

Exhibit Columbus: Context, Precedent, and Prototype

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How can an architectural exhibition speak to ideas of between-ness? How can a temporal event forever transform the understanding of a place? In 2014, along with a small talented team, we started working on a project with the goal to transform and heighten awareness of the architectural legacy of Columbus, Indiana, through the production of contemporary architecture and design. In this paper, we will describe Exhibit Columbus' curatorial premises of dialogue and context through the lens of our multiple roles: as members of the steering committee that defined its curatorial vision, as university installation coordinators who hope to impact architecture education in the Midwest, faculty research, and thoughts on pedagogy, and finally as instructor for a design-build studio.

EXHIBIT COLUMBUS OVERVIEW

Exhibit Columbus is an annual event that alternates between a symposium and an exhibition of new built work. The three goals are:

1. to provide an innovative vehicle for the production of knowledge and the exchange of information,
2. to promote the advancement of contemporary design and fabrication,
3. to build a community of designers, fabricators, artists, and architecture schools that come together to showcase the state of design in the region.

Exhibit Columbus launched with the "Foundations and Futures" symposium in September 2016, which brought together scholars, designers, and community members to explore the past, present, and future of architecture in Columbus. This year, the 2017 exhibition has 18 projects divided into five parts:

- Miller Prize Installations: Five projects were constructed in dialogue with national historic landmark sites along 5th Street- Aranda\

Lasch, Plan B Architecture & Urbanism, Oyler Wu Collaborative, studio:indigenous, and IKD.

- Washington Street installations: Five international design galleries commissioned designers to add interventions that would connect emerging trends in design to the commercial core- Studio Formafantasma, Pettersen & Hein, Productora, Cody Hoyt, and Snarkitecture

- University Installations: Six Midwest universities built prototypes beside Central Middle School and North Christian church- Ball State University, College of Architecture and Planning; The Ohio State University, Austin E. Knowlton School of Architecture; University of Cincinnati, School of Architecture and Interior Design; University of Kentucky, College of Design, School of Architecture; University of Michigan, Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning,

- High School Installations: Local students did a design-build at the historic post office.

- Graphics and Signage- Rick Valicenti of Thirst developed the branding and graphics in digital and print media at the scale of the book, website, and wayfinding.

This project connects to the theme of 'between proximate and remote' through an attention to context, precedent, and prototype. Each of these three concepts were drivers for the curatorial premise as well as the pedagogy of the design-build studio. While context can be viewed as simply the site, it should be understood in a multiplicity of ways including its historical, social, political settings (past, present, and future), how and why it was made, and its place in the greater arena of art and architecture in the city of Columbus. Precedent is a method of listening and extracting strategies. Prototype speculates somewhere between building and temporary structures: it is at once the immediate experience of an installation yet speaks to the idea of a prototype by projecting how and what we might build in a place.

COLUMBUS AS CONTEXT

What is the context of Columbus? Columbus (pop. 46,000) is home to seven modern buildings that have been designated National Historic Landmarks, one of which is the revolutionary First Christian



Figure 1: Cleo Rogers Memorial Library by I.M. Pei with reflection of North Christian Church by Eliel Saarinen, photo by Hadley Fruits

Church designed by Eliel Saarinen, arguably the first modern church structure in the new world. The city also boasts seven buildings designed by four different Pritzker Prize winners (Kevin Roche, 1982; I.M. Pei, 1983; Richard Meier, 1984; and Robert Venturi of Venturi Scott Brown Architects, 1991), as well as sixty other notable modern buildings and landscapes by architects such as Deborah Berke, Harry Weese, Cesar Pelli, Gunnar Birkerts, and Stanley Saitowitz. In addition, the city is adorned by major pieces of public art such as Large Arch by Henry Moore, Chaos I by Jean Tinguely and Exploded Engine by Rudolph de Harak. Charles and Ray Eames designed their Aluminum Group Lounge Chair in 1958 for the Miller House and Garden by Eero Saarinen, Alexander Girard, and Dan Kiley.

J. Irwin Miller, CEO of Cummins Inc., was profoundly influential on the city's mid-century architectural renaissance. In response to a poorly designed school, Miller's oft-repeated maxim "nothing is more expensive than mediocrity" led to the Cummins Foundation Architecture Program. The Foundation pays the design portion of the architecture fees if the client picks from a select list of

architects). (1) Another of his favorite quotations, this from the Roman historian Tacitus, "The good life is one lived in praiseworthy competition with one's ancestors," became a touchstone for the Exhibit Columbus project. (2) The installations celebrate Columbus' design heritage, while making it relevant to new audiences.

