

TOD WILLIAMS
BILLIE TSIEH

THE
ARCHITECTURE
OF THE
BARNES
FOUNDATION

The Architecture of the Barnes Foundation

Gallery in a Garden, Garden in a Gallery



Edited by Octavia Giovannini-Torelli

Principal photography by Michael Moran

Skira *RIZZOLI*
NEW YORK

in association with The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia

Tod Williams and Billie Tsien

Tod Williams and Billie Tsien began working together in New York in 1977 and nine years later established Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects in the same Central Park South studio where they work today.

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FOR THE BARNES FOUNDATION
Johanna Halford-MacLeod, *Director of Publications*

FOR SKIRA RIZZOLI PUBLICATIONS, INC.
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Philip Reeser, *Editor*

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On the front cover Detail of the Collection
Gallery's south facade

On the back cover Detail of mosaic floor
at entrance to the Light Court

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FOREWORD

When we first started to imagine moving the magnificent Barnes collection from Merion, just outside Philadelphia, to a new home in the city, the challenge seemed almost insurmountable—in part because of the Foundation's history and in part because of the intricacy of the installation. We had a wonderful site on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia's cultural neighborhood, and now we needed a building. For more than three years, the Building Committee and the board held a series of conversations about the wishes of Dr. Barnes and the purpose of his world-famous collection.

During meetings, seminars, and retreats, we considered the galleries, the question of access to the collection, and the educational mission of the Barnes Foundation. Over time, we agreed that our obligation was to replicate the hang in the original galleries, and that the new building should allow for more visitors, longer hours of operation, various amenities, and adequate office space for the staff. We decided to offer programs with other approaches to art appreciation and art history, complementing the Foundation's established Barnes method. We hoped the new building would allow for additional classrooms, seminar rooms, a library, a state-of-the-art conservation lab, a special exhibition gallery, and an auditorium.

During the architectural selection process, several of the trustees met with philanthropist Mrs. Walter H. Annenberg to discuss our progress. We spent a good amount of time reviewing the space and circulation requirements, and evaluating the site on the Parkway. At our final meeting over tea, Mrs. Annenberg gently expressed her hope that our building would be beautiful. I did not realize it at the time, but beauty, of course, became our unwritten aspiration, in addition to the long program we had developed.

We considered and met with talented architects in the United States, Europe, and Asia. In the end our choice was unanimous: the team of Tod Williams and Billie Tsien. We had visited and admired several of their buildings, including the Phoenix Art Museum; the Neurosciences Institute in La Jolla, California; the American Folk Art Museum in New York; and Skirkanich Hall at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Each of these projects had challenged the architects in various ways, and we knew they would be able to confront the enormous difficulty of replicating the Merion galleries in an authentic way.

During our initial discussions with Tod and Billie, they emphasized the domestic atmosphere of the original galleries and spoke of their desire

to extend that feeling to the new building. They also wanted to re-create the surroundings of those galleries—an environment that separates visitors from the hectic city, gets them to drop their shoulders and quiet down, making them more receptive to really *seeing* the collection. “We do not teach students how to paint, for that would be like teaching an injured person how to scream. We teach them how to learn to see; that is, to perceive the meanings in the events of everyday life, as well as in paintings, sculpture, music, furniture, objects in wrought iron, trees and flowers” (Dr. Barnes, WCAU radio address, April 9, 1942). Tod and Billie’s idea of creating a gallery within a garden—and, on a smaller scale, a garden within a gallery—may seem obvious in retrospect, but their execution of this simple concept is indeed beautiful.

Tod and Billie turned out to be a wonderful choice, not only because of their attention to detail and their selection of materials but also because of their talent for working from the inside out, and their special ability to create an experience. But mostly it is because of who they are as people. In addition to caring about quality and design, they also care deeply about the individuals they work with. They value the opinions of others regardless of their status, from quarry workers in the Negev desert of Israel to the construction team, staff of the Barnes, and members of the board. Dr. Barnes desired a stronger democracy and valued every individual. I can only imagine that he would have been as overjoyed working with Tod and Billie as we have been.

During the construction, Tod mentioned the desire to honor and give recognition to the craftspeople and other individuals who contributed to this project. A plaque on a wall of the terrace at the Barnes Foundation now lists more than two thousand names. When the plaque was unveiled at the construction party, a line immediately formed to take photos of individual names. As the evening wrapped up, it was Billie’s turn to speak. Her words were direct and full of emotion: “Some of us work with our heads,” she said, “and some of us work with our hands. But to have built this together, all of us here have worked with our hearts.”

