How to Edit a Building: Fieldnotes from the North American Brasilia[1]

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This article reports on my recent ethnographic interactions in Columbus, Indiana, a unique Midwestern American city that has been ranked sixth in the nation 'for architectural innovation and design' by the American Institute of Architects, just after New York, Boston, Washington D.C., Chicago and San Francisco. After briefly outlining my methods, discussing the history of Columbus and contextualizing the design-oriented Exhibit Columbus event, I focus on interview, archival, digital and participant observation data around one Columbus site: *Entry Portal*. An interactive exhibit designed by Daniel Luis Martinez and Etien Santiago of Columbus's own J. Irwin Miller Architecture Program, *Entry Portal* plays with the concepts of architectural durability, monumentality and approachability. Through its subtle modifications, the interactive exhibit seeks to improve on the accessibility of a canonical mid-century modern design. *Entry Portal*, I argue, offers an insightful case study into more egalitarian, accessible and anti-monumental design — what my ethnographic informants describe under the rubric of 'new civilities'.
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Introduction

This article reports on my recent ethnographic interactions in Columbus, Indiana, a unique Midwestern American city that has been ranked sixth in the nation 'for architectural innovation and design' by the American Institute of Architects, just after New York, Boston, Washington D.C., Chicago and San Francisco (Vinnitskaya 2012). After briefly outlining my methods, discussing the history of Columbus and contextualizing the design-oriented Exhibit Columbus event, I focus on interview, archival, digital, and participant observation data around one Columbus site: *Entry Portal*. An interactive exhibit designed by Daniel Luis Martinez and Etien Santiago of Columbus's own J. Irwin Miller Architecture Program, *Entry Portal* plays with the concepts of architectural durability, monumentality and approachability. Through its subtle modifications, the interactive exhibit seeks to improve on the accessibility of a canonical mid-century modern design. *Entry Portal*, I argue, offers an insightful case study into more egalitarian, accessible and anti-monumental design — what my ethnographic informants describe under the rubric of 'new civilities'.

I am currently working on a book project titled *Synecdoche, Columbus: An Anthropology of an Urban Architectural Experiment.*[2] My interlocuters are architects and designers, city officials and professors. Informants include Columbus natives, transplants and exiles. Collaborators range from educators, architectural students and preservationists, to city personnel, archivists, tourists and tour guides. As an urban anthropologist, participant

[2] This book project emerges, methodologically, out of the overlapping subfield domains of *urban anthropology* (Pardo and Prato 2018), the *anthropology of architecture* (Buchli 2013) and the *anthropology of design* (Clarke 2018).

observation in this context means studying alongside fellow design pilgrims in the architourist networks of this city that has been described in the national press as the 'Athens of the Prairie'. Sitting in coffee shops or walking through modernist buildings, parts of my ethnographic research program include conversing with architects, architectural historians and theorists, and discussing buildings, public art, urban planning and the design of everyday life.

Although research is still in progress, I am making use of a flexible array of multi-modal methods in conducting an anthropological study of a city. Since last spring, I have been making ethnographic excursions to Columbus to do participant observation among the architourist networks that are vital to the city's local economy, a practice that involves observing interactions between tour guides — the city's own applied architectural historians, myth-keepers, and walking compendiums of architectural facts (MacCannell 1976) — and the architecture aficionados who pilgrimage to visit this destination for progressive design. My research, beyond participant observation in the tourist circuits, and in addition to interviews with Columbus inhabitants, makes central use of extended observations at public city spaces, spaces that include plazas, gardens, parks, greenspaces, National Historic Landmark sites, public sculptures and interactive exhibits and installations.

Drawing on theories of *walking* and *the street* (de Certeau 1984; Lefebvre 2003: 18-21; Benjamin 2002), I take seriously the embodied, emplaced practice of walking as an effective and productive form of participant observation.[3] According to Young-Jin Kim (2018: 3), walking as an ethnographic method 'makes it possible to observe, describe and take photographs of the details, the rhythm and the flow of urban landscapes'. The human body, as Harvey Molotch (2018: 19) argues, is (among other things) a 'tool-being' and thus research instrument. Attending through walking to those spaces, urban theorist Kevin Lynch (1964: 47-48) categorises as the *nodes*, *paths* and *landmarks* of a city are a form of participative occupying of physical urban space. Walking allows for the gleaning of 'multisensory data' and direct participation in the everyday rhythms and movements of city life (Kim 2018: 6). As an applied method, walking encourages emplaced listening and the observation of nearby social interactions as they occur in their 'natural' urban settings.

