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We Had to Destroy the Village to Save It

Posted by Richard Lacayo

Just last week the county commissioners of Montgomery County, Pa., where the Barnes Foundation is located, voted unanimously to go in search of outside legal assistance to explore ways to keep the Barnes collection from being relocated to an as yet unbuilt facility in downtown Philadelphia. The commissioners also voted to have their lobbyists in the Pennsylvania state legislature try to slow the release of some of the \$100 million the state authorized five years ago to subsidize the relocation.

Those commissioners need to move fast, because it turns out that the Barnes is moving faster. On Tuesday afternoon it announced that that "it has issued a request for qualifications to an extensive group of leading national and international architecture firms. Architects will be selected based on design philosophy, technical approach, organization, experience, innovation, creativity and sensitivity to the goals of the Barnes Foundation."

The Barnes press release goes on: "The Foundation plans to review the responses in April, select a short list later in the spring and announce its selection by August 1, 2007. Design will begin immediately, and the site will be prepared from the end of 2007. Construction will start on completion of design work."

I was out at the Barnes just last Friday, in a fairly discouraged mood. There's still an organization devoted to keeping the Barnes where it is, but for the powers that be it's strictly Philadelphia, Here I Come. Albert Barnes was a truculent, combative man, and his aesthetic theories tend to devolve into simplistic pseudo-science. But he put together an incomparable collection in a unique setting. Even if you grant that it has too many mediocre Renoirs and that Barnes placed a comically heavy bet on Jules Pascin, an all too scrumptious art historical loser,

there is nothing else in the U.S. like the cheek-by-jowl assemblage of Van Gogh, Cezanne, Rousseau, Matisse, Picasso and Modigliani in the relatively intimate Paul Cret-designed mansion. It simply will not be possible to "recreate" the Barnes in a much larger new building on Ben Franklin Parkway, any more than the Dulwich Picture Gallery outside London could be stuffed into the Great Turbine Hall of Tate Modern. In an era of big box museums, the Barnes is the ultimate jewel box. The financial problems of the Foundation are real, but the snatch-and-grab solution of relocating the collection to Philadelphia is no solution at all. It isn't salvation. It isn't even euthanasia. It's death by disembowelment.