reinforce them?

Couldn't one argue that the deliberate decision to refrain from moral judgments ("ni leyenda negra, ni leyenda dorada") provides a convenient way of circumventing the need to confront Spanish imperialism and its effects on the peoples of the Americas? There is, after all, relatively little in the museum plans about the annihilation of the populations of the Greater Antilles, ethnicicide in Mesoamerica and Peru or, for that matter, slavery. In general, the plans devote far more space to the pursuit of knowledge than the pursuit of power in Spain's New World expansion. At each historical moment of the developing encounter, it is discovery rather than conquest or domination or resistance that is highlighted.

Klor de Alva confessed pro-Spanish/Latino delight in being able through the exhibits to undermine French pretensions, on the one hand of having single-handedly invented the social sciences, and on the other of holding
the copyright to the Enlightenment. Or again, there was disagreement within the coordinating committee about the proper balance between Indian "ethnography" (life-sized mannequins, modern domestic objects, and the like) and the archaeological and historical masterpieces belonging to the museo. (Léon-Portilla pointed out that even in the great National Museum of Mexico, the ethnographic exhibits were now being moved elsewhere so they would not detract from the museum's archaeological displays. "Some people think archaeology has a dignity that grass huts simply do not!" he told us with a smile.) Similarly, there was animated discussion about the proposal to bring the CARA exhibit (Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965–85) from UCLA as the museo's first temporary exhibit. Some felt it was too "art-oriented" to be appropriate for this museum; others apparently felt the art was "too ugly" and compromising of "European standards." (Klor de Alva's temporary exhibit on Chicano life, Memory and Invention, was then designed as its replacement for the new museum's opening.)

From our own perspective, the museum's most egregious lapse was the virtual erasure of the African presence in the Americas. Recall that over the course of three and a half centuries, between 1.5 million and 2 million enslaved Africans were landed in Spanish America (nearly four times the number brought to what is now the United States). And the continued cultural/physical presence of their descendants in the former Spanish colonies—from Cuba and the Dominican Republic to Colombia and Peru—hardly needs to be pointed out. Yet the museum planners, committed specialists on Indian and mestizo and Chicano populations, found themselves repeatedly unable to summon up sufficient enthusiasm to formulate exhibits on the African contribution. Klor de Alva was surely on target when he remarked to us that "racism would be far too simplistic an explanation" for what was going on.

In our discussions with a number of the players, several contributing elements emerged. Spain's conceptual division between Moros and Cristianos retains remarkable valence today. (In everyday speech, "hay moros en la costa" is still used to say "the coast isn't clear.") People in the streets quickly assimilate Afro-Dominicans into the category of "Moors," and there's much talk in the air about fear for Spain's future in terms of "racial purity." At the same time, from the perspective of Mexican nation-building, the African presence is at best a distraction—the wonders of the Aztecs, not the treasures of Benin, are what patriots focus on. And in the political context of a multicultural United States, Chicanos and African Americans are more often competitors than allies. Given all this, the museo's solution is telling.

In late 1990, the subject of a mini-exhibit (some 15 square meters) on Saramaka Maroon life was broached to us, to remedy what the coordinating committee recog-

ized as an ethnographic hole in their nearly completed plans. In asking for Saramakas, the committee knowingly chose an eminently musealizable people: bare-breasted women, loinclothed men, consummate artists all, and about as close to tropical forest Indians in blackface as one could get. Nor did anyone mention that these particular African Americans had not the slightest connection with Spanish America, having lived since their New World arrival in the Dutch colony of Suriname. When we declined on the grounds that such a "token" exhibit could neither transcend the stereotypes visitors would bring nor do justice to the rich contributions of Africans in the Spanish New World, the alternative proposed by the museum-makers was an exhibit on Haitian vaudou. Again, this choice avoids slavery and its legacy in Spanish America, focusing instead on what was the most important American colony of Spain's rival, France. Furthermore, it selects the ultimate symbol of black savagery, superstition, and depravity—vodoo—to be deconstructed and explained to the Spanish public, in a tiny exhibit, as just another religion, with its body imagery, domestic spaces, destiny, and death ... All this to represent the African presence in the Americas.

