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# Preservation

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## Modernist visions, Main Street realities

Columbus, Indiana, has 60 buildings by famous architects. Why are the sidewalks empty?

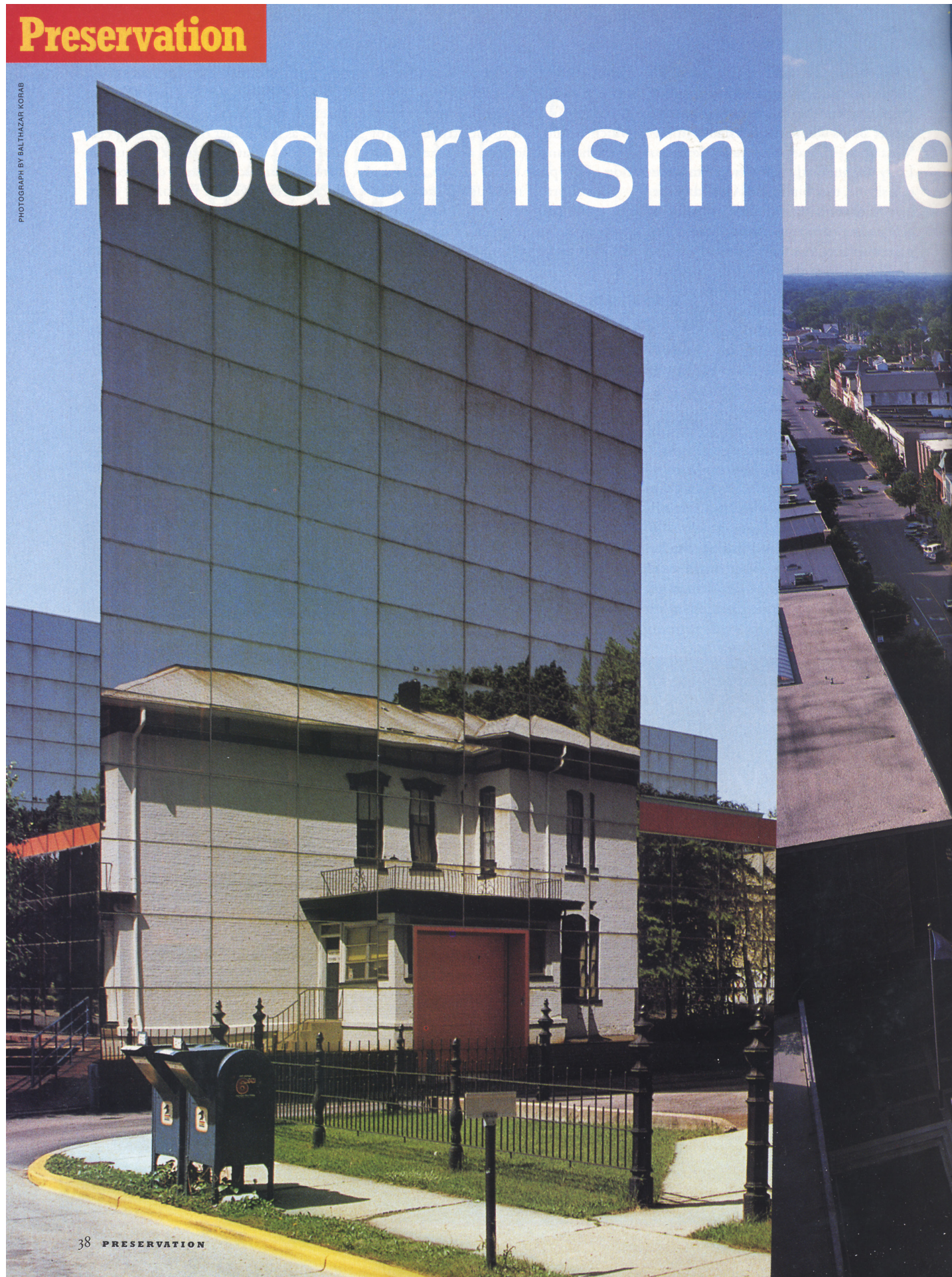
BY ROBERT CAMPBELL

JAN MORRIS' CAIRO · SARASOTA SAGA · M.F.K. FISHER'S LAST HURRAH

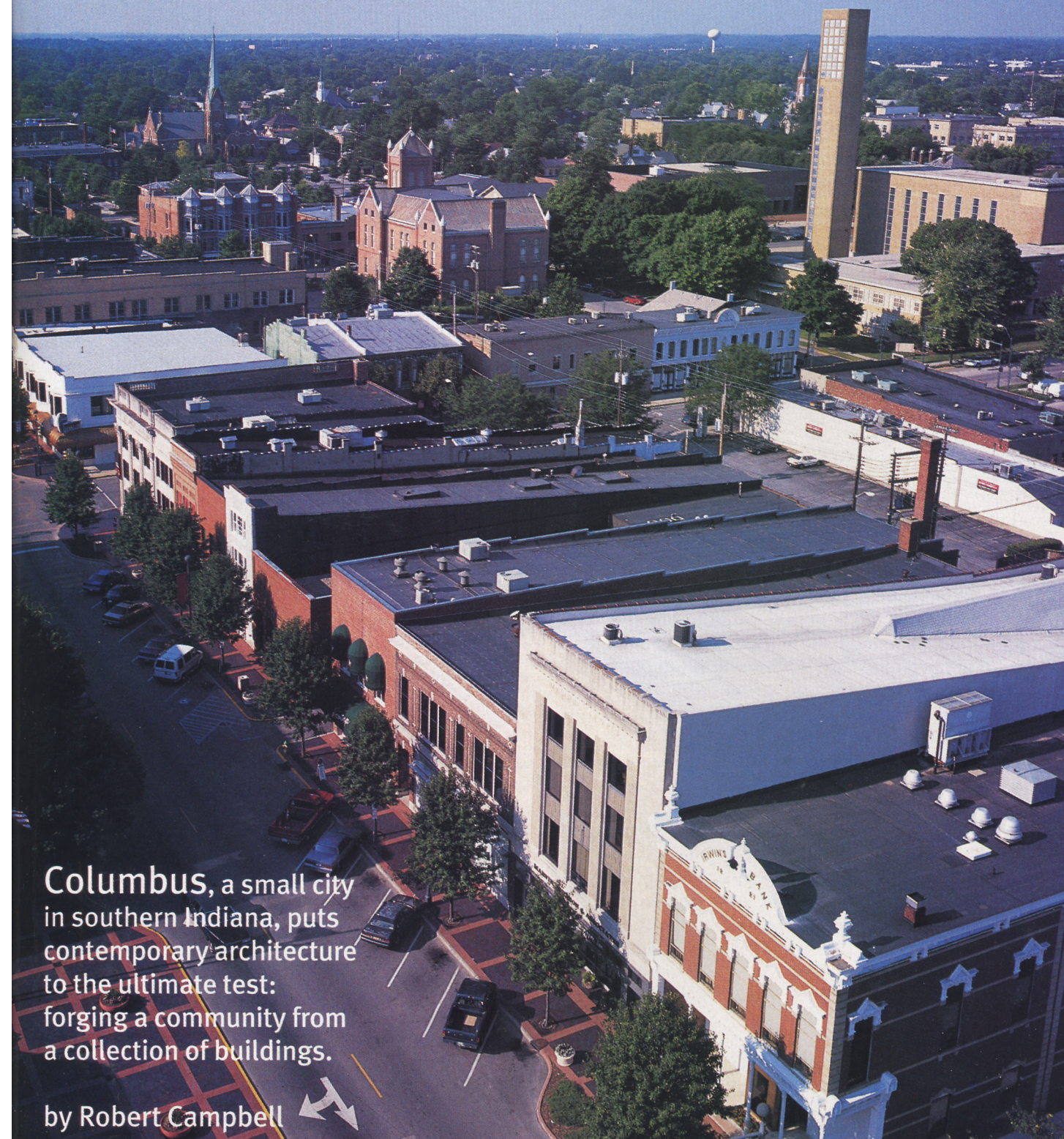


PHOTOGRAPH BY BALTHAZAR KORAB

# modernism me



# ets main street



Columbus, a small city in southern Indiana, puts contemporary architecture to the ultimate test: forging a community from a collection of buildings.

by Robert Campbell





**Y**OU KNOW SOMETHING'S GOING to be different when you see the big billboard on the interstate. You're driving south toward Columbus, Ind., from Indianapolis, where your plane landed. The billboard blares:

WORLD RENOWNED ARCHITECTURE  
FREE SAMPLE 22 MILES AHEAD

Later, when you turn off I-65 to head into Columbus, you find yourself passing beneath the arch of a red bridge, a bridge as bold and bright as the gate to a Zen temple. You learn this arch was designed by Jean Muller, a Swiss engineer headquartered in Paris. The folks in Columbus call it "the front door."

