

October 30, 2020

To the honorable chair and commissioners:

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The Milwaukee Preservation Alliance strongly supports temporary historic designation of the former Forest Home Library, a building that matters deeply to the people of this city and stands as one of our finest examples of Mid-Century Modern architecture. This 1966 masterpiece was designed by prominent local architecture firm von Grossmann, Burroughs, & Van Lanen and was awarded the American Institute of Architects Wisconsin Chapter Honor Award and American Institute of Steel Construction Design Excellence Award the following year. The AIA praised the building as “an alive and creative solution to small scale public architecture” displaying a “great deal of competence in technology.”

Chief among the building’s technological innovations are its pioneering use of Corten (or weathering) Steel. This special steel framing, engineered to weather to a patina, would have been significantly more expensive than traditional steel at the time and evidences the importance of the building as a true work of public art. The first use of this technology as an architectural element was just two years earlier at the John Deere World Headquarters in Illinois, designed by internationally renowned Modernist master Eero Saarinen. The early use of Corten Steel on the Forest Home Library may be the first in Milwaukee. This innovation combined with its high style of modernism would influence architecture in Milwaukee moving forward and may make the building the most significant Milwaukee library of the 20th Century.

The only Modernist building in Milwaukee that currently has historic designation is in fact another library, the 1953 former Finney Library, which is included in the Sherman Boulevard Historic District and does not have the architectural distinction of the Forest Home Library. The Finney Library was recently successfully adaptively reused as an arts incubator after sitting vacant for 15 years.

Further, the Wisconsin State Historic Preservation Office also noted the Forest Home Library’s importance in 2018 by determining it potentially eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

Finally, the Forest Home Library may have cultural significance as well. Preliminary exploration into the community’s understanding of the value of the building revealed a strong sense of connection residents feel toward the property, with nearly 100 responses to limited outreach sharing memories and calling for preservation.

For these reasons, we urge the Commission to grant temporary historic designation to the Forest Home Library to allow time to more fully explore the architectural and cultural significance of this pioneering and beloved building.

Thank you as always for your hard work on behalf of the people and places of Milwaukee.

Respectfully,

Jeremy Ebersole
Executive Director
Milwaukee Preservation Alliance