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Barnes' move debated at Drexel

by Cheryl Allison

Give Gresham Riley credit for courage.

The former president of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, taking the "pro" position in a debate Monday night on the controversial proposed move of the Barnes Foundation from Merion, faced an audience made up mostly of firmly convinced "cons."

In a nearly two-hour exchange with Robert Zaller, a Drexel history professor and critic of the move, he held firmly to his core point.

That is, that only a relocation to Center City will create "a realistic chance" of implementing Dr. Albert C. Barnes' educational mission in founding the institution. In Riley's view, that mission is making the collection accessible to the "plain people" he mentions in his much-examined will: people "who gain their livelihood by daily toil in shops, factories and schools, stores and similar places."

In its bastion in a "posh neighborhood that is not easily accessible," Riley said, "the walls around the collection have grown higher and higher, making it a collection of jewels for a small elite." And that's something about which Barnes, who notoriously held in contempt Philadelphia's elite, would be outraged.

Zaller, on the other hand, said the educational mission and accessibility are in fact a matter of will for the foundation's leadership, not the victims of an "artificial financial crisis" or remote location. "People make it sound as if the Barnes is located somewhere in the Poconos," he said. It could be a short bus ride from Center City art institutions. And Lower Merion officials have already endorsed measures to increase attendance and revenues, to solve any financial shortfalls in place.

On the other hand, Zaller said, the move - even if galleries and installations are recreated in a new, much larger museum on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway - will irrevocably alter the experience of viewing and studying Barnes's collection in what the painter Henri Matisse famously called "the only sane place to see art in America."

The two men have been staking out their positions for more than a year in the online arts and

culture journal, *The Broad Street Review*." In fact, a fiery essay from Zaller was one of the first submissions, said journalist Dan Rottenberg, when he launched it last year. Riley speedily replied.

But this is the first time, proponents of keeping the Barnes in place pointed out, that a representative of Philadelphia's art establishment has been willing to argue the points of the move in a public forum.

In fact, Riley said, when friends and acquaintances heard about the debate, they wondered, "What's the point? The major issues have been settled." Court permission to move the collection has been obtained. The foundation's board of trustees has been restructured. An initial \$150 million for the new museum has been raised. A short list of architects has even been announced. "The reason I've gotten into the public fray is to keep the educational [mission] at the forefront," Riley said. But, on the other hand, he suggested, if Zaller and other opponents were to succeed, "It would be a pyrrhic victory at best. The foundation would end up in its most precarious situation ever."

"The best course at this stage is for citizens of Philadelphia to assist the major parties to succeed," he said.

Debate moderator Charles Morscheck, a professor of art history at Drexel, asked Riley, however, whether he really believes the educational goals for "the working classes" are likely to be achieved in a new setting.

A member of the audience had the same response. "If there is a great desire on the part of the city to provide art education [to everyone], the opportunity exists at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and elsewhere. There's never been such a program."

Another speaker, tongue in cheek, suggested that, if the Barnes environment is going to be reproduced, "The concept should be copywrited. [Then] the Disney Corporation might be inspired to duplicate it and fill it with copies."

"In fact, what we're seeing is an attempt to Disneyfy the collection," Zaller agreed.

"This is not a good idea for Philadelphia" and the major charities supporting the move," Zaller said. "A real city doesn't build itself up on the idea of 'art ghettos' and avenues of the arts. Art should be dispersed throughout the city."

"The money wasted on a move could do so much more for the city," in support of other arts programs," he went on to say. "This really is a big, great city. It's time to start acting like it."