INTROSPECTION AND INTERNAL OPERATIONS: ARCHITECTURE RESOURCES IN THE IRWIN-SWEENEY-MILLER FAMILY COLLECTION AT THE INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY LIBRARY

Above photographs are courtesy of the Irwin-Sweeney-Miller Family Collection, Indiana Historical Society

Maire Gurevitz, Archivist, Indiana Historical Society
What does IHS have to offer?

- The Irwin-Sweeney-Miller Family Collection is more diverse and comprehensive, but less architecture specific than the IMA Miller House collection or the Columbus Archives.

- Strengths of our collection are:
  - Personal, business, and philanthropic correspondence from all family members
  - J. Irwin Miller public speaking preparation notes and speech transcripts
  - Casual/candid family photographs
Life at the Miller House

A game of baseball in the yard, ca. 1960s. Irwin-Sweeney-Miller Family Collection, Indiana Historical Society
Life at the Miller House

Xenia Miller and Alexander Girard seated in the Conversation Pit, ca. 1970s. Irwin-Sweeney-Miller Family Collection, Indiana Historical Society
Life at the Miller House

Birthday party for Will Miller, ca. 1960s. Irwin-Sweeney-Miller Family Collection, Indiana Historical Society
Life at the Miller House

J. Irwin, Will, and Betsy Miller relaxing on the patio, ca. 1960s. Irwin-Sweeney-Miller Family Collection
Life at the Miller House

J. Irwin, Margaret, Xenia, and Betsy Miller relaxing in the Conversation Pit, ca. 1960s. Irwin-Sweeney-Miller Family Collection, Indiana Historical Society
Life at Miller House

J. Irwin and Xenia Miller entertaining at home, ca. 1980s. Irwin-Sweeney-Miller Family Collection, Indiana Historical Society
of what it takes to make a business run. As to the prestige
etc. part of it the only thing I can do at the present
is to ignore it, however pleasant it would be to possess it,
and to take the attitude that I intend to do my job
as well as I can using any (and that I mean) means
I can, whether it involve loss or gain of prestige or what.
I am not able yet to pitch myself into that job to
see things to be done, or to arrive at decisions that show
be easy over. I am very lazy, I watch the clock.
Introspection

- What experiences and interactions inspired J. Irwin Miller to begin the architecture program in Columbus?
- What were Miller’s thoughts on the tension between architects, their clients, and the larger community?
- What did Miller define as “great” architecture?
- How do Miller’s innermost thoughts on community and architecture guide the city of Columbus moving forward?
Introspection- Desire to do good work

- **JIM’s notes, 8 Mar.1934:**
  
  “Last June I left school, last Fall I ‘worked’ on the coast. This January I returned home to live after a ten years absence, and now work at the Engine Company. I shall be wholly responsible if it fails- in very very small part responsible if it succeeds…I intend to do my job as well as I can using any (and that I mean) means I can.”

- **JIM’s notes, 1 Jan. 1935:**
  
  “If the Engine Co. remains a place where work of a high quality is done, then Columbus will continue to be made up of a good sort of people…I think it better to build more solidly. If we have talent and ability and management in the Engine Co., we should last long.”
Letter from JIM to Kevin Roche, voicing his thoughts on the design of the Cummins offices, 26 Jan. 1972

“You should bear in mind that Cummins in no way is thinking of a Corporate Monument. These buildings (if they are plural) should be considerate toward the people who work in them, friendly to visitors, and a pleasant respectful neighbor to the community...I still think it important not to violate the skyline of Columbus, or compete with the Courthouse or First Christian Church. In respect to materials I think consideration should be given to relating to the community. I guess what I’m really saying is that all-glass is not the only option.”
J. Irwin Miller, in an introduction for Edita Tokyo’s book on architect Kevin Roche, 16 May 1973:

“Great architecture is...the solving of a concrete problem. It is the free expression of the architect himself. And it is an inspired and intuitive expression of his client. The greatest architecture accomplishes all this with no appearance of strain or awkwardness, but rather with an evident conviction that these simultaneous goals have enriched the whole enterprise and have not simply watered it down by compromise. At its best architecture partakes of immortality, giving joy and excitement to the present, and perpetual challenge to the future. When the challenge is of the highest order, it is a most precious legacy to future generations.”
Introspection- Moving forward