In addition to in-depth interviews and participant observation via walking, dwelling in, and moving through public city spaces, I am also doing historical research in several relevant archives and have experimented with digital anthropological methods in observing how people interact with geolocation apps and contribute place-oriented auto-documentations of buildings, public artworks and other city structures to online media forums. The discipline of architecture, after all, has historically centred around the concept of imagery, modelling and two- and three-dimensional representation (Cache 1995; Osborne 2018: 49-77), a practice that extends into but reconfigures in the age of Instagram. But before getting to the content of some of these conversations and observations, be they digital, in-person, or archival, how did a small midwestern town come into its identity as an exemplary urban design showcase?

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[3] For a global comparison of this Midwestern modernist city with contrasting modernist philosophies of the street in Brazil, see Holston 1989: 101-144.

A Short History of Athens of the Prairie

Columbus has over the years cultivated a reputation as a design 'mecca' or 'utopia' given the high concentration of mid-century modern and contemporary structures built in the city. Eliel and Eero Saarinen, Charles Eames, Alexander Girard, Robert Venturi, Richard Meier, Kevin Roche, I.M. Pei, Harry Weese, Deborah Berke, Cesar Pelli, Dan Kiley, Henry Moore, Jean Tinguely, Dale Chihuly and many other high-profile architects, designers and avantgarde artists have contributed works in Columbus. Flagship architectural firms such as Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) and The Architects Collaborative (TAC) have developed projects in the city. Walter Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus, oversaw TAC in the United States after he fled Nazi Germany (MacCarthy 2019: 423-440; Hurley 2019: 91-112). Columbus has over time come to be known as an experimental architectural showcase for modern design, linking back indirectly to the Bauhaus through the work of protégées of Gropius and even Mies van der Rohe, a later Bauhaus director who also immigrated to the United States. Columbus has even more direct links to what some consider the American Bauhaus, Cranbrook Academy, an early hotbed for modernist design in the United States. Eliel Saarinen both designed campus buildings as well as served as the director of the school for some time in Bloomfield Hills, near Detroit. His son Eero, with Charles Eames and Harry Weese, also spent formational years at Cranbrook (Bruegmann 2010: 20-23) and went on to apply their experimental design methods in Columbus. With both striking similarities and differences to the modernist urban project in Brazil (Holston 1989), this North American Brasília has, given the above connections, developed as a vital node in the network of American modern design. Contemporary architects have vied for the privilege of contributing buildings in the area. 'To this day', writes architect James Polshek (2014: 89), 'architects covet the opportunity to build in Columbus'.

Behind the city's architectural pedigree is the story of one influential family's dedicated patronisation to the arts that worked together with their progressive values along the parameters of race, ethics, labour, gender and religion. Of considerable wealth, the Millers owned and developed the burgeoning Cummins Engines Company. Under J. Irwin and Xenia Miller's leadership, this corporate producer of industrial-grade, diesel engines grew to its current Fortune 500 status. J. Irwin, with his Oxford and Cambridge credentials, love for travel and cosmopolitan interests, introduced the town to names such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier. At his encouragement, the family's home congregation invited Finnish-American architect, Eliel Saarinen, to build what has been considered by architectural historians to be perhaps the earliest example of mid-century modern church architecture in North America. After First Christian Church, co-designed by father-son team Eliel and Eero Saarinen along with their Cranbrook associate Charles Eames, Cummins Engines initiated a novel program that linked architecture and industry from the beginning. The corporation covered the architectural fees for additional public building projects in the city, provided those projects chose from a pre-determined list of architects working in the modern idiom. With this urban design policy in place, Columbus began quickly after the 1940s to earn its reputation as the North American

Brasilia. Over time, mid-century modern and contemporary architecture developed into an acknowledged consensus, at least in downtown, public spaces.[4]

Columbus is indeed a city of architectural 'firsts'. Eliel Saarinen's First Christian, which set the town on its modern track, at the time of its completion in 1942 was considered 'the most modern church building in the world' (Gordon 1953). Architectural historians identify Eero Saarinen's Irwin Union Bank (now Conference Center) as the first iteration of a glass-walled, open-plan structure to reject the concept of American banks as defensive, gated-and-barred fortresses. James Polshek's Mental Health Center is perhaps the earliest example of a bridge building in America. Intended to symbolise a 'bridge' to psychological health, literally and figuratively, the building spans Haw Creek, a tributary of the White River, connecting the hospital campus with an idyllic park setting.

