

# Columbus Conversations and Exhibition Conversations

GEORGE TOWERS AND RICHARD MCCOY

Columbus, Indiana is known for its modern architecture and for fostering a vibrant spirit of community. This summer, Columbus Conversations, a new series of local public forums, provided an opportunity for residents to help articulate the architecture of their community's distinctive identity. Columbus Conversations grew out of the partnership between Indiana University - Purdue University Columbus (IUPUC) and Columbus' nationally-renowned facility for older adults, the Mill Race Center (MRC). Every spring, IUPUC and the MRC organize the Great Decisions foreign policy discussions for the Columbus community and, every spring, participants ask to keep their conversations going into the summer and fall. Their enthusiasm led IUPUC and the MRC to envision Columbus Conversations. The Indiana University Council for Regional Engagement and Economic Development championed the idea with an Innovate Indiana grant.

Columbus Conversations topics resonate with local relevance. For example, IUPUC faculty have shared their community-serving scholarly work on women immigrants' experience in Columbus; the local dimensions of the opioid epidemic; and, identifying Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) through brain science. On behalf of the MRC, Executive Director Dan Mustard led a timely discussion on the state of senior services in Indiana. The series concluded by celebrating the 25th anniversary of IUPUC's student literary magazine, Talking Leaves, with prose and poetry readings by current and former students.

Columbus Conversations also hosted a dialogue with Richard McCoy, the Founding Director of Landmark Columbus Foundation. Established in 2015 with support from the Heritage Fund - The Community Foundation of Bartholomew County, Landmark Columbus Foundation is dedicated to furthering the vision

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**Love Letter to The Crump by Borderless Studio for Exhibit Columbus.** Photo credit: Andrew Towers

of J. Irwin Miller, Columbus' legendary leading citizen. Miller, who transformed Columbus-based Cummins Diesel from an unprofitable business into a Fortune 500 company, dedicated a portion of his philanthropy to making Columbus the best community of its size in the country. He and his wife Xenia understood that the settings for public interaction – schools, main streets, churches, and parks – model our expectations and aspirations for community life. Therefore, they commissioned thoughtful architect, landscape architects, and artists to evoke a modern spirit of progres-

sivism. In that tradition, Landmark Columbus extends architecture's visible expression into a vision of community, preserving the vitality of the architectural masterpieces that have made Columbus famous.

Richard shared this mission with Columbus Conversations through a preview of this year's Exhibit Columbus, his organization's annual exploration of architecture, art, and design. In even-numbered years, Exhibit Columbus is a symposium that attracts thought leaders from around the world



to reflect upon the town's unique relationship between architecture and community. In odd-numbered years, the Exhibit takes physical form. Last year, teams from design studios, university architecture programs, and local high schools interwove 18 projects amongst downtown's modernist monuments. The installations were part of the community's fabric through December 1.

For Columbus Conversations, Richard related the installations to the theme, "Good Design and the Community," the title of the National Building Museum's 1986 exhibition in Miller's honor. Each project is a collaborative accomplishment rooted in conversation. For example, Playscape, developed by Associate Professor Sean Ahlquist and his colleagues in the University of Michigan's Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, is designed to engage those with ASD. Informed by inter-disciplinary research and the involvement of the ASD community, the Ahlquist's team combined textured surfaces and lighting in a self-contained space that redirects the isolating hyper-awareness associated with ASD towards collaboration. Located immediately outside the entrance to The Commons, an indoor public park that floods the senses with the sights and sounds of Jean Tinguely's giant Rube Goldberg machine / sculpture Chaos I and a Jack-and-the-Beanstalk-esque kids climber designed by Spencer Luckey, Playscape invites playful communication between those with ASD and people who are not on the autism spectrum.

The designers' commitment to reaching out to the community is reciprocated by residents sharing their ideas. A wonderful example is provided by Borderless Studio's Love Letter to The Crump, which is connected to The Crump Theater, an 1889 opera house that remains unrestored, unused, and endangered. A beloved local landmark, the Crump's state of disrepair is much lamented in Columbus. Paola Aguirre Serrano and her associates at Borderless Studio engaged the issues of remembrance and place by holding workshops to



**Love Letter to The Crump by Borderless Studio for Exhibit Columbus.** Photo credit: Andrew Towers

collect residents' memories of and hopes for The Crump. They then represented these community sentiments with a pattern of graphic designs that repeats to fill an enormous curtain. Staged against The Crump's large exterior wall facing incoming downtown traffic, the Love Letter declares that through the will of the community, the curtain will be pulled back and the show will go on. There are sixteen other installations to explore in the exhibition, and two exhibition guides, one that is geared towards families, and a mobile app that will allow users to explore the theme of this year's exhibition. The exhibition and the guides are provided free to everyone thanks to the generosity of many in Columbus and beyond.

Columbus Conversations is intended as an educational service for the community. The philosophical vision and the physical articulation of Exhibit Columbus remind us that conversations are also mutually instructive. As Exhibit Columbus is a dialogue that re-envisions and re-constructs Columbus' identity through architecture, we hope that Columbus Conversations can contribute to continuing the city's commitment to civic-minded collaboration for the benefit of the community.