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Designs Solicited, Discussion Unwanted at the Barnes Foundation

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Last week's announcement that the [Barnes Foundation](#) has selected the architects Tod Williams and Billie Tsien to design its new home in downtown Philadelphia is unlikely to dispel the rancor among those who oppose the move. Nor should it.

There are few places in the United States where art and viewer share a closer bond than the beloved old Barnes in suburban Merion, Pa. Dismantling it is a crime.

Still, if the Barnes is going to move, come hell or high water or last-gasp legal challenges, it would be nice to understand what the trade-offs will be. Is it possible, for example, to create an equally intimate experience in a bustling urban setting? Will the fabled art collection of Cézannes, Renoirs and Picassos be eclipsed by the bookstores, cafes and auditoriums that are de rigueur at museums these days? And how do you preserve the unique charms of the Barnes experience while moving the art from its idiosyncratic neo-Classical setting?

Although the six firms that competed for the Barnes commission are all highly regarded, the idea that people might want to discuss, debate and appraise the actual design proposals seemed to terrify the Barnes. Little information was released to the public, and the six teams were instructed to present only vague conceptual sketches to the Barnes itself.

While the architects doubtless invested considerable creative energy in their proposals, ordinary people will probably never see what they envisioned. And in announcing that Mr. Williams and Ms. Tsien had won, the Barnes gave almost no indication of how the two will proceed.

From ground zero to a proposed new Pennsylvania Station in Midtown Manhattan to other arts institutions, secrecy has come to dominate many architecture commissions that are vital to the public interest. In a blend of paranoia and near-contempt for the people such institutions will serve, the decision makers have come to assume that the less the public knows, the better.

For those who love art, there's a lot at stake in the Barnes move. Part of the enchantment of the old museum arises from its isolation. Scorning Philadelphia's elitist cultural establishment, Albert C. Barnes, who made millions of dollars on patent medicines, built his eccentric museum in the 1920s in a suburban enclave that is eight miles but a world away from the city's downtown — today, about a 20-minute drive.

This remove helps prepare you for the encounter with the Barnes, which lies within a 12-acre garden. It's as if you've invaded someone's private lair, which gives you a vaguely mischievous feeling as you explore the galleries.

The arrangement of the paintings, with juxtapositions of wildly different artists, periods and styles, and good and bad examples, makes the art pop. Next to the impassive solidity of one of Cézanne's women, for example, the blushing cheeks and rounded bottoms of a Renoir have a lecherous gloss. A tiny Matisse measuring five by eight inches holds your eye in a way that a bigger, inferior painting cannot.

A legal ruling in 2004 by a county judge in Pennsylvania that allowed the foundation to move — despite the wishes expressed in Dr. Barnes's original charter — was based on testimony that the foundation would keep the arrangement of pictures intact. Yet it is unclear exactly what this means.

Will the architects, for instance, have to reproduce the burlap walls? Will they have to keep the strange tchotchkes — hinges, ax heads, surgical instruments — alongside the paintings?

The new site, on a busy mile-long strip running from the Philadelphia Museum of Art to City Hall, will include additional space for education, a restaurant, a bookstore, administration offices and a vastly expanded lobby to accommodate the anticipated tourist traffic.

But most of the suspense involves the art galleries. The Barnes has taken a circumspect approach, telling the competing architects that the layout of the galleries and the artworks must be preserved. It remains to be seen if Ms. Tsien and Mr. Williams will be allowed more flexibility as the design process unfolds. So far they have offered only the vaguest description of their design strategy, which could include interior gardens and a wider range of galleries.

Yet conversations in recent days with several of the teams that competed suggest the strains implicit in trying to preserve some of the aura of the old museum while moving it to a new site. The architects Diller Scofidio + Renfro, for example, say they considered a wide range of landscape ideas, including lifting the museum above ground level or submerging it underground, to shield it from traffic roaring by on a multilane parkway.

While abiding by the rules on the installation of paintings, the architects suggested inserting smaller galleries between the recreated ones that could be used for temporary installations. Computer-generated reproductions of the Barnes's paintings could even be rearranged on the walls at the whim of curators or visitors.

Thom Mayne of Morphosis took a maverick approach that bordered on sly irony. He proposed transporting the entire Barnes collection, room by room, to the new site, leaving even the corridors and interior paneling intact. The result would evoke a stage set on a Hollywood back lot. The museum would be encased like some valuable relic from another era, and shielded from the street by a long rectangular building housing the lobby, bookstore and auditorium.

By contrast, Mr. Williams and Ms. Tsien project a kind of earnestness. Like Diller Scofidio + Renfro, they said that they were considering breaking the existing gallery rooms apart to create space for educational programs in between. But they have also suggested that a museum like the [Frick Collection](#) in New York, with its lush galleries set around an airy central court, could serve as a loose model for a new-old, intimate-urban Barnes.

In the end, no architect can replicate the experience of the real Barnes, not least the commitment made in traveling there. Though short, the journey fulfills a psychological purpose, calming the mind and preparing you to cross the portal with superattenuated vision.

But, in theory at least, an architect could offer us something just as thrilling as the eccentric mansion in Merion. However sketchy, these proposals suggest that the architects felt shackled by the mandate on the paintings and by the history of the Barnes. The risk is that the final result will be a wishy-washy design, with neither the vibrancy of a great urban museum nor the serenity of the original.

In a saner environment, the public would at least have been invited to explore these issues in some forum. In most of Europe, for example, the design of a major cultural institution requires a public competition in which dozens of architects may participate. Proposals are usually exhibited. The public may be indignant, thrilled, revolted, relieved. It's all part of the democratic process.

Here, alas, the architects' efforts have mainly gone to waste. Rather than risk further public criticism over the relocation, the Barnes's board chose to hide. The result is not just a stifling of debate, but also a choking of creative imagination. Since it's likely that none of us will ever see the range of possibilities for the design, we are incapable of judging what is gained or lost by the move.

This kind of secrecy reinforces the bleak notion that cultural institutions operate at the service of a privileged few rather than the general public. More often than not nowadays, the cynics are right.