

# COLUMBUS'S NEW WORLD

*Ed Stocker* REPORTING FROM *Columbus, Indiana*: This Columbus (not its Ohio namesake) has a population of 45,000 and one of the best line-ups of modernist architecture in the world. But as the city searches for a future in which everybody benefits from good design, could Columbus be about to discover a new horizon? PHOTOGRAPHER *Jesse Chehak*



St Peter's Lutheran Church, designed by Gunnar Birkerts, 1988

Ed Stocker has been MONOCLE's New York bureau chief since 2014; before that he was a correspondent for the magazine based in Buenos Aires. Over the years he has gained an appreciation of the US's diverse architecture, from arts and crafts in southern California to Detroit's art deco skyscrapers. He has covered everything from the presidential campaign to the border fence in Nogales, interviewed musician and artist Laurie Anderson and filmed the development at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. He has also edited Monocle Travel Guides for New York, Miami and Los Angeles – and is at work on the forthcoming San Francisco edition.

Mention the city of Columbus and most will assume that you mean the Ohio metropolis, home to one of the largest universities in the US and with a population close to the seven-digit mark – not the Columbus located in the depths of southern Indiana. This is a much smaller community surrounded by cornfields and an hour's drive from the nearest airport – although it's at least bigger than a third Columbus in Michigan.

The Midwest, that expansive stretch of plain between the Appalachians and Rockies, gets a bad rap, derided by coastal sophisticates as a cultural desert. But Columbus, Indiana, amounts to much more than any preconception – and much more than the sign that proudly marks it out as the hometown of current vice-president Mike Pence. This Columbus has something the others don't: some of the finest examples of modern architecture anywhere in the US. Not bad for a town of 45,000.

Pulling up at the Inn at Irwin Gardens in the centre of a miniscule downtown district feels like

went on to become a triumph of the industrial age, a multi-national engine-maker that today employs thousands of people in Columbus alone. Cummins continues to be the lifeblood of the community in this company town and none of its CEOs are more revered than the late J Irwin Miller, great-nephew of WG Irwin. Miller grew up in this same house and started Cummins' architecture programme, which offered to pay the design fees for new modernist buildings, helping bring international talent to the Indiana community. But he was not the last of the lineage to inhabit the house: Clementine Miller-Tangeman, known to her friends as Clemmie, lived here until her death in 1996.

Going from the Inn to the corner of Columbus's high street Washington Avenue, there is an urgent and unmistakable call for Clemmie ringing through the air. Is this some sort of seance? Not quite. Clemmie turns out to be a boisterous 15-month-old golden retriever owned by gift-shop owners Jeff Baker and John Pickett. Baker has a cheeky glint

## Indiana is a pious place where people's identity is often marked by the congregation to which they belong

encountering one of those millionaire-row piles from a wealthy Detroit enclave or New York's Upper East Side. A red-brick Edwardian mansion with a grandiose wrought-iron gate and sculpted gardens inspired by classical antiquity, it predates any of the nearby mid-century offerings by about 50 years. "My husband is a dreamer," says co-owner Jessica Stevens. She is dressed casually but a formal gown would be more in keeping with the museum-like feel of the interior. It's all wood panelling and laced tablecloths – a throwback to Victorian styling that has changed little since the last remodelling in 1910. Jessica's husband convinced her that they should buy the property and turn it into a B&B despite neither of them having any experience in hospitality. Since 2010 the former residence has been just that.

Stevens calls the house "part of the community" and its outsized importance – it was a former home to the town's most powerful and influential clan – gets to the heart of what this place is all about. Originally inhabited by the Irwin family, it was their chauffeur and mechanic Clessie Lyle Cummins who came up with the blueprint for a diesel engine. And it was WG Irwin – a lifelong bachelor whose top-floor room can now be booked at the B&B – who injected the money to fund it.

Although Cummins frittered away his money, the company he founded – also called Cummins –

in his eye. Within minutes he's explained that Clemmie is named after Clementine (who was a good friend of theirs) and spilled the beans on a secret room at the Inn. He also mentions a notorious shower in the WG Irwin suite that's known as the "rib cage", which has wraparound metal bars with multiple showerheads that spray water in every direction. "No wonder he remained a bachelor all his life with a shower like that," he says, smiling.

