

Marcus Center unveils plans for updated architecture and reimagined grounds

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(Photo: Courtesy the Marcus Center and HGA Architects)
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The [Marcus Center for the Performing Arts](#) has unveiled plans for a reimagined campus, including a “great lawn” for community events, a new atrium and terrace on the Milwaukee River, a five-story projection wall where performances can be seen live from the street and new seating in its main theater space, Uihlein Hall.

With the performing arts center nearing the half-century mark, the idea is to create a more open, welcoming and flexible campus that can generate more revenue and a wider array of events, said Paul Mathews, president and CEO of the Marcus Center.

“The plan that we’ve put together is our vision for the next 50 years,” Mathews said.

While the overall cost is still being finalized, Milwaukee County has committed \$10 million toward the project, which will begin in spring of 2019 and be done over a period of three to five years, Mathews said. The Marcus Center signed a new, 99-year lease with the county last year after a law that would have transferred ownership of the center to the Wisconsin Center District was repealed.

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Specifically, the plan calls for a modest, new structure — a rounded, glassy atrium — to be added on the Milwaukee River side of the building. This will provide another entrance to the center and create new event spaces both inside and on a terrace deck above.



A rendering of the reimagined public spaces around the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts. (Photo: Courtesy the Marcus Center)

The face of the Marcus Center will be transformed by replacing the dark glass that surrounds the lobby today, sometimes called limousine glass, with highly translucent glass. A band of windows will also be installed on the south side of the building, giving the otherwise impenetrable Brutalist structure a bit of translucency. The new second-floor windows will offer the public peeks inside the building and afford views out to the cityscape, including City Hall and the public plaza below.

"You know they didn't call it Brutalism for nothing," said architect Jim Shields of HGA Architects, who is working on the project for the Marcus Center. "There's no porosity, there's no visibility, no transparency at all in the building now."



The Marcus Center for the Performing Arts plans to renovate its theaters as part of an overall revamping of its complex. (Photo: Courtesy the Marcus Center and HGA Architects)

The center's main theater, Uihlein Hall, will get all new seating. A new configuration with new aisles will provide greater accessibility, especially for people with disabilities. A total of about 110 seats will be lost. Improvements will also be made to the technology and acoustics in Uihlein Hall, Mathews said.

The plan also calls for the dismantling of a grove of chestnut trees, laid out in a grid and set into the ground, designed by internationally recognized landscape architect Daniel Urban Kiley. This will make way for a more open and accessible great lawn on the south side of the center. People sitting on the grass, which will be brought up to grade, or seated around its edges will have a clear view to performances in the outdoor Peck Pavilion, where a barrier wall that contains sound equipment and that's no longer needed will be removed, Mathews said.

This public park-like area along Kilbourn Avenue will also include seating similar to that found in Bryant Park in New York City, including lightweight chairs that the public can move around, and illuminated fountains, water spilling over sheets of glass that people can run their fingers over. The hope is to broadcast parts of performances happening inside onto a five-story-high wall in real time in this outdoor plaza, too.

"We really see some opportunity for much greater use of the grounds," Mathews said.

Shields said Kiley's grove has gotten little use in the last decade or so. It was designed in collaboration with architect Harry Weese, who designed the center's 1969 building.

"The general term around here ... is the black forest and not in a real complimentary way," said Shields, referring to what center staff call the grove today. "It's really dark shade under there."



The Marcus Center for the Performing Arts will revamp the public spaces around its 1969 Brutalist structure, designed by Harry Weese. (Photo: Courtesy the Marcus Center)

The outdoor transformation will also make the area more environmentally sensitive, Mathews said. They plan to improve stormwater management, for instance, he added.

Other changes to the Marcus Center include dotting the campus with illuminated kiosks, back-of-house upgrades, improved restrooms and enclosing Fitch Garden, an uncovered terrace that isn't used in colder months, in glass. The new Fitch Garden will be a year-round event space with spectacular skyline views, Shields says.

The Marcus Center is home to several resident arts groups, including the Milwaukee Ballet, the Florentine Opera Company and First Stage. It is facing some added financial pressure as it prepares to lose one of its major tenants, the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, which acquired its own venue, the Warner Grand Theatre, last year. The MSO expects to take up residence at the Warner in 2020.

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The symphony's departure cuts about \$800,000 from the Marcus Center's annual earned revenue, which represents a little less than 10% of its overall budget, Mathews said.

Looking toward the future, Mathews hopes the Marcus Center will be at the heart of a multiblock arts sector that includes the newly rebranded, art-focused Saint Kate Hotel, slated to open in the current InterContinental Hotel mid-2019, and a hoped-for redevelopment of an adjacent parking structure, Mathews said.