Columbus, it's clear, is a town that pays attention to architecture. In this city of 35,000—no more people than jam Fenway Park in my hometown of Boston—and in its surrounding Bartholomew County, there are at least 60 buildings, plus a few parks and monuments, designed by nationally or internationally known architects. For any fan of architecture, the roll call is impressive: Eliel and Eero Saarinen, I.M. Pei, Kevin Roche, Cesar Pelli, Charles Gwathmey, Harry Weese, Edward Larrabee Barnes, Robert A.M. Stern, Eliot Noyes, Aldo Giurgola, Richard Meier, Thom Mayne, the firm of Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer, and many more.

There's a source for Columbus' obsession with architecture. For more than 40 years now, a local businessman, J. Irwin Miller, and his Fortune 500 company, Cummins Engine, have taken it upon themselves to improve the town's architecture. Cummins and other Miller interests not only build buildings themselves. They also help select the architects for almost all the new public buildings in town. And for those public buildings, they pay the architects' fees and expenses.

I have been sent here to answer a couple of questions. After four decades, what's been the impact of all that so-called good design? Is Columbus a scattered world's fair of self-regarding architectural ego trips? Or do the buildings add up to something more?

After wandering the town for two days and talking to lots of people then and later, I came to two conclusions. First, yes, the Columbus architecture program has been an incredible boon to the city and its county. Second, if Columbus is the measure, it's going to take more than architecture to rescue the American small town from decline.

Whatever conclusion you reach, Columbus is certainly worth a visit. If you enjoy town life, you'll probably do what I did: ignore the Holiday Inn and its clones out near the interstate and come downtown to stay, instead, at the Columbus Inn at Fifth and Franklin streets. Possibly the world's largest bed-and-breakfast, the inn fills an 1895, Romanesque Revival building that was originally the city hall. It's a few steps from the center of everything.

You'll probably begin your visit at the visitors center, catercornered from the inn. Unlike other visitors centers, Columbus'

is almost entirely devoted to architecture. During my visit, it was offering a major exhibit on the work of Harry Weese, a Chicago architect who designed many of the early buildings under the Columbus architecture program. There were also displays on the meaning of architectural terms, on the architecture of Florence and Rome, and on the 16th-century Italian architect Andrea Palladio. A small theater offers a film on the town, its history, and, of course, its architecture. An architectural bus tour leaves regularly; you can choose the one-hour or the two-hour version.

J. Irwin Miller, who started all this, is 89 now. The running of the architecture program has largely been taken over by a son, Will Miller. Will heads one of the family companies, Irwin Financial, but he admits he spends a quarter to a third of his time on pro bono work—"because that's how the family wanted it." Miller talks about the program in his office, which is housed in a magical building, designed by the Pritzker Prize-winning Connecticut architect Kevin Roche, with etched glass walls that resemble lightly drifting snow.

"We've made architecture something to think and talk about," he says. He explains how the program works. The Cummins Engine Foundation maintains a list of about 30 leading American architects. It's a secret list; if you're an architect, you may not even know you're on it. The foundation deliberately keeps the process "shrouded in mystery," says Miller, to discourage architects from lobbying for consideration. Frequent consultation with distinguished older architects, deans of architecture schools, and critics helps keep the list up to date. Since Will took over, there's been a serious effort to refresh it with younger names. When the city or county needs a new public building—a school, a fire station, a city hall—the foundation picks five or so architects off the list, people it thinks would be appropriate. It suggests those names to the client—the school board, fire department, county library, or whomever. The client picks the architect it likes best. From then on, the only role of the foundation is to reimburse the client for the architect's fees and expenses.

Will Miller emphasizes there's more to Columbus than architecture. "That's only about 20 to 25 percent of the giving of the foundation. Architecture is one piece of the puzzle. We've got community identity, pride, a sense of place. There's a healthy aspiration level. There's the ethic of self-help of the Midwest, nurtured by a series of leaders over time, of whom my father is one. We can accomplish what normally only a bigger city could do. Our county of 65,000 has the cultural life of a city of 250,000. We have, for example, an excellent symphony orchestra."