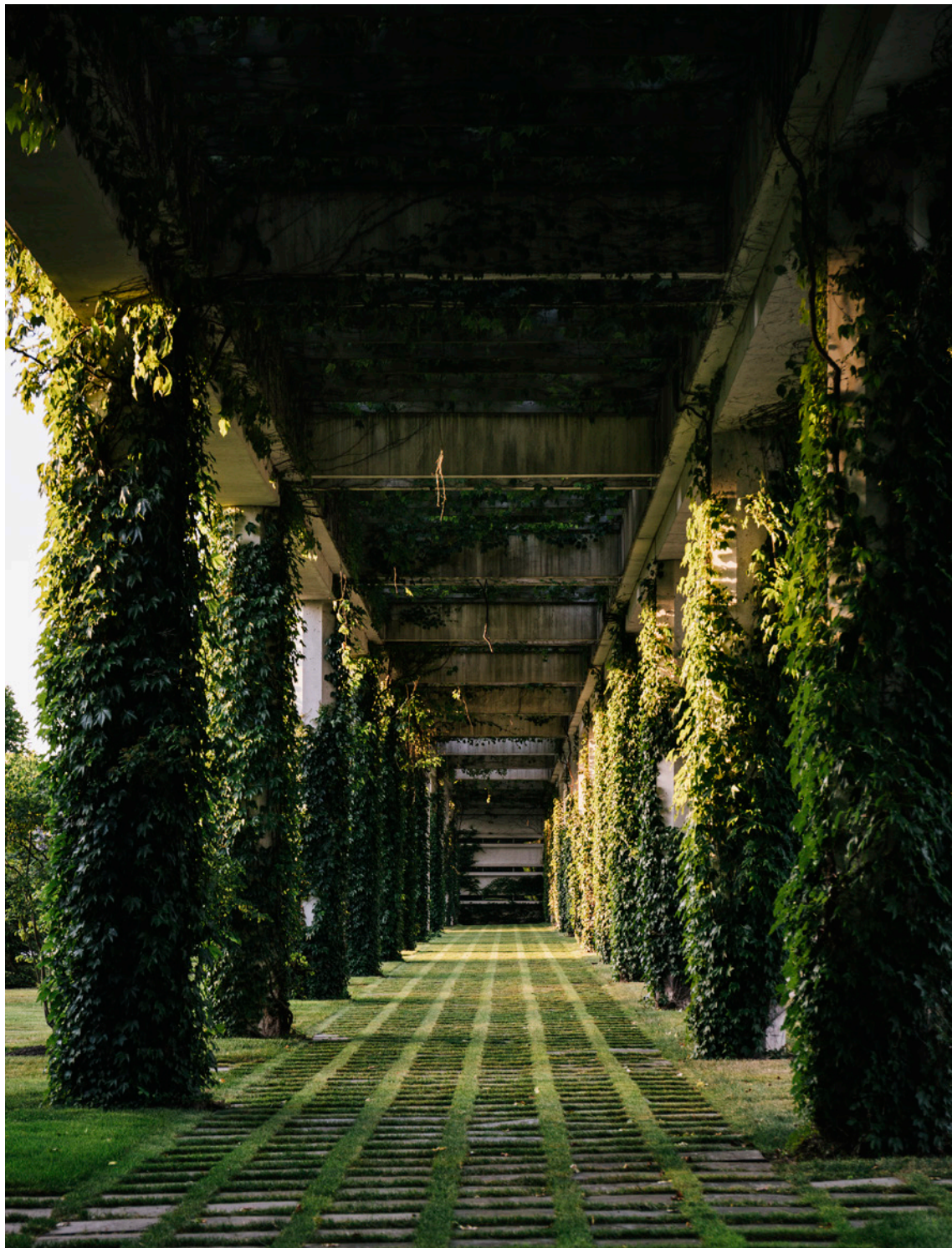
J Irwin Miller has left a stamp on this community and is held in the sort of deferential reverence usually reserved for the British aristocracy. Everyone seems to have an anecdote about "Mr Miller" – title obligatory – and his vision for transforming what had long been a sleepy town.