The latter site is the subject of a graduate-level design studio at the University of Wisconsin's School of Architecture and Urban Planning and led by internationally known Chicago architect Jeanne Gang. That studio is exploring whether the site might accommodate the Milwaukee Public Museum and the Betty Brinn Children's Museum, as well as parking.

While the Gang-led studio is speculative, literally an academic exercise, there is real interest in seeing the two museums relocate next door to the Marcus Center, Mathews said.

"You are certainly going to see a new cultural destination around us here," Mathews said.

Mary Louise Schumacher is the Journal Sentinel's art and architecture critic. Keep up with the culture by [subscribing to her weekly newsletter, Art City](#).

Significance of the Architecture and Landscape Architecture of the Site Commonly Known as the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts

Description of the Site History and Development

Address:

929 North Water Street, Milwaukee WI

Architects:

Harry Weese & Associates (Chicago) 1966-1969 with Landscape Architect Daniel Urban Kiley
Kahler Slater Torphy (with Robert Davis, New York), Engberg Anderson Design Partnership 1994-1997

In 1965 landscape architect Dan Kiley and Chicago architect Harry Weese were working together on the design of an arts complex at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. The two men had just completed their work on the IBM Headquarters in Milwaukee. During this period of fruitful collaboration, Weese was also commissioned to design the Milwaukee Performing Arts Center (now the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts) at 929 East Water Street in Milwaukee, and he asked Kiley to join him on the project. This would be a continuation of a long-term working relationship that included the Rochester (New York) Institute of Technology, Reed College in Portland, Oregon, the First Baptist Church in Columbus, Indiana (now a National Historic Landmark), Grant Park in Chicago, Illinois, and Forest Park Community College in St. Louis, Missouri.

Construction on Milwaukee's new Performing Arts Center began in June 1966, with Kiley's design for the surrounding grounds well in hand by then. Kiley was known for the keen architectonic sense he brought to many projects, which, in this case, was matched by the special interest that Weese took in the landscape. The dialogue between the two practitioners, each at the top of his respective profession, is evident in the seamless dialogue between the landscape and the architecture. The facades of Weese's building were articulated in bold but simple planes of travertine. Kiley's landscape was equally bold in form and simple in materiality.

This iconic Milwaukee structure was designed by Harry Weese and completed in 1969. At this time the arts were a sector that experienced substantial infrastructural growth with help from a Federal program known as Great Society. The Marcus Center for the Performing Arts is an excellent example of a substantial arts project constructed during this period. The building, originally known as the Milwaukee Center for the Performing Arts, exemplifies the Chicago architect's brand of Brutalism. This nationally recognized style propelled Weese to fame with his completion of the Washington, DC metro rail system just several years prior to the start of the Marcus Center. Construction on what became the Marcus Center began with Weese's blueprints dated June 1966. The design of the theater complex is notable for a couple reasons. First, although originally clad in Italian travertine marble (now limestone) instead of raw concrete this structure is widely regarded as one of the finest examples of Brutalist architecture and one of the enduring legacies of the Great Society. The arts complex is an excellent example of form following function with the foyer, auditorium, fly loft and flanking banks of elevators all clearly articulated from the outside. The Modernist design of the Marcus Center is seen in the arrangement of interlocking cubes and a geometric pattern of rectangles and diamonds. In 1994, the Marcus Center travertine was replaced with two different stones. A lower course of Diamond Pink Granite, is topped with exterior walls of Winona Travertine, quarried near Winona, Minnesota. Original building plans called for a major music hall, a thrust stage auditorium for live theater (intended as a rehearsal space for the Florentine Opera) and a recital hall. Milwaukee County agreed to establish two parks in conjunction with the new center, Red Arrow to

the east and Pere Marquette to the west. The boat landing along the Milwaukee River was the precursor to the current River Walk in downtown Milwaukee. The Performing Arts Center, as it was known until a decade ago, officially opened Sept. 17, 1969, at a price of \$12.7 million. The gala opening included the Milwaukee Symphony, Donizetti's opera *Luciadi Lammormoor* and guest appearances by stars of the American Ballet Theatre. Touring acts during the first month of operation included the New York Philharmonic, Duke Ellington, National Ballet of Canada, Hildegard and Louis Armstrong.

Significance of the Architect and Architecture

Harry Mohr Weese (June 30, 1915 – October 29, 1998) was an American architect, born in Evanston, Illinois, who had an important role in 20th century modernism and historic preservation. Weese grew up in Chicago's North Shore suburbs and returned to the city to practice after training at MIT and Yale. Known as an architect's architect early in his career, his experience and interests stretched well beyond building. At various times, Weese found himself working as a mechanical engineer on a Navy destroyer, a real-estate developer, a magazine publisher, and a furniture designer, importer and retailer. Weese's urbanism was equally wide-ranging. Believing suburbs wasteful, he argued for giving middle-class families a comfortable place in the city with nature close at hand, an aim achieved in several infill rowhouse and apartment projects. A ceaseless stream of watercolors, sketches, essays and letters to the editor promoted sailing marinas, streets reborn as glazed shopping arcades, novel high-rise structures and Burnhamesque visions, including a 1992 World's Fair on Lake Michigan. He was an ardent if not orthodox preservationist, who tried to put Chicago's "L" stations on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978. Largely through Weese's efforts, the Navy Pier was added to the register that same year.

