From a floodplain with temporary slum housing to an acclaimed park: the redevelopment project that changed Columbus, Indiana.
Welcome to Columbus
Columbus, Indiana is a truly unusual town. With a population of only 45,000, it has seven buildings included in the National Historic Landmarks program and has been ranked sixth in the nation for architectural innovation and design by the American Institute of Architects. It has been declared a “veritable museum of modern architecture,” by Smithsonian Magazine and called “one grand, landscaped park,” by USA Today (Small City, Big Dreams, Bigger Results).

One ambitious benefactor is primarily responsible for Columbus’s impressive reputation: J. Irwin Miller. From 1934 to his retirement in 1977, Miller was the Chief Executive Officer of Cummins Incorporated, a diesel engine manufacturer that designs, makes, and distributes not only engines, but also filtration and power generation products (Mills, "Biography of a Great Cummins Leader, J. Irwin Miller,"). During his time at the helm, Miller took Cummins from a company based in Indiana to a Fortune 500 corporation branching out and doing a significant amount of international business. He was a powerful man with a fortune at his disposal, and in 1964, he voiced that “Columbus should be the very best community of its size in the country,” (Small City, Big Dreams, Bigger Results). Miller decided the best and most lasting way to invest in the future of the town was in its architecture and landscaping. He had a deeply rooted belief that space shapes behavior, and it was with this ideal that he went about the search, commission, and funding of the improvement of Columbus in its entirety. Some distinguished urban development projects include First Christian Church, North Christian Church, The Miller House and Garden, The Republic Newspaper Offices, and The Irwin Conference Center, all recognized for their important work in the modernist architectural movement. Though perhaps the most rewarding development project in the history of Columbus is a park, rather than a building. Mill Race Park is another namesake of the generous man with a vision, Mr. J. Irwin Miller, and a particular point of pride for the community of Columbus.

Mill Race Park, the product of a successful development project with a particularly interesting past, is a centrally located public space in Columbus, Indiana. Train tracks separate Mill Race from the headquarters of Cummins Incorporated, an international engine company responsible for making the southern Indiana town the diverse place it is today, famous for its architectural innovation. Mill Race Park acts as a focal point for the arts and various outdoor activities.
and citywide events, but was once one of Columbus’s greatest obstacles in becoming a cleaner, safer, more community oriented place. Before the area underwent major renovations, it was a slum by the name of “Death Valley.”

The Problem
The first settlement of Columbus, Indiana took place in 1821 at the East Fork of the White River, created at the convergence of the Flat Rock and Driftwood Rivers (Berkey 2015). For upwards of a century, the public called it “Death Valley” due to the area’s annual flooding, temporary slum housing and shantytown inhabitants, rat infestation, and unpleasant-smelling Mooney Tannery site. As the town of Columbus began to grow and flourish outside the bounds of the floodplain, Death Valley continued to be an impoverished area lacking permanent settlements and being ravaged with crime. With many entrepreneurial businesses rooted in Columbus advancing and making a name for themselves outside of the local scope of the community, it became an important matter to improve the city of Columbus as a whole. The issue of Death Valley was one of the first concerns to be addressed. The city of Columbus purchased the land in the 1960s with the intention of cleaning it up and making it into a usable public space.

The first version of Mill Race was a riverfront park that was finished in the late 1960s after the community bought the land. Though a great improvement from Death Valley, Mill Race was not sufficiently utilized by the Columbus community because of the poor design. A combination of poor lighting, inadequate playground equipment, flooding, and an undesirable reputation caused the condition of the park to decay and become a popular place for illegal activities to occur (Brinegar 2015). The city was unsatisfied with the results of their renovation, but did not break ground on construction to improve Mill Race until 1989.
The Proposal & Planning Process
The idea of reinvesting in Mill Race and creating a gift for generations of Columbus citizens began with a fifty-member committee of volunteers proposing a legacy project in commemoration of the quincentennial of the voyage of Christopher Columbus. The public and private leadership within Columbus both gave a considerable amount of support to the cause as they believed it would enhance the growth and development of the downtown area and provide a beautiful green space conveniently close by.

