

Middle Cities with Anne Surak and Iker Gil

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SPEAKERS

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Greg Lindsay 00:24

Hello and welcome to threesixtyCITY by NewCities, a podcast series delving into the future of urban life. I'm your host, Greg Lindsay. Columbus, Indiana, is a mecca for modernist architecture fans with a collection of National Historic Landmarks by Eero Saarinen and his father, Eliel, Harry Weese, Kevin Roche and others, with roughly 50,000 residents set amongst the cornfields it is also an archetypal middle city, mid-size, Midwest Berg in the middle of the country. The future of middle cities is the theme of the third edition of Exhibit Columbus, biennial celebration and exploration of the city as a laboratory for design and civic investment. Today, I'm joined by Exhibit Columbus Director Anne Surak and co-curator Iker Gil to discuss all things middle metropolis, from demographics to technology, climate change, and of course, the pandemic, and what cities can learn from Columbus. Thanks for joining us Anne and Iker. We'll start with with you Anne, again, the architecture fans who are among our listeners need no introduction to Columbus. But I think for others, it bears a bit of history to begin about how such a collection of modernist architecture came to the cornfields of Indiana, far from Indianapolis. And what's its whole legacy and how it's being carried forward?

Anne Surak 01:36

Yeah, well it's a long story at this point, although it's a relatively young city. So we're actually celebrating our bicentennial of the county this year. But about 75 years ago, Columbus and its philanthropic leaders and civic leaders started using architecture as a way to create space for public good, and make the city a better place to live. And so Columbus has about 80 significant works of architecture, landscape and art, that exists in the city today. And a lot of that came about through the Cummins Foundation Architecture Program, which was developed by Jay Erwin Miller, through the intention of making better schools in the city. And so 14 of the 17 schools are made by significant architects along with civic buildings, libraries, fire stations, banks, parks. It's an interesting exploration in how architecture can be used to forge a thriving identity for a place even in the middle of Indiana, in the middle of cornfields in America. And so that's how Exhibit Columbus came to be. It was really meant to reignite that passion

for architecture and design that had been built since 1942. And create a space to invite new leaders in architecture and design, to think about the context of this place, and make work in response to the legacy of the designers that you mentioned, that had built buildings there.

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Greg Lindsay 03:19

Great. I want to return to Cummins in a bit. But first Iker if you could talk a bit about the theme New Middles: The Future of Middle Cities. How do you define a middle city and are there particular characteristics? Can we recognize this as sort of an archetype of a overlooked form of urbanism?

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Iker Gil 03:34

Yeah, what was interesting about this year is they've done two different cycles of Exhibit Columbus. So this was an opportunity of maybe shifting the lenses of how to approach a place like Columbus. So Mimi Zeiger and I wanted to look at this idea of the new middle, thinking about a place that has its own conditions. That we're not thinking about it in relationship to each one of the codes, but something that has its own characteristics. Columbus has about 45,000 people, and how do we think about its own qualities in relationship to the changing demographics, to technology, to mobility, to climate change. We began to think about it instead of an isolated place, or like it's unique in many characteristics, but also it's in relationship to many other middles across the US. So we were thinking about that aspect, about what are its own characteristics, and then what are the multiple futures that places like Columbus can have. So to give it a framework and explain that idea of multiple relationships, we wanted to use the Mississippi watershed as way of thinking about ecological systems going beyond the typical political boundaries about how places that you might not think are connected are actually connected by all these conditions.

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Greg Lindsay 04:52

Interesting. Well, can you expand a bit upon that in the sense of what can we learn from Columbus in terms of those changing demographics? I think it's also worth noting, that if you look at the Wikipedia of Columbus, it of course mentions that Vice President Pence was born there. I'm from the next state over in Illinois. These are the kinds of regions that typically are being pointed to as the declining American heartland, places where immigration away from these cities is happening, particularly among younger people. And so I'm curious, like what we can learn from Columbus in terms of what is the mix of institutions, partners, Cummins obviously part of this, that has kept the city flourishing. And, is there a recipe for middles? I'm curious what both of you have learned from this year's Exhibit and how we can carry this forward.

