

The Barnes on the Parkway

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DAG's response to the initial presentations of the new design – November 2009

The Barnes being the Barnes, and the new site on the Parkway being a prominent one, it's not surprising that the public presentation of the Williams/Tsien and OLIN design has generated conflicting opinions about the building, the site, and – again – whether the move should take place at all.

For DAG, the last is not an issue. Long arguments can be made by both sides, but the move is now definite. DAG's concern is what the Barnes Foundation's physical presence on the Parkway will do for the City.

The design challenge of relocating from Merion to the Parkway is daunting. There is the legal constraint to replicate the relationship of the paintings and objects within the original dimensions of the Merion rooms. More challenging is the obligation to replace the intimate and idiosyncratic setting that Dr. Barnes created for his collection with a worthy new one.

Philadelphia is fortunate that the Barnes Foundation has involved such talented and thoughtful architects as Todd Williams and Billie Tsien, and landscape architect Laurie Olin, in the task. Improved quality of new design in Philadelphia depends not only on educated public engagement, but on owners who select designers who can set a high standard and then respond to critique with an improved and enriched design.

For those who have heard a presentation of the project and viewed the models, it is apparent that the design evolved from a careful consideration of the program needs, with well-rooted reasons for every move. Overall, the design seems to satisfy the requirements of the Barnes Foundation extremely well. And although it is not possible to see, from the images presented so far, what the entire effect of the completed design will be, the beauty and care with which Williams/Tsien have crafted their previous buildings suggests that the results will be equally satisfying here. At the urban design level, however, DAG thinks that the project can – and hopes it will – do more.

The Parkway and the City.

The designers' original concept is presented with two concept diagrams – "the gallery in the garden" and the "garden in the gallery". The gallery within the garden refers to the Merion venue, and the garden in the gallery to the new design, with its "internal" multistory garden which marks the entry for those on the Parkway and, on the interior, links the floors as it cuts a section through the building. But the gallery in the garden also describes the designers' attitude to the site, and that has sparked criticism that there should be more commerce (an entry, a cafe, a bicycle rental) on the Parkway side.

Perhaps it comes down to a question of "which Parkway" this building suits. The Parkway was modeled after, and we still compare it with, Paris' Champs Elysees, but we sometimes forget that the French version has two distinct parts – the densely-built urban street and the open, tree-lined park. The Barnes' new design fits well with planner Jacques Greber's original vision for the Parkway as a bucolic boulevard where civic buildings are set back from the street within a garden. In recent years many in the Philadelphia architecture and planning community have been advocating for the Parkway to become more like architect Paul Cret's vision of a dynamic urban boulevard. Failure to meet the latter vision has led many to question the building's urban response.

The Parkway surely needs increased pedestrian activity and a greater sense of urban liveliness. Perhaps the Barnes proposal will force us to be more discriminating about how to achieve this within an existing context that is already strong. Like its Parisian predecessor, the Parkway is divided into urban and bucolic halves, with the division marked by the Civil War Soldier Memorial pylons, at 20th Street where the Barnes site begins. East of 20th Street the Parkway buildings touch the sidewalk; west of 20th Street sycamores do. East of 20th Street we feel like we're downtown; west of 20th Street we feel the park begin. The site the City gave the Barnes has long been characterized as a park, and surely no one would suggest the removal of the rows of magnificent trees that distinguish it as such. Nor can we ignore the Barnes' immediate neighbor, the Rodin Museum, which is very much a gallery in a garden.

In other words, this particular urban context comfortably accommodates the designers' intent to recall the Barnes' history by means of the garden setting and preservation of the green views from the gallery windows which have flanked the paintings in Merion. How, given these realities, can the Barnes engage in the life of the City and increase activity along the Parkway? DAG suggests that there are a number of ways it can do so by refinements to the existing design.

Entry, parking, and pavement.

The building's surprising north entry is justified by the designers as the way to correctly orient and approach that portion of the building that houses the collection. It's true that the site has multiple "fronts" and that Pennsylvania Avenue will be a more important one once the (hoped for) addition to the Free Library is complete. However, the Parkway is surely the primary facade and the Barnes Foundation's new address. For those approaching from the south, a clear sense of where to find the front door and how to navigate the path that leads there, are essential. The designers' intention to create a complex spatial narrative for the site is admirable, but success will depend on greater physical development of the nodal points at which the paths turn and join.

For a relatively small building within a large site, there is a significant amount of paving. Parking has always been a problem for the Barnes in Merion, so it is particularly disappointing that it needs to bring its own on-site, on-grade parking into the heart of the City. For a building of this significance, underground parking would be preferable. Surely the proposed parking location is one of the reasons for the building's north entry. If the garden approach from the south is intended to remove visitors from the bustle of the City before contemplating the collection, it is hoped that the final design for the parking lot maintains enough of a separation from the front door so that those entering from the north have a similar opportunity to remove themselves from the asphalt.

The Arbor and Fountain Plaza, planned for the southeast corner of the site, will be a valuable public amenity for the Parkway, particularly if it offers comfortable seating midway along the trek from City Hall to the Art Museum or for the daily users of the Free Library who perch on its moat walls for lack of a better option. This amenity is outweighed by the large bus drop off and turn around that threatens to make a "back door" of the 20th Street portion of the site. The designers' intent is for an elegant urban approach like the vehicular courtyard in front of the University Museum. But even if the final design maintains the street edge with appealing materials (the equivalent of the University Museum's Yellin gates and Calder sculpture would be nothing to sneeze at!), it would be better to eliminate the bus lot altogether. For the number of buses the turn around can accommodate, a cheaper, greener, and more urban alternative would be to convert the existing parking spaces that line the Parkway edge of the site to a bus drop off zone. The elimination of the turn around would permit a continuous green edge along 20th Street, increase the garden area available for public enjoyment, and – with the elimination of the lot's screening walls and hedges – give

better visibility to the entry from the south and east. If Parkway drop off is not possible, other options should be considered.

Elsewhere on the site there are too many high "walls" (whether actual walls or wall-like hedges) that are intended for screening or possibly motivated by security. Better security might be obtained with lower walls giving more open sight lines, particularly if the security of the pedestrians on the sidewalks, and not just of the site, is considered. Although it is important to screen the parking, a lower wall might permit a greater layering of the landscape. At the northeast corner at the building entry, views of the front door should be maintained even if direct access is not.

The potential relationship across 21st Street between the Barnes and the Rodin Museum, whose own garden is about to undergo renovation, is particularly appealing. Unfortunately, the relationship is limited because of the size of the service yard. Service issues, like parking and security concerns, are legitimate needs that often overwhelm the building and site design. Granted, secure and protected loading for works of art – happily, the new Barnes will have space for visiting shows – is a necessity. However, given what appear to be relatively light service needs, which could be reduced by good scheduling, it would be worthwhile to try to reduce this area to a bare minimum.

The western edge seems an ideal spot for the cafe seating, affording users with a sunny spot and views of the Rodin while helping to animate the Parkway. The outdoor eating area shown corralled between the building and the parking lot on the north side of the site seems a lost opportunity. While the effort not to commercialize the project can be appreciated, consider that even the park along the Champs Elysees benefits from a few tables under the trees.