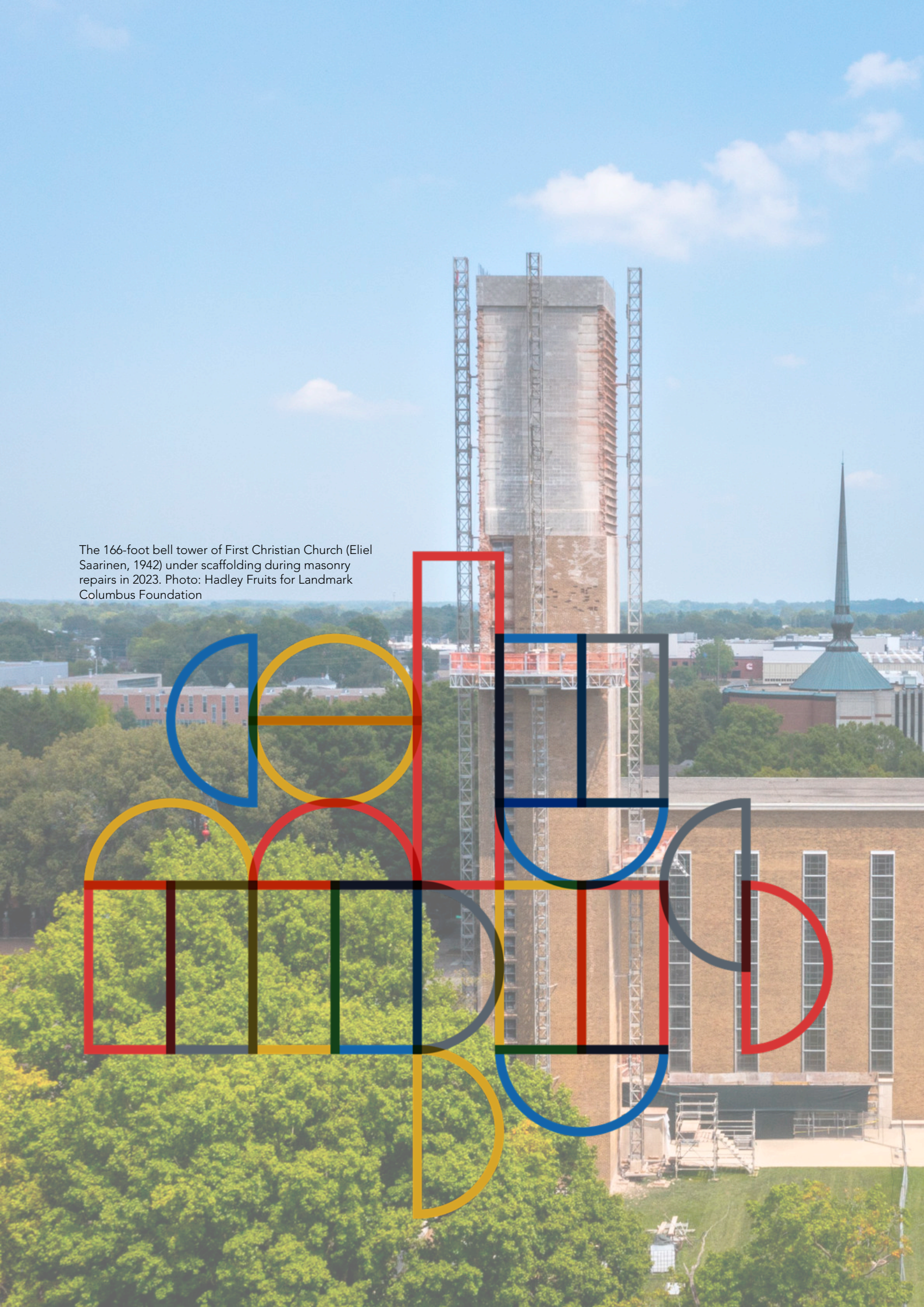


The 166-foot bell tower of First Christian Church (Eliel Saarinen, 1942) under scaffolding during masonry repairs in 2023. Photo: Hadley Fruits for Landmark Columbus Foundation

When Conservation Becomes Civic

By Richard McCoy





I trained as a conservator-restorer in the United States. My education at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts, internships at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art, and a decade at the Indianapolis Museum of Art formed the habits that still shape how I work: close examination, material analysis, documentation, and the ethics of intervention.

The profession trains judgment before action. It teaches restraint and places the conservator within a continuum of time. The art and artifacts we care for may outlast us. Every individual thing we work on carries its history in its material condition, so care begins with close attention to what is there, physically. I did not expect those habits to lead me out of museum life and into a leadership position in the civic life of a small Indiana city.