Charles W. Wilt, as Director of the Columbus Parks and Recreation Department, served a coordinating role in the planning as well as in the construction phases of the Mill Race project (Brinegar 2015). In order to discern what the Columbus community wanted out of their ideal park, he had the Parks and Recreation Department host various events offering people a chance to voice their opinions that constituted of “squatter’s sessions” at shopping malls, town hall meetings, and visits to local elementary classrooms to talk to children about their dream playgrounds. The feedback from these events was taken into account with the available funding and what was deemed reasonable was considered for the design.

The Debate
Because the renovation of Mill Race was a legacy gift to the city of Columbus to celebrate the 1992 quincentennial, the date of completion of the project was absolutely nonnegotiable. Coordinating many different groups to focus on the final objective, having to work under the constraints and expectations of all of the people necessary to make the park a success in time for the celebration, was considered the most challenging task of the 1989 Mill Race project by the director of the City of Columbus Parks and Recreation Department at the time, Charles W. Wilt (Brinegar 2015). A host of small problems stemmed from the hard time limit. An example was the pressure placed upon the young trainees of the Job Corps, a problem that was resolved by supplementation of more experienced workers to meet the deadline.

Contention arose among the members of the city planning committee from the hiring of more workers. A large amount of effort went into the agreement with the National Job Corps to allow their students to work on the project and learn the ins and outs of landscaping and construction. A group of local leaders were working with the Indiana congressional representatives and senators in order to combine forces with the federal program (Brinegar 2015). The students were also working for free as they were getting job experience through the program. Hiring additional seasoned construction workers would deny some learning opportunities to the students and was more expensive. This dispute was settled when it became clear that it would be impossible to meet the deadline without taking certain lengths to finish Mill Race in time. This clarity came during a critical point in the construction of Mill Race, when a one hundred year flood occurred, halting construction at its most efficient level and further slowing down the pace of development until the water could be dealt with (Brinegar 2015).
Certain modifications were made to the original proposal to the park as the project advanced. The outdoor amphitheater had a revision in its design due to budget restrictions, it could no longer be a covered facility, as the arts population would have preferred. Ultimately, because of the budget cuts, the amphitheater that was finished in 1992 was not able to adequately meet the needs of the arts community. Work is being done on it currently to address accessibility to the stage, weather concerns, and technical issues (Brinegar 2015). Four steel truss bridges were saved to use in the park, but there was not enough room for all four to be put on display as originally planned. To compromise, the largest bridge was put on display as a sculpture and another was used on the People Trail as a functional piece. The two remaining were saved for use in other city parks. The city also determined that they could not afford to develop the north end of the park, land that was donated by the Cummins Engine Foundation. A solution was found to this problem when a local construction firm, Contractors United Incorporated, picked up the work and finished the development on the north side as their donation to Mill Race Park.

An issue with the park that the people of Columbus still feel could have been better planned for is the handicap accessibility. In some parts of the park there was a clear effort to ensure the accessibility for those with physical disabilities, but other structures were not designed to fully accommodate the needs of the disabled. Changes have not yet been made to remedy this negative aspect of Mill Race’s design.

**Design & Construction**

Going into the 1989 construction of Mill Race Park, three objectives determined by the both the greater community of Columbus and the city planning committee influenced its design. The first was that the space needed to be a commemoration of the diverse social and cultural history of the park, the second that the area needed to celebrate the park’s proximity to the rivers by creating a water dominated landscape, and the third that the park needed to create a provocative civic landscape that speaks of the present and
anticipates the needs of a future (Brinegar 2015). It was with these objectives in mind that the new design of Mill Race Park was drawn up and implemented.

