

Main Line Life

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“Discussion on Regionalism is Missing Something Big”

by Evelyn Yaari

Last Saturday afternoon, a forum called “The Big Canvas” was held at the Valley Forge Radisson, the culmination of a series of citizen forums on arts and culture in the region. The findings show that arts and culture are valued by people and make a big contribution to the quality of life throughout the region. A summary is available on the Great Expectations website: <http://www.greatexpectationsnow.com/content/the-big-canvas-summary-findings>

Attending the event were about two hundred people from the arts and culture community and public officials from the state and local level, including several from Philadelphia. The event was also an opportunity to urge public officials to legislate for stronger public funding of the sector. Particular emphasis was given to the concept of “regionalism.”

The heading on the Great Expectations website is “***A regional dialogue on arts, culture and ... your wallet.***” Call me a cynic, but it seems that the purpose of the Big Canvas is ultimately to prime the pump, if you will, for a tax-based arts fund.

Public funding for the arts and culture sector seems worth exploring, but only if the system were vastly improved over what we currently have in Pennsylvania. Frankly, the influence of politics in concert with unknown agendas of powerful foundations casts a long shadow with results that are not always good. One does not have to look far for evidence of this.

Consider the plan to dismantle the Barnes Foundation. The plan arose in the high places of political and financial power, where opportunity met the means to affect things and – Whack!—there goes the Barnes. So much for “civic engagement.” The project is a colossal mess: planned destruction of a historic and aesthetic treasure, partly at public expense (!); callous disregard for its cultural significance to the nation, including just ignoring its eligibility as a National Historic Landmark. There has been no public debate; no transparency; no published feasibility study; only a continuous “spin” from public relations professionals and others.

It is an undertaking that has been decried from coast to coast here at home and around the world and yet, it lurks at the edges of our region like a scary Blob that will gobble up scarce resources at lightning speed should it proceed.

Public officials involved in the Barnes controversy drone on with high-sounding statements about acting for the public good, even while betraying both the public trust and the Barnes legacy. The use of public funding for the project has never been openly

discussed. The project has now been dubbed as “Philadelphia’s Bridge to Nowhere” as a high cost project of dubious origins.

But now I have just committed the *faux pas* of introducing The Barnes Foundation into the discussion on regionalism and that is apparently bad form. But it is obvious that discussion of regional arts and culture policy that omits the Barnes controversy is dangerously incomplete.

- A core value of regionalism is cooperation between communities, such as Philadelphia and Montgomery County. Are we to turn a blind eye to “the most audacious art heist in American history” (*Philadelphia Inquirer*) that would destroy the county and region’s most significant cultural monument?
- Regionalism invites the public to perceive of our cultural assets as contributing to a good quality of life throughout the area. To enhance the value of the Barnes for the region, why not *promote it* to the region’s citizens right now?
- Regionalism does *not* mean concentrating our cultural assets inside the city of Philadelphia. The plan to hoist the Barnes art collection from a site that is a stone’s throw from the town line to install it on the City Boulevard five miles away in a cluster of museums smacks of provincialism, not regionalism, and is certainly not a hallmark of a healthy, cosmopolitan view.

What about financial resources? To consider arts and culture funding issues in the region, we ignore a project, of seismic proportions like the Barnes at our peril. If pursued, the venture will likely soak up something like \$500,000,000 in public and private resources.

Here are a couple of facts to consider:

- The Barnes in Merion is a cultural asset of inestimable value unsurpassed in the world. Despite a mountain of disinformation to the contrary, it is also highly appreciated by the community around it.
- Its value as a cultural asset would be greatly diminished should the site be dismantled, as evidenced by the Assessment of the Barnes as National Historic Landmark.
- Were the Barnes art collection to be re-installed in Philadelphia, the pool of the region’s cultural assets would be negatively affected. That is because the prized art collection itself would remain constant; whereas the cost of replicating it there would cost hundreds of millions of dollars.

In conclusion, the proposed move of the Barnes art collection from Merion to Philadelphia is clearly inconsistent with the goals of regionalism. Indeed, the proposed move is inconsistent with societal norms for wise public policy and stewardship of our cultural and financial resources. It’s time to face the obvious.

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