

CultureGrrl, ArtsJournal weblog

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Burying Albert Barnes in the Philly MegaBarnes

This is a continuation of [yesterday's post](#), in which I promised a critique of the [specific plans](#) for the new Barnes.

What's wrong with the future MegaBarnes in Philadelphia is the same thing that's wrong with the newly expanded Morgan Library and Museum, which opened in New York last April. As I wrote in [The Atrium that Ate the Morgan](#) in the June/July issue of Art in America magazine:

There's just one problem: [Renzo] Piano has taken Morgan out of the Morgan.

We don't know yet if the architect for the Philly Barnes will be the ubiquitous Piano, Polshek Partnership (the Barnes' site and program planners), or some other distinguished firm. But no matter how much sensitivity is employed, there is no getting around the fact that founder/collector Albert Barnes and his intimate, idiosyncratic galleries will be engulfed in a much larger, more modern building, which will inevitably do the same thing to Barnes that the new Morgan has done to Morgan. As I wrote, regarding the New York construction:

Part of the mystique of any house museum is the spirit of the master of the house. But now J.P. Morgan's outsize ego has been supplanted by Piano's beautiful but discordantly sleek addition. New Yorkers, especially, will love the way this gorgeous space accessions the whole city into the Morgan's collection--a complex architectural collage viewed through glass walls. But the insular old-world ambience of the robber baron's luxurious lair is upstaged by this upstart, with its modern glass-and-steel pizzazz.

Yes, you can still ogle the old man's study and library....But these rooms now feel like a minor diversion from the main architectural event.

The Barnes part of the new Barnes will be approximately the same size as the 16,000-square-foot original facility, director Derek Gillman has indicated. But it will be dwarfed by a modern 120,000-square-foot structure, with special exhibition galleries and all the standard museum amenities and 21st-century diversions.

The dutiful recreation of the old Barnes room layouts and art installations, as a small portion of the much greater whole, will reduce his galleries to an anachronistic time capsule, diminishing rather than celebrating his spirit and achievement. These "faux" galleries, copies of the originals, would not only disregard Barnes' written instructions that his collection remain as he left it, but would also violate his beliefs in a fundamental way: He was notorious for his aversion to reproductions. Barnes wouldn't even allow visitors to sketch the works in his collection, yet his bastion of authenticity is soon to be transformed into a cluster of replicated galleries

My own NY Times [Op-Ed piece](#) is still my last word on the subject: Transplanting the Barnes from its idyllic Merion setting to a gritty urban site (now home to a juvenile correction facility) will "reduce...[this] unique haven created by a passionate collector to just another museum."