The first modernist building in Columbus – and thought to be the first in the US – was erected before Cummins initiated its architecture programme. But the Cummins family privately funded the construction of the First Christian Church because they needed a larger church to attend as the town grew. Indiana is a pious place where people's identity is often marked by the congregation to which they belong; many of the town's modern landmarks are churches. This one is a sand-coloured edifice with a tower featuring an off-centre clock. It was designed by Finnish-born Eliel Saarinen and his son Eero and, in January 1941, a year before completion,



First Baptist Church interior by prolific architect Harry Weese, 1965





Cummins Corporate Office Building by Kevin Roach



Italianate gardens at the Inn at Irwin Gardens, completed in 1913 and inspired by Pompeii



## Columbus has its midwestern oddities but the sophistication of its design is undeniable

*Time* called it “the costliest modern church in the world, planned by Europe’s most modern architect”. At the time Columbus had a population of just under 12,000. Eliel didn’t need to travel far; he was based just outside Detroit at the time.

Eero would become prolific in the town, working on a home north of downtown – one of the few residences he designed – for a newly married J Irwin Miller in 1957. A flat-roofed open-plan modernist structure, the highlight is the interior design by Alexander Girard, who sprinkles the place with colour and intense detail, from the wallpaper backing of the bookcase to the tulip-stemmed round dining table that once had a water feature in the middle. It was also the Saarinen-Girard combination that was responsible for the spiked exterior and minimalist, oculus-lit interiors of the North Christian Church, as well as the Irwin Union Bank downtown.

Other highlights include the 1969 red-brick-block library by I M Pei (get someone to show you the 30 or so ways it lines up with and complements the First Christian Church opposite) and the ivy-clad Cummins Corporate Office Building by Kevin Roach, completed in 1984.

Columbus has its midwestern oddities. You can have breakfast on the edge of Columbus’s municipal air strip at Hangar 5 (Pilot pancakes or an Airbus breakfast anyone?) or head to Exit 76 Antique Mall, a sort of Wal-Mart for collectables stewarded by Denise Pence, sister-in-law of the veep (her mantra is “Recycle. Reuse. Repurpose”). But the sophistication of Columbus’s design is undeniable. And the architecture initiatives – backed by Cummins or otherwise – were always civic-orientated, meaning that the buildings haven’t become empty shells. On a weekday evening the faithful trickle into the First Lutheran Church and ice skaters turn up to twirl at the 1958 Hamilton Center, designed as a sort of midwestern-meets-Switzerland chalet by Harry Weese, another prolific Columbus architect.

At Fire Station #4 in the eastern part of town, a group of firemen are snacking and chatting. When we visit, a young blonde-haired man named Derrick Chitwood offers his services as a guide. He points out that the 1967 building by Robert Venturi doesn’t contain any right angles, that its shape is actually a number four on its side and that there are two black bricks lodged in the façade, a signature move from the architect. “If people didn’t come here and take photos I would never have known that this was a famous building,” he says. Our interview is cut short, however, when the station’s bell starts to sound.

There is, of course, a danger that Columbus will forever be looking back at its rich architectural legacy, stuck in a sort of historical stasis. This is exactly what Richard McCoy, an out-of-towner who fell in love with Columbus and its buildings, is looking to avoid. Come late August, he and his team will launch the exhibition leg of Exhibit Columbus (there was an initial symposium in 2016), an idea several years in gestation that takes the town’s modern buildings as a point of inspiration and introspection and asks designers to create a series of temporary installations that will transform Columbus for three months. “What we said when we started was, ‘Columbus is known for what it did, not what it’s doing,’” says McCoy, sat in his office just off Washington, back in downtown.