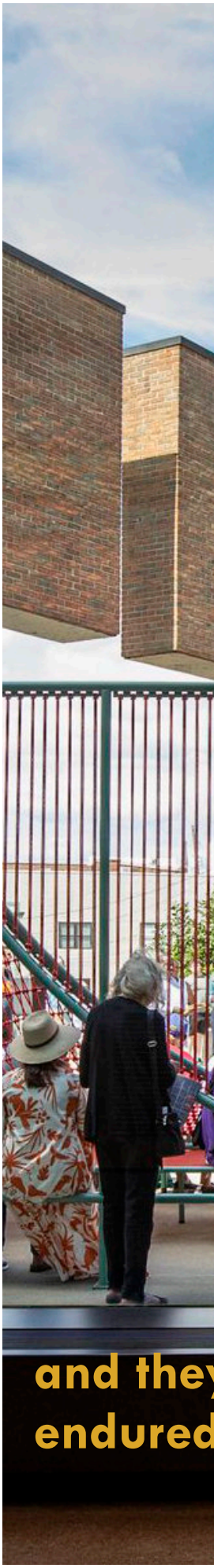
In 2013, I found myself on the other side of a new museum director's vision. Days later, I appeared at the Redevelopment Commission in Columbus, Indiana, to pitch my services. That meeting set me on the path toward creating Landmark Columbus Foundation, an organization charged with caring for, celebrating, and advancing the cultural heritage of a city with one of the most significant concentrations of modern architecture in North America.

Columbus has about 50,000 residents. Its schools, churches, parks, and civic buildings include works by Eliel Saarinen, Eero Saarinen, Harry Weese, I. M. Pei, Kevin Roche, and Deborah Berke. These buildings did not appear by accident, and they have not endured by accident.

The story usually gets told as patronage, and it began that way. In 1942, the family of the industrialist J. Irwin Miller commissioned Eliel Saarinen to design a new home for their own congregation, First Christian Church. The family funded the construction and led the building decision-making process as well. Fifteen years later, something different began.

In 1957, the Cummins Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the engine company led by Miller, paid the architect's fee for a public elementary school, Lillian C. Schmitt Elementary, designed by Harry Weese. While the money came from a corporation, the design decisions were made by a school board answerable to voters. Three years later, the foundation formalized this funding-design model, opening it to any public building in Columbus,

"These buildings did not appear by accident,





Bryony Roberts Studio's "Soft Civic," a 2019 J. Irwin and Xenia S. Miller Prize installation for Exhibit Columbus. Photo: Hadley Fruits for Landmark Columbus Foundation

"Increasing neglect over time can be overlooked because buildings can remain standing while the discipline of caring for them weakens"





Left: High school students from TuFuturo lead a Spanish-language walking tour along Washington Street in downtown Columbus, August 2024. **Right:** The twin-arched overpass carrying State Road 46 over Interstate 65, designed by Jean M. Muller of J. Muller International and completed in 1997, photographed during repair work in 2023. Both photos by Hadley Fruits for Landmark Columbus Foundation

provided the architect came from a list assembled by a jury of design professionals. The model was used for fire stations, libraries, parks, and government offices. Boards and committees chose whether to participate on a project-by-project basis, and they have continued to do so for decades. This building practice in Columbus survived Miller's death in 2004 because it had become an institutional expectation that no longer required his presence. The program remains active today with two new buildings currently under construction.

Learning this legacy taught me that the central focus for maintaining this established Columbus cultural tradition for the built environment is in discovering how to sustain the civic habits that made those buildings possible. This quest inevitably leads to other questions. How does a community care for what it inherits? How does it decide what deserves protection? How does it build support for stewardship measured in decades? How does it create conditions in which new work will be seen as worthy of the same care?

Conservators are familiar with working through these questions. We recognize when quality has been protected over time, and we know how fragile that continued protection is. Materials and documentation often survive, but Institutional memory may only partly survive over time. A culture of attention continues only when the community and institutions actively choose to renew it. Even museums evidence how easily that transmission of collective knowledge can break. Standards may slip. Context is forgotten. Short-term pressures hold more weight than long-term judgments. At the civic scale, the responsibility of continued care becomes political and more widely distributed. Care passes among property owners, institutions, public bodies, professionals, and residents who possess different forms of authority and unequal resources. Increasing neglect over time can be overlooked because buildings can remain standing while the discipline of caring for them weakens.

For a decade, Landmark Columbus Foundation has worked to sustain the city's habits of civic awareness



Into the Hedge by SO-IL, a J. Irwin and Xenia S. Miller Prize installation for the 2019 Exhibit Columbus exhibition. Photo: Hadley Fruits for Landmark Columbus Foundation

and action. Some of our work follows established preservation practices—research; documentation; conservation planning; advocacy; and fundraising for significant buildings, landscapes, and artworks. Other work is public and experimental.

Through Exhibit Columbus we commission installations that place real design questions in public spaces. We created Progressive Preservation as a system to treat preservation as continuous, anticipatory, and embedded in everyday decisions. With our newly-formed Civic Design Institute we have begun working with communities across Indiana to understand how design excellence can become a civic practice beyond Columbus.

