In March, at the grand unveiling of the UPMC Immune Transplant and Therapy Center (ITTC)—a new partnership between Pitt and UPMC—the century-old former Ford assembly line and showroom at 5000 Baum Blvd. was transformed, with displays celebrating Pittsburgh’s past as well as Pitt/UPMC’s role in shaping its future.

OUT OF THE PARK
WHERE HOME-RUN IDEAS GET SOME PLAY TIME

BY ELAINE VITONE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY AIMEE OBIDZINSKI
Charles F. Reynolds III is an affably serious man. He’s a lover of Roman history and of Latin, who long ago studied philosophy. He presents himself as mild-mannered, although you don’t have to talk to him long before you understand exactly how sharp and penetrating his intellect is. But he’s ever congenial; he easily could be cast as a benevolent pastor. His once ashen brown hair, now that he’s 69, is mostly gray. He sports round wire-rim glasses and prefers a blue oxford-cloth shirt and dark red tie when he knows he’s having his picture taken. His friends call him Chip. And there’s a series of exercise videos that he “stars” in. This accolade is one he uses himself—with tongue firmly in cheek. In these videos, he stands behind a young trainer, following her example for an easy, 10-minute workout. Dressed in a plain T-shirt and gym shorts, he marches in place, step-together-step-tap, and thrusts his arm out in front of him as he does a leg kick. Some of the time, like many of us in an exercise class, he is in great form. Other times, again like many of us, he is a smidge out of step. He embellishes the march-in-place with enthusiastic arm movements. He stays unflustered.

For most biomedical researchers, the main source of funding is the National Institutes of Health. “To use a baseball analogy, they’re looking for contact hitters,” Toren Finkel, who worked for the NIH for 25 years, told CBS Pittsburgh recently. “If you come to them with a home-run proposal, they’re worried more about you striking out than hitting home runs.”

So when the University of Pittsburgh and its clinical partner, UPMC, came courting with the promise of a very different approach, Finkel was game. Finkel joined Pitt last year as professor of medicine as well as the G. Nicholas Beckwith III and Dorothy B. Beckwith Professor of Translational Medicine. “We’re making a bet on the talented faculty to say, ‘Let’s hit it out of the park and find some unique, novel solutions.’”

Pitt and UPMC are looking for new pitches for radically effective new therapies. They want to bring new understanding to the field of immunotherapy, a principle behind some of the most exciting advances in recent memory. Modulating the immune system is key not only in cancer and organ transplantation, but also in aging and its consequences, including chronic diseases, says Finkel, who directs the Aging Institute.

As part of a $200 million commitment to funding research that builds on our knowledge of the immune system, a new eight-story facility called the UPMC Immune Transplant and Therapy Center (ITTC) will house labs, offices, startups, and industry partners. The facility, located at 5000 Baum Blvd., near UPMC Hillman Cancer Center and UPMC Shadyside, will be an anchor in the city’s innovation district. The hope is that by putting researchers and industry together under one roof, and providing funding for innovative new pitches, Pitt and UPMC can bring new treatments to the clinic much faster. The ITTC is slated to open in 2020.