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Barnes to downtown Philly? A bad move

Relocating the collection to a new home in Philadelphia isn't a good idea but architects have trouble saying 'no.'

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As a profession, architecture has never included many refuseniks, those who decline to work for a particular client out of principle. Architects by nature believe in the power of the new to improve upon the old or even redeem it. Often they think that a building, if completed with enough skill, can make irrelevant the question of whom it was designed for or what it replaces.

Last week, when the Barnes Foundation released a shortlist of firms competing to design its new museum in central Philadelphia, we got a reminder of how strong that participatory strain has always been in the architectural character. The Barnes' planned move from its home in suburban Merion Station to a new location on Benjamin Franklin Parkway, where it would join a sort of murderer's row of museums, has been dogged by controversy from the start. So there was reason to wonder how many firms would shy away from the commission.

One very prominent architect, in fact, told me earlier this year that he had received a request for qualifications, or RFQ, from the Barnes but was reluctant to respond. He said he didn't like the idea of stripping bare the 1925 Barnes building, which was designed by Paul Cret and is crammed from floor to ceiling with a stunning collection of Impressionist and early Modern paintings.

Apparently very few of his colleagues in the field share that point of view. The six architects on the shortlist make up an all-star squad. Three — Santa Monica's Thom Mayne, Spain's José Rafael Moneo and Japan's Tadao Ando — have won the Pritzker Prize, the field's top honor. (The executive director of the Pritzker Prize, Martha Thorne, is advising the Barnes.) Another, Diller Scofidio + Renfro of New York recently designed the acclaimed Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. The last two firms, Kengo Kuma and Associates from Tokyo and New York's Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects, are known for the intelligence and rich materiality of their work.

Clearly the Barnes had no trouble attracting accomplished firms. And clearly it was not willing to risk the appearance of tepid response to its RFQ by including a single talented unknown among the chosen half-dozen.

That strategy is typical of the campaign waged by champions of the Barnes move. In attempting to wrest control from administrators who have, admittedly, put the future of the institution in peril with flagrant mismanagement, they have lined up a powerful group of allies, including leaders of the Annenberg Foundation and Pew Charitable Trusts. They hope to suggest a cresting, unstoppable wave of support among the city's power brokers, and line them up against the bumbling conservatism of those fighting to keep the collection in place.

Another message the shortlist sends is that there may be some flexibility in the foundation's earlier insistence on re-creating the 1925 galleries inside the new building. At first the plan was to construct a simulacrum of the old galleries, perhaps even down to the door handles and drapes. But over time, thankfully, this absurd idea has become less literal. As the RFQ went out, the Barnes was saying only that the new museum "will replicate the scale, proportion and configuration of the existing galleries."

What makes visiting the old Barnes so unusually satisfying, though, is not simply the depth of the collection and the way that it was arranged by Albert C. Barnes, in dense rows without any identifying wall placards. It is those things in combination with the ineffable qualities that make up a sense of place: the way the worn floors creak, the way light filters through the trees that surround the building, the experience of leaving the city and giving yourself over, as a viewer, to the idiosyncrasy of Barnes' ideas, some nuttier than others, about how paintings affect the eye and mind. None of that is replicable.

In that sense, if there is optimism to be wrung from the shortlist, even by those who oppose the move altogether, it is to be found in the fact all six chosen firms seem likely to oppose the idea of re-creating the old Barnes galleries in ersatz fashion. It is hard to imagine Mayne, for instance, agreeing to replicate the scale, proportion or configuration of anything in one of his buildings. Just this week he told Susan Stamberg of NPR: "There's a whole group of people that want to build new buildings that look like old buildings. It's ridiculous, right? It would be like ... somehow cherishing a horse and buggy."

The prospect of giving up the old Barnes seems especially cruel at a time when oversized, over-budgeted expansion projects have removed a good deal of the intimacy from the museum-going experience in this country. (The Cret museum is about 10,000 square feet; the new one will be 120,000.) It surely says something about the trajectory of the field that the most satisfying new museum spaces tend to be the smallest ones.

That direct connection to the art, along with a domestic scale, is what links the Barnes and other beloved small museums to recent projects such as the superb Neue Galerie in Manhattan. That raises the question of how many of the architects on the shortlist have actually visited the old Barnes.

There is, finally, something deeply old-fashioned — and not in a good way — about the idea that museums need to be clustered in a city center. As condo towers and chain stores sprout in American cities and baby boomers age and move downtown, cities are growing more homogenous, and more suburban, in character. (Immigration and other demographic changes, meanwhile, have invigorated the suburbs.)

Philadelphia's museum row may end up feeling like a shopping mall where you can buy the experience of looking at art.

Certainly, more people will be able to see the Barnes collection in a new museum freed of the strict visitor limits (1,200 per week) that apply in Merion Station. But if they shuffle into the parkway building from a museum down the block — saving time for a trip through the nearby behemoth of the neighborhood, the Philadelphia Museum of Art — how meaningful is the experience likely to be?

There are times when architects serve the culture, and their profession, best by staying on the sidelines, quietly or otherwise. Earlier this year, writing in the Spanish newspaper *El País*, architect Iñaki Ábalos suggested that instead of trying to design "green" buildings for their corporate clients, firms could better advance the cause of environmentalism by quoting Melville's *Bartleby*: "I prefer not to."

I wish more architects had said the same thing to the Barnes Foundation.

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