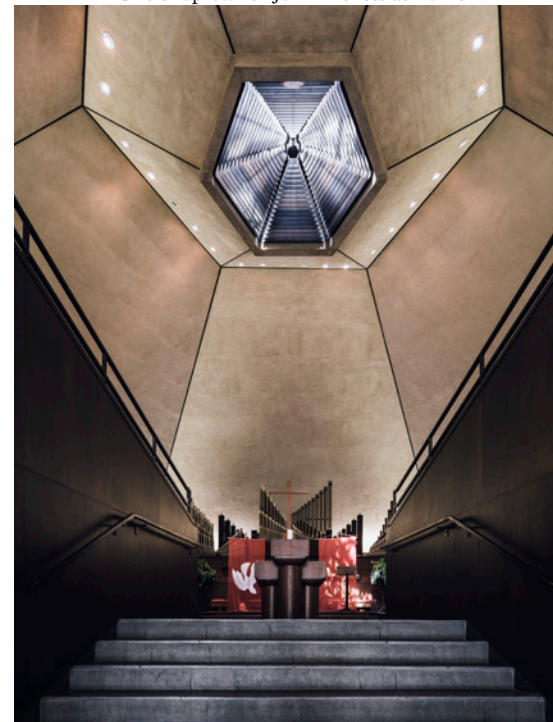
There will be 18 installations across town, six of them from regional universities, including a conical tent-like structure – modelled on the traditional home of the Myaamia people, a Native American tribe who once occupied this land – from Wisconsin’s Studio Indigenous, which will be located next to the First Christian Church. There will also be a series of interventions along Washington Street, including an alley “playhouse” and mini-museum “Stairway to Columbus”, which will change contents every week and will be accessed via an external stairway and viewed through an open window.



