

# ALCHEMY

“EVERY TIME I DESCRIBE  
A CITY, I AM SAYING  
SOMETHING ABOUT VENICE.”

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

The *Alchemy* exhibit, although uniquely Cincinnati, utilizes material, texture, and design to reveal the socioeconomic disparities of one community that are representative of our global society.

The 2018 Venice Biennale *FreeSpace* theme articulates a desire to benefit from “nature’s free gifts.” We used this as a starting point to uncover the abundant resources that are readily available, finding inspiration in the discarded manufactured products—industrial detritus—and abandoned techniques and processes that comprise the distinct neighborhoods of Cincinnati.

Our project demonstrates the simple philosophical position of *Alchemy*; transmuting base matter into gold. At the heart of this position is the notion of direct experimentation as a form of research, and the belief that change and transformation can happen through optimistic speculation—turning the banal and discarded into things of wonder and beauty.

Through a careful and thoughtful (re)consideration and crafting of what is considered “left-over,” a new appreciation for their embodied energies might emerge—equipping us with material and a construction ethic that could inspire future fabrication. Specifically, we present a position that is uniquely MidWestern and particularly *Cincinnati*—a constructed terroir that embodies material, place, and experience.

## THE BENCH

A forged steel frame system supports signage for our project and provides a seating area made from re-claimed wood pallets.

## THE WALL

Wood joists salvaged from a 150 year old church in Cincinnati were transformed into a woven wall with “glyphs”—patterns created by local school children using copper leftovers from manufacturing. The patterns were stamped into the wood with a custom made press crafted by University of Cincinnati graduate students. Cincinnati high school students created poetry about living in Cincinnati—which is laser etched in one line on the surface of the wood. Individual, augmented reality symbols trigger spoken-word poetry and aerial scenes from Cincinnati.

## THE PAVILION

The pavilion is constructed with a steel frame armature incorporating more than one thousand ceramic tile pieces salvaged from Rookwood Pottery in Cincinnati. All of the tiles were considered imperfect based on stringent quality control. The tiles are attached to the steel frame with custom-made copper and aluminum clips.

## THE FLOOR

Scraps of waste solid surface material were cut into uniform sizes and glued together to create slabs of material that are treated like stone on the floor of the pavilion. Words describing each of Cincinnati’s 52 distinct neighborhoods are carved into the surface of the floor. The map is composed of four steel treatments (rusted steel, cold rolled steel, galvanized steel, and stainless steel), to represent the four socio-economic quartiles present in Cincinnati. At the very center of the map is a bronze marker of the University of Cincinnati—an augmented reality trigger that provides information about the city and the quartiles.

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# URBAN FUTURES

UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI

COLLEGE OF DESIGN,  
ARCHITECTURE,  
ART, AND PLANNING

BIRTH OF AN URBAN EPICENTER  
AND ACADEMIC LEADER

The University of Cincinnati, Ohio's premier urban research university, traces its origins to 1819, a time in which Cincinnati served as a major port along the 891-mile long Ohio River, and was considered the cultural and economic epicenter of the Midwest.

Referred to as the 'Queen City,' Cincinnati grew into an important industrial, political, and educational center. However, in the 1950's downtown businesses moved to the suburbs. Residents who could not afford to move lost jobs and struggled financially.

Today, Cincinnati is home to worldwide business and industry leaders, renowned arts and culture, and a global world-view and influence.

However, not all residents within the city's 52 neighborhoods flourish. Eight neighborhoods have low income and nearly 82-percent of Cincinnati Public School students are from economically disadvantaged families.

UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI  
ALCHEMY: SUSTAINING THE PAST  
TO CREATE THE FUTURE

Building on the history of Queen City and the university's present day movement to redefine the 21st century, this exhibit focuses on the socio-economic landscape of an urban city. *Alchemy* was originally conceived to represent UC's School of Architecture and Interior Design in the 2017 *Exhibit Columbus* Biennale in Columbus, Indiana, and has been re-purposed and re-configured to reflect current initiatives at our institution.

The entire pavilion was designed and constructed with architecture students.

To create *Alchemy*, the students mined materials destined for the landfill from local industry, some of which claim an iconic stake in the yard of Cincinnati's cultural and industrial heritage.

URBAN FUTURES CLUSTER:  
CARRYING THE VOICE OF UC'S  
URBAN IMPACT FORWARD

UC is committed to broadening its impact in interdisciplinary areas of real-world learning and research, solving issues related to urban health, talent development and community-based partnerships. Each day the university empowers its more than 44,000 students to question and change the world.

Part of that work lies within the Urban Futures Cluster, a university-wide initiative to conduct research and teaching in the areas of race or racism, social (in) justice, educational inequality or access, health disparities, urban housing, poverty, policing, and other topics that speak to the challenges facing cities and urban living.

SIMPSON CENTER FOR  
URBAN FUTURES & UNIVERSITY  
OF CINCINNATI PRESS

The Simpson Center for Urban Futures, within UC's College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning, supports the integration of visionary and interdisciplinary urban studies into curricula and provides scholarships and fellowships.

With a focus on social justice and community engagement, UC established the University of Cincinnati Press in 2017 to help carry urban initiatives forward, and cast fresh light on common problems in our global community. The Press cultivates and disseminates accessible books by architects, planners, designers, engineers, educators and others to sustain and reinvent the vitality of urban spaces. Cutting-edge tech platforms stimulate dialog and connect the author and reader to resolve disparities at every level of society.



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**COLLEGE OF DESIGN,  
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ART, AND PLANNING**

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