From the first, the remaking of the museo was a high-stakes gamble, wholly dependent on the patronage of Jaime Brihuega. It was he, and later Estrella de Diego, who nurtured and protected Gutierrez's team and permitted them to operate outside the structures of the already established museum bureaucracy. During the two-year gestation of the project, the lobbying and pressures of the museum's longtime curators were kept under control, though barely. When Brihuega and de Diego became part of "The Eighteen" from the ministry of culture who signed the public protest against Spain's entry into the Gulf War and were dismissed from their posts, the bureaucracy was more than ready to close ranks. Spain's professional curators saw no need for assistance from carpet-bagging academics, especially from the other side of the Atlantic. Gutierrez had little choice but to relinquish his project and return to his professorial chair. And Paz Cabello, longtime curator at the museo, took over as director, succeeding the retiring Old World archaeologist.

Cabello and her staff quickly produced their own plan for the museum's reopening (Cabello Carro 1992), which included a number of similarities to Gutierrez's plans—perhaps not surprising, since the design firm that sat in on Gutierrez's meetings is also serving for Cabello's team. There would be a stress on "epistemology" and "instruments of knowledge," a focus on "themes" rather than a chronological or geographical organization, a reconstructed 18th-century cabinet of curiosities, and animals in the cloisters. The absences also mirror those in the written plans of Gutierrez and his committee: little attention to Spanish imperialism, almost nothing on Afro-America, and not a great deal about the destruction of
indigenous peoples and the environment. Nevertheless, when set next to the Gutiérrez project, the overall plan ends up looking much like an old-fashioned anthropology museum: Introduction, Geography, Society (an evolutionary sequence of exhibits on bands, tribes, chiefdoms, and states), Religion, Communication, and America Today.

In February 1993, we visited the museum (with a "closed to the public" sign that for all we know had been there for the last 30 years). Conservators in white coats and surgical gloves showed us magnificent objects stored according to the latest museological techniques in state-of-the-art shelving. The director and her staff greeted us in beautifully appointed offices. And the great white arched halls of the exhibit areas stood freshly plastered and painted, empty and tentatively expectant.

In our talks the same month with Gutiérrez, who now looked back on his project with a flood of nostalgia, we mused about the museum that might have been—the ambivalent museum, the anti-museum, the utopic museum—and how it had become the imaginary museum, the intangible museum, the empty museum. We all felt intellectual frustration that the provocative theoretical ideas of the project hadn’t had a chance to be poured into the crucible of exhibit-making in real museum spaces. To us, it remained a wide-open question, for example, how Klor de Alva’s arguments and artifacts on the 16th century could successfully be transformed into the kind of ironic, playful, and open-ended exhibit envisioned. 14 Partly to answer such questions, Gutiérrez reports that he and Klor de Alva are now considering producing the "published museum," an attempt to do in book form what the museum would have done in visitable spaces (though it almost goes without saying—to borrow a tobacco metaphor—that “ceci n’est pas une pipe”).

On that same visit to Madrid we asked de Diego, as former head of state museums, when she thought Paz Cabello’s museo would be ready to open its doors and we could finally see some exhibits. "The pressure’s off," she sighed. "1992 has come and gone, and in the absence of the kind of external impetus we were providing, I wouldn’t be surprised if the opening were delayed for a very long time. Maybe," she offered with a smile, "you should book a flight for the Sexcentenary."

Notes

*Acknowledgments. This essay about museum-making reflects on the courageous efforts of dedicated colleagues in several parts of the world to realize their visions in the midst of political, historical, ideological, and economic complexities. Such an essay is inevitably perspectival and partial; all views expressed are our own. We wish to thank various people involved in the development of the museums we discuss, particularly the following colleagues who generously agreed to share their ideas with us and to provide us with internal documents and other museum plans: O. Nigel Bolland, Jaime Brihuela Sierra, Paz Cabello Carro, Gérard Collomb, Antonio Díaz Royo, Estrella de Diego Otero, Joan Duran Benet, Montserrat Duran, Jerry Egger, Byron Foster, Gary Gossen, Manuel Gutiérrez Estévez, Marie-Paule Jean-Louis, J. Jorge Klor de Alva, Henna Malmberg-Guicherit, Miguel León-Portilla, José Linares, and Concepción García Saíz. Many of the spoken words we quote in English are our translations from conversations in French or Spanish.

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Finally, we would like to thank Jorge Klor de Alva for inspiring our title. In his formal commentary on a presentation we made at Princeton in 1992, which he called "Executing Museums," he pointed out that *execute* comes from *(ex-sequi*: to follow out, pursue, perform; or abolish, annihilate, assassinate."

1. The third element of "musee, museo, museum" was originally intended to refer to Het Surinaamse Museum in Paramaribo. The civil war in that country and its devastating economic consequences have prevented the museological developments that would have permitted us to include it in the comparison (see Malmberg-Guicherit 1992; Price, in press). Thanks to a tip from Nigel Bolland, we learned of the parallel project in Belize and were able to substitute that case.

2. We write as if the latest of the numerous planning documents and architectural blueprints had been realized; quoted passages are from these 1991 plans.

3. Duran and other People’s United Party ideologues chide their party leader George Price for the “one of each” mentality that made him want each “ethnic group” of Belize to have a room of its own in the museum. During the Duke of Kent’s visit to Belize, Duran scoffs, the government actually had six bouquets of flowers presented by little girls who represented six ethnicities—a colorfully bloused Mayan, a blond Mennonite, a dusky Garifuna, and so on. And for the same reason, Duran and his political allies are opposed to Garifuna or Maya efforts to introduce their languages into the school curriculum.

4. For an acerbic picture of the Belizean civil service during this period, see Edgell 1991.

5. Conceived in the aftermath of Hurricane Hattie, which devastated low-lying Belize City in 1961, the new capital, Belmopan, was situated well inland, at the geographical center of the country. Projecting a population of only several thousand for its first few years, the capital’s planners expected it to level off before long at 30,000 (only slightly less than Belize City), and by 1970 government ministries had been moved to the site in anticipation of final independence from Great Britain (Dobson 1973:284). However, by 1980 the population was still only 3,000 and today it is barely twice that. Aside from government offices, the site is still largely green.

6. The advisory committee included O. Nigel Bolland (British-born, U.S.-based historian of Belize), Byron Foster (British-born, Belize-based ethnographer of the Garifuna), David Pender-
gast (Canadian-based archaeologist of the Maya), Assad Shoman (Belizean activist and political scientist), and Harriot Toppie (a Belizean archaeologist who served as a liaison with the civil service).

7. As late as 1971, 3 percent of the landowners owned 95 percent of the land and 91 percent of the landowners farmed on 1 percent of the land, in small plots. More than 95 percent of the freehold land in the country was owned by foreigners (Sunshine Books 1987:47).

8. The classic evocation of the waning years of British colonialism and the struggle for independence may be found in Edgell 1982, an affectionate picture of Belize City in the 1960s through the eyes of a Creole girl.

9. This and all further quotations in this section are (unless otherwise attributed) from internal museum planning documents dated February 1993.

10. “From the people of Hispanoamerica and the Philippines to Isabel la Católica, Queen of Spain, Mother of America, Founder of Pueblos, whose brilliant leadership brought to fruition the geographical and spiritual roundness of the world...”


12. In addition to Gutiérrez’s description of this space, we have a 25-page plan by Gossen covering the first three sections, and a book-length text by Wilbert, in collaboration with Wade Davis, Peter Furst, G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, and Douglas Sharon, on the last.

13. A similar high culture–low culture tension influenced the development of another museum we visited in the course of our comparative project. In Ponce, Puerto Rico, the battle had raged, not over stone temples versus grass huts, but rather over whether Ponceño culture should be represented by upper-class Criollo salon dancing or by the popular Afro-Caribbean plena. The heated debate over whether to build a Museo de la Danza or a Museo de la Plena ended in the compromise Museo de la Música, an eerily silent museological disaster that no one really wanted and that consists largely of two-dimensional graphics (posters of musical events in Ponce and extensive label texts that end in mid-sentence) with no audio component at all.

14. Some other recent museological experiments, such as the Out of Africa debacle at the Royal Ontario Museum, suggest that it is sometimes easier for curators than museum visitors to understand irony. There is a considerable bibliography on the ROM controversy, but Cannizzo 1991 and Schildkrout 1991 are a good place to start.

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Fox, Lorna Scott

Gaya Nuño, Juan Antonio

Glassman, Paul

Gutiérrez Estévez, Manuel

Malmberg-Guicherit, Henna

Price, Richard

Price, Richard, and Sally Price


Museum of Belize Project Coordination and General Planning Office (MBPCGO)

Sanz-Pastor y Fdez. de Pielola, Consuelo

Schildkrout, Enid

Sunshine Books