

the Atlantic

Going Home to Columbus

A generation returns to build lives and a town.

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Deborah Fallows



Statehouse in Columbus, Sept. 11, 2014 (Deborah Fallows)

On the first full day of our visit to Columbus for [American Futures](#), I went to see the [Tree Walk](#), a collection of 35 trees in the Old Deaf School Park, right downtown. The school, then called the [Ohio Institution for the Deaf and Dumb](#), opened in 1829, one of the earliest such schools in the US and the only one publicly funded at the time. By 1868, seven stately buildings housed about 400 students.

I was interested to see the native [Buckeye](#), *Aesculus glabra*, which I knew from my 7th

grade Ohio history is the state tree. It was listed as Number 17 on the walking guide, way up on the north side of the park, and on the site where the dormitory for the students stood until it burned in an early morning fire in the 1980s. (No students were there; the less Dickensian-sounding Ohio School for the Deaf had renamed itself and moved north to a more suburban campus.)

I passed the Japanese Pagoda tree, the White Pine, the Dawn Redwood. Then I scoped out the spot where the Buckeye should stand.

No! It can't be, I thought, consulting my tree guide again. But there it was: a scrawny, sickly, almost leafless Buckeye. I wondered if this was going to be symbolic somehow of what we would find in Columbus.

We had encountered other moments of symbolism during our reporting over the last year: the broken clock in the main intersection of Allentown, which the mayor commissioned to repair as a sign that "Allentown is coming back!" Or the comment by Joe Max Higgins, the leader of an economic development team in [the other Columbus](#) (Mississippi) that when the helicopters—something *that flies*—came off the assembly line, that "people started walking upright a little bit." Would the dying Buckeye symbolize something dire, I wondered?

To skip to the end of the story, I need not have worried. What we heard in Columbus over the next several days were institutional-scale stories of [building](#), [creativity](#), [cooperation](#), and solid investment in the [city's future](#). Here are short versions of a few smaller personal-scale stories. All together, they start to tell the emerging narrative of Columbus.



Sickly Buckeye on the Tree Walk



Ajumama food truck (Deborah Fallows)

First, food trucks. I met Laura Lee at her truck, Ajumama (it means “ma’am” in Korean), which was parked on a lot next to the indoor-outdoor Seventh Son Brewing Co. near north Columbus. It was a Friday early afternoon, perfect for a late lunch with a little local beer, I rationalized. Lee cooked up one of the family recipes she adapted from her Korean mom’s collection: pajeon, a green onion pancake, followed by hoddock, a sweet pancake with brown sugar, cinnamon, and walnuts. Lee says she’s a stickler for ingredients, making her own kimchi and personal pancake mixes from scratch. They have earned her a bunch of awards and trophies, which sit on a shelf next to the order window.

Lee is part of the wave of young people finding their way or returning to Columbus. She had headed west to culinary school in Phoenix, then farther west to work as a sous chef in San Diego, where she found that Californians didn’t appreciate her experimental creations. She missed Columbus, and like many others of her generation, was looking away from the classic L.A., SF, NYC, and D.C. and toward smaller cities like Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Columbus.



Another food truck in Columbus (Deborah Fallows)

Several things have been working for Lee in Columbus, including a vibrant start-up food truck culture and an open-door attitude from the city. Last spring, the city eased up on licensing and parking rules and regulations for food trucks. This past summer, they created a new city-government position pluckily named “small business concierge” to cut through the red tape and provide some business advice for getting small ventures like Laura Lee’s up and running quickly and successfully.

Leaving Ajumama behind, I headed for the top of High Street in the Short North,

famously loaded with restaurants, shops, art galleries, and boutiques. Walking the length of the street, I stopped in as many as places as I could, starting with one named Co+Op. It is so edgy that I'm not sure how to describe it. Is it an art gallery? A fashion-forward clothing boutique? A vintage clothier? A consignment shop? Yes. I think it is all of these. There was art on the walls, some old luggage and paraphernalia, a rack of newly-designed clothes, some old clothes. Food trucks sometimes park in their lot out front.