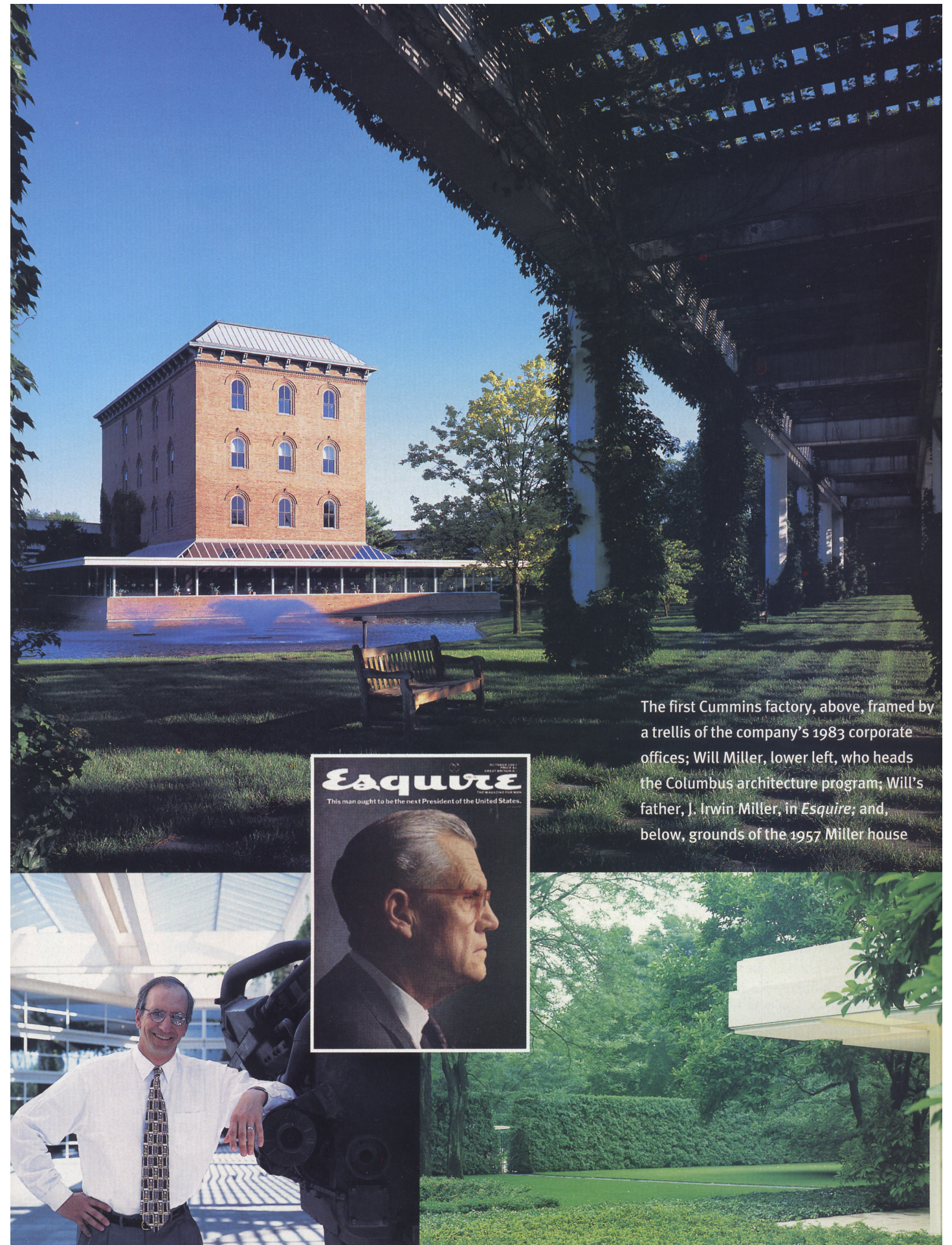
I hint that a visitor might not suspect this richness of cultural life from a walk through the largely deserted downtown. He admits the problem.

"We've got to keep the pedestrian experience alive," Miller says. "I don't know how you make a city out of parking lots."

Later, over lunch, I meet J. Irwin Miller himself. At 89, he's impossible to one-up. I tell him I first saw his name when his face appeared on the October 1967 cover of *Esquire* magazine. The article was entitled: "Is It Too Late for a Man of Honesty, High Purpose and Intelligence to Be Elected President of the United States in 1968?" I remember thinking, I tell him, "Who

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*Robert Campbell, a contributing editor of this magazine, is the Boston Globe's Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic.*



The first Cummins factory, above, framed by a trellis of the company's 1983 corporate offices; Will Miller, lower left, who heads the Columbus architecture program; Will's father, J. Irwin Miller, in *Esquire*; and, below, grounds of the 1957 Miller house



the hell is J. Irwin Miller?” He replies equably, “That’s a question I often ask myself.” Miller, I learned from that old article, besides being a master businessman, reads Greek and Latin, plays a Stradivarius, was the first layman ever elected president of the National Council of Churches, and helped organize the August 1963 March on Washington at which Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his “I have a dream” speech.

