

Art

Raising the Barnes. A serene new home for a contested collection

By Richard Lacayo

AT THE NEW HOME OF THE BARNES Foundation, which houses the dazzling art collection of Albert C. Barnes, visitors enter via a pathway that crosses a reflecting pond. Given the history of the place, it feels like a bridge over troubled water. For much of his life, the spectacularly cranky Barnes—a chemist who made his fortune with a drug to treat gonorrhea—was at war with the social elites of Philadelphia. Many of them at first had no taste for the Cézannes, Matisse, van Goghs and Picassos at his private museum, a limestone villa located in the suburb of Merion, Pa. Barnes also established an art school there in 1922, intending his collection to be primarily for the benefit of students. Anyone not connected with the school could visit by appointment only.

By the time of Barnes' death in 1951, powerful segments of Philadelphia society had dreams of adding his astonishing cache of Impressionist, post-Impressionist and modern art to the city's cultural attractions. A serious opportunity to move the collection emerged in the 1990s, when the foundation's finances fell into disarray. A multiyear endgame followed, featuring institutional mismanagement, political gamesmanship and bad faith. In the end, with the Barnes endowment nearly exhausted, three philanthropies assembled a rescue fund on the condition that—sure enough—the art would be moved to a more accessible location in downtown Philadelphia, where the new \$150 million Barnes is opening May 19. All that's missing is a banner above the entrance reading MISSION ACCOMPLISHED.

One indisputably good thing came out of the whole sorry mess: the search committee assigned to choose architects for the project settled on the New York City-based firm of Tod Williams and Billie Tsien. A husband-and-wife team, Williams and Tsien are well known for producing what you might call bespoke architecture—entirely Modernist in its language of planes, voids and volumes

but with an Arts and Crafts-style attention to materials and surface textures. Their buildings are finely detailed specimens of etched metal and hammered stone, sensuous places where light is an almost palpable material in itself. They brought all their gifts to bear on the new Barnes, and the result is laugh-out-loud beautiful, a splendid new container for a war-weary institution.

For a start, though the city wanted a prestigious presence that opened directly onto Benjamin Franklin Parkway, the architects wisely decided that this was no way to create a setting of maximum calm. So they situated the new museum with its back to the busy roadway, behind an expanse of trees and a lawn by landscape designer Laurie Olin.

The Barnes commission also came with an unusual, court-ordered stipulation. The new building had to reproduce the galleries that Paul Cret designed for the original Barnes, with rooms of the same dimension and every picture, art object and iron hinge—Barnes collected those too—placed exactly where they were in the Merion building. The result could have been a faux-historical Disney-Barnes. Instead, Williams and Tsien have made a new Barnes that contains the old one but frames it in ways that are both subtle and spectacular.

The re-created galleries occupy a two-story rectangular structure faced with limestone panels. It sits parallel to an L-shaped building that houses offices, an auditorium, a café and a gift shop. Between them is an immense open courtyard covered by a single powerful gesture, a translucent light-box roof that rises above the paired buildings and cantilevers over a terrace at one end—a mighty, thrusting solid to transmit and signify light. And certainly the light at the new Barnes is much improved over what it was at the old one, especially in the second-floor galleries that have ceiling light-well systems.

The magic of the old Barnes was its serenity, a precious quality in a world of

clamoring herds at big-box museums. The idyllic experience of that place can't be reproduced along a multilane parkway in a large city. But to the extent it can be approximated, in sensitive and beguiling ways, Williams and Tsien have done it. Albert Barnes, no doubt, is flinging curses from the grave all the same. ■



Old Collection, New Address The Barnes is relocated, and re-created, in downtown Philadelphia

1. THE GALLERIES
All the galleries are designed to reproduce the appearance of the corresponding rooms of the old Barnes. In Room 6, conservator Geza Mika touches up the frame around Renoir's *The Source*.

2. THE COURT
Visitors arrive through a courtyard topped by a trapezoidal vaulted ceiling. Then they move through bronze gates, at left, inspired by African metalwork and the African art Albert Barnes also collected.

3. THE LIGHT BOX
Limestone panels in a syncopated pattern appear to float slightly across the facade. The translucent light box gives the building a locomotive thrust and a spare but powerful silhouette.

4. THE MAIN GALLERY
Limestone panels in Cézanne's *The Cardplayers* and, above it, Seurat's *The Models* occupy a prominent wall. Sunscreening windows make the shades and curtains of the old Barnes unnecessary.