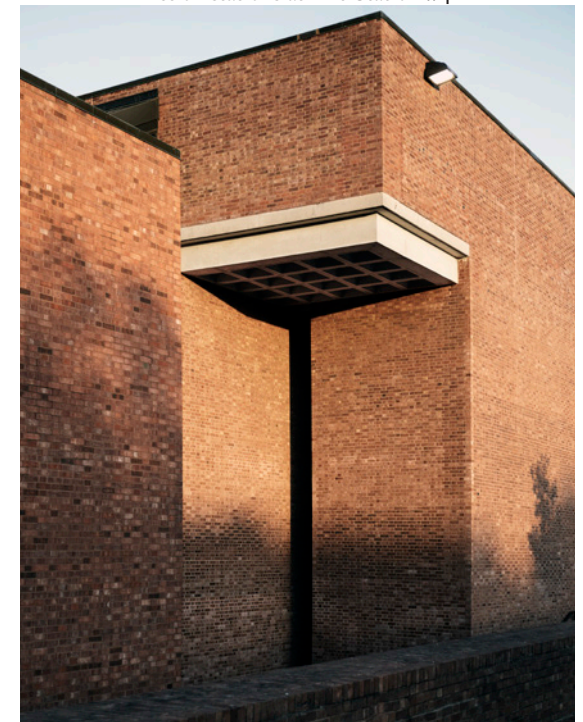
Gift-shop owner John Pickett at home



Action stations at Fire Station #4



North Christian Church’s divine interiors



Cleo Rogers Memorial Library by IM Pei





First Christian Church by Eliel Saarinen and son Eero

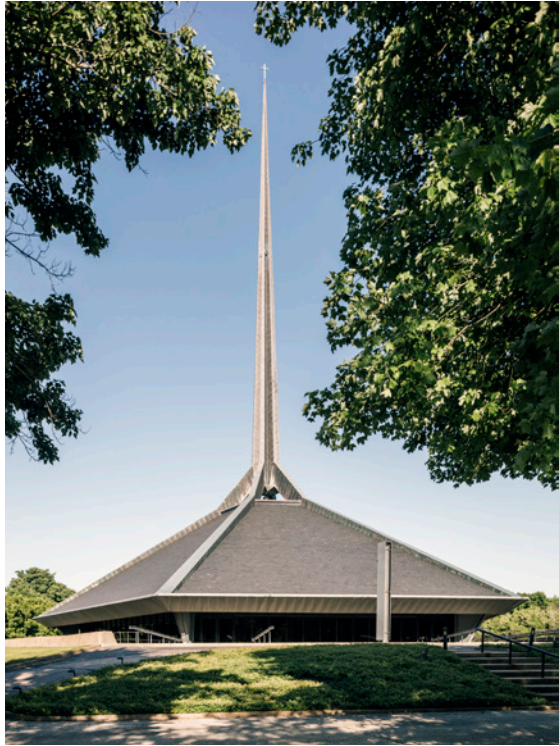


Bartholomew County Veterans Memorial, built from limestone in 1997





Exhibit Columbus's Richard McCoy



North Christian Church making its point



Miller House, designed by Eero Saarinen, Alexander Girard and Dan Kiley



Tea room at The Inn at Irwin Gardens



Exhibit curator T Kelly Wilson

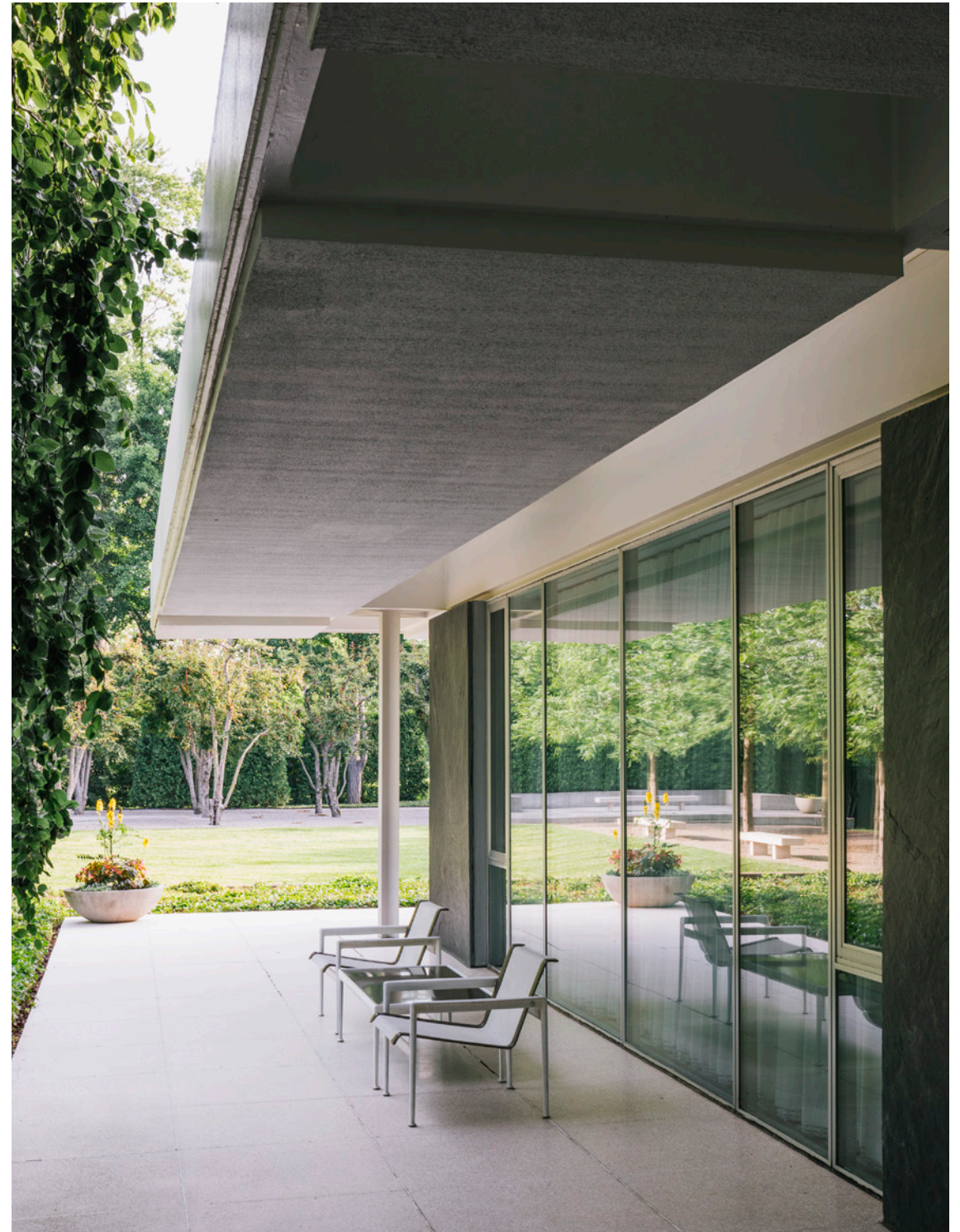


Downtown Columbus





Miller House, completed in 1957



Terrace seating outside the Miller House





Purdue Polytechnic Columbus