Mid-century modern and contemporary architecture is the most visible layer of this urban narrative. But these progressive architectural dispositions map onto ideological and political commitments. J. Irwin and Xenia Miller pushed for progressive labour policies within Cummins, some of the only industrial capitalists of their day to support unionisation within their workforce. They were outspoken advocates for Civil Rights, implementing racial equity at Cummins but also working to organise the March on Washington and other political demonstrations. Local folklore has it that when Martin Luther King Jr was imprisoned during the protests, it was the Millers who paid his bond fees. At one point, due to his political activism, President Nixon placed Miller on his blacklist of political enemies. The family shut down large industrial plants in South Africa to protest apartheid. Back in Columbus, they spearheaded a church plant, Eero Saarinen's futuristic North Christian, to afford women more leadership opportunities and promote equality among congregants. Not least among their progressive social, educational and political activities, Miller also served as the first lay president of the liberal, ecumenical and social justice-oriented National Council of Churches (O'Toole 2019: 313-319; Rentschler 2014).

My overarching ethnographic project, *Synecdoche, Columbus*, traces the development of this interlaced history of diesel engines, ethical capitalism, activist religion, political dissent, avant-garde public art and high modern architectural structures into the present. In this article, however, I focus on an ongoing chapter of the city's history, a biannual, design-oriented event central to the city's ethos and identity building called Exhibit Columbus.

Fieldwork Overview: Exhibit Columbus 2019

Historically and symbolically, cities have symbolised negativity and vice. Drawing on Niccolò Caldararo's (2017: 4) description, the urban, as a compromised social-spatial form, is 'detrimental to morals and spiritual ideals'. From another direction, recent studies of urban design and city planning in the United States have focused on the implicit racist and classist tenors of capitalist-driven urbanist policies (Stein 2019). Although not without its own

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[4] For overviews of Columbus's progressive architectural heritage and the formational role the Miller family played in that heritage, see Korab 1989; Rentschler 2014; Leukart 2016: 51-52; and Wissing 2016: 52-59.

problems, Columbus is aware of and works actively against such negative understandings of the urban, either as symbolically caricatured or applied in the real world. City movers and shakers are engaged in searching for, identifying and employing experimental ways of fostering virtue, inclusiveness and thick social bonds. Urban design and architecture, for Columbus, are applied tools through which moral ideals might be realised or at least aspired to.

Fieldwork for this chapter involved participant observation at public city events over this past summer, most notably the recent Exhibit Columbus 2019, which had its opening weekend at the end of August (and runs until early December). Exhibit Columbus aims to carry on Columbus's tradition as an experimental, socially progressive, design-centred town. An initiative of the city's Landmark Columbus organisation, founded and directed by Richard McCoy — who has conservation experience with MoMA (The Museum of Modern Art) and The MET (Metropolitan Museum of art) — Exhibit Columbus began in 2017 with a series of temporary installations set up all around the city in public locations. Landmark Columbus organises the exhibitions on an every-other-year basis. On non-exhibit years (2018, 2020, etc.), Landmark invites panels of architects, scholars, designers and curators to speak in a public symposium forum (Exhibit Columbus 2019).

Exhibit themes vary thematically. This most recent round of installations took inspiration from a 1986 exhibit in Washington at the National Building Museum: *Good Design and the Community: Columbus, Indiana*. At this event, officials inducted J. Irwin Miller into the museum's hall of fame, the first person to hold the honour. According to the Exhibit's brochure, 'Mr. Miller chose to emphasise the community's process and involvement in building, rather than the architecture itself, as a source of his hometown pride'. 'Architecture is something you can see', Miller said in an interview with *The Washington Post*. 'You cannot see a spirit of a temperament or a character, though, and there is an invisible part of this community of which I am very proud because, in a democracy, I think that the process is more important than the product' (Exhibit Columbus 2019).