An Exhibit Columbus commission from 2019 is a model case study of the Foundation in action. SO–IL, one of that year's five recipients of the J. Irwin and Xenia S. Miller Prize, began with a maintenance problem at the Miller House and Garden. The 70-year-old arborvitae hedge surrounding the outdoor swimming pool at the Miller House and Garden, one of seven National Historic Landmarks in Columbus, had reached the end of its life and was scheduled for replacement. SO–IL procured the replacement trees early and temporarily installed all 130 of them on the lawn of the Bartholomew County Courthouse, strung with a hand-woven hammock structure whose nylon webbing takes its colors from Alexander Girard's palette for the Miller House dining chairs. For one season, a hedge that had always marked a private boundary held the public interest.

The next spring, the trees were planted at the Miller Garden where they continue to grow. The temporary public installation had become part of the preservation project, situated transitionally between the arborvitae hedge removal and replanting. It made a maintenance cycle public and allowed the replacement material to carry civic meaning before assuming its permanent role at the landmark. In this instance, contemporary art and design became part of the preservation method itself.





Above: Richard McCoy, Executive Director of Landmark Columbus Foundation, welcomes participants to the 2024 Exhibit Columbus Community Kickoff, opening the program's fifth cycle. Hadley Fruits for Landmark Columbus Foundation

Below: Opening weekend crowds gather at *Accessing Nostalgia*, the 2024–25 J. Irwin and Xenia S. Miller Prize installation by Chicago-based Adaptive Operations at the Crump Theatre. Hadley Fruits for Landmark Columbus Foundation

Oftentimes, art and design are used as community engagement tools to bring people together, but the work we have commissioned through 10 years of Exhibit Columbus has allowed new ideas to emerge that build collective memory throughout the community and create meaning that is transferable to other places. What is preserved is just as much the personal connections to the material or formal aspects of art as it is the ideas they represent in their original state and their continued evolution.

These ideas from Exhibit Columbus commissions now rest on a strategic framework our board recently adopted—Design Excellence as Civic Practice—which claims that design excellence is a civic discipline, sustained by habits belonging to, and sustained by, an entire city rather than any one project. Communities practice those habits through attention, collaboration across public and private interests, public participation in decisions about

shared space, and investment measured in decades. This year we will convene a national summit, Prove It, to test that claim with other communities.

This year I am also testing the Landmark Columbus Foundation strategic framework against the wider field. The James Marston Fitch Charitable Foundation has awarded me a Mid-Career Fellowship for research titled *Preservation in Public: Art, Design, and the Making of Civic Belonging.* The project maps practitioners and organizations working where contemporary art, experimental design, and preservation meet; develops a framework to explain what they share; and tests that framework against Columbus and other programs in North America and Western Europe.

The fellowship's namesake matters here. James Marston Fitch co-founded the nation's first graduate program in historic preservation at Columbia University (New York) in 1964. His major book, *Historic Preservation: Curatorial Management of the Built World,* framed preservation as curatorial work at the scale of the built environment. Its title leaves an enduring question: who gets to be the curator? My fellowship follows that question into practices where professional expertise, institutional authority, artistic authorship, and community knowledge all have a place at the decision-making table.

Three questions organize this fellowship—and for now I want to keep them as questions rather than as conclusions. What changes when art and design are built into preservation practice as part of the work, instead of added afterward, as a community engagement tactic? What changes when public art becomes part of how a community understands memory and belonging? What changes when stewardship is understood as public meaning-making alongside physical protection?

Current preservation discourse often assigns material care to specialists, and public meaning is left to interpretation by those specialists. In practice, every technical decision carries cultural consequences. Choices about treatment, access, reuse, documentation, and investment influence who feels included in a community's heritage. Expertise establishes material evidence, identifies constraints, and clarifies the consequences of intervention. Civic relationships reveal how cultural, economic, and political value is created, experienced, contested, and renewed. With this in mind, preservation decisions emerge through the interaction of professional knowledge and the ways communities use, interpret, and care for what they inherit.

My training gave me a method before it gave me a career. It taught me that care is an intellectual act, that stewardship is inseparable from judgment of cultural significance, and that what survives depends on materials and on whether institutions remain capable of recognizing their obligation to what earlier generations built and entrusted to them.

If you are a conservator-restorer asking questions that exceed your current role, follow them. The field needs people willing to carry conservation's habits of mind into adjacent fields and test what those habits can contribute to larger public questions while remaining grounded in the discipline's evidence, ethics, and limits.

Conservation becomes civic when its habits of care enter the life of a city and a community takes up those habits as its own. Close attention matters in civic work. So do evidentiary honesty, restraint, and respect for what already exists. These habits aid in caring for the past as an act of optimism about the future rather than living in nostalgia.



Richard McCoy is the founding executive director of Landmark Columbus Foundation in Columbus, Indiana. Trained as a conservator at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts, he previously worked at the Indianapolis Museum of Art. He is a 1998 Fulbright scholar, a 2004 Kress Fellow, and a 2026 James Marston Fitch Mid-Career Fellow.