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Iker Gil 05:32

I think we tend to oversimplify the stories of places. In the same way that we talk about Columbus as this architecture mecca, that's one part of the story. But there's many other things. And sometimes these powerful narratives overshadow the reality of places. I grew up in Bilbao, I know a lot of these things about how you can oversimplify a story. But the idea of Columbus as a place where Cummings has a huge presence, they also have a lot of international workers who live there. So the makeup of the city, the amount of languages, when you go a little bit deeper into the story of a place like Columbus, you understand that the reality is much more plural, it's much more diverse. The relationships between a middle town is connected to many international places in ways that you might not think about. So I think this was an opportunity to really begin to reveal some of the human conditions that are

already there and use Exhibit Columbus to talk about these things. So it's not overly imposing, it's actually just thinking about what is already there and shine a light onto that and think about how we strengthen those relationships that are there?

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Iker Gil 06:43

Anne I'm curious your thoughts on this question too. And coming back to Cummins as well in the sense of Columbus with such a strong partner is in many ways another archetypal example of the American Midwest manufacturing city that had such strong civic institutions. Of course, all that faded away in many cities with globalization. I'm curious how that's part of the mix, not just how Cummins underwrites exhibit Columbus, but also it's ongoing investment underwriting a lot of the works that have been done there. How can cities strengthen those relationships? Or rebuild those with such civic minded partners and using it through design?

A

Anne Surak 07:16

Yeah, that's an interesting question. One we've thought about as an organization, could you apply this model to other cities and make public work in the context of those places? And having worked in Columbus for six years now, there's something very unique and special about the way there's community collaboration to make things happen. And I don't know how that exists in other places. But, there's really a strong commitment by the people that live there to be involved in community work, to serve on boards of other organizations, to participate in that culture as a whole. And I think that's something that's very special about that place. It is a city that's built on manufacturing and as a company town. At one time there were three Fortune 500 companies in the Columbus area. It also makes it like an incredibly rich environment to make things. There's a lot of manufacturing that still exists there in all forms. I think Iker's right, we don't want to over simplify why this place is what it is. But I do think, there's been a history of the community working together in a way to make it ideally, a better place. And I think that's important to celebrate.

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Iker Gil 08:38

I would say one of the interesting aspects about the role of the Cummins Foundation is there is all these significant buildings, but there's a moment that you can't build more, you don't need more buildings. So how do you continue that idea of socially minded commitment to foster life in a place like Columbus, that takes other shapes, it doesn't have to be about new civic buildings. To me the idea of Exhibit Columbus, and finding other ways of supporting these ways of coming together. It's an incredible opportunity to support, to come together, to think about what is possible. And when the opportunities come to do a new park, a new building, or any other private things, then you have these conversations already going on. So you don't start when you have to build it. You have all these conversations, all these groups coming together, all these communities understanding what the goals are even though they manifest in different ways. So I think there's a lot of opportunity for people to come together even if there is not a building or a specific outcome that was happening than previous decades.

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Greg Lindsay 09:44

On that vein Iker, can you talk a bit about how some of the various installations and programming for this edition are being used to further those conversations? Can you point to some examples about how you can use Exhibit Columbus itself as a platform to imagine projects and imagine these kinds of conversations? How is it manifesting over the course of the three months. I should note for our listeners, this runs through the end of November. So plenty of time to see these exhibitions as well. How are you using them to catalyze conversations in addition to simply being a biennial of sorts?

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Iker Gil 10:14

We have 13 installations, plus two other ones for the photography fellows. And I think they all explore a wide range of topics. For example, talking about the idea of manufacturing, we have this project by Future Firm called Midnight Palace that is looking at the idea of the second and third shift workers knowing that Columbus has 39% of the population that work in manufacturing versus an average of 9% in the US. So the idea that this is a manufacturing town, that there are people who work the nine to five, but there are many other people that work in many other spaces. We don't build cities to address those, the people who work on those off hours. So here is an opportunity to think about the night time, the midnight city. It overlaps in the physical space with the daytime city, but the conditions are very different. So how do you create places where people can have a Skype when you're in Columbus with their family in Sri Lanka, or you can watch cricket or do other things. So in that case, for example, is how do you create that public space for people that don't operate at the nine to five. We have other installations that makes us think in a place like Columbus, in a state called Indiana, thinking about the uniqueness of the place, but what is the relationship between all the towns that are named after Christopher Columbus? And what are the narratives? And how do we talk about those places? How do we think about those places? And, to me, that's a very powerful thing that has incredible presence in Mill Race Park. But at the same time, you begin to think about that relationship between places that we don't think about them together, how do we talk about them? How do we describe them? And then what are the legacies of these places? And there are no easy answers. They're not pointing out this is good or bad, but it's just trying to make people think about what are the legacies and how our towns and places are shaped, and who shapes them. So those are two different ways of looking at archives, like Olalekan who's looking at the archives of an exhibition that was used during the opening of the library that he was considered so important. An exhibition about African art and African American art the library opened with but then it faded away, like nobody knew about it. So he was looking back at something like 50 years ago, and the relevance that it has now and confront the past, but in a way to move forward. So none of the installations tell you what to do. They don't tell you what has to happen. But it opens up a path about this idea of multiple futures that Mimi and I were very interested in.