Columbus has also been a backdrop for changes in the discourse. Through the influence of the Saarinens, Columbus became a living laboratory for the Arts & Crafts education practiced at Cranbrook, as opposed to the Bauhaus legacy in the US that Mies Van Der Rohe established in built form on the IIT campus in 1938. Even the debate between modernism and postmodernism had an early start in Columbus. In 1951, Robert Venturi worked for Eero Saarinen on the GM Technical Center in Dearborn. In 1967, Venturi finished one of his earliest projects, Fire Station 4— hopefully Columbus' next National Historic Landmark. This humble decorated shed questioned the dogma of the modern movement.

"The term precedent . . . refers to a representation of the knowledge about a past design in a form that makes it applicable or 'reusable', in new, but similar problem situations." (3) In Columbus, the discipline progresses by finding alternative ways of producing architecture through the application of precedent: the combination



Figure 2: Inscribed, by Austin E. Knowlton School of Architecture, The Ohio State University, photo by Hadley Fruits

of historical legacy with emerging design. Critical design is an inquiry that brings forth ideas of others by drawing out their reasoning and questioning. This provides insights into one's own design methods and helps build mutual understandings as well as setting forth unexpected ways of constructing space. It is about learning to suspend judgment that allows for critical listening and deeper understanding. The goal of dialogue is to understand your place in the world and to advocate for new ideas while simultaneously trying to presence something which is not there, but is deeply felt.

An early precedent for Exhibit Columbus is Pei's Cleo Rogers Memorial Library, completed 1969, which developed through a deep understanding of its context. Pei respectfully pulled back the library from Saarinen's First Christian Church across 5th street, thus creating a shared plaza. Further there are alignments, material responses, and framed views which make these two buildings seem to be in dialogue with each other rather than merely adjacent. This is the curatorial premise of Exhibit Columbus: to advocate for new projects that simultaneously resonate with what is already there. These are intended to provide a new awareness and interpretation of the site via a response with the formal and intellectual ideas found within the context.

For example, Oyler Wu's project The Exchange "defines a new public space on the site by completing the geometries implied by the three canopies, legacies of Irwin Conference Center's history as a drive-up bank." (4) It further reinterprets the work of Saarinen through its attention to the use of lightness at moments of structure.

Snarkitecture's Washington street installation, Playhouse, reimagines an alleyway between the adjacent 3-story buildings. Using forced perspective to create the illusion of unexpected depth, it has become a backdrop for play through its use of scale, enclosure, and material.

IKD's Conversation Plinth is a series of shifting timber discs which spiral up to an elevated hangout space. It is inspired by the conversation pit in the Miller House and the plinth under Henry Moore's Large Arch, which shares the library plaza. New programs have been developed such as fashion shows and dog parades, which shows an understanding of the potential of the space beyond what the community might have imagined before.

These temporary installations and the other Exhibit Columbus projects, in their response to context, will forever transform the discourse, memories, and understanding of each of these landmark sites. Influenced by Andrew Zago's reference to T.S. Eliot's essay 'Tradition and Individual Talent', we consider any new work that is in dialogue with the past will alter the way the past is seen. (5) Eliot speaks of "perception, not only of the pastness of past but its presence" in the present. (6) We see the past as streaming, the present is a moment projecting to the future.

Prototypes exist somewhere between building and temporary structure. John Enright writes in response to Sylvia Lavin: "A prototype differentiates itself as an incomplete or experimental fragment of a thing, conveniently disembodied itself from the completed work, or even a completed conceptual agenda. A prototype has built in to its essence the fact that it may not work, it has bugs, it needs to be revised, it is a work in process." (7) In addition, prototypes carry with it the objective to connect contemporary designers with local fabricators and to consider the role of advanced manufacturing and new construction materials. This aspires to be a lasting impact of Exhibit Columbus in the form of shared knowledge, working relationships, and development of a contemporary design community.