This quote, originating from the city's Medici of the Midwest, as he has been called, became the organizing theme of the 2019 exhibition, the concept around which every design firm involved was tasked with reflecting on and responding to. As the exhibition booklet encapsulated,

> 'Exhibit Columbus explores the idea of "good design and the community" and what it means today. The 2019 exhibition expands on these ideas in a tangible way by inviting architects, artists, and designers to create public, site-responsible installations and experiences that use Columbus' built heritage as inspiration and context, while highlighting the intangible role that a visionary community plays in growing a vibrant, sustainable, and equitable city.' (Exhibit Columbus 2019)

This self-description sets the table for the events, introducing some of the exhibit's key concerns: *design*, *community*, *tangibility of values*, *built heritage*, *sustainability* and *equitability*.

In order to study this event ethnographically, I attended Exhibit Columbus's opening weekend events, sitting in and taking notes on panel discussions that introduced each of the

exhibit design teams, and then making several follow-up research trips to the city to do observations of the site-specific installations and exhibits at public spaces around the city, as well as to meet with designers in person. In the following pages, I draw on both fieldnotes as well as interview data with one of the exhibit's designers. I also make sense of additional archival, historical, and digital data genres. Although as an urban anthropologist my work is 'inextricably ethnographic' and directly centred on fieldwork, I do not fetishize participant observation (on this debate see Pardo and Prato 2018: 2). Augmenting direct, in-person observation, I draw on multi-modal, supplementary methods to gain a more thorough picture of the local urban worlds I study. Walking the city streets, as I've mentioned, is an efficient way of experiencing urban settings as the city's everyday inhabitants experience them. Furthermore, digital media, and especially geolocational social media such as Instagram, do not replace first-hand research but cannot be ignored as they are an increasingly integrated, habitual media in the lives of everyday Columbus locals, be those locals white-collar design professionals or blue-collar industrial workers.

During opening weekend, I attended multiple panels over the two-day period. Four total panels, described as 'conversations', organised several exhibit teams under a common topic or subject. 'Conversation One: Heritage Interactions', for instance, introduced Borderless Studio, People for Urban Progress, Thirst, and the University Design Research Fellows. This conversation occurred on a Friday evening and took place at North Christian Church, a National Historic Landmark site and one of the city's most iconic architectural features. As another example, 'Conversation Three: New Civilities', took place the following Saturday morning at First Christian Church, another landmark situated on the city's central plaza and Avenue of the Architects, just across from I.M. Pei's Cleo Rogers Memorial Library.

In short, high-profile, international design firms such as LA-Más, Borderless Studio, Agency Landscape+Planning, People for Urban Progress, Extrapolation Factory, Bryony Roberts Studio, SO-IL, Frida Escobedo Studio, PienZa Sostenible, MASS Design Group, among others, contributed installations and presented their exhibits during opening weekend. Each of the panel discussions took up and ran with a different subject (such as, 'Heritage Interactions', 'Future Forward', 'New Civilities', and 'Living Systems'), but I was struck, from an anthropological perspective, by the shared rhetoric, terminologies and discourses that circulated in common among the four separate conversations. Discussants debated the construct of *community* and implored designers and city planners to think seriously about what the term encompasses. 'When we say community, what do we mean?' Daniel Luis Martinez, from the Miller School of Architecture, provoked. 'Who do we leave in and who do we leave out?' Sean Anderson, a discussion moderator and associate curator of architecture and design at MoMA in New York, urged conversants to think about the binaries of *inside* vs. *outside*, *permanent* and *impermanent*. 'American cities are falling apart', Anderson narrated, touching on the social, political, economic, and racial inequalities present, by definition, in the complex urban spaces we define as cities. 'We need to rethink the ways that we see', he expressed, urging new ways of viewing urban space and interacting in diverse urban domains. The groups discussed the contested fabrics of cities in terms of politics, internal divisions, inequalities, and borders.

Conversations returned again and again to the unique context of Columbus. Design teams as well as those locals involved in the proceedings agreed that Columbus was exemplary, even exceptional, in architectural terms. I found most interesting the ways the people speaking on the panels theorised Columbus as an experimental cite in terms of civics and civil interactions, a place that has historically done well in so many regards but which still, like any city, has a lot to improve on. Rick Valicenti, from the Thirst design group, for instance, tried to get at the essence and function of the Exhibit Columbus event itself. 'Exhibit Columbus is like a science fair', he concluded. The various public exhibits, for Valicenti, were 'prototypes for thought and thinking' about civic interactions. Anderson agreed with this designer's metaphor, arguing that the exhibits 'are a lesson in civics'. Other metaphors for Columbus's experimentalism also circulate. Daniel Luis Martinez discussed, during opening weekend, Columbus 'as a laboratory for architecture and design'. Journalist Douglas Wissing (2016: 55) has characterised the city as 'a Petrie dish, where the idea that good architecture can improve the human condition is still being tested', and even Richard McCoy, the head of Exhibit Columbus, draws on the experiment metaphor when commenting on what it is he hopes Exhibit Columbus does in and for the city.