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Greg Lindsay 13:07

That's great. Well Anne, beyond the exhibition itself, this is sort of a two year cycle. So can you explain a bit about how, in even the broader sense, Exhibit Columbus helps further those conversations? I was thinking beforehand, the classic conversation goes around, how do you use the arts or design to revitalize a community. In this case, it doesn't need revitalization, so how to use it to revitalize Columbus. But I'm curious how that gets woven into the fabric of how decisions get made, and plans are being made, and the future of Columbus is being made?

A

Anne Surak 13:36

Yeah, Iker through his other organization, MAS Context hosted a conversation yesterday between the Chicago architecture biennial, some participants in that, and then ConcAñtrico, which is in Spain, and then Exhibit Columbus. And we talked a lot about this idea of disrupting public space. And, each festival or exhibition is doing that in different ways. Exhibit Columbus is really a celebration of that, taking over public space and helping people use it in new ways. But, as Iker had mentioned, in some of these installations it really helps people present and think about complex ideas and challenge things in a way that's accessible and open. And so for me, personally, that's why I love this type of program, because we get to bring work by internationally relevant people doing amazing work anywhere, and bring them to this small community and invite people to get to experience that. And so that's really removing a lot of barriers to entry in an exciting way. And I think it's important in having difficult conversations to use

art and design in that way, because I think it allows people to sort of meet in the middle and have those conversations productively. That's what's exciting about Exhibit Columbus right now. It's an important time to make work in public and invite people to share that space together.

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Iker Gil 15:10

One of the things also that I like about the idea of how Exhibit Columbus is structured is this idea of a two year cycle. A lot of times the Biennials put installations for three months, and then kind of disappear. And then you come back and there's another installation. There is no continuity and it takes people time to get back to it. So what is interesting about Exhibit Columbus is it's the first year we have a symposium. Where we can begin to address a lot of the topics that are going to inform the topic of the next cycle. And through that we opened that opportunity to have conversations between the community in Columbus, designers that were going to be part of Columbus, but also with other cities across the globe. It became that moment of connecting international practitioners with local community and shape what the brief was for everybody. So you begin to create that conversation and then have the design presentations in March the following year, and then the Exhibition. So this idea of breaking the two years into opportunities to engage with multiple participants is a very smart move.

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Greg Lindsay 16:25

Interesting. Well, given the two year cycle of this, the majority of that cycle has been during the pandemic and dealing with the pandemic. And I feel sometimes that mentally we're done with the pandemic in terms of a cultural force, but certainly the pandemic is not done with us. So, how did that shape this or how do we think about it? Because I also think that Columbus is, in theory, one of the small middle communities in America that has gained in residents coming from high cost coastal metros, as part of that remote work. I would think Columbus would be well positioned for that. I'm curious what particular lessons have been unearthed during the pandemic that's relevant to this? Because I feel that still deserves its own special area of conversation about how Columbus has weathered this time?

A

Anne Surak 17:09

Yeah, I will just tell you a little compliment to NewCities, like you guys were one of the first organizations to really start doing online programming when the pandemic started, and transitioned really seamlessly to bring people together from all over the world to think about these topics in real time. And I think it was really inspiring to do that, as a lot of organizations have had to shift to online. Mimi and Iker were incredibly nimble. And I feel like we came up with this theme, or they presented it in February of 2020. And we had a moment where we're like, do we need to rethink this. And it was like, no, everything that's happening is making these topics even more relevant to explore, and giving people room to do that in the work that they make and think about. So, being able to bring people together from all over the world to explore these topics globally, and then relate it back to this hyperlocal situation was very exciting. I think the only sad part this time is that we didn't get to bring participants to Columbus to see their sites in the same way that we might have in the past. And so some of that contextual response was more difficult, but it allowed people to make connections in other ways, which I think we all had to do, which honestly was a more intimate experience in a lot of ways, then maybe doing it differently.