In the 1970s, Weese and his partners bought two buildings in the South Loop and converted them into residential and artists' lofts, a risky bet at a time when the only similar developments were in New York's Soho district. The group ended up controlling two whole blocks of South Dearborn Street, and their name for the reborn neighborhood, Printer's Row, stuck. His firm completed over 200 new buildings and major renovations, including that of Adler & Sullivan's structurally challenged Auditorium Building. The majority are in Chicago and the upper Midwest, but commissions took Weese as far afield as Ghana, India, Saudi Arabia and Singapore. Weese avoided specializing in a single building type, and his work covers an astonishing range of scales and programs, from transit systems to townhomes and hotels to corporate headquarters. The commission that first put Weese on the map, in 1958, was the U.S. Embassy in Accra, Ghana, a handsome rectangle of offices with projecting bays of louvered mahogany. Weese's most poetic work includes a pair of churches built in the early 1960s: First Baptist of Columbus, Indiana, and St. Thomas in Neenah, Wisconsin. The Weese oeuvre is mainly one of brick, concrete and timber, and these obvious material sympathies led him to be labeled an alternative to the "mainstream" modernism of Mies van der Rohe, SOM, and C.F. Murphy.

Weese's last contribution to D.C. is almost unbelievable: the Vietnam Memorial as we know it today would never have been built without him. After Maya Lin's entry board to the 1981 competition had been rejected, Weese, always uneasy with final decisions or consensus, dragged it out from the rear of the airplane hangar where it had been consigned. He swayed the rest of the jury and later championed Lin in the face of intense criticism.

Weese was an architect who was neither a stylist nor an iconoclast, whose work and words responded to a set of progressive social values and a straightforward concern for bettering the built environment.

Significance of the Landscape Architect and Landscape Architecture

Daniel Urban Kiley was one of the most important post-war landscape architects in the U.S. He is considered a visionary of the Modernist movement and is acclaimed for more than 1,000 landscapes worldwide.

Kiley was born in Massachusetts in 1912. In 1932, he began a 4 year apprenticeship with Warren Manning, the planting designer who worked with Frederick Law Olmsted and who oversaw the development of Milwaukee's Olmsted designed Parks (River, now Riverside, West, Now Washington, and Lake) and a founder of the American Society of Landscape Architects.

Kiley entered the Harvard Landscape Architecture program in 1936, which he left before enlisting in the Army. He was named as Presentations Branch Director of the Office of Strategic Services, being nominated for the position by Architect Eero Saarinen who was stepping down. Kiley first met Saarinen through Louis Kahn while he was employed at the U.S. Housing Authority. The two would later collaborate on iconic American projects such as the Miller House and Garden (Columbus, IN), the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial (Gateway Arch) (St. Louis, MO), and Dulles Airport (Washington, D.C.).

While at this position, Kiley was tasked with laying out the courtroom for the war crime trials in Nuremberg, Germany. He was able to travel after this assignment and the sites he saw left a great impression on him and largely shaped his approach to landscape design from then on.

"[T]he opportunity to travel around Western Europe and, for the first time in my life, to experience formal, spatial built landscapes (as championed in France by André Le Nôtre at its grandest, most rarefied level, yet found on every street of tiny towns and cities). THIS was what I had been searching for – a language ... to reveal nature's power and create spaces of structural integrity. I suddenly saw that lines, allées and orchards/bosques of trees, tapis verts and clipped hedges, canals, pools and fountains could be tools to build landscapes of clarity and infinity, just like a walk in the woods." (from The Complete Works of America's Master Landscape Architect).

Dan Kiley had a great Architectonic sense – his ability to respond to architecture was one of his strongest attributes. In terms of the rise of Modernism, we see evidence of that in the actual physical makeup of Kiley's spaces. The modernist agenda calls for good design available to all (egalitarianism) and honesty and simplicity in the use of materials. These important markers of Modernism are explicitly evident in the design of this Grove – concrete, gravel, and trees. This is definitively simple materials used in elegant ways and accessible to the public.

Kiley's work on the Performing Arts Center is significant for many reasons. It is a masterful demonstration of the skill and vision that brought him international acclaim as a pioneer of Modernism in designed landscapes and as a recipient of the National Medal of Arts (1997), a rare achievement for a landscape architect.

His final public commission to be realized during his lifetime is the Cudahy Gardens at the Milwaukee Art Museum, which opened to the public in 1998. