

# DESIGN

# JAM

# Cincinnati



**Urban  
Manufacturing  
Alliance**

**September 2019**

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Jordan Hildebrandt has organized her fair share of innovation events in Cincinnati—like hackathons and design brainstorming sessions—with the companies and clients she works with.

But when the 30-year-old industrial designer and strategist sat down at a table with unknown design and manufacturing peers at this year's Design Jam Cincinnati, she realized she'd embarked on a professional experience that was unique from past get-togethers.

"I thought it was organized really, really well," said Hildebrandt, co-founder of design and innovation consulting company [39A](#). "It was really fun to push each other and stimulate each others' thoughts with all the different experiences we brought."

"Meeting the people was just as fun as the ideation," she added.

In partnership with the Chicago-based industrial designer Emily Taylor, the Urban Manufacturing Alliance hosted our first-ever Design Jam event in the historic manufacturing city of Cincinnati. Around 50 industrial designers, manufacturers, startups, and the people and organizations that support them came together on a Wednesday evening in February 2019 to collaborate with companies grappling design questions.

According to attendees, the event brought dividends to Cincinnati's design and manufacturing community.

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The Urban Manufacturing Alliance and Taylor decided to partner together and launch a national Design Jam series to celebrate the industrial design and manufacturing communities in partnering cities. Taylor previously hosted successful Jams in cities like Chicago and St. Louis with the pilot non-profit DesignHouse, where the Design Jam concept was created.

On top of celebrating these communities, Design Jams also aspire to create more bridges between them.

Research by the National Endowment for the Arts suggests that small- and medium-sized manufacturers are generally unfamiliar with industrial design and how it can benefit their businesses. Those few small and medium-sized manufacturers that do partner with industrial designers [saw costs diminish and revenues increase by 17.5 percent on average](#).

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“Design is a lever that manufacturers can pull to help differentiate themselves,” said Greg Meyer, a design consultant at the product development and innovation strategy firm [Thrive](#), who attended the event. “If the relationship exists between designer and manufacturer and they have a working knowledge of each other, then that becomes a symbiotic relationship for both groups.”

“It’s really gratifying for us to be helping build these relationships,” said Katy Stanton, program director at the Urban Manufacturing Alliance. “Relationships between manufacturing groups or universities, CDFIs, the public sector—there is a network to be built here to really achieve the potential of Cincinnati’s assets, and harness them for manufacturing growth.”

Cincinnati, the first city to host a Design Jam led jointly by UMA and Taylor, is an epicenter of

design and manufacturing activity. The University of Cincinnati has one of the most celebrated design programs in the nation, and major manufacturers like Procter & Gamble have called the city home since the 1800s.

Design Jam Cincinnati took place at Union Hall, an entrepreneur workspace in the heart of the city’s historic Over-the-Rhine district. Attendees started arriving after 6PM and settled into their tables a reach away from exacto knives, cardboard slabs, a CNC machine, and ample slices of pizza.

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**DESIGN**

**JAM**

**BREAKDOWN**

**1**

Once the challenge is described, teams start brainstorming as many loose ideas as they can. No idea is too big here. The teams have this time to share, build on their 'big' ideas, and find categories within them.

**2**

The Jam director then introduces the constraints that the teams use to help narrow their favorite ideas and turn them into more thought-out concepts. In Cincinnati, the constraints for the packaging concepts were:

- Protect the product
- Look premium
- Consider the sustainability of the packaging

**3**

Team members gather materials to bring their concepts to life and begin prototyping.

\*Each part lasts 20 minutes.

Participants at each table had an hour to come up with suggestions for packaging designs that up-and-coming startups could look to as they work to launch new products. After that hour ended, they presented their ideas to the room.

Hildebrandt's table, which included designers and manufacturers from Procter & Gamble, was tasked with quickly turning around a packaging prototype for [JUMPER Premium Threads](#), a local apparel company.

"What [the company] wanted to do was have their socks elevated and displayed," said Hildebrandt, who described the socks as having a "different quality and high aptitude for style."

They decided on a shippable cardboard package that rolls open, revealing the socks like a scroll reveals its text. "Most of the challenge was how it ships but we got into a more playful aspect of how to elevate the brand more," said Hildebrandt.

