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“Architect Robert Venturi slams planned Barnes Foundation move”

By Christopher Knight

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Robert Venturi, the Pritzker Prize-winning architect and lifelong resident of Philadelphia, has written a stinging letter in opposition to a controversial plan to dismantle the suburban Barnes Foundation and relocate its unparalleled collection of postimpressionist and early Modern art from its specially designed 1925 building to a new, tourist-friendly structure near downtown.

The schematic design for the new building is scheduled to be unveiled Wednesday in Philadelphia.

In a letter to opponents of the move obtained by The Times, Venturi decries the \$200-million project as “an indiscrete and ridiculous waste of money.” The celebrated architect is the most prominent cultural figure in the city to publicly oppose the plan, which was initiated by a powerful group of local philanthropies, politicians and business interests.

The Barnes collection in suburban Lower Merion Township includes 69 paintings by Cezanne, 59 by Matisse, 46 by Picasso, seven by Van Gogh and scores more by Renoir, Degas, Modigliani, Soutine and many other Modern masters. They were acquired in the early 20th century by pharmaceuticals manufacturer Albert C. Barnes, who died in a 1951 automobile accident.

The letter focuses on the artistic damage Venturi believes will be caused by the move:

The current building in Merion was designed specifically for the Barnes collection by Paul Cret in collaboration with Dr. Barnes as owner/curator. The building and site design are an integral part of the collection, and vice versa. Separating them vastly diminishes the value and purpose of both.

Reached in Philadelphia on Monday, Venturi extolled “the force of contrast” offered by Cret’s classical building, the Modern paintings inside and the extensive garden outside. Removing the collection, he said, will destroy that unique context.

Cret was a French American architect who applied classical Beaux Arts traditions to Modernist forms and who headed the School of Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania for three decades. Venturi taught at Penn for 11 years, also serving as architect Louis Kahn’s teaching assistant there. Kahn had studied under Cret and later worked in Cret’s office.

Venturi, 84, was named a Pritzker Laureate, the highest honor for an architect, in 1991. His letter was sent to the Friends of the Barnes Foundation, a group that has been fighting the move since it was approved by a local court nearly five years ago. The long-delayed project was supposed to break ground this fall.

Controversy over the plan has heated up in recent weeks, following the first public screenings of "The Art of the Steal," a well-reviewed documentary film on behind-the-scenes maneuvers for the move by wealthy and influential members of the Philadelphia establishment. Currently being shown at the New York Film Festival, the film had its debut last month at the Toronto International Film Festival, where it was one of relatively few movies to secure a national distribution deal, beginning next spring. A second sold-out screening in New York was added for Tuesday afternoon to accommodate wide interest.

In his missive Venturi also questions the sizable expenditure of funds for the move at a time of deep economic distress. State lawmakers stunned the local arts community in September by proposing to charge a sales tax on tickets at museums and performing-arts theaters to generate about \$100 million in annual revenue. The tax would be 8% in Philadelphia and 6% elsewhere.

Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell has committed \$30-million in state funds to move the Barnes.

Written three days after the so-called "culture tax" was revealed, Venturi's letter says "the expenditure of \$200-300 million for a new site and building seems an indiscrete and ridiculous waste of money when existing museums and libraries are undergoing major budget cuts." He added that the original Barnes building and site "work perfectly well for the collection."

The letter, dated Sept. 23, was disclosed to coincide with Wednesday's press conference to unveil schematic plans for the Barnes' new home, originally budgeted at \$100 million. New York architects Tod Williams and Billie Tsien were awarded the commission two years ago, selected in a competition from among six finalists. The 120,000-square-foot site on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway is about eight miles from the current building in residential Merion.

The Barnes Foundation is a school located within a 12-acre arboretum that is integral to the building and exhibition concept. When Henri Matisse visited from France in 1933 to install his "Dance" mural, commissioned for three lunettes of Cret's main gallery, he described the ensemble of architecture, art and gardens as "the only sane place" for aesthetic experience that he had seen in America.

[Click here to see Venturi's letter.](#)

--Christopher Knight

Photos: Robert Venturi, credit: George Widman, Associated Press; Paul Cret's 1925 Barnes Foundation building, credit: Brad C. Bower, Associated Press