By the end of opening weekend, it was clear to me that the goal of Exhibit Columbus is to help people think about the politics of public urban space and to propose new visions of inclusive civility and more accessible, non-monumental built forms. This idea of the *non-monumental* in architecture stems from the work of architects and theorists Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown (1997) as well as Deborah Berke, the first woman dean of the Yale School of Architecture. Both Venturi and Berke, notably, have designed in Columbus. Berke (1997), for instance, has championed the concept of *everyday architecture*, a philosophy of building and constructing space that aims to defy monumentality and be more attuned to the rituals and movements of everyday life. I shall mention, very briefly, several exhibits that aimed to express these sorts of progressive civic agendas, both in the physical structure of the exhibits themselves as well as in the commentary and discourse produced during the conversations about those exhibits.

During opening weekend, the design duo of LA-Más, Elizabeth Timme and Helen Leung, discussed their firm's 'drive toward social justice' as the modus operandi of their architectural and infrastructural design projects. The purpose of their *Thank U, Next* exhibit, with its colourful hybridity of modular outdoor meeting tables and chairs, is to soften the monumental hardscape of Columbus's downtown modernism and experiment with democratic and flexible ways of interacting in civic space. This conversation's moderator, curator and critic Mimi Zeiger, asked again about how to better theorise *community* as a civic category. Leung mentioned that their firm, having been accepted as an exhibition team for the competition, did their own social reconnaissance in the area by listening to and meeting with community locals. One theme that stood out to them as a concern of local Columbus residents was that 'downtown Columbus is wonderful but catered to the well-to-do'. Their goal for *Thank U, Next*, then, was to 'bring in community members who wouldn't normally come to downtown'.

During this discussion, Timme also brought up the ideas of 'civic responsibility' and the 'multiplicity' of public spaces. In her group's quasi-ethnographic background research leading

up to the design of their exhibit, it occurred to them that many of Columbus's structures downtown were 'monumental' and 'heroic', and that perhaps residents not up with design and architecture history as well as contemporary built trends might feel 'intimidated', even 'judged by these heroic, brilliant buildings'. Timme discussed how she and Leung wanted to engage in 'taking that conversation' about civic responsibilities via 'new civilities' by 'putting it on the street'. *Thank U, Next* sits literally between main street and a contemporary parking garage. The reconfigurable, bright outdoor furniture sets have served many different functions for the community. I have observed as people use the space to eat lunch, read a book during a work break, or meet with friends to laugh and talk. The exhibit has partnered with the local community by including public bulletin boards where businesses, clubs, and other groups can schedule events at the exhibit. Digital observations show groups using the space to hold yoga classes, crafting events, cooking classes, or as a stage for public talks, concerts, and many other planned and impromptu events. When the exhibit is not serving as a city meeting space, children run across the colourful plastic tabletops and hop from one pedestal seat to another like it is a jungle gym.[5]

Likewise, whereas *Thank U, Next* envisions new civilities in terms of everyday, non-monumental, soft-scape types of architecture, other design firms address additional issues with built urban hardscapes. Agency Landscape + Planning, a Cambridge-based, woman-ran firm, approaches design through decidedly feminist frames. In their *XX* exhibit located next to Paul Kennon's *AT&T Facility* — a striking building with a bluish glass façade — the firm used the lens of gender to address civic inequality. This exhibit team also did quasi-ethnographic research leading up to installing the physical exhibit, interviewing Columbus locals and asking them about notable women in their lives. According to the designers, *XX* 'connects and uncovers hidden stories, particularly those of women'. The exhibit's location is strategic: the AT&T Facility employed women in the switching centre. This exhibit joins other sources in promoting the role that women such as Xenia Miller played in shaping the city over time. *XX* showcases audio snippets of oral recordings of Columbus inhabitants discussing formational women who have too often gone under the radar of public visibility and recognition.