- J. Irwin Miller in an address to the Kansas City Architectural Foundation, 21 April 1988:

  - “If we are to be honest with each other, we must acknowledge that most cities today, and that includes my own, are in many parts depressing and even downright ugly...Who did it? Among others, you and I did it, that’s who. Business did it, past and present, by trying to go on the cheap, get as many variances as possible to cut cost. Architects did it. It might be embarrassing to your profession to learn how much thoughtless urban junk is the design creation of graduates of accredited schools of architecture. Of course, we both have our alibis, but we have an obligation to have answers too. Is there an answer for you and me? I think there is. It begins with the realization that we’ve got to care about everything we do. We’ve got to care beyond concern for the immediate dollar. We’ve got to care about the future impact of our own decision and actions as well as the present impact. Others in other times have cared, have built generously and well, and we owe them our gratitude.”
Internal Operations

J. Irwin Miller, architect Harry Weese, and an unidentified man at the unveiling of Northside Middle School, Columbus, Indiana. Irwin-Sweeney-Miller Family Collection, Indiana Historical Society.
Internal Operations

- How were various projects conceptualized and budgeted for?
- How did community stakeholders sell bold and expensive projects to the public taxpayers?
- What problems and miscommunications arose over the course of the various building projects? How were they addressed and resolved?

Construction of The Commons, Columbus, Indiana, ca. 1973. Irwin-Sweeney-Miller Family Collection, Indiana Historical Society
Internal Operations- City Planning

- William G. Irwin takes a gamble on First Christian Church, 1942-1943
- Columbus Chamber of Commerce Housing Committee, Columbus Village, 1953
- The fight for expanding and improving Columbus city schools, begins 1958
- Cummins Engine Foundation, begins 1958
- Columbus Master Plan/hiring of a city planner, beginning 1959

JIM, NSM, XSM and an unidentified woman inside First Christian Church, ca. 1940s. Irwin-Sweeney-Miller Family Collection, Indiana Historical Society
JIM editorializing in the Columbus Republic, “Columbus of Tomorrow”, Jan. 1958:

“The program which Columbus has accomplished in the last ten years and which has caused a great deal of attention has been essentially a program of catching up with present needs rather than one of building for the future. The achievement of this program now gives Columbus a choice. We can settle down to a policy of maintaining what we have, or we can work toward what we could be. The latter is immediately more costly in time, thought, and money, but could very well prove more economical in the long run.”
JIM to Eero Saarinen on the status of North Christian Church, 5 April 1961:

“I think I know a little of the pressure under which you find yourself, a pressure exerted by the twin and opposing forces of clients…and your own integrity which makes you insist on giving to each job the best you have in [you]…If this church doesn’t come off pretty soon, I think the congregation might fall apart. I know it shouldn’t. I didn’t think it would. But now I am concerned.”

Saarinen’s Response, 18 April 1961:

I have good and able partners and associates but sometimes it is necessary for me to defend anything from the color of the tile on the toilet wall to door handles…Irwin…we have to finally solve the church so that the church can become a great little building. I feel I have this obligation to you and I have this obligation to the congregation, and as an architect I have that obligation also to my profession and my ideals.
Past and Future Projects

Alexander Girard and Xenia Miller look over plans at Girard’s New Mexico home, 1958. Irwin-Sweeney-Miller Family Collection, Indiana Historical Society
Creative Collection Use

- Past uses for the collection:
  - Two Destination Indiana journeys on JIM and XSM
  - Correspondence and a few audio reels, composing a script and providing content for the Exhibit Columbus 2017 “Hear/Here” App
  - Images for supplemental content on the Columbus (2017) film on DVD
  - Reference services for a variety of authors, journalists, and architects

Photo credit: Maire Gurevitz, September 2017
Gaps in the scholarship

- Xenia Miller’s artistic and architectural preferences; her connections to the big names of Columbus architecture and interiors
- Miller Family influence on architecture outside of Columbus- Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis; Irwin Library, Butler University Indianapolis; Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, Residences at Muskoka, Canada, etc.
Let’s have a conversation

- Engage with us on your next research project.
- View the 628 (!!!) page collection guide.
- Call or email me:
  - Maire Gurevitz
    mgurevitz@indianahistory.org
  - 317-234-0041

Light and shadows over the Conversation Pit at the Miller House, Irwin-Sweeney-Miller Family Collection, Indiana Historical Society