

The New Barnes Foundation Building: Soulful, Self-assured, and Soaked with Light

by **Paul Goldberger** 5:15 PM, MAY 4 2012



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An aerial view from the Benjamin Franklin Parkway and 20th Street.

There is no record of what Dr. Albert C. Barnes, the famously eccentric, famously difficult collector of post-Impressionist painting, African art, ancient art, and American furniture and decorative art said to the architect Paul Cret when he hired him to build the Barnes Foundation, his personal museum, in suburban Philadelphia in 1922. Cret gave Dr. Barnes, who made his fortune with the invention of Argyrol, an early treatment for gonorrhea, a formal limestone building that has the air of a grand house. It's no surprise that plenty of people who visited it thought that the Barnes, like the Frick Collection in New York, had once been the collector's residence. The small, domestically scaled galleries were filled to overflowing with pictures, sometimes hung in rows that went almost to the ceiling. Barnes was quite particular about how his collection was to be handled. After his death, in 1951, by order of the trust he established, every single picture remained in precisely the position Barnes had placed it, arranged not by artist or style but by juxtapositions that struck Barnes's keen, if idiosyncratic, eye: a Modigliani beside a Rousseau, because Barnes liked the way their compositions and colors played off against each other. There were no wall labels, also at Barnes's insistence. The result was that a

visit to the Barnes was a museum experience like none other.

Now, of course, all of that is history. The long, difficult story of how Barnes's trust was broken and Cret's chateau replaced by a new museum building in downtown Philadelphia—either to save the institution from financial ruin or to exploit its treasures for the sake of the box office, depending on whom you believe—is no longer news. Whatever you thought of the battle that divided Philadelphia, it's water under the bridge. It's over. Beginning on May 19th, people will see the Barnes collection not where Barnes intended it to be seen, but in a new building designed by the New York architects Tod Williams and Billie Tsien.



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The view from Pennsylvania Avenue.

This building won't please the absolutists, the people we should probably call Barnes fundamentalists, because nothing would please them short of a return to the way things were. But it really ought to please everybody else, because—to cut to the chase—the new Barnes is absolutely wonderful. The court order allowing the foundation to relocate the collection to Philadelphia specified that the pictures were to be hung exactly as they had been in suburban Merion, in galleries that had to duplicate the configuration and the proportions of Paul Cret's. It was a requirement that could have been stifling, a prescription for trite replication, as if the court, seeking to mollify the people who were arguing against any changes to the Barnes, had ordered up a Barnes theme park.

But that is not what Philadelphia has gotten. Williams and Tsien are architects of extraordinary subtlety, and they have managed to fulfill the requirements of the court decision and at the same time create a handsome, self-assured building that has not a

whiff of the sentimental. It is a strong and distinctive new work of architecture on its own, a design that navigates skillfully between the dangers of slavish copying the old Barnes and what, for this unusual institution, would be the even more pernicious alternative of corporate-museum modernism. It would have been the most un-Barnesian thing of all if Albert Barnes's one-of-a-kind museum had become yet another handsome, sophisticated palace of art with a vaguely soulless air.

Williams and Tsien were an inspired choice. If anything, you would describe their work as soulful, the opposite of standard-issue modernism. The firm they have run since 1986 is among the few architecture offices I know that restricts the amount of work it takes on so as to be able to focus intensely on a limited number of projects. Their buildings, like the American Folk Art Museum in Manhattan, the Neurosciences Institute in La Jolla, California, or the new academic building they have just finished at Bennington College, have always been, to me, a series of meditations on the meaning of materials, arranged to create spaces and surfaces that are dignified and serene. Everything about them is designed to encourage reflection. These are architects who talk about slowness, and precision, and about how the making of buildings is still, in the end, a process of doing many things by hand. They are interested not only in how different materials function but in how they feel, in what emotions and tactile sensations this kind of stone or that kind of wood or metal communicate to us. They think about light, and texture, and proportion, and scale, and materials, and about how all of these things can be put together to create an order and a serenity that make a place meaningful.



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The view from 21st Street.

That is what they have done in Philadelphia. The new Barnes is a limestone building made up of two long sections, set parallel to each other, with one of them forming an "L" as it wraps around its neighbor. In between the wings is an open court, roofed with a long translucent box that appears to float over the entire structure. The three elements—the two limestone sections and the translucent box—together form a carefully balanced

composition of masses, textures, and volumes, unquestionably modern but with a very un-modern sense of repose.

The simplest way to describe how the building functions is to say that you enter through the L-shaped limestone section, which contains all of the functions that did not exist in the old Barnes: a lobby, a library, an auditorium, a café, meeting rooms, and classrooms. From there you cross the courtyard, symbolically (although not actually) going outdoors to re-enter the gallery building, in which Williams and Tsien have created rooms that almost precisely duplicate the spaces in Paul Cret's building, allowing the collection to be re-hung as it was.



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An ensemble view, North and West walls, room 18.

Two things are different. The less important change is that Williams and Tsien have subtly but firmly altered Cret's architectural details, making moldings, decorations, and windows that are slightly more abstract, and that allude gently to Cret's Renaissance design but do not replicate it exactly. They have done something similar on the exterior, where the limestone is set in huge panels that appear to float, making the surface quite different from Cret's. All of these changes serve as a reminder that we are in a new building that pays homage to an old one, which is not the same as being in a new building that is intended to fool you into thinking it is an old one.

The more important difference is in light. There is more and better light of every kind here than there ever was in the old Barnes—more natural light and more artificial light. One of the things that never gets talked about by people who elevate the experience of visiting the

Paul Cret building is how dark the galleries were, and how difficult it was to see a great many of the paintings. Suddenly now, the paintings, in all of their magnificent color, are visible in a whole new way. I would not be at all surprised if some people accused the Barnes curators of having cleaned the canvases as they brought them from Merion to Philadelphia. They look that different.

If you want to evaluate the removal of this collection from its original home primarily in terms of the legal issues raised—the court’s overturning of Barnes’s trust was for the presumed benefit of the public—then there isn’t much to do except wait and see if you feel that the tradeoff is worth it, and that the public will benefit enough from easier access to Barnes’s collection to justify changing his intentions. But walking through the galleries, I realized that there is another way altogether to see this situation, which is from the standpoint of the collection itself. There is no question that the paintings are more visible in their new home; they look better in every way, and they are likely to be far better cared for in a modern, humidity- and temperature-controlled environment. You may or may not believe that visitors fare better in the new Barnes. But you cannot dispute the fact that the Cezannes and Renoirs and Matisses do.

And no one can fail to understand, going through these new galleries, that this is anything but a distinctive, idiosyncratic, and highly personal collection. That is what Albert Barnes wanted it always to be, and what it still is: a place where you not only see incomparably great art but feel the instincts and the personality of a single collector. Barnes’s will may have been changed, but his presence surely remains.

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