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# Best in the Midwest

Laugh in delight all the way to the Deborah Berke-designed bank and linger at IM Pei's library – you're in Columbus, Indiana, the world's most unlikely modernist hot spot  
 Photographer Chris Floyd. Writer Eva Hagberg

On a stretch of road in Columbus, Indiana, sandwiched between a Kohl's megabox hardware store and a Johnny Carino's Country Italian Kitchen, stands a branch of the Irwin Union Bank, one of the simplest and most sublime structures to have been built in the US in recent memory. It might seem an unlikely location for such a prime piece of high modernism – for a return to what the building's architect, Deborah Berke, calls the 'clean, strong, quiet' qualities of modernist architecture. In fact, Columbus is one of the last remaining strongholds of an architecture that, while often fabulous, just doesn't quite fit in anywhere else.

Columbus was chartered as a city in 1864, and remained a steadily growing Midwestern town without much to distinguish it from any other steadily growing Midwestern town until the success of Cummins Engine Company (founded in 1919 and run by the Miller family since 1934) kick-started its development. The foundations for Columbus's future as a hothouse of modernist American architecture were laid with the construction of Eiel Saarinen's First Christian Church in 1942, but it wasn't until the Cummins Foundation architecture programme was founded in 1957 that the town really started to bloom.

The programme evolved in response to the post-war baby boom and the demand it created for schools. There had been local outcry over a school built quickly, cheaply and poorly in an attempt to meet the demand. At the same time, Cummins Engine Company began having trouble recruiting engineers, who were fearful of relocating to a town without enough schools for their children. Cummins approached the school board about building a new school and offered to pay an architect's fee, as long as Joseph Irwin Miller, then president of Irwin Union Bank and CEO of Cummins, could approve the choice of candidate. Modernist Harry Weese was hired and the Lillian C Schmitt school opened to such happy students, and happier parents, that the board requested another similarly funded school. Miller agreed, but not before realising that this altruism-couched, business-savvy support could get out of hand unless a formal programme was instituted.

As laid out then, and as it stands now, the programme pays the architects' fees for approved public projects, including hospitals, courtrooms and schools. Buildings by architects such as the postmodernist-inflected Robert AM Stern, the spacecraft-inspired John M Johansen, and the bread-and-butter-modernist James Stewart Polshek have all been funded by the programme. Joseph Irwin Miller's son, William, the current CEO and chairman of the Irwin Financial Corporation, points out that this has had a knock-on effect. Of the 50-odd buildings on the official Columbus architecture tour, only half have »

**GRAND UNION**

**The 4000 sq ft branch of the Irwin Union Bank, designed by New York architect Deborah Berke and completed this year**





#### INNER CIRCLE

**St Peter's Lutheran church, designed by Gunnar Birkerts, was completed in 1988 and features a circular sanctuary and an 186ft tall copper-clad spire**

been funded by the programme. The rest, including *The Republic* newspaper offices by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, the Eero and Eliel Saarinen churches, and a bank building by Eero Saarinen (Irwin Union's first foray into architecture), were funded solely by the clients. It's this domino effect, with quality buildings attracting more quality buildings, which, Berke argues, sets Columbus's experience apart from the flash-in-the-pan 'Bilbao Effect' that so many other towns find when they turn to sensational architecture in search of economic salvation.

'The thing about Columbus is that these commissions by significant architects are regular buildings,' Berke says. 'They're not museums. They're not the current "cool, gotta have it" buildings.' Instead, the outstanding architecture of Columbus is found in its police stations, fire stations, schools and churches. At a time when many small towns believe in the regenerative power of big-statement architecture, often only to find themselves in the same dreary economic situation they were in before, taking such a pragmatic approach is remarkable and refreshing. There are no glass-fronted Richard Meier-designed courthouses (as in Islip, New York), no Frank Gehry-designed pottery museums (as in Biloxi, Mississippi) and no Tadao Ando-designed modern art museums (as in Fort Worth, Texas). Here, in Columbus, there is a Robert Venturi fire station close to an IM Pei public library that sits just a short drive »