Michael Van Valkenburgh, a landscape architect out of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Stanley Saitowitz, a structure designer from San Francisco, were given the task of redesigning and overseeing the expansion of Mill Race Park. Both men worked together to integrate the annual floodwaters into the design of the park, making many decisions that have since made the park maintainable under harsh weather conditions. Surfaces were paved with reinforced concrete rather than asphalt, as it is better able to withstand flood damage. The steel and glass walls of the restrooms are raised to allow floodwaters to flow through freely. The playground and the amphitheater are elevated on wide earth platforms to be kept above the waterline. Native species of plants the primary source of greenery, because they are hardy enough to withstand both droughts and overly saturated
conditions. All of these are examples of integration techniques within the design of the park that made Mill Race strong enough to withstand the recurring urban problem.

The Mill Race Park Project cost eight million dollars, the funding of which relied heavily on the donations from public firms and private citizens of the Columbus community (Brinegar 2015). Cummins Engine Foundation footed the bill for the work of Van Valkenburgh and Saitowitz and donated land on the north side of Mill Race to the park. The National Job Corps, a federal organization that trains disadvantaged inner-city youth in construction trades, helped to prepare the park structures and plantings, by donating approximately two million dollars in labor, materials and equipment. Other corporations such as the Arvin Foundation, the Irwin Union Foundation, the Heritage Fund of Bartholomew County, and the Irwin-Sweeney-Miller Foundation made a pool of funds that encouraged people to donate with $2 for $1 challenge that promised to match money that was donated privately (Brinegar 2015). Often people would buy pieces of the park, like a bench, shelter-house, or tree, as a part of their donation. In this way, Columbus raised four million dollars between 1990 and 1992.

The Final Product & Impacts
In 1989, Mill Race Park began going through an extensive renovation that ended three years later in 1992. The result was a wonderfully transformed and well-used public space consisting of eighty-five acres of land and multiple points of appeal to draw the community in. Citizens of Columbus have long been known for their generosity and
support of lasting projects meant to improve their community as well as for their 
appreciation of well-designed public spaces. Without the grassroots involvement of the 
area, Mill Race Park would not have been nearly as successful of a development project 
and would not be as well used as it is today (Brinegar 2015). The park serves as a good 
example of civil society coming together to meet the wants of people through the state; a 
similar approach to financing could be successfully replicated in communities of like 
values.

Since the completion of the Mill Race development project, the surrounding area has 
grown to become wealthier. Maps 1 and 2, pictured on the previous page, show 
downtown Columbus shaded to display average family income. Mill Race Park is the 
area where the Driftwood and Flatrock Rivers meet and flow into the White River with 
the curvy road that comes off of Lindsey Street right in the middle of both the maps. As 
seen in the comparison of the two maps that show average family income in 2000 and 
2015, with the lightest color being the least wealthy and the darkest color being the most 
wealthy, downtown Columbus has become more wealthy as judged by this variable. In 
2000, downtown was within the lowest bracket, between $0 and $4,1967.99. In 2015, this 
same area was within the second lowest bracket of $61,154 and $76,402.99. The other 
shaded areas changed colors only slightly because Columbus as a whole became much 
more wealthy, making the brackets different for Map 1 and Map 2. Many factors played 
into making the downtown area richer, Mill Race Park being one of them. Over the last 
decade, Cummins has been hiring more young, often international, professionals who 
move to Columbus and need a place to live. Apartment buildings have been built to 
accommodate the influx of young professionals that are within walking distance of both 
the Cummins building and Mill Race Park. The apartments were in high demand and 
filled up quickly because of the proximity to work and easy access to the recreational 
green space. A hotel bought the land across from Mill Race and was built so its guests 
could have a beautiful view of the park. New local boutiques, restaurants, and bars have 
opened up and been able to prosper because of the revenue they are generating from the 
younger class of people. Mill Race, as a well-utilized and wonderfully organized area for 
outdoor activities, is a factor that is making living downtown more desirable, and because 
of the increased demand, the price of the apartments is getting higher and more money is 
being circulated around the area.

