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Arts booster Fred Bidwell creates museum, festival and more: My Cleveland

By Grant Segall, The Plain Dealer

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*Fred Bidwell and his wife, Laura, turned a 1924 utility building into the Transformer Station museum.
Grant Segall/The Plain Dealer*

With his wife, Laura, retired ad man Fred Bidwell has enriched Cleveland culture through the Transformer Station, Front Triennial, Canvas City Mural Project and more.

Cleveland creds: Came from New England for college and stayed

Currently lives: Hingetown

Age: 67

Schooling: Oberlin

Family: wife, Laura; no children

Favorite locally owned food outlets: Larder, Bruno's, Superior Restaurant, Diamond Grille, Luigi's

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A year after the first Front Triennial, Tony Tasset's "Judy's Hand Pavilion" still dominates Uptown. Lisa DeJong/The Plain Dealer

What's the Transformer Station about?

Fred: It's a private museum, a place to show and share our collection. It's not really big enough for it all. We have a bit more than 1,000 works.

We organize two shows each year. Most of them involve our own collection. And we've invited artists to create new work around an idea we propose. Many of those works find their way into our collection.

We also developed this unusual idea of lending our galleries free of charge for half the year for two shows by the Cleveland Museum of Art. The only string attached is that they make their exhibits more daring than anything they do in the big, fancy place with the columns over on the East Side.

We also have small ensembles perform inside or at our park outside.

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Workers finish remaking Julian Stanczak's 1970s mural at 1012 Prospect Ave. for last year's Front Triennial and beyond. Steven Litt/The Plain Dealer

What's it cost to keep the Transformer humming?

Fred: The budget's about \$250,000 to \$350,000 per year. We have the world's worst business model here. We operate a museum without charging admission. We buy work and don't sell it. We seek some donations, but the primary source is our family foundation.

What's the building's history?

Fred: It was built in 1924 for the trolley line that ran over the bridge to downtown. They built the most mundane industrial infrastructure to look beautiful. The brickwork is amazing.

The original building was maybe 3,000 square feet. We restored it in 2013 and added about 3,400 feet. It was about a \$2.5 million project.

What's in your collection?

Fred: We have world-renowned names like Hiroshi Sugimoto and Kehinde Wiley, but also local artists. We just showed Amber Ford from Cleveland right next to Zanele Muholi from South Africa, who's extremely hot in the international art market.

Michelangelo Lovelace painted a picture in Cleveland. A New York dealer took it to an art fair in Chicago. We bought it there, and it's coming back to Cleveland.

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Fred Bidwell at the Transformer Station last year with an installation by A.K. Burns called "The Dispossessed." Lisa DeJong/The Plain Dealer



Laura and Fred Bidwell opened the Transformer Station in 2013., Lisa DeJong/The Plain Dealer



Fred and Laura Bidwell own and occupy the top floors of the Van Rooy Coffee building on Detroit and helped the Spaces gallery buy the bottom floor. Grant Segall/The Plain Dealer

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What's the Front Triennial all about?

Fred: Front is to showcase Cleveland as a hub for arts and culture, and also give Cleveland artists a platform to be seen by curators, collectors and art lovers from around the world.

Were you happy with last year's Front Debut?

Fred: We had terrific success. We received positive reviews from around the world.

Front sites had over 250,000 visits. There were about 90,000 unique visitors. Over a third were from outside Cleveland. We had over 130 artists in 28 venues,



Fred Bidwell kicks off the inaugural Front Triennial last year. Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer

With Front over for now, why are those giant murals and that giant hand still on view?

Fred: Most of the exhibits are temporary, but some things will last. Case Western had the option of Tony Tasset's "Judy's Hand Pavilion" as a temporary installation, but I believe it will stay in Uptown for a long, long time. It's going to be like the Free Stamp.

The murals are an ambitious long-term project. Our goal is to create the largest outdoor exhibition of contemporary abstract art in the world.