He talks about the accidental way in which the architecture program began. “At Yale around 1930 the only thing we were interested in was architecture. Yale was building its traditional colleges, but we undergraduates knew about the modern architecture in Europe. I’d followed the [1922 competition for a new *Tribune* building] in Chicago, where Eliel Saarinen, the Finnish architect, finished second with a modern design. I was a fan of that. So a few years later, when my family was involved in building First Christian Church here, I wanted him. He’d come to the United States to head Cranbrook School near Detroit. At first he said that as the son of a Lutheran, he didn’t do churches because they’d become too fancy. I went to see him and told him ours was a congregation of simple external signs and a rich inner life. It’s been said that Frank Lloyd Wright was also interviewed for the job, but he wasn’t. Saarinen said, ‘You go tell your mother I’ll do the building.’ At first people hooted at the design—‘Why can’t you do a church that looks like a church?’”

That was the first Miller involvement in architecture, around 1940. The program as it exists today began 15 years later, when Bartholomew County realized it would have to build an elementary school a year for the baby-boom generation. The first, says Will Miller, was terrible. The school board then came to Cummins Engine Foundation for help. The foundation suggested Harry Weese, and the company underwrote his fee. Weese designed a small gem, the Schmitt School. After that, the school board went to Cummins for almost every school, and the architecture program, which nobody ever planned, was under way. “The first team of outside advisers,” says J. Irwin Miller, “were Douglas Haskell, the editor of *Architectural Forum*, Pietro Belluschi, dean of the architecture school at MIT, and Eero Saarinen [Eliel’s son], who was probably my best friend.”

Over time, the program became codified, but it’s still pretty informal. New York City architect Deborah Berke remembers the phone ringing one day. Will Miller was on the line. “My understanding is he’d make a million phone calls, and if your name came up often enough, he’d call you to interview you over the phone,” she says. Six months later, she was designing a branch library. Kevin Roche, who not only designed several Columbus buildings but also served as an adviser, says he’d get calls asking him to suggest an architect for a particular new building. “I never knew who else they’d called, and I never knew how they made the final selection,” he says.

Not everyone, it should be noted, loves the program. Recently there occurred a minor revolt at Cummins, led by stockholders who thought the company should spend more on dividends and less on good works. And you hear mutterings in the town about elitism, about the Millers trying to run everything. But those are minor dissonances in a general chord of public approval.

Enough about the process. We’re here to look. What’s

Columbus really like? First of all, among all those buildings, only a few qualify as remarkable works of architecture.

The best is still Eliel Saarinen’s First Christian Church. No architect I spoke with failed to give it first place. First Christian is modernism at its best: logical in its order and orientation, bold in its shapes and spaces, but still in touch with the crafts tradition. Photographs don’t do justice to the magic of its perfectly balanced yet asymmetrical architecture, especially in the main sanctuary. But there’s more than the sanctuary; First Christian fills a whole city block. Wings containing offices, classrooms, and a daycare center branch out from the sanctuary to frame elegant courtyards.