The list goes on. Sean Ahlquist's *Playscape* offers a flexible jungle-gym, of sorts, intended to engage 'neuro-diverse individuals' and those 'with autism spectrum disorder'. Other exhibits, such as Viola Ago and Hans Tursack's *Understory*, MASS Design Group's *Corn / Meal*, Marshall Prado's *UTK Filament Tower*, Frida Escobedo Studio's *Untitled*, PienZa Sostenible's *Las Abejas*, and Sean Lally and Matthew Wizinsky's *The Long Now* drew attention in various ways to nature, the natural environment, and to environmental concerns, speaking to Pardo and Prato's (2018: 3) point that urban contestations are simultaneously political and environmental.[6] Alongside LA-Más's *Thank U, Next*, Bryony Roberts Studio's *Soft Civic*

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[5] See https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/17888369494399093/
and https://www.instagram.com/p/B29qsqKp_1U/ for imagery related to *Thank U, Next* gatherings (mas4LA 2019, exhibitcolumbus 2019).

[6] As a group, the exhibits were very much engaged with environmental concerns and the influence of their installations on both the urban and natural environment. The *Love Letter to The Crump* exhibit

envisioned new, more democratic, 'softer' forms of civil interaction. SO-IL's *Into the Hedge* critiqued the exclusive structural landscaping of the Miller House and Gardens, and in so doing dealt explicitly with the idea of arbour hedges serving as exclusive, elite boundaries, rejecting, in short, 'the hedge as a divider' concept by inviting people to participate in 'a responsive and playful environment'. The Extrapolation Factory's *What If Columbus* 'explores free speech and the public sphere in our digital age', encouraging participants to 'contemplate, articulate, and share their visions for Columbus' and the city's infrastructures via a tablet that blends into the city's hardscape.

If Exhibit Columbus is a science fair for progressive civics and a laboratory for inclusive, new civilities and pluralistic modes of social interaction, each of these exhibits gets at civility in a slightly different way. These exhibits and installations aim, each in their own manner, to carry on the progressive Miller family tradition and embody the Exhibit Columbus motto wherein investing in architecture, art and design serve to 'improve people's lives and make cities better places to live' (Exhibit Columbus 2019).

How to Edit A Building

In the remainder of this article, I want to focus on one exhibit. Although following ground-breaking urban studies work that observes and analyses the 'social lives' of urban spaces by documenting, quantitatively, uses and experiences of those spaces (Whyte 1980), I am also fascinated by the behind-the-scenes development of the installation, that is, in the discourses, rhetoric and ideologies that surround and map onto the creation and use of the physical structure. One local design team associated with the recently established J. Irwin Miller Architecture Program was tasked with creating an installation at the site of their own campus.

A student of Mies van der Rohe and long-time architect at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, Myron Goldsmith designed The Republic Building. Goldsmith's building, originally a printing plant and headquarters for Columbus's local newspaper, *The Evening Republican* (now *The Republic*), was completed in 1971. 'Conceptually, the building was meant to expose the inner workings of the paper', writes one architectural preservation scholar (Leukart 2016: 55), emphasizing the building's intended evocation of transparency via its sheer glass walls and minimisation of symbolic barriers between inside and outside. The mechanics of the press were to be a kinetic sculpture, of a sort, the industrial operations observable through the transparent walls. The Republic Building is a well-respected local specimen of Miesian glass-walled, light-filled rectilinearism. Since the 1970s, Columbus locals have viewed the building as an iconic point of pride, especially given the structure's high visibility when first entering the city by highway.

(https://exhibitcolumbus.org/2019-exhibition/washington-street/borderless-studio), for instance, plans to recycle the massive tapestry into handbags to be sold in local stores, therefore making dual use of the materials as well as returning capital back into the local environment and economy. *Entry Portal*, which I discuss in detail below, originally planned to recycle the iron parts of their structure after the exhibit and turn the plastic façade pieces into a wall mural. As Etien Santiago confided, however, they received an offer from an upstate outdoor sculpture park that plans to move the exhibit to a permanent location after the Columbus exhibit ends.

So how to edit a near-perfect icon of mid-century modern design? Thinking about the single building as part of a complex urban fabric, the team started by asking how a seemingly perfect Miesian structure might be improved upon. After several months of brainstorming, Daniel Luis Martinez and Etien Santiago, together with three graduate student collaborators, landed on the idea of the *Entry Portal*. The project underwent several iterations, but the final product is a life-sized, angular walkway, of sorts, a rectangular kaleidoscope of steel and plastic that stretches from a main sidewalk and street to an entrance in the side of the glass façade. To reduce the structure to its primary function, the portal is an entryway.