Aileen Roberts

Trustee, The Barnes Foundation, and Chair, the Building Committee



Kenneth Frampton

“Once he had cut himself off from contemporary life, he had resolved to allow nothing to enter his hermitage which might breed repugnance or regret; and so he had set his heart on finding a few pictures of subtle, exquisite refinement, steeped in an atmosphere of ancient fantasy, wrapped in an aura of antique corruption, divorced from modern times and modern society. For the delectation of his mind and the delight of his eyes, he had decided to seek out evocative works which would transport him to some unfamiliar world, point the way to new possibilities, and shake up his nervous system, by means of erudite fantasies, complicated nightmares, suave and sinister visions.”

J.-K. Huysmans, *À Rebours*, 1884

It is not often that an architect has the opportunity to add to an urban set piece that has existed for more than a century, this being the time that has elapsed since Albert Kelsey first drew up his plan for a parkway in Philadelphia in 1902. The effort, inspired by the City Beautiful Movement, got underway with remarkable alacrity given that fifteen city blocks were cut through and demolished in order to arrive at a grand tree-lined avenue extending from City Hall to the Philadelphia Museum of Art by the time of the stock market collapse of 1929. It is equally remarkable that almost all of the neoclassical buildings occasioned by this *percement* were already in place on either side of Logan Square by the same date. The ensuing Great Depression and the Second World War totally foreclosed on Jacques Gréber's lateral elaboration of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, which he had initially projected in 1919. The net outcome was that nothing culturally minded would happen for the next eighty years after the completion of Paul

Cret's diminutive Rodin Museum in 1929, until the realization in 2012 of the Barnes Foundation, on the same side of the Parkway.

It is somehow fitting that both institutions have origins in the Francophile passions of two self-made men: the movie theater mogul Jules Mastbaum, whose obsession with collecting Rodin bronzes eventually necessitated the construction of a museum to house them; and the chemist Dr. Albert Barnes who, with a fortune accruing from the sale of the antiseptic Argyrol, assembled a virtually unparalleled collection of post-impressionist and early modern art, which he installed in a gallery that he had expressly commissioned. The gallery and an attached house—set within a pre-existing arboretum in the well-appointed Philadelphia suburb of Merion—were completed in 1925 to the designs of Paul Cret.

Some thirty-five years after the deaths of Dr. Barnes and his wife, Laura, there followed a highly controversial legal battle waged by the Barnes Board of Trustees to survive as an independent organization by deviating from the charitable trust document that established the Foundation, in order to move the collection from Merion to a site on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, which had been made available by the city for this express purpose. Once this essential variation was legally established, the Foundation launched an architectural search process and interviewed a short list of firms from which they selected Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects as the designers of the new building. Once appointed, the architects immediately engaged in a fast-track design process that intimately involved the client from the outset—from an early sketch known as the “medallion” scheme, in which the symmetrical form of the gallery was echoed by an equally symmetrical building, to the final *parti* of December 2008, in which the symmetrical gallery was accompanied by an asymmetrical administration building that served to enclose a court between the two. The enduring symmetry of the gallery was made desirable by the legal settlement of 2004 in which it was stipulated that the original arrangement of the art had to be maintained. The only major concession the Barnes board gave the architects in the reinterpretation of the original Cret gallery plan was the introduction of two buffer volumes to separate the three *en suite* rooms at either end of the building from the core cluster of rooms in Cret's plan. This allowed the architects to introduce a light well and classrooms into an elongated version of the original building.

By the end of 2008, the design was finalized by the addition of an out-sized lantern light transforming the overall plastic form of the building

into a tripartite composition consisting of the gallery, the support building—L-shape in plan—and the monumental, translucent lantern light that surmounted the court and essentially crowned the composition. This rather dominant feature had the effect of transforming what would have otherwise been a rather staid, stone-clad megalith into a dynamic plastic composition, animated by a discreet if nonetheless discernible allusion to Suprematism. In this way the assembly presents itself as a hybrid work that, on the one hand, asserts its monumental presence as a kind of neo-Kahnian stone-faced block with classical affinities, and, on the other, posits itself as a combination of opaque and translucent masses harking back to the visions of the Russian avant-garde.

On entering the site and moving toward the entrance, one is captivated by the syncopated, modular character of the stone rain screen that envelops the entire structure. This screen—divided into three equal courses for the full height of the building and built of large panels of pale Ramon gray stone quarried in the Negev—is articulated vertically by recessed joints of varying width. The resulting low relief is accented occasionally by bronze fins inserted here and there between the panels. These inflections are augmented by projecting stone ribs. Although this constructional relief continues around the entirety of the building, its effect on the Parkway side is countermanded by the symmetrical fenestration of the gallery that houses the original collection. Here, the classical deportment of the elevation, totally determined by Cret's layout, overrides the continuing asymmetrical pattern of the rain screen, not only by virtue of its symmetry and the beautifully proportioned windows, but also because of how it projects out toward a four-foot-deep ha-ha, planted with shrubs, running out beyond the base of the building toward the tree-lined Parkway.

One of the most subtle aspects of the stone revetment is the treatment of the stone itself at two distinctly different levels—in one way, the stochastic weaving of small stone rectangles into the larger fifteen-foot slabs from which the tripartite coursework is assembled; in another way, the tooling of the stone itself, a treatment that is particularly noticeable once one passes from the exterior facing to the interior lining. Since each cuneiform inscription stems from a different hand, the chisel marks are at one and the same time both consistently repetitive and unique—a kind of “literature without an alphabet” as Henry van de Velde once described his own aestheticism. A different stone, granite, plays an equally crucial role

as paving in the stepped forecourt of the building at the intersection between North Twentieth Street and the Parkway. Here, at the conjunction of areas of deconstructed gravel with an elevated fountain pool made from basalt, an unexpected spatial rapport is set up between the forecourt and the neoclassical facade of the adjacent Free Library, all of which serves to evoke the ineffable Parisian park atmosphere sought by the architects at this juncture.

Apart from the narrow-fronted Rodin Museum, this is the first monumental building to be built parallel to the Parkway since its inception, and yet, despite the aforementioned frontality, it has nonetheless been largely conceived as an asymmetrical complex embedded in a garden. In accordance with this preconception, the architects, in conjunction with the landscape architect Laurie Olin, have given the overall approach a somewhat picturesque aspect. Thus, irrespective of whether one enters on foot from the Parkway or from the hinterland to the north or, alternatively, on foot through the main portico after being dropped off by car under a cantilevered canopy, one is always obliged to turn into the formal approach established to the north of the building, where one progresses through an allée of red maple trees while being contained on one side by the building itself and on the other by a low wall intermittently covered with vines that serves to conceal the parking lot from the approach. This axial promenade is accompanied by a reflecting pool running parallel to the building and by an elevated concrete wall set at right angles to the approach so as to shield the terrace of the museum café from being seen. At the end of this axis, one has no choice but to turn left, cross over the pool, and enter the threshold of the building and from there to turn right immediately and pass through the lobby into the main reception space.

This entry sequence, causing one to turn first this way and then that, serves to initiate one into a slightly uncanny, labyrinthine movement pattern that will be reiterated throughout much of the building. Thus, whether one is outside or inside, one's ambulatory impulse is always on the verge of being checked so that one is invariably caused to pause, here and there, before proceeding further. This delay, so to speak, first occurs in the reception foyer where the deposit of outer clothing entails a descent to the lower level in order to access the coatroom before returning to the first floor by elevator or stair. This necessary deviation is facilitated by the dynamically stepped, abstract form of a timber-sided stair in black walnut that, together

with an equally abstract, luminous chandelier, is a combination that may well evoke the dark vitality of the library in Charles Rennie Mackintosh's Glasgow School of Art.

Out of desire to approximate the atmosphere of the Merion gallery, the architects gave the reception space a domestic character by carpeting the floor throughout and by providing a long baronial table in the same walnut to carry one into the depth of the building from the point of entry. One wall of this space is lined with Belgian linen in beige and gray, held in place by an elegant grid of timber battens. This intimate ambiance changes rather abruptly as one turns toward the large court by virtue of a black-and-white inlaid floor mosaic that serves as a cryptic threshold to the monumental space. Three routes are offered at this juncture: one turns right to continue across an apron of Jura stone and a large wooden floor of recycled ipe wood, laid in a herringbone pattern, to access the terrace at the end of the court; or, one turns left to enter into the temporary exhibition space; or, one moves diagonally across the court to enter the enigmatic stone face of the gallery itself to which one has already been attracted by the interior garden which one initially glimpsed on entering the building. However, this atrium is not the point of entry to the gallery and one is obliged to proceed further across the court to locate a monumental set of double doors that by virtue of their ornamentation again evoke the aura that one first encountered in the reception area. A long table of black basalt, fixed to the floor on the opposite side of this honorific space, represents the public character of the court, as opposed to the intimate, somewhat withdrawn quality of the gallery. The character of this space is greatly enhanced by a series of off-white rectangular wool and silk cord reliefs by the Dutch textile artist Claudy Jongstra, who has also contributed more brightly colored wall hangings to the café space. These off-white reliefs by Jongstra, set within the stone, uncannily recall classical metopes.

As one experiences the all but sacrosanct aura of the gallery, one senses that this almost mythical assembly of art was never just the manifestation of another wealthy patron's taste, for one soon realizes that, for Barnes, the collection was in effect the consummation of his life's work—being seen by him as a coherent and systematic teaching tool, as well as a creative composition in itself. This accounts for his rejection of wall labels, testifying to his confidence in the innate sensibility of every viewer to