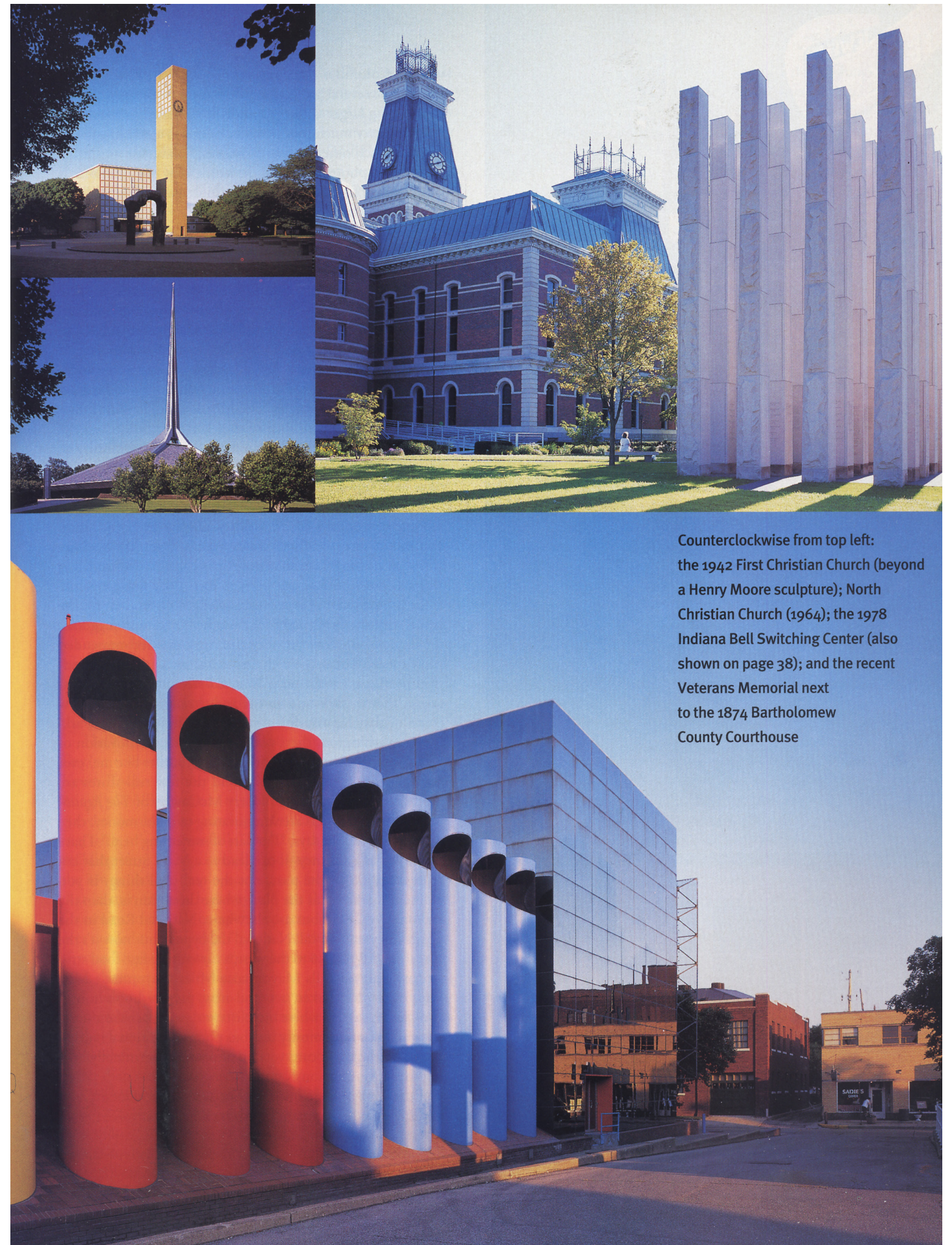
One of these wings is particularly successful: Raised a story above the ground, it’s a bridge that allows the lawn to flow beneath it in the modern manner, while indoors its corridors are illuminated with south-facing glass. Unfortunately, it’s necessary here to ring the preservation alarm. A minister with a growing congregation plans to double the width of this wing, thus destroying those elegant corridors, and—worse still—fill the open space beneath with new construction. Most buildings only become more interesting as change layers up over time, but a few are so perfect you don’t mess with them. First Christian is one. And since the church owns a parking lot across the street, why try to expand on the old site? Isn’t crossing the street part of the neighborliness of small towns? Isn’t that how you generate community life?

Probably the second most remarkable design isn’t architecture; it’s the landscaped gardens around J. Irwin Miller’s own house in a pleasant neighborhood a mile or so north of downtown. The house—one of a very few by Eero Saarinen, well known for Dulles Airport near Washington and many other buildings—is a gem in itself. But the landscape, by Dan Kiley of Vermont, who has done a lot of work in Columbus, is a true masterpiece—not, alas, open to the public. Among other winners are *The Republic* building (1971), home of the town’s newspaper and one of the most elegant modern glass boxes ever conceived, by the late Chicago architect Myron Goldsmith; and Eero Saarinen’s Irwin Union Bank and Trust (1954), including its addition by Kevin

Roche (1973), where Will Miller has his office. The younger Saarinen also did a much-admired church, North Christian, but it’s perhaps too theatrical, in the mode of Saarinen works like the TWA terminal at JFK Airport in New York. Also strong are two of the newest additions, the Veterans Memorial in the main town square, by Thompson and Rose of Boston, where the carved quotations from soldiers’ letters home bring you to tears; and Mill Race Park, by Michael Van Valkenburgh, also of Boston, a relaxed, pleasantly varied large park next door to downtown. The park isn’t helped much by garish pavilions designed by Stanley Saitowitz of San Francisco, including an observation tower that’s a nostalgic revival of the gritty industrial architecture of a bygone era—although in fairness, Saitowitz’s grandstand is elegant.