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Iker Gil 18:36

I mean, when Anne and Richard approached us to do this and we started in February with thought, piece of cake, this is gonna be amazing. And then March hits. We thought the approach and the topic was so strong and also

flexible, we obviously had to adjust to things. And I think the format and changing how we had the conversations, but the same way that we were invited to be the first outside curators to think about the format of Exhibit Columbus, how do we change it on the third edition? This was also an opportunity to think how to have these conversations? How do we bring new voices? How do we change a little bit the format of how things were done to see what happens. Like change the way you look at things and see what it does. So, it wasn't a simple time to do this. And everybody was affected in many different ways to have to go through the pandemic. But within that context, just trying to still push forward and understand how a pandemic was, again, if 39% of the population in Columbus is in manufacturing, and you don't work on site, and everybody from Cummins doesn't work there, that has a huge impact on Main Street in the way you think about a place. Those things were always in our mind, but also making the opening in August, and bringing all the people for two weeks, a very remarkable moment, I think everybody really enjoy being with each other, seeing the place, helping each other, make all the installations, and come together to talk about all these things. And there were projects, I'll mention one from Ecosistema Urbano that was called the Cloud Room where they had a site that was related to a high school, that is a very open site that never has shade. And that's why they never use that space for classes or anything. And that has been ongoing way before the pandemic. But all of a sudden, this idea of giving shade and teaching outside took a completely different perspective with this idea about how do we have classes in a safe environment outside for 30 people. And you begin to think about how some of the ambitions that may be projects had at the beginning, were so good to address the conditions right now. So that is an incredible space right now outside that you can use for classes, but you can also have people eat there or just relax for the community. I love how these projects start in a one way and then they become more complex and richer within the context of the pandemic.

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Greg Lindsay 21:18

Iker, you mentioned both growing up in Bilbao and also the Chicago Architecture Biennale, which is happening right now. And I think both of those are interesting in this context because of the Bilbao effect of the Guggenheim opening there in 1987, is 25 years old next year. And also the Chicago Biennial was explicitly designed to create a architectural biennial for the United States that would compete with Venice in a way or draw people to Chicago in off years, which is sort of the history of almost all biennials. I'm curious for the two of you too, about how that entire arts led vitalization or festival-led revitalization has evolved since the Bilbao effect. I mean, that was copied across the world. I've read documents in like Abu Dhabi, about how they were going to build an entire museum district there to replicate the Bilbao effect. What would be your recommendations for other communities, the two of you, to try to create something like an Exhibit, Columbus, or how would you leverage this as well? I mean, not everyone has an Eero Saarinen collection, obviously, or that great legacy. But yeah, is there still life in that formula? Or how can we carry the formula forward of using the arts, and exhibits, and design in other contexts for that to care for communities? Iker, can you take that first.

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Iker Gil 22:32

I'd say Bilbao and Columbus have great business cards. They have an incredible amount of buildings that form its legacy and you can present that. But that's just one part of the story. I grew up before the Guggenheim, I lived through the Guggenheim, and I've seen it throughout the years. The problem about that is been oversimplified. So even the way you present it says, we curate a cultural district, and we have the Bilbao effect. Well, it doesn't happen like that. To do the Bilbao effect like the Guggenheim, you needed to move the port outside the city. And that was just one thing, one instance, within a very complex framework of how to transform the city. So because the story has been oversimplified, it can now be replicated because people don't understand the conditions. To me, Columbus is a little bit of the same, where you say, we have incredible buildings, but you need to understand the reality of Columbus to see how you can intervene there, how you can make it better. And then when you have your own city, I don't think you can take the recipe of one to one. You need to understand how other places have done it in reality, like really what went on? And then say, how can you export that and what is unique to your place? So to me, even

though the cities are very different, the populations are very different, and the whole history of Bilbao and Columbus are very different, I actually saw a lot of similarities in terms of how an oversimplification of a story helps you sell something very quickly. But the downside is you do need to know more about it if you want to translate that to other places.

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Greg Lindsay 24:11

I'm particularly curious about who the key players are in Columbus, Indiana. As Iker said, it's an oversimplification of you build it, and they will come. Obviously, it's these networks of individuals and institutions who have to work very closely together in exactly the right way to do it. And I'm curious, what are the lessons there from Columbus in that regard, in terms of how everyone came together, not just Cummins, but the city as well, and what lessons could other places learn?