There were seven murals painted downtown in the 70s. There was no funding to maintain them. They started falling apart and were painted over.

At Winton Manor, we repainted the Julian Stanczak one. We've commissioned six new murals and executed three.

Cleveland has these enormous blank walls not slapped up against each other like in Manhattan. They're the perfect canvasses.

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I'd like in a decade or so to have a dozen or more. We have to talk the owners into them. And our obligation is to make sure they're maintained. We're using contemporary technology. One of our sponsors is Sherwin-Williams.



*Odili Odita designed a mural at Prospect Avenue and East 12th Street for the Front Triennial and beyond.
Steven Litt /The Plain Dealer*

Future Fronts?

Fred: We have some really exciting, different things we're working on for 2021. We have a new artistic team, a new perspective.

We'll probably have half the number of artists but show more work of each. We'll have fewer venues. Some people loved the treasure hunt, but a lot were, "Give me a path."

Your background?

Fred: I grew up in New England and transferred to Oberlin. I worked as a photographer for seven years. I finally threw in the towel. My greatest contribution to the art world was deciding that I shouldn't be an artist.

For most of my career, I was the CEO of Malone Advertising in Akron, which became a national agency. We were experts in how people shop. I completed selling it in 2010 and retired in '12.

Where'd you meet Laura?

Fred: At the agency. She was an art director. When I became CEO, she quit to do freelance and eventually worked as an artist. She's shown at the Cleveland Print Room, Harris Stanton, quite a few places around town.

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Fred Bidwell with Amber N. Ford's "Down by the River" recently at the Transformer Station. Grant Segall/The Plain Dealer



The Transformer Station has elaborate brickwork. Grant Segall/The Plain Dealer

What was it like moving from the national park to the lakefront?

Fred: In Peninsula, we had a minimalist contemporary house on 15 acres in woods on a pond. Two years ago, we bought the Van Rooy Coffee building on Detroit. We sold the bottom floor to Spaces at a bargain price and loaned them the money.

We have no lawn, but we have a rooftop garden and amazing 360 views of the city and the lake and the ore boats and the salt mines. I couldn't be more at peace and more in love with our neighborhood, this vibrancy and friendliness in diversity.

In small towns, people are private. We knew no one. In the city, you're running into your friends all the time.

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You've boosted Hingetown, but some yard signs still protest the changes.

Fred: I understand that point of view. The neighborhood was peaceful, quiet. You could park for free right at your curb. Now rents are rising, and taxes are rising. You can't just walk into a restaurant for a table on Saturday night. You may have to wait in line.

But the neighborhood had its downside of crime and worn-down housing stock. Now you may have to walk a couple blocks to park, but you're safer walking than before.



Fred Bidwell inspects a small part of his collection at the Transformer Station. Grant Segall/The Plain Dealer



The Transformer Station has helped revitalize the Hingetown neighborhood. Grant Segall/The Plain Dealer

How's Cleveland's art scene?

Fred: Cuyahoga County is more arts-aware than ever. There's more of an appreciation for the arts in all forms.

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We've been a little isolated. That's partly because of looking inward but partly because the art world has been focused on the hubs. But there's a lot of amazing work being done in cities like Cleveland. People are discovering the talent, diversity and innovation around the country.

Cleveland style?

Fred: It's got some toughness. There's beauty but also grit. And there's a focus on the materiality of the art, the whole art and craft of making beautiful things.

The urban landscape is full of change, contrast, decay and growth. We have incredible weather, which can be demoralizing, but it's moody and dramatic.

The incredible creativity of the African-American community hasn't gotten the attention it's deserved.

With no children, who will you leave your art to?

Fred: We've pledged the collection to the Cleveland and Akron museums. We've pledged the building to the Cleveland museum.



*The Transformer Station recently displayed works by Peter Larson' in an exhibit called "I Sing the Body."
Steven Litt/The Plain Dealer*

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Raul de Nieves poses with some of his elaborate performance costumes early this year at the Transformer Station. Steven Litt/The Plain Dealer