Today Mill Race Park acts as a focal point for the arts, various outdoor activities, and 
citywide events in Columbus, Indiana, attracting countless visitors per year for things like 
the annual Chautauqua of the Arts festival, multiple 5k walks and races to benefit 
different charities, symphony concerts and theater performances, the Festival of Lights 
display, and an abundance of other recreational activities. The park includes a round 
reflecting pool bordered by trees, a river vista, a senior center, an 84-foot lookout tower, 
an amphitheater, basketball courts, and many biking and walking trails that connect to a 
larger circuit of trails that wind throughout the Columbus area.
Mill Race Park won the 1993 Boston Society of Landscape Architecture Honor Award, the 1994 ASLA Design Merit Award and was recognized as one of the top one hundred properties in the nation for its design, reputation, and accessibility by Landscape Management Magazine in 1996 (Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates Inc.). Mill Race Park is a triumph urban planning and public space, as it is an acclaimed park built to withstand a recurring urban problem.

**Evaluation**

After researching Mill Race Park, I feel that the best way to evaluate it as a development project is to put it into context with the values of fundamental figures in urban planning and compare the park to what these figures understood an ideal park to be. William H. Whyte was a sociologist commissioned to study park and plaza use and help draft a design plan to improve the utilization of New York City’s parks. In his research, he found that elegance of a space bears no effect on whether or not people will actually use it. Instead, he found that factors like a central location with a view of the street, strong flow of people, a solid balance between sunshine and shady areas, and open design will draw more people to use a public space more frequently. Beyond that, features like touchable water, available food, an abundance of movable seating, and landmarks to gather around will further increase the chances of a park being well used. Mill Race has a touchable water all over with its placement at the convergence of two rivers, round reflecting pool, and fountain. There is no permanent food available, but food and ice cream trucks will set up shop there during summer days and for large events. The seating at Mill Race is abundant, but by no means movable because it wouldn’t be able to withstand the flooding. All of the architectural structures in Mill Race are meant to act as landmarks with their specific purposes, recognizable qualities, and significant size. While the location is relatively central, the park doesn’t have the best view of the street as Whyte suggests the best parks have. There is enough sun and enough shade and plenty of grass and trees. The design of Mill Race is really as open as it gets, it’s essentially an eighty-five acre plot of land with water features, a speckling of trees, some monumental architectural structures, and grass filling all of the space in between. If Whyte looked at Mill Race, he would have deemed it a space that is likely to be well used, despite the details that do not align completely with his findings. He would’ve been correct.

Epic planners have claimed that the presence of public parks, if planned and constructed correctly, could have a distinctly positive effect on society. Of the five urban epic planners, three have details of their plans that can be seen in Mill Race Park: Olmsted, Burnham, and Le Corbusier. None of their visions were fully carried out in Mill Race, but the some of the benefits and downfalls of their park plans have been manifested in the finished urban development project. Evaluating Mill Race as a solution to the flooding slum situation based on the ideals of Olmsted, Burnham, and Le Corbusier helps to identify where the park has succeeded and failed.
Olmsted was the man who spoke for the trees; he believed that a park should act as a refuge from the chaos that is the urban environment. Parks should be spaces that provide both mental and physical relief. If a park perfectly matched Olmsted’s vision, he claimed that it would improve public health and combat crime. Mill Race has a good deal of trees, which Olmsted would have appreciated. Because Mill Race is conveniently located near downtown, it is common for people to spend their lunch break there or use the trails to fit in some exercise. Olmsted would have preferred for the park to be right in the midst of the downtown area, but Mill Race is close enough that it provides the same benefits that a park in the middle of an urban area would. As in Olmsted’s vision, Mill Race is refuge, which indicates a large success on the part of the planners and greatly benefits the people of Columbus.