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Anne Surak 24:33

Yeah, I mean Exhibit Columbus is a big lift for a small city to execute every two years and every year. Cummins, we're so grateful to them. They're our presenting sponsor this year, they've given a lot of support in many ways, not just financially. The city of Columbus has been very supportive in many ways too, and even helping us build things just like borrowing equipment to help make the things and providing staff time to support that, and just making it really easy for us to work with them in public. And then our community foundation of Bartholomew County, the Heritage Fund, they really incubated this exhibition over the last six years and helped lift that up and support it still. And then, private individuals that really believe in what this can do for quality of place in the city. And so, we take that responsibility very seriously. And, thinking about these other festivals or exhibitions, we've always thought about our audience and trying to speak to the consumer of architecture and design and someone that knows everything, and then someone that knows nothing, like a third grade student that stumbles upon it. And so we feel like if we can communicate what we're trying to do and make it interesting for both those parties than we can reach everyone in the middle. And so, it is meant to bring people to Columbus, it's also meant to be for the people of Columbus. Germane Barnes, who's a designer from Miami, was in a conversation yesterday and said, I wanted to make something for the people I care about. I thought a lot about that. And I think that's also what we're trying to do. But I also want to make things for people I don't know I care about yet. And that's the beauty of doing things in public, there's all these people that play a part in it. There's these small gestures of kindness and ways of making that come together in these things that really make it incredibly powerful.

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Greg Lindsay 26:35

It's a great way of putting it, especially during the last 18 months when very little public activity could happen. When I've reported on or investing in places like Newcastle in Australia and other efforts of using the arts and entrepreneurship to revitalize communities it's just simply the act of doing something in public that attracts people. Well, we're almost out of time. So as a final question, I'd love to pose to both of you. Obviously, you have forthcoming gatherings and events that are happening in October, I was wondering if you could each talk a bit about something you are very much looking forward to and that our listeners might potentially visit if they find themselves in the Columbus neck of the woods. So Iker, if you could start?

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Iker Gil 27:17

Yeah, I'm super excited that this is running until November 28. And with that, we get to see it when it was scorching hot and then hopefully we will see everything when it's snowing. But one of the things that I'm particularly interested

in is on the weekend of October 22-23, we're going to bring the photography fellows who when we look at the scale, like the Mississippi watershed, it's hard to comprehend. And we've been working with them to document what that means and what the places are across the Mississippi watershed. So to me, I'm very interested to hear Virginia Hanusik and David Schalliol to talk about their work, but also have people experience their work in ordinary places in the city, in the alleys, in the observation tower of Mill Race Park. Just having that idea of bringing other places into Columbus, literally, and also have them explain from their perspective, from Louisiana and Minneapolis, and really look at bringing those experiences.

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Greg Lindsay 28:16

And Anne, what's your personal highlight?

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Anne Surak 28:17

Well, go to our website exhibitcolumbus.org, to learn more about the upcoming events. And also as Iker had mentioned, because we did all these online programs, you can see the designers talking about their work, introducing it and then sharing more about the design concept. So it's a really holistic way that we've been able to share what's like the thinking behind everything that's happened. Again, we have 13 very thoughtful projects. And then, our graphic designer and our photography fellows, everybody's shared their story about how they came to make this. And so October 2, we are working with Ball State and IU, which are our Indiana institutions, to celebrate our University Fellows that Saturday. So inviting them to think about what they've made, and the research, and how that plays into their pedagogy and practice moving forward. And so we hope to stream that or have that available for those that can't come to Columbus, but you get some CEUs if you want to come. So anyways, we always welcome people to Columbus. It's a very friendly place. And everyone's very proud of this program and the exhibition and their community. And so if you haven't been I wouldn't highly recommend it.

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Greg Lindsay 29:34

Well, thank you. And so October 2 and October 22, a pair of fall Saturday's if you happen to find yourself in southern Indiana right around harvest season. So I would encourage all of our listeners to go to both exhibitcolumbus.org and then hopefully Exhibit Columbus. So with that, thank you so much Anne, thank you so much Iker. It's been a pleasure having you on. Can't wait to see what the outcome of those sessions are. And for our listeners, we'll be back next week and every week going into the fall and the winter with another episode of threesictyCITY. Until then, take care.