#### COLUMBUS MODERNISTS

##### Deborah Berke

**One of the only truly modernist architects working today, Deborah Berke is known, and respected, for her quiet interiors, thoughtful public projects and inspired commercial work. She has designed spaces for Calvin Klein, the Battery Park City Parks Conservancy, and the Yale School of Art, among other commercial and public projects.**

##### Robert AM Stern

**Often hailed as the next dean of American architecture, Stern has risen through the ranks of the post-postmodernist architects to become one of the most recognised American architects working today. His projects include interiors and office buildings, as well as the *New York* series of books detailing the city's architectural and urban development.**

##### IM Pei

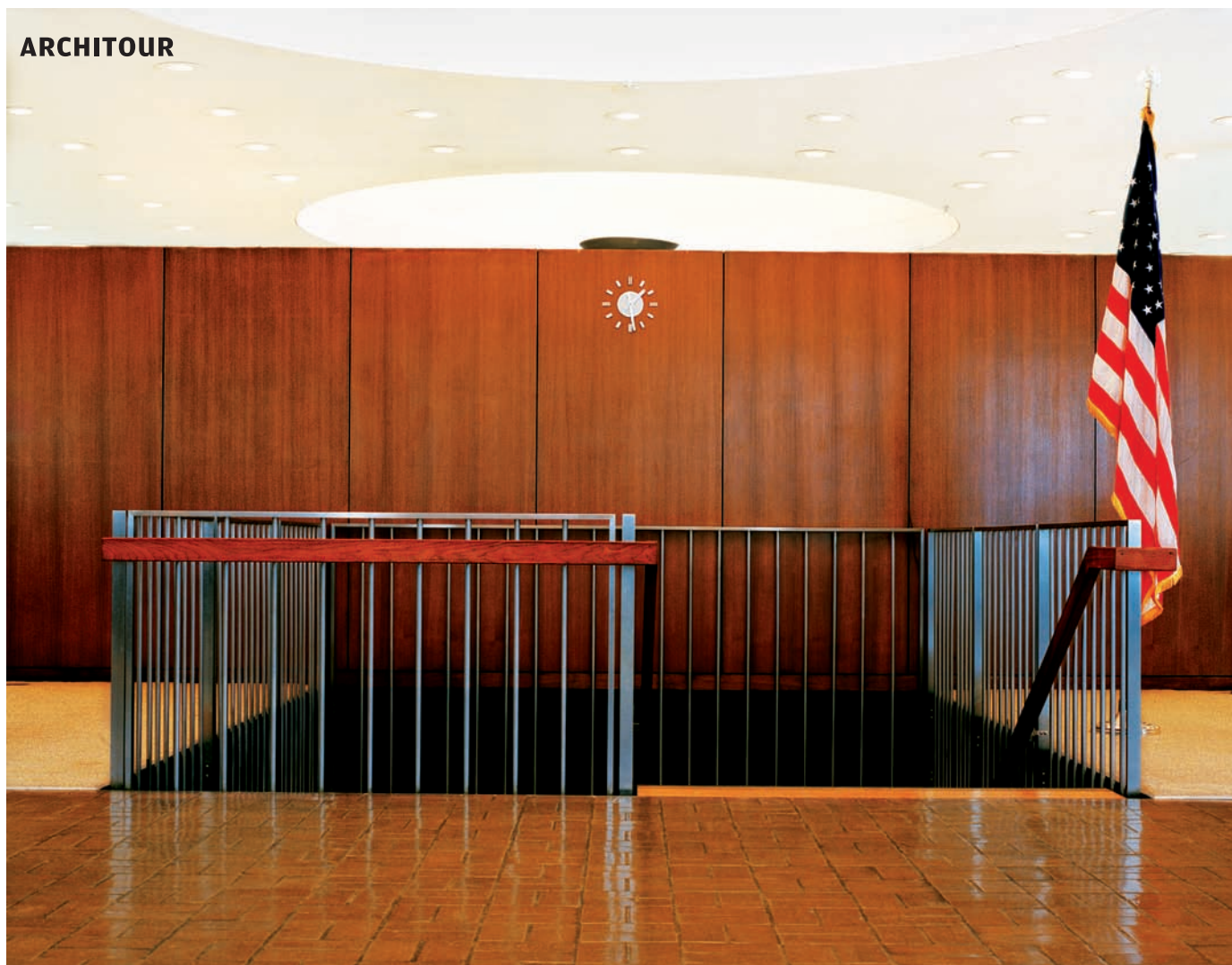
**The Chinese-born IM Pei, who is sometimes called the 'Mandarin of Modernism', became internationally famous for his glass pyramid addition to the Louvre museum, which was begun in 1983 and completed in 1989. Pei also designed the Bank of China Tower in Hong Kong and the East Building of the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC.**

