

From The Philadelphia Inquirer

The Barnes should stay put; The foundation hasn't justified a move to the Parkway, and should sell art to raise money.

January 18, 2004

by Edward J. Sozanski

I wouldn't blame Judge Stanley Ott if he envied King Solomon.

Determining a baby's real mother was child's play. Ott, president judge of Montgomery County Orphans' Court, is trying to figure out how to save the Barnes Foundation from financial collapse while preserving the integrity of the indenture under which it operates.

At a hearing last month on their petition to move the foundation's art collection, Barnes officials shifted the responsibility for staving off bankruptcy, a responsibility they have failed, onto Ott's shoulders.

The Barnes trustees want to move from Merion to Center City, preferably to a site on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. Conventional wisdom holds that this would be a splendid development for the city and the foundation, a classic "win-win" situation.

Yet this is a dubious assumption, based not on clear-headed research but on blind faith. It's a \$150 million roll of the dice - \$100 million to move, \$50 million for an endowment - by the principal backers of this scheme, the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Lenfest and Annenberg Foundations.

And it's not so much about saving the Barnes as about saving the city.

Would putting the Barnes on the Parkway accomplish either goal? On its face, the idea seems like a natural, but it's full of imponderables.

The Barnes might not be such a hot ticket if it becomes a more crowded, more conventional museum. The location - an intimidating, commuter-congested boulevard that discourages pedestrians - could be a liability.

The trustees tried to persuade Ott to approve their request by invoking the "orphan defense." Remember the old joke about the boy who kills his parents and then begs the court for mercy because he's an orphan?

Imprudent actions and benign neglect by several generations of Barnes trustees have pushed the foundation to the brink of insolvency. Now the current board importunes (or threatens) Ott: Let us move, or we go out of business.

That brutal ultimatum only compounds the judge's dilemma. His court is supposed to safeguard the intentions of the man who established the foundation, Albert C. Barnes.

Yet if Ott grants the petition wholly or even in substantial part, he will inevitably fracture Barnes' legacy seriously, perhaps fatally. After that, anything goes.

Only one proposed change, enlarging the board of trustees from five to 15 members, seems potentially beneficial. A larger board might find a seat or two for people knowledgeable about art and art education.

Ott, much to his credit, examined the petition skeptically. His questions pointed up what a speculative and nebulous "solution" this plan is.

For instance, the judge asked, how will the financially beleaguered foundation support three facilities - Parkway, Merion, and its 137-acre property in Chester County - when it can't manage two now?

The Barnes trustees couldn't answer that question satisfactorily. They and their sponsors obviously believe that a Barnes on the Parkway, open longer hours, easily accessible to tour buses, will generate enough revenue to make this improbable notion feasible.

Has the Barnes actually studied the feasibility of such a move? inquired Ott. No, said Bernard Watson, president of the Barnes board; the foundation couldn't afford such an effort. That's an absurd answer, given the tectonic magnitude of the proposed change. Why hasn't one of the sponsor foundations funded such a study?

The overriding vision for the Parkway foresees development of a "museum mile" that would include not only the Barnes but an Alexander Calder museum, which is having some trouble getting off the ground. Yet this vision, too, lacks a solid, empirical base. For instance: How many visitors would a Calder museum draw? How many people have even heard of Calder, one of America's foremost sculptors, these days?

The city already has a concentration of museums on or near the Parkway - besides the Art Museum and the Rodin Museum, they include the Franklin Institute, the Academy of Natural Sciences, and, two blocks off the Parkway, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

If a museum ghetto is supposed to generate exceptional tourist appeal, why don't we see even the slightest evidence of such a phenomenon now?

The Barnes collection might be a strong draw initially, but visitorship is bound to slack off because of a simple truth: Museums that do not mount special exhibitions don't consistently attract lines around the block.

For instance, over the last three years, the Rodin Museum has logged an average of 55,450 visitors. This is slightly less than the Barnes attendance now in Merion. The comparable average at the Pennsylvania Academy, one of the country's major collections of American art, is about 69,000.

The Art Museum recorded 800,000 annual visitors over the last three years, but that figure was inflated by three popular special exhibitions - for Thomas Eakins (100,000), Edgar Degas (220,000), and Vincent van Gogh (318,000).

The Parkway presents another handicap: 10 lanes of continuous traffic, especially formidable at rush hours. One needs to be an Olympic-class sprinter to cross it, especially at Eakins Oval and Logan Square.

There isn't much parking on or near the Parkway, or any commercial establishments - shops, restaurants, etc. - that would provide walk-in traffic for the museums.

Ott should consider these factors carefully as he wrestles with his ruling, but in the end he's still up against the orphan defense.

He can't let the Barnes perish, and he must also contend with two situations, over which he hasn't any control, that militate against staying put.

First: Potential donors who might help the Barnes stay in Merion apparently just don't trust the Barnes board to manage money wisely. Otherwise, the foundation's fund-raising toward that end would have been more successful.

Second: All the powers on earth, from the Pew Foundation to the Art Museum to the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corporation, want the Barnes to move. Big money and civic power are solidly behind this scheme. As noted, the idea enjoys strong intuitive appeal. Besides a handful of starry-eyed art critics, the only people opposed to relocation are the Barnes students.

They possess an insight that Ott should take into consideration. Because of the intimacy they develop over a year or two of study, they, more than anyone except the foundation's staff, come to appreciate fully the unique spirit of the place, a spirit that will be severely compromised, if not destroyed, by a move.

I sincerely doubt that any trustee, past or present, connects or has connected with the institution at this level.

So how does Ott rescue virtue from expediency? Ironically, former Barnes board president Richard Glanton offered the most logical answer years ago. Sell 10 or a dozen third-level stored Renoirs, which the Barnes owns in abundance - or as many as it takes to raise a \$50 million endowment, which would keep the Barnes in Merion.

Outrageous? Hardly. Museums sell art all the time to buy other art. If a museum can ethically sell to "upgrade" its collection, why can't it sell to save its life?

The Barnes doesn't need 180 Renoirs to carry out its educational mission; it could easily manage with 150, or even 100.

It has been suggested that the Barnes might sell nonart items (it has already sold Mrs. Barnes' grand piano) or perhaps let go of Ker-Feal, Albert Barnes' former country property in Chester County.

The Barnes doesn't need all of Ker-Feal's 137 acres; it could make do with perhaps 10 and the house, which contains a collection of ceramics, furniture, and other American folk crafts.

However, this kind of selling isn't likely to raise as much money as the foundation needs to establish a sustaining endowment. To stabilize its finances, the Barnes needs to raise \$50 million in a hurry. Paintings are the obvious remedy.

Since the trustees evidently don't have a Plan B, Ott might insist on selling as the least injurious and least complicated alternative to relocation. He might conclude that spending \$150 million to solve a \$50 million problem doesn't make sense.

Memo to Judge Ott: Let them sell some paintings, but one time only. Then, if the trustees run the Barnes into the ground a second time, sentence them to eternal community service - Center City or Merion, wherever they prefer.