## ‘This town is small enough to act like a family. It’s a very powerful thing’

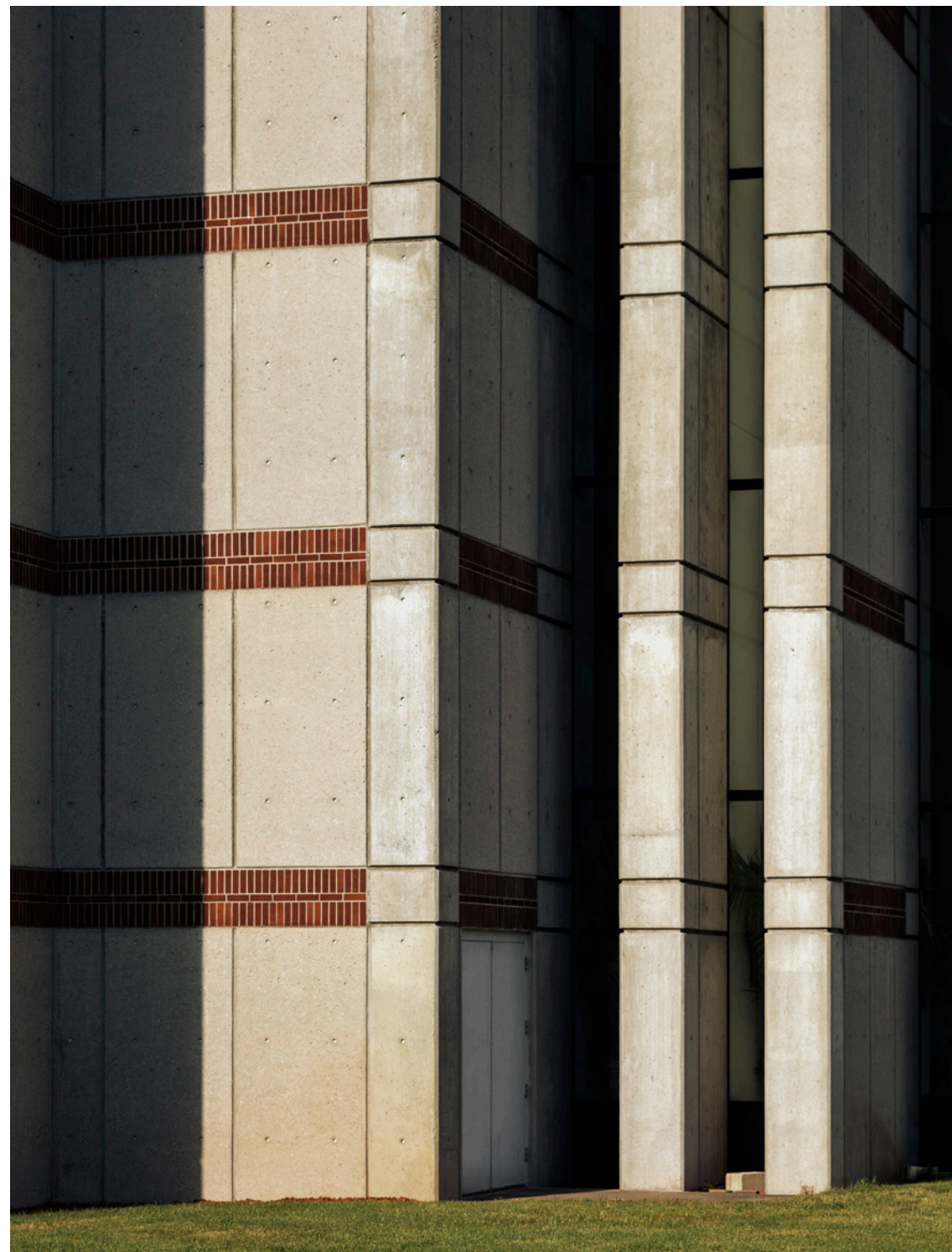
Overseeing the Washington Street installations is furniture designer, artist and another transplant Jonathan Nesci, who is sat next to McCoy. His goal for Exhibit is bold. “My dream is that we introduce the town to outside talent and to its own legacy,” he says. McCoy sees it differently. He says that as a child growing up in Indiana he couldn’t wait to get away. Now he wants to encourage people to stay and thrive. “Think about why Cummins introduced the programme,” he says of the fund, established to help lure talent to Columbus through gleaming schools and fire stations. “They believed that architecture affects the way we live and our aspirations.”