##### Robert Venturi

**Venturi brought an appreciation for the kitsch to the world of architecture with his 1977 book *Learning From Las Vegas*. He identified two building typologies (which continue to be used both in and out of the classroom today) – the 'decorated shed' (a mundane structure whose function is explained by symbols or signage on the exterior) and the 'duck' (a structure whose shape actually indicates its function).**

##### Eliel and Eero Saarinen

**The Finnish father-and-son architects worked together until Eliel's death in 1950. Neither of them designed many buildings, but Eero became famous for his concrete-shell structures, like the 1962 TWA terminal at JFK international airport, and the St Louis Gateway Arch in Missouri, which was completed in 1966, five years after Eero's death.**



from a Robert AM Stern hospital. And it is here, in this environment, that Deborah Berke (a modernist architect struggling to make her name in an architectural climate that, as she says, is so much about the ‘sex symbol on the skyline’) has found her place.

Her branch building for the Irwin Union Bank is a two-note structure. The base, clad in brick and on a perpendicular axis to the main drag, is a well-proportioned, window-lined rectangle in plan and a box in section. On top of the base, about a third of the way back when seen from the street, sits a translucent glass box on which perch the words ‘Irwin Union Bank’, facing the road. In a world of signage, this one looks quite extraordinary. And that is precisely the point of it: to call attention to the bank. Because, as enticing as the space up top looks, as light-filled and perfect, it’s completely empty, save for a few fluorescent lights. Empty, but hardly useless.

‘I grew up with drive-through banking,’ says project architect Marc Leff, explaining the reason for giving such architectural attention to the canopied drive-through lanes that the glass box creates. For him, paying as much attention to the design of the drive-through as to that of the interior equalises the two previously separated customer groups. In an environment that’s typically all about money, it’s a bold move.

In Berke’s interview with William Miller, they discussed the founding of the Irwin Union Bank (it started out in the back of



**BRANCHING OUT**

**Top, interior of the town’s first Irwin Union Bank building, designed by Eero Saarinen in 1954**

**Above, interior of the new Irwin Union Bank branch, designed by Deborah Berke**

a dry goods store, in the only safe in town), and the sense of equality his family’s firm had tried to foster. Berke recalls Miller describing his ‘big idea’ for the concept of the bank: ‘It should never be polarising or look down on anyone.’ Architecturally, she translated that into bare concrete floors, white walls, pale wood counters and grey carpeting. The biggest visual design motions inside are the rows of safety deposit boxes (their tarnished shininess having almost the same effect as wallpaper) and the Noguchi lamps, which are usually the most minimal object in a room, but in this case are the most decorative.

Berke found it natural to slip into this egalitarian attitude. ‘I used to joke in lectures that it was tough being the poster child for anonymity,’ she says, dryly examining the way her work is so often (she thinks wrongly) interpreted. ‘The truth is that my work isn’t anonymous, it’s just really understated.’