The current manager, Kait Cutler, described the atmosphere of Columbus that draws many of her generation back. After 6 years of corporate life in Chicago, she said, she wanted to "pull back a little" and find a way to engage her creative side. Creative: if there were a word cloud hanging over the city of Columbus, *creative* would be in the biggest font, right alongside *collaborate*. John Tierney wrote about both: the expanse of creative efforts in Columbus [here](#); and the net of public- private collaboration in Columbus [here](#). Collaboration is so ingrained in the culture of Columbus that the word itself has evolved: "We *collab* a lot with Mouton," said Cutler, about Co+Op and its relationship with the wine bar and restaurant, Mouton, across the street.

Next up was the clothing boutique Rowe and its founder Maren Roth, who also left Columbus and returned in 2005. She opened a pop-up shop in 2006, moving to a brick and mortar shop a year later. Loyal to local would be the sense I got from Roth, an example of many in Columbus who would share that description. She and her staff had been working late at a fundraiser the night before, but they were up and running without missing a beat. If Roth is loyal to being a part of the small business scene in Columbus, her clientele is loyal right back



Maren Roth at Rowe

Trying to get a sense of the reach of local designers, I asked Roth about sourcing her fashion locally. Like other retailers I asked along High St., Roth said she does have some local representation, but for her it is still only accessories. The local Columbus small manufacturers are too small so far to scale up to numbers and sizes she would need in a clothing line, she said. Or maybe, she added, she just hasn't found the right one yet.

High St. carries an interesting tension in Columbus. Retailers like Roth are happy to be there, saying that a storefront located right on that street is important because of the habits and payoff of the foot traffic, which sticks tightly to that favorite street. Even those



Kait Cutler at Co+Op (Deborah Fallows)

who are now just around a corner on a side street are always looking for space to move to on High. But there is also an interesting question about coming competition that might test the loyal-to-local idea among shoppers.

The national women's clothing boutique, Anthropologie, which carries some of the same brands that Rowe carries, was scheduled to open at an upscale new development down High St. What will that mean, I asked Roth. She replied that when Starbucks tried to move in, Columbus rejected them for the local coffee shops. "Maybe they'll do the same for this." Anthropologie just opened its doors at the beginning of October. According to *The Columbus Dispatch*, a spokesperson for the Short North Alliance struck a more optimistic note and said Anthropologie would be "[a great thing](#)" for the area's shops.

One more self-made Columbus transplant is Thomas McClure. He grew up 2 hours west of Dallas among steers, tagging cattle, as he put it, with his Thai mom and American dad. To be talking with Thomas McClure is to be swept up into his forcefield. From an early age, he wanted to be in entertainment. He moved to Dallas, met his partner, and after discovering that Columbus was a gay mecca, they moved there ten years ago. He worked for a Columbus talent agency, which also represented him as a model and actor, became a business partner in the company, started a runway show as a fundraiser for local designers in 2010 attracting 300 attendees in an athletic club, and grew it to 1,200 this year in the elegant space of the [Columbus Athenaeum](#).

His dream, he said, is to sponsor scholarships at the acclaimed and respected [Columbus College of Art and Design](#). Take a breath.

McClure says that cooperation and support comes easily to the fashion industry in Columbus. [Major clothing brands](#) located in Columbus or just outside include the Limited Brands (including Victoria's Secret), Abercrombie and Fitch, Design Shoe Warehouse (DSW), Express, The Limited, and Lane Bryant. According to McClure, those big brands get along with the little start-ups, new hires, and boutiques, and operate as though there is room for all to work for the greater good of fashion in Columbus. McClure and several others told me something about the town, which struck me a moment of symbolism: "Columbus is #3 in fashion design," he said, after New York and L.A. I heard that said several times, and I saw it referenced all over the media.

Like the running clock in Allentown and the flying machines made in Columbus, Mississippi, that Columbus, Ohio talks about itself as being #3 in fashion design matters. If you say something often enough, people believe it is true, or at least they will work



McClure's Fashion Week 2014 (Fashionweek)

with confidence to move it toward that goal. Now, as for that Buckeye in the Tree Walk, it is time for someone to plant another one.