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Keep the Barnes, and build another

By Nancy Herman

Nancy Herman is an artist who lives in Merion.

The image of a new museum on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, creating an arts walkway, is a compelling one. I can understand why so many people are drawn to it. Yet for me, destroying one perfect museum to create another seems, to say the least, bereft of imagination.

Contemplating this problem of the Barnes Foundation and the desire of the City of Philadelphia to make hay out of the collection, I have come up with an idea I think could satisfy all involved. It would honor the ideas of Albert C. Barnes, create many new reasons to visit Philadelphia, and keep the original foundation intact. I humbly suggest creating a new museum on the Parkway, dedicated to the ideas of Dr. Barnes - the new Barnes Museum of Art, Craft and Design.

This museum would house contemporary art, craft and design, displayed with Barnes' philosophy in mind. Exhibitions in the museum would change, thus inviting new tourists constantly. Every summer, when the Barnes Foundation in Merion is closed for classes and the greatest number of tourists are about, a small portion of the Barnes collection could be exhibited in the new building along with contemporary work. Each summer there would be a different selection.

This would provide new reasons to visit and re-showcase the old work. This new building, designed solely for this purpose, would not be restricted by having the exact arrangements contained in a larger building, which the current plan demands, thus freeing the architect to make his own solution to the ideas of philosopher John Dewey and Barnes. The building could have contemporarily crafted details as well as a more contemporary idea of space. I imagine a wonderfully exuberant Frank Gehry building with the museum on the first floor of a lovely hotel, or condominium complex. Each room in the building would be designed to express the ideal of beauty Barnes envisioned.

Meanwhile, the old Barnes could be exactly as Barnes wanted it to be. The real spirit of his indenture would be maintained and expanded, with history preserved. With the now-upgraded number of visitors being 100,000 a year at the old Barnes, with shuttle buses running from the new Barnes to the original

one, and with a live person answering the phone to make reservations, access would be much facilitated.

The board of the original Barnes could fire the public-relations team, the fund-raising team, and any other personnel who would no longer be needed, and thus its budget worries would be over. Or, the two institutions could share these functionaries. With only \$25 million of the pledged money given to the Barnes in Merion, it would be solvent forever. The remaining \$125 million could be used as seed money for the nonprofit component of this structure.

The new Barnes Museum of Art, Craft and Design would be, like the original, unique in the world, and two reasons to visit the city instead of one. And those who are now opposed to the move and those wanting a new reason for tourists to visit would all be satisfied. The hotel or condominium would provide many thousands of dollars in real-estate taxes that could help the school system (something a nonprofit does not generate).

Philadelphia badly needs a contemporary museum and has a great passion for craft, as the success of the Philadelphia Craft Show demonstrates. I can imagine that many artists and craftspeople would be inclined to donate art for such an enterprise to get the core collection started. The whole enterprise would be an excuse to celebrate the arts in a new and fascinating way.

The art establishment once called Barnes' art "degenerate." It is time that community redeemed itself by doing the right thing by his indenture and his vision.

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