The Exhibit team is taking something of a risk, banking on attracting people to a place that isn’t particularly easy to get to. But McCoy believes that Columbus could be the “Marfa of the Midwest”, saying that travel to southern Indiana is far easier than getting to the tiny arts community in western Texas. But what’s clear is that Exhibit is trying to shake up a community that, if not resting on its laurels, has been content with its lot.

But it’s by no means the sole instigator of change. Alongside a total refresh of Columbus’s Arts Council, the University of Indiana has also got in on the act, recently announcing that it would bring

a master’s degree in architecture to town for the first time in 2018. The programme will be overseen by T Kelly Wilson – also part of the Exhibit curatorial team – who divides his time between Dumbo in Brooklyn and Columbus. A foppish-haired, yellow-rimmed-spectacle-wearing academic, he talks to us from the university’s Center for Art + Design next to mock-ups of some of the Exhibit installations. He says that the course is “using the city as a backdrop for launching the future” and that it will attract new attention. “No one gets to create a programme from scratch any more,” he adds. “And no one gets to do it in a city. This town is small enough to act like a family and pull resources together. It’s a very powerful thing.”

So what does the figurehead of the community make of all this disruption to the status quo? Columbus mayor Jim Lienhoop proves tough to track down because his daughter is getting married imminently and it’s causing quite the stir. Over at Dell Brothers – a menswear shop that has been family owned for 101 years and sits directly opposite Baker’s Fine Gifts – customers on first-name basis with the Dells are already trickling in to buy new ties or get quick alterations to suits. As for Lienhoop, he finds time to talk to us at city hall. It’s an arresting 1981 edifice from Skidmore,



Detail of St Peter’s Lutheran Church





Columbus, home of Michael (as he's known here) Pence

Owings & Merrill, which features brick wings – to some, embracing arms – set in front of a glass-dominated façade. “My first reaction was, ‘Are you serious?’” he says when asked about the premise of Exhibit. A straight-shooting Hoosier – as Indiana residents are known – he is what many residents refer to as a no-nonsense Republican, the sort that used to exist before Trump came along and changed the rules of engagement. “But one of Mr Miller’s precepts was change,” he adds. “You have to be prepared for that.”

Lienhoop isn’t interested in presenting some sort of utopian vision of his city, whose architecture forms the backdrop of *Columbus*, the film that premiered at Sundance this year and will be released in the US in August. He talks about the need for architecture to be important to everyone, even in the poorer eastern part of town. He also recognises the dual challenges of local opioid abuse and the need to diversify an economy that is reliant on the clout of Cummins and other automotive players. He suggests that Exhibit is a voyage into the unknown but says that it has the potential to double the number of annual tourists to Columbus (currently about 10,000 people come for the architectural tours each year). “We’re not the easiest

place to get to,” he says. “There’s no mountain or shore. Nature didn’t bless us so the built environment needs to be the draw.”

There are already signs of the reinvigoration of that environment. And it’s not just the individual backers of Exhibit who are taking a gamble on their town’s future. It’s also the likes of Tony Moravec, a Tesla-driving, Trump-touting businessman with a background in pharmaceuticals. He decided to buy Zaharakos, a failing ice-cream parlour (and reportedly where J Irwin Miller met his wife) that had been in town since 1900. He spent more than \$3m (£2.6m) of his own money on an 18-month restoration that has returned the space to its former gilded glory. More recently he’s helped restore a former pump house and turn it into a craft-brew pub on the edge of the river; he is also thinking about restoring the art deco-style Crump Theatre with its prominent neon marquee.

The focus may be turn-of-the-century rather than modernist buildings but the idea is the same. “I firmly believe in Mr Miller’s concept of leaving something of value to future generations,” says Moravec. If the architects of Columbus’s future are successful, there may be a lot more of that to come. — (M)