After 20 minutes in the bank’s main room, it becomes increasingly clear that she’s absolutely on point. The building holds up under scrutiny. Every angle and every turn is interrelated and impeccable. It’s the quietness with which everything is executed that slips the building into the modernist camp, as opposed to the minimalist, which Berke describes as far more aggressive. ‘Minimalism has this kind of strident, “I’m so stripped down that I’m tougher than you” attitude,’ she says. ‘Modernism, with a small m, means there’s nothing extraneous.’ The bank »



#### SCHOOL MASTER

**The Clifty Creek Elementary School, built in 1982 by Richard Meier, is characteristically minimalist and provides pupils and teachers with sweeping views**

almost dares the visitor to try to find something unnecessary, something extra, but the closest it ever comes is the slightly off-kilter taps in the staff kitchen.

Despite the fact that the bank building has been privately funded, it is clear that the attitudes behind it – and indeed those that govern the construction of virtually every architecturally distinguished structure in Columbus – can be traced back to the Cummins programme and its intentions. Columbus has become a town that invites architectural tourism without fetishising architecture, that warrants closer attention without requiring excessive analysis.

And, while on a recent spring day there was virtually no one on the sidewalks save for a (heavily pregnant) 15-year-old, it is clear that the people of Columbus live, breathe and use their architecture, constantly aware of what it does for them without stepping into self-conscious territory. There will always be social problems (such as the Midwestern methamphetamine situation), and it will always be harder to find a fancier meal than the ones the peanut-littered Texas Roadhouse offers, but the backdrop against which the locals live is an architecturally important one. These buildings are never going to solve the town's problems, but they do explain why Columbus (population 39,000) has now been named the US's sixth most architecturally significant city, behind Chicago, New York, San Francisco, Boston and Washington DC. ✪

#### ARCHITECTURAL TOUR OF THE TOWN

**First Christian Church, 1942, by Eiel Saarinen, 531 Fifth Street**

This simple, yet soaring, church, Columbus's first contemporary building, marked a lasting shift in the town's architectural approach.

**Irwin Union Bank & Trust Company, 1954, by Eero Saarinen, 500 Washington Street**

One of the earliest architecturally significant structures to be built in Columbus, it set the tone of Irwin Union's later structures.

**Fire Station No 4, 1967, by Venturi & Rauch, 4720 East 25th Street**

This was designed with Venturi's 'duck' buildings (see box, page 159) in mind and is, in Venturi's words, 'ordinary, conventional, familiar'.

**Cleo Rogers Memorial Library, 1969, by IM Pei, 536 Fifth Street**

Long before he added glass pyramids to the Louvre, Pei designed this brutalist library, which features a Henry Moore sculpture outside.

**The Republic Newspaper Building, 1971, by SOM, 333 Second Street**

A clean, modern structure, *The Republic's* offices brought a new openness to the formerly hidden newspaper process.

**Regional Hospital Mental Health Center, 1972, by James Stewart Polshek, 2075 Lincoln Park Drive**

Spanning a creek, the Center links the hospital's main campus and a city park, and is a serene setting for the facility's mental health focus.

**Clifty Creek Elementary School, 1982, by Richard Meier, 4625 East 50 North Street**

The second rural school funded by the Cummins architecture programme, the multistorey school complex shows Meier's love of white simplicity.

**St Peter's Lutheran Church, 1988, by Gunnar Birkerts, 719 Fifth Street**

A curious mix of flat and curved, boxy and organic, the church focuses on the circular sanctuary, a massive, and massively lit, interior.

**Regional Hospital, 1992, by Robert AM Stern, 2400 East 17th Street**

Inspired by the original Italianate 1917 structure, the hospital is a typical Stern building, pleasingly symmetrical and warmly detailed.

**Irwin Union Bank, 2006, by Deborah Berke, 707 Creekview Drive**

This stunningly simple building breathes new life into a commercial strip dominated by big-box megastores and empty parking lots.