So there’s plenty for the architecture buff to see. And there are less visible virtues, such as the fact that Columbus has jump-started the careers of a lot of good architects (“the chance to

## First Christian Church is modernism at its best.



Counterclockwise from top left: the 1942 First Christian Church (beyond a Henry Moore sculpture); North Christian Church (1964); the 1978 Indiana Bell Switching Center (also shown on page 38); and the recent Veterans Memorial next to the 1874 Bartholomew County Courthouse





work in Columbus made my career,” says Van Valkenburgh, who’s done several projects there). But do these gems add up to anything larger than their individual selves? Not usually. They’re pretty much scattered, like raisins in a pudding. They reinforce each other in only a couple of places, of which the best, always photographed as the iconic view of Columbus, is a plaza where I.M. Pei’s main library looks past a Henry Moore sculpture toward First Christian Church.

Do the buildings, on the other hand, destroy the genius loci of Columbus? Is this an example of globalization, in which the special character of a place is violated by the inrush of outside fashions? Will Columbus eventually become Anywhere? I don’t think so. For the most part, the new buildings don’t feel as if they’ve landed from Mars. Modernism is sometimes castigated as an international style that ignores local scale and context, and that’s often a fair rap. But in Columbus, the architects have usually looked around and found ways to be good neighbors. “I did a less aggressive, less industrial looking building than I might have done elsewhere,” says Deborah Berke of her new branch library in the neighboring community of Hope. “This building’s *nice*.” On the other hand, nobody’s done any stage-set revivals of the past, either.

Finally, the key question: Does the architecture program nurture community life? I wish I could say so. But Columbus’ main street, called Washington, is pretty lifeless, although not so bad as many of America’s boarded-up Main Streets. And in the whole city you can’t get a good meal, as far as I could tell. I asked one knowledgeable resident for the best restaurant; he thought for a moment and then suggested the name of a private country club. Another recommended what turned out to be a chain restaurant with galvanized-steel peanut buckets and galvanized-steel partitions: a nostalgic, theme-park nod to the industrial past, a lowbrow clone of that high-style viewing tower in Mill Race Park. Along Washington, there’s been a lot of cute renovation of Victorians, but hardly anybody (except tourists like me) ever seems to be on the sidewalks, and the few real stores are pretty much empty. Editor Harry McCawley of *The Republic* tells me the owners aren’t renovating to make money; they just want to feel, he says, “I’m part of something here.” That’s great, yet—as at Disney—it can lead to a Main Street that is a representation of the past, not the real vital thing. If you define Main Street as the place where the action is, then the real ones in Columbus are elsewhere: National Road in the north (they used to call National the bypass, but now it’s the center) and Route 46 to the west, a car-culture fast-food strip a former mayor calls Mayonnaise Mile. Mayonnaise Mile leads to Tipton Lakes, a brand-new, picture-book house-and-garden suburb where bicyclists and joggers snake among streams, lakes, and mostly hideous phony-traditional houses: a kind of Hallmark card version of paradise, terminally boring to me, but obviously a marketing success.

I try some of these questions on Will Miller. Doesn’t Tipton Lakes (a development with which he was involved) suck

**From top: a Washington Street scene; the Commons, a 1974 shopping mall positioned at one end of Washington; and a 1992 addition to Northside Middle School**

life out of downtown? As always, his answer is interesting. He points out that Columbus developed at a confluence of rivers and streams, from which flatboats once traveled as far as New Orleans. Downtown grew up next to those streams. But they occupy a floodplain that can’t be built on. (Mill Race Park is in the floodplain.) So downtown Columbus isn’t a center; it is, in fact, at the extreme southwest corner of the city, bordered by floodplain at its south and west. By putting Tipton Lakes on the other side of the floodplain, developers hoped to recenter the downtown. It’s an idea that may look better on a map than in reality. I find it hard to see how a suburban sprawl development is going to help the downtown.