Burnham’s urban park plans were designed to impress and inspire. It was his conviction that if one built a public place to be grand and monumental that it would in turn inspire and motivate all who came in contact with the space. People would want to become the best versions of themselves and this would promote good morals and values within the surrounding community. An epic failure associated with Burnham’s plan is that in times when inspiring architecture and landscaping is not being used for its intended purpose, nighttime or after business hours for instance, the area becomes a great place for people to meet to participate in illegal activities. In these instances, nobody is getting inspired and the opposite of what Burnham intended is occurring. Mill Race’s inspiring architecture is the amphitheater and its inspiring landscaping is the round reflecting pool. The amphitheater is meant to host artful and musical events and the reflecting pool has been made to be beautiful and thought provoking. These structures do arouse good things in people while a festival is being held or the sun is out, but in the night, Mill Race is susceptible to Burnham’s failure. When the park is generally empty and the dark of night cloaks the actions of those who may still be out, it is assumed that criminal activity is occurring. Mostly juvenile drug dealing has been known to occur. Dealing drugs is not a behavior of a person with good morals, as it is against the law. Both Burnham’s benefit and disadvantage can be seen in Mill Race Park, an inspiring place during the day and somewhere to avoid during the night.

Le Corbusier was under the impression that society would get more out of public space if all of the buildings were tall, condensed, and far away from each other, and if there was a large expanse of grass in between these very tall, very dense buildings. Le Corbusier’s vision can be seen in elements of Mill Race, but the park itself does not achieve the efficiency or speed that Le Corbusier believed a public space should. All of the structures of the park are spread out greatly, from the playground to the observation tower to the amphitheater to the covered bridge. Separating these structures are large stretches of grass, much like in Le Corbusier’s urban plans. People use these grassy spaces for sports games and picnics; unlike they would have in Le Corbusier’s vision. There are individual paths designated for walking, biking, and driving that resemble somewhat the four-tier highway system Le Corbusier proposed. This is more efficient and safer for the movers
and shakers using the park space, so in this way, his benefit is seen on a much smaller scale. The structure in Mill Race that most clearly mirrors the structures of Le Corbusier’s plans is the 84-foot observation tower. It is not used for the same purpose as the tall buildings within his vision, but it’s a dense, tall building nonetheless. The epic failures of Le Corbusier’s plans are not an issue within Mill Race, though there is a different problem that has come from one of the Corbusian elements. One suicide and two known attempts have occurred from jumping off of the top of the observation tower since the completion of Mill Race Park. In the winter of 2015, a teenage boy attempted, but was saved. There was an uproar about the worth of the tower and since then there have been talks about removing it completely because of the danger. What Le Corbusier expected to be the benefits of his plan, the efficiency of movement and the dense structures saving room for green space, can be found in Mill Race if only on a small scale.

I grew up in Columbus and got to experience Mill Race Park on a regular basis. Maybe that makes me partial, but it definitely has given me insight on how important the park is to the community and what role it plays in the design of the town. I can personally attest to the races, the Frisbee matches, the musical performances, and the barbeques. In my opinion, this park was the best way to transform the space. The land could not be used for anything essential because of the flooding, and from that grew a beautiful, universally useful, public park. If I had the power, I would make it more accessible for the handicapped with paths and an elevator in the observation tower. I would hold more “squatters sessions” to see how the amphitheater could better fit the need of the arts community and work to fulfill those needs. I would add more lighting. Overtime I would try to gather a committee to add more flood-withstanding structures to the park; I think it could benefit from more landmarks.

Altogether, Mill Race Park is a successful urban development project, a strong solution to a recurring problem. The Columbus community benefits from its presence and it makes the downtown area more valuable. J. Irwin Miller, a crucial figure in the improvement of the town economically and visually said, “Columbus should be the very best community of its size in the country,” (Small City, Big Dreams, Bigger Results). While there is no definitive way to judge whether Columbus holds this title, if there were to be a competition, Mill Race Park would be an advantage. Standing as a tribute to the Columbus community and the history and values of the city, Mill Race Park is a public space of green and ever-changing beauty that acts as a functionally useful urban area.
References


A significant portion of information about the Mill Race Development Project was gleaned from email and phone correspondence with friend, coach, and neighbor Jamie Brinegar, who is the current Financial Director of the Parks and Recreation Department of the City of Columbus, Indiana. He has a great wealth of knowledge on the history of parks in Columbus and access to records that I would not have had access to and our conversations were a great help when elaborating on the bare bones of information.

Phone number: 812-606-7372
Email: jamiebrinegar88@gmail.com