In addition to conducting participant observation among tourist groups who visited the building and interacting with the exhibition site, I recently talked with Santiago one-on-one. The built structure itself is simple enough aesthetically and structurally, but while conversing with one half of the design team lead, I was fascinating by the level of deliberation about symbolism, intent and interpretation of built forms that informed the process leading up to the construction of the physical exhibit.[7]

Santiago told me that one of the most productive parts of the process was scrutinizing The Republic as a team through the grid of Exhibit Columbus's theme: 'Good Design and the Community'. Analysing the building in which you teach and inhabit daily, according to this architect, designer, theorist and professor, was a telling experience. They decided that The Republic 'doesn't engage the street in any way. It doesn't have any little courtyards or urban plazas that welcome people to nestle up close to the building. It's kind of an imposing building in this way'. Santiago expressed that they classified the building after their analysis as more *suburban* than *urban* because of the way it was set off from the street and the connective fabric of the downtown area in what might be interpreted as a standoffish sort of way.

My interactions with visitors at the site corroborate this public impression of inaccessible, distant beauty. 'It's true, it's not really inviting', one woman in my tour group whispered, observing our own images projected back at us through the reflective north wall of Goldsmith's building. In my walking though Columbus, I took care to note how other people interact with the building when they pass by it. Because of its current function as an architecture school and campus building, the edifice is not necessarily open to the public beyond students and professors. I observed frequently how people walked by the building, stopping to take it in from the sidewalk, sometimes crossing the wide lawn to inspect the building's exterior glass up close. Sometimes interactions included photographing the structure at different angles. But human-building interactions, for the most part, end there.

Co-designer Daniel Luis Martinez picked up on these interpretive tensions regarding the built structure and at one point during opening weekend described the building as perhaps 'the most egalitarian in the city', on the one hand, but then characterised the structure's transparency as thinly symbolic rather than an objective reality. In its research and deliberations leading up to the exhibit's installation, the exhibit team looked for and noted these sorts of interactive

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[7] For images of the portal in various production stages, see https://www.instagram.com/p/B07MQ7GJvrS/, https://www.instagram.com/p/BzLCT_5Jz7o/ and https://www.instagram.com/p/B0CQZj2pJTE/ (daniel_iu_arch 2019).

limitations, noting that even if a person intended on entering the building, confusion would ensue. 'To make matters worse', Santiago narrated, 'we knew exactly where the entrance was, because we use it every day, but we realised that outsiders don't really know'. 'All of the entrances', he continued, 'look exactly the same'. For the general public, 'it's not really clear whether you're supposed to enter there or not'. The goal, for this design team, was what urban anthropologists describe as the 'production of pluralist spaces' (Pardo and Prato 2018: 9) that counteract entrenched social hierarchies of various sorts, in this case being campus insiders and outsiders, usual building inhabitants and visitors.

The Exhibit Columbus *Family Activity Guide* (Woo 2019) also speaks to these issues, at the same time accentuating the ways that Columbus seeks to cultivate design-minded inhabitants. Los Angeles artist, designer and writer Rosten Woo's illustrated activity booklet for the 2019 exhibition engages young people and children, helping them to think architecturally about the urban environment in Columbus. 'What makes a good hello?' the two-page section designated to *Entry Portal* inquires (Woo 2019: 10-11). 'Architecture can make us feel things. When you look at The Republic Building do you feel like you can enter? Why or why not? How does it make you feel?' The backdrop for the two-page spread is a black-and-white image of the side of Goldsmith's Miesian building. No exhibit is yet present. The guide goes on: 'ACTIVITY: What would you add to The Republic Building to make it feel a little more . . . friendly?' it asks. 'Draw it in below'. Woo's guide is a lesson in architectural feeling and seeing, reflecting the MoMA curator's comment during opening weekend on the need for new ways of seeing, visualizing and experiencing urban settings. The guidebook invites children to participate in the process of design, interacting with the *Entry Portal* (and its potentialities) in both two and three dimensions. The guide assumes and encourages the reader to see the structure in person.