Two other, more disastrous attempts have been made, over the years, to invigorate Washington Street. The first, in 1974, was designed by Cesar Pelli and is called the Commons. Occupying a full block at the lower end of Washington, it’s a shopping mall sheathed in dark solar glass, a sort of black hole in the city. The Commons violates every commonsense principle of marketing you can think of. You can’t see what’s for sale through the black glass, so there’s nothing to lure you in. If you do go inside, you find yourself in an intimidatingly huge volume of empty public space, surrounded by a few small shops and restaurants, along with commercially unrentable space that’s used for things like two art galleries (one closed much of the time), a friendship association with a Japanese sister city, and a branch outlet for government licenses. There’s nowhere near enough critical mass of activity to hold your interest or make you want to return. Like other urban malls of its era, the Commons is a misguided attempt to bring a suburban idea downtown. All you get is a bad mall and a damaged Main Street. The Commons is kept on life support by means of an endless series of programmed activities, everything from concerts to aerobic calisthenics.

The other, less forgivable mistake is the Cummins Engine corporate headquarters designed in 1983 by Kevin Roche. It’s only a block off Washington and brings 700 office workers to the center of town, workers who should be out lunching, strolling, and socializing with other townsfolk. Instead, the Cummins building turns its handsomely landscaped backside to the town, and the employee entrance faces onto a parking lot that in turn fronts a highway and the floodplain. Still worse, Cummins installed a company cafeteria to make sure nobody ever needed to go outside. “When I go there, I never recognize anyone,” reports a long-time Columbus observer. “You never meet those people anywhere else.”

I harbor a bias: that the function of towns is to bring people together as a community, to introduce them to one another so they can develop a life rich in experience. Life is impoverished when we feel we know the stars of our favorite sitcoms better than we know our neighbors.

Columbus has done wonders. But maybe the focus is still a little off. “We’re still in the mode of saving retail downtown,” says Will Miller. “We’ve done a C-plus to B-minus job.” I’d argue he has the cart before the horse. What downtown needs is people living and working there. Some kind of retail will follow them, but it isn’t going to bring them there. What if Cummins found a way

to encourage its younger employees to live above the Washington Street stores? What if it closed that headquarters cafeteria?

Why would you want to live above the store, you ask? Well, you can forget the commute, you can walk to work, you can enjoy restaurants and entertainment without a car trek, you can save a lot of money, you can enjoy the social and cultural buzz of a living town. Ask anyone who’s inhabited such a place. A Columbus woman remembers how, way back around World War II, her family and many others used to come downtown to Washington Street in the evenings. To eat, I ask? No, she says, just to sit on the fender of the car or stroll the sidewalks, talking to everyone. She remembers it with affection.

Some of the latest initiatives aim at this kind of community life, but they’re half measures. There’s attention to what Will Miller calls “ligaments”—connective tissue, such as new bike, roller-blade, and hiking trails that will link the city’s parks. Even at that bold bridge “front door” interchange out at the interstate, room was left for such trails to thread through the concrete and steel. There’s been attention, too, to streetscape in the form of tree plantings and patterned paving, sometimes including bricks with donors’ names engraved on them. A graphics program is being tested to help visitors by dividing the city into five color-coded districts, with coordinated directional signs.

There’s admirable local patriotism in much of this activity. But some of it may be missing the point. The last thing Columbus needs is more aesthetic fine tuning. Washington Street is already too tame. What it’s desperately lacking is a sense of irrepressible life busting out.

**Do the  
buildings  
destroy the  
pervading  
spirit?**

“Retail is the obvious answer to pedestrian traffic,” says Miller. But there were cities filled with pedestrians before the age of the retail consumer, which began only with the department stores of the late 19th century. Samuel Johnson rarely went shopping in 18th-century London. Florence in the Renaissance did not offer a retail experience (although it certainly does today). If major retail isn’t going to return to downtown—and I don’t see why it should—does that mean the end of city life? Is that really all there was?

Columbus poses what may be the key question for the city of the 21st century. How do you make a city center that isn’t dependent on consumerism? How do you recapture the intensely rich cultural and social life of cities, without a blitz of shopping?

Only a few miles away, I stopped at Franklin, a similar town that hasn’t had the benefit of anything like Columbus’ architecture program. I wanted to compare. This town’s courthouse square, which obviously had once been magnificent, was now occupied largely by antiques malls. The town was selling its image while its life was disappearing, as if you were peddling your dying grandmother’s jewels. Columbus could become an upscale version of that. It could turn into a painted mask of itself: a theme park of architecture and a theme park of Main Street America. Or it could reinvent the American small town. Oddly enough, so far as I can find out, no other patron has tried to emulate the great achievement of the Millers anywhere else in America. It’s still Columbus’ ball game to win or lose. I wouldn’t bet against this town.