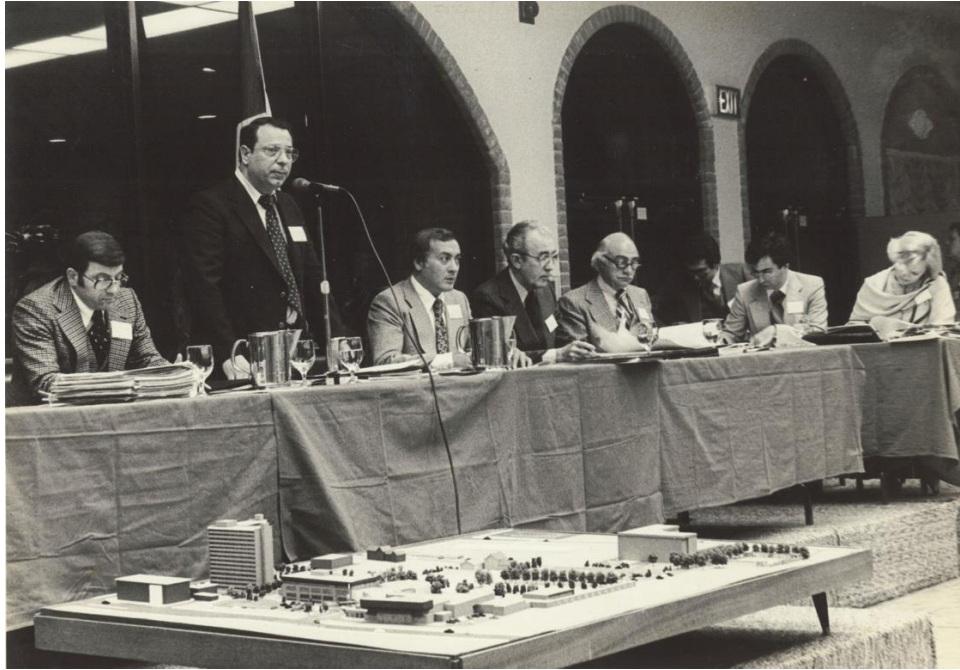


## An Interview with Columbus Centre Founder, Anthony Fusco Sr.



*Photo: At the ICBC annual general meeting, the architectural model of the campus, including the proposed Columbus Centre, was presented to members by (left to right) ICBC Vice President Joseph Chiappetta, President Anthony Fusco, Executive Director Paul Ariemma, Governor Elio Rosati, Chair Joseph Carrier, and Celeste Iacobelli. (1978)*

**On October 10, 2020, Columbus Centre proudly celebrated its 40th Anniversary. Marianne Corigliano, Vice-Chair of the Columbus Centre Board recently interviewed Mr. Anthony Fusco Sr., one of the founders of the Columbus Centre to reflect on its history and significance to Italian Canadians and the community at large.**

**Q: The story goes that it all started on a cold March morning in 1977, when you and a few other people were at Villa Colombo Toronto and heard the noise of a bulldozer coming from the adjacent property. Can you recall what happened on that day and the frantic weeks that followed?**

A: One morning in March 1977, I was meeting at Villa Colombo with some of the executives when we heard a loud mechanical noise coming from outside. They were indeed starting the demolition of the St. Mary's Training School building, the lot to the north of Villa Colombo. We asked them to stop immediately and right then and there called to order the Board of the ICBC (Italian Canadian Benevolent Corporation) – a group of wonderfully committed and enthusiastic community members who saw right

away that it was time for action if we wanted to buy the property from the Sisters of the Good Shepherd and build a community piazza. We knew we had the community behind us; when we built Villa Colombo it was understood that this one was only the first step. Everybody understood that we had to seize the opportunity. Within the following 48 hours we were able to secure a meeting with the Ontario premier of the time William (Bill) Davis and in a matter of a week we managed to have the province step in and support our purchase with a loan. By then the deed was in our hands. It was time to raise the funds and get the community involved to decide what we were going to build. We were short of money but we were lucky to have a group of marvelous people such as Rudy Bratty, Joe Carrier, Orey Fidani, Joe Chiappetta, Sam Ciccolini, John Cirillo, Con Di Nino, Carlo Fidani, John Di Poce, Marco Muzzo, etc. These people were inspiring and anxious to do a good job. I was the first chair of the Columbus Centre Board; it was a lot of work and we were meeting every other night. The most joyous thing was that we had the right people at the right time. It does not happen often.

**Q: The Columbus Centre has recently received Heritage status by the City of Toronto. The designation, besides recognizing the cultural and community building value of the Centre, makes specific reference to the Lobby and the Rotunda of the Columbus Centre. Can you share with us why these architectural elements were chosen and what they represent?**

A: When we started there were two separate buildings. We thought that it would be a good idea to connect the two wings with an original architectural solution, and I can tell you that what you see now was discussed and decided on Orey Fidani's kitchen table. We knew what we wanted: an exhibition area, an event space, and a restaurant. A man who should be recognized in this case is Anthony Ferracuti, who was instrumental in facilitating the process that resulted in the Italian piazza look and feel of the lobby and the Joseph D. Carrier Art Gallery.

**Q: What role would you say that the Columbus Centre played for the Italian community?**

A: The Columbus Centre helped gel the Italian community together. At the time, the Italians were still labourers but were also experiencing great financial success and social mobility. The Columbus Centre served as one of the conveyors of our parents' traditions, culture and family values. We were able to offer a place where our children could go and enjoy a meal, socialize and feel at home.

**Q: It is my understanding that the Youth Advisory Board played an important role with fundraising and building support for the community centre. How would you describe the participation of young Italian Canadians in the "making" of the Columbus Centre?**

A: We were determined to attract young people to the Columbus Centre. The Athletic Club was one of the ways to attract them. We tried to make the centre as a small Italian village – young people were meeting for social gatherings in the Columbus Room. Their participation was slower than we had wished, but significant enough to make a difference.

**Q: After 40 years and an incredible series of achievements, what is your birthday wish for the Columbus Centre?**

A: My birthday wish is that it continues, and we continue to draw in people from different age groups to participate and keep the community alive. Although I was born in Canada, I recognize that my parents' traditions were made of gold and our children, and grandchildren should not lose them.