What I find most interesting is the way the guide's subtle commentary on the exhibit gently or suggestively leads children to think of the pre-exhibit building as less than inviting but also leaves room for interpretive ambiguity ('[D]o you feel like you can enter? Why or why not?'). Beyond *Entry Portal* itself, the activity book welcomes children to think in terms of affect and the emotive aspects of the built environment in everyday lives. 'What is the most friendly building you know?' it inquires. 'What is the LEAST friendly building?' it counters. An information bar on the far right of the spread offers further commentary on the exhibit: 'While the Republic Building is set back from the street and has hidden entrances, this installation is a bold new portal — an embodiment of the school's desire to extend a welcoming hand to the local community and visitors alike' (Woo 2019: 10-11). This booklet encourages children to think like designers and to share, to some degree, in the brainstorming process that the *Entry Portal* itself underwent in working up to the creating of the entryway.

In Santiago's words, and as we observe in the language of the *Family Activity Guide*, one way to improve on the existing design of this 'understated glass box' was to accentuate and modify the public entrance in some way, making the building more inviting and welcoming to the community. 'We have to make an entrance', the team decided. Thus, *Entry Portal*, as an interactive marker, inviting passageway, or three-dimensional sign, came into being.

In my observations during the opening weekend talks as well as in conversations with the designers themselves, I picked up on a thread of taboo entertained in the ways the designers

theorised and conceptualised their exhibit. Martinez, at one point during the proceedings, wondered whether 'Myron would be rolling in his grave' if he could see *Entry Portal* jutting out from the side of his perfect glass rectangle. Another visiting exhibit designer, Paola Aguirre of Borderless, also expressed wonder at Martinez and Santiago's deft balance between respect and experimentation: 'It's a Skidmore, Owings & Merrill building', she exclaimed at one point. 'You don't touch those things!' Aguirre was thrilled with how well the team did with their project given the pressure and status of the building as an icon. These sorts of discourses seem to get at the designers' cognizance of the high esteem the building has both in terms of mid-century modern architectural history as well as local pride of place.

Conclusions: Toward the Possibility of New Civilities

Through the lenses of urban ethnography and the anthropology of design, I find it helpful to think of *Entry Portal* as a body modification, technological edit, or built extension. The exhibition team sought to balance between respect for a semi-permanent, canonical structure and wanting to improve upon that edifice's functional limitations in subtle, layered, non-permanent, creative ways. *Entry Portal* is a lesson in inclusive space-making, demonstrating what Alison Clarke (2018: xvii) describes as 'the mutuality of people and things, the confluence of the material and the social'. In my interlocuters' own words, the exhibit is a productive case study in 'new civilities', a fascinating glimpse into the complex relationships between built 'non-human agents' (Pardo and Prato 2018: 5) and those agents' creators, inhabitants and interactants. The designers sought to take a symbolically egalitarian building and make it even more practically so.

During my latest research trips to the city and digital ethnographic observations, I am paying close attention to how people interact with these new temporary exhibits. It remains to be seen how 'successful' the exhibit will be, at least in an empirical, observable sense. From one direction, *Entry Portal* is less interactive than, say, *Thank U, Next*, with its modular, interchangeable outdoor furniture arrangements. What do people *do* with *Entry Portal*? My observations confirm that people, indeed, utilise the exhibit for its primary function as an entryway. They progress through the structure's panels and then pass into The Republic building itself. But aside from this task, I have observed other interactions. People photograph or video the exhibit at key time periods throughout the day, capturing the way the sun filters through the materials, throwing shadows like a kaleidoscope. People, singly or in small groups, gather around the portal, observing its width and heights, touching the panelled sides and running hands along steel frames. Interactions with the exhibit include both the visual as well as the tactile. There are also more dynamic uses: Children run and around and around the structure, peeking around the frame, playing tag or hide-and-seek. Most recently, a contemporary dance team from nearby Indianapolis chose the *Entry Portal* as the grounds for one of several site-specific, interpretive group dances (dance kaleidoscope in 2019).

Built structures, though, inevitably contain a symbolic dimension. *Entry Portal* serves as a bridge-portal between the street and the building, the city and the architecture school, the urban and the suburban. As an Exhibit Columbus project, *Entry Portal* is a case study in 'new civilities' in that its aim is to span the symbolic and physical gap between the environment of

the city of Columbus and the presence of a new architectural school. The exhibit intends to attend to the inequalities of hierarchical, canonical built space and bespeak inclusivity and welcome.

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