For example, IKD is collaborating with the Indiana Hardwood and Lumbermen's Association to develop cross-laminated timber sourced from local hardwood by-products typically used to make pallets. This has the potential to create a new Indiana industry that might compete with northwest softwood production. In 2017, the project team received a \$250,000 US Forest Service Wood innovations grant towards this research. "Indiana's largest cash crop is hardwood, but over 55% of each log processed is of low value. The idea is that low-value hardwood, such as grade 3 common oak, maple, and ash, can be used to create high-value Cross Laminated Timber (CLT), which can then be used in commercial applications." (8)

UNIVERSITY INSTALLATIONS OVERVIEW

In addition to grappling with these ideas as members of the steering committee, we worked through them as University Installation coordinators. The University Installations design brief prompts students to consider context and precedent while responding to contemporary discourse. There is an interest in advanced manufacturing and possible trajectories of the discipline. For students, applied research can be both a process and a hinge between the academic and the professional.

With an interest in speculating on the way in which we might build, the Ohio State University team led by Michael Baumberger



Figure 3: Alchemy by School of Architecture and Interior Design, University of Cincinnati, photo by Hadley Fruits

developed large carbon fiber reinforced ABS-composite thermo-plastic panels using one of the Midwest's largest 3D printers. Scripted drawings translate procedural work from artists such as Sol Lewitt, Bridget Riley and Casey Reas into a CNC milled plywood frame.

Alternatively, the University of Cincinnati team led by Terry Boling started by visiting industries local to Cincinnati and Columbus, and explored ways, as Boling notes, "to exploit the embodied energy of industrial waste, reclaimed material, and materials that did not meet quality control and would otherwise end up in a landfill."⁽⁹⁾ Students developed tectonic systems for limestone offcuts, salvaged wood, Rookwood cast off tile, and Kroon copper punchouts.

The design by University of Michigan led by Mick Kennedy emerged from "a series of details that embody the historic legacy and current and latent potential of the distributed networks of design and fabrication of both industry and agriculture in the Great Lakes / Midwest Region."⁽¹⁰⁾ Each student developed an expertise with a tool or

technique and moved from digital to assembly using an innovative series of jigs and forms to fabricate the piece.

49262- BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

These ideas came into sharper focus again as Joshua led a design-build studio at Ball State University that emphasized critical dialogue, yielding the design of 49262. It is important to have a conversation that fosters an understanding of how the architecture came to be, how it performs in everyday experiences, and its relationship to a broad context. Recognizing that critical dialogue is a two-part process of inquiry and advocacy, the students inspected, probed, questioned, and listened to the existing landscape and, through reflection, developed insights and arguments for their interventions. The project began by considering the values and relationships between perception and fabrication, computational materiality and material tolerances, and the impressive physical context of Columbus and its relationship to the architectural discourse.

Students found connections across time and space between the existing architecture and advocated for proposals that looked to the



Figure 4: 49262 by College of Architecture and Planning, Ball State University photo by Hadley Fruits



Figure 5: 49262 by Dept of Architecture, Ball State University photo by Hadley Fruits

future. Responding to local landmark buildings, form and material investigations began to focus on spatial effects produced by moiré and color. Discussions led to observations about the town's many towers and campaniles and their relationship to the surrounding public squares and spaces. 49262, named for the amount of holes in the skin, is designed to respect and reference the frequent verticality within the city. Made of laser cut perforated sheet metal over a milled plywood frame, the perforations grow in size and density as the height increases. The ruled surface object blurs and then fades into the sky, creating a gradient between material and space. Perforated metal skin was laser cut by a local HVAC shop (the first public art project they had worked on), and a custom hot rod shop consulted on and completed the paint job.

In between near and far: We hope that Columbus can be used as a living example on how one small city can change perceptions and the trajectories of a region. If we consider the five states participating in Exhibit Columbus (Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Kentucky, and Illinois) as a country, it would be of equal size and population as Spain, a recognized distinct culture and place known for its food, architecture and landscape. Spain is the 13th largest world economy based on GDP. (11) If the Midwest were a country, it would be the 8th largest economy in the world, twice the GDP of Spain. In addition, 50% of the US population is linked by a network of highways, trains, and waterways within 500 miles of Columbus. Imagine the educational impact that this could have. Imagine the symbiotic benefits to Columbus and the region.

This type of investment cannot be underestimated in terms of the lasting difference it can make: building the design scene here, developing alternate practices, connecting to local manufacturers that are tooling up in response. Design thinking and mass customization cannot easily be outsourced: the hope is that Exhibit Columbus might act as a catalyst for change in how we educate, design, and build the Midwest as a center for design thinking.

ENDNOTES

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