Another table designed a package for [New Riff Distilling](#), a local whiskey brand, that looked like a minibar inside a suitcase. When opened it revealed the whiskey bottle, label facing you, at a tilt, with two tumblers placed side-by-side beneath the mouth of the bottle.

**Hemmer suggested creating prompts that specifically address systemic challenges or bottlenecks in the local design and manufacturing ecosystem.**

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Design Jam Cincinnati was limited to one evening, but participants say impact from the event is still resonating today. It catalyzed connections between design and manufacturing aficionados that could bloom into meaningful partnerships down the line, according to Jessica Hemmer, founder of Hemmer Design and UMA board member.

"This was a great opportunity for a bunch of people to get into a room and have conversations around design and products and manufacturing," said Hemmer. "This is the type of event I've wanted to do since I moved back to Cincinnati four years ago."

For future Design Jams, participants like Hemmer and Lukshus suggested dedicating a couple more hours to the brainstorming and prototyping breakouts. Hemmer suggested creating prompts that specifically address systemic challenges or bottlenecks in the local design and manufacturing ecosystem.



When asked if they'd support more events like these, UMA's local partners were overwhelmingly in favor. Lukshus noted that a few new contacts from Design Jam Cincinnati had already come by to tour his company. The next time a Design Jam takes place in the region, he and his staff want to be a part of it.

“Our people enjoy it because it's a way to be creative and in front of new people, non-brand managers [...] there's no power struggles,” said Lukshus. “It supports our culture and our philosophy.”



# Local Partner: Cog

Local packaging developer Cog was UMA's main Manufacturing Partner for the "Jam." Cog is a rare breed of business, landing somewhere between an R&D firm and a design house. They also do their own light manufacturing on-site, making them a go-to for bigger design, printing, and packaging firms that want state-of-the-art concepts without additional middlemen.

By doing their own prototyping on site they can ground the wants of the client in the reality of manufacturing and material costs, according to Lukshus. "We don't like to encourage the prototyping of things that can't be done. The end benefit to the customer there is that we're reducing rework, and not bringing ideas past a certain point [...] that just aren't feasible."

"You want to still be iterative, still be creative, but consider sound manufacturing methods," said Lukshus.

Industrial designer Emily Taylor says Cog is the perfect example of how manufacturing and industrial design can make production more efficient when partnered together. "They're uniquely positioned in that they help develop and prototype ideas, and are able to 'speak



both languages' by communicating with both designers and manufacturers to work towards solutions that fit both needs," said Taylor. "They are filling one of the gaps that we often see in the work we do."

Cog staff wrote about the Cincinnati Design Jam experience over at COGNitions, their online blog. [Click here to read.](#)

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# Practitioner Breakfast

The morning after Design Jam Cincinnati, those organizations working to support Cincinnati's industrial designers and manufacturers—like non-profits, capital practitioners, and government representatives—gathered for a Practitioner Breakfast to map out strategies for filling gaps in Cincinnati's design and manufacturing ecosystem.

“It was so striking when we asked everybody in the room to raise their hand if they'd met someone new that day—and most did,” said Lee Wellington, founding executive director of the Urban Manufacturing Alliance. “The connections that were forged during the practitioner breakfast are the start of the very ecosystem that is going to be foundational to creating a more connected design manufacturing community.”

UMA, Taylor, and the attendees discussed a call list of best practices that they think every city should take on to build up these ecosystems.

A sample of those practices include:

1. Get local designers and product-based entrepreneurs on factory floors by offering tours and conversations



- with manufacturers to help them better understand manufacturing processes and capabilities.
2. Encourage manufacturers to use designers internally for product and process redesign through internships, consultants, or subsidized hours.
  3. Encourage design education programs to educate on manufacturing and the importance of local manufacturing.



Participants also expressed a strong desire to see more collaboration between local industry and universities like the University of Cincinnati.

“One of the big areas that attracted us to this is the Urban Manufacturing Alliance, and what they’re trying to do around the country: go in and understand what’s taking place as far as manufacturing activity, and where best practices are. That’s huge to us,” said Pete Brown, executive director of Main Street Ventures, an entrepreneur investment group that provided invaluable support to Design Jam Cincinnati.

“To have a group that’s doing something like this, to come into town and having done it in another city with a proven model, that takes a lot of risk out for us,” said Brown. “We don’t have to worry about execution of event, just about the city coming together and taking advantage of it.”



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