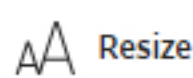
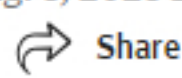


The Dallas Museum of Art Picks a Winner

The museum selects the Madrid firm of Nieto Sobejano Arquitectos for a makeover of its 1984 Edward Larrabee Barnes building.

By Michael J. Lewis

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Aerial view of the winning design from Nieto Sobejano Arquitectos PHOTO: NIETO SOBEJANO ARQUITECTOS/MALCOLM READING CONSULTANTS

The Dallas Museum of Art announced today that it has selected the Spanish firm Nieto Sobejano Arquitectos, little known in the U.S., to remodel and expand its nearly 40-year-old building.

The DMA is a 1984 work of Edward Larrabee Barnes, an architect who made his mark with his dignified, politely modern museum buildings. It has aged rather well, and there was no question of demolishing it or remodeling it beyond recognition, as has been happening to the museums of his postmodernist contemporaries. Its problems are more logistic in nature.

Given a large rectangular lot in a forsaken edge district of car lots and parking garages, Barnes turned his building inward. He ran his main axis lengthwise through the site, making a kind of internal street some 650 feet long. To either side were the galleries, housed in square pavilions with plantings and paved walkways between them. He placed public entrances to the north, south and east, and surrounded the whole with a continuous border of trees. The idea seems to have been to get visitors inside the museum as quickly as possible, screened from what lies outside.

That was prudent then but no longer. Today the DMA is the centerpiece of a lively 60-acre art district, with two museums across North Harwood Street to the east and a large sculpture park to the north. Hence the search for an architect who could “strengthen its work with its communities, create stronger civic connections, transform the visitor experience with new facilities, and expand education and gallery space.”

Architects are normally chosen on the basis of their credentials and recent work, but the selection committee’s consultant recommended that six architects be invited to make preliminary designs and each be paid a stipend of \$50,000, plus expenses. At this, I was told by Jennifer Eagle, co-chair of the committee, “there was a gasp in the room.” But two donors stepped forward, leading to the most unusual architectural competition in recent memory.

Out of 154 applicants, the six firms were chosen, each with expertise in museum design or landscape and infrastructure. Normally architects compete in a void. In this instance they were flown to Dallas for three days so they could dine together and interact, then present their first impressions at a public forum on May 13, suggesting how they might approach the commission. By the morning of the presentation, they were high-spirited to the point of giddiness. Liz Diller, one of the competitors, joked that seeing former associates working for new firms was “like seeing former lovers with their new partners.”

On July 10, the finalists’ handsome models were unveiled and, to the relief of the selection committee, “there was not a Guggenheim among them!” But if there was no extravaganza of furious originality like Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Bilbao, the competitors varied widely in the degree of respect they accorded the work of Barnes.

At one end of the spectrum were the minimalists, such as David Chipperfield, who showed his “profound respect” for the original building by making his proposed interventions nearly invisible, except for a discreet new gallery constructed of timber. At the other end was Diller Scofidio + Renfro, which decided that Barnes’s citadel should be “aloof no more.” Its proposal would have enclosed the museum at either end with mighty new entrance pavilions, the kind of wildly overscaled additions that dwarf the original into insignificance. One senses it would have swept away all of the original building if it could have.

The proposal of Michael Maltzan Architecture, of Los Angeles, was ostensibly more radical, but in a way that respected the essence of Barnes’s original design with its internal street. Mr. Maltzan wanted to demolish everything along the museum’s long North Harwood Street flank, opening up its internal street to a landscaped “cultural carpet” that would have run its length, forming a gently graduated transition from city to garden to museum. Above this carpet of green would loom a series of sleek glass pavilions, cantilevered into space and not touching the ground. In contrast to the earnestness of the other designs, this one offered a mischievous smile.

Weiss/Manfredi put the greatest stress on landscape, as might be expected from the designers of the visitors center at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. Their inspiration came from Barnes’s landscape architect, Dan Kiley, who gave the original building its character of an oasis in a desert. Johnston Marklee of Los Angeles, another firm that emphasized landscape, had one inspired architectural idea: to take the only curvilinear form in the Barnes building, the barrel-vaulted hall that forms the east entrance, and repeat it in new additions to the north and south. Unlike the Diller Scofidio + Renfro proposal, here were additions integral to the spirit of the original.

The committee was unusually sophisticated, with five professionally trained architects, including the director of the museum himself, Agustín Arteaga. In the end, it opted for what was easily the most subtle of the projects, that of Nieto Sobejano Arquitectos, whose approach was that of scrupulous microsurgery, not roughshod gesture making. Mr. Arteaga told me that they were struck by the firm’s “respect for the Barnes legacy” even as it went about “opening up our fortress.”



A view of Nieto Sobejano’s expansive proposed gallery PHOTO: NIETO SOBEJANO ARQUITECTOS/MALCOLM READING CONSULTANTS

The most visible change Nieto Sobejano proposed was a large new gallery for the northwest end, anticipating future gifts. This was eminently in the Barnes mode, showing the same lean precision and rigor, if at a much larger scale. But what swung the decision in its favor, and about which Mr. Arteaga spoke with the most enthusiasm, was the way they changed the south entrance so you approach through a garden, “a simple and beautiful gesture” that puts you in the presence of art before you set foot in the museum; in all of this ran a spirit of “poetry,” a word that could not be easily applied to many of the other submissions. The museum made the correct choice.

Of course, this preliminary concept will be subjected to many changes in the years ahead. Will it succeed? Time will tell. But in one respect the Dallas Museum of Art has already triumphed, and that is in the novel and ingenious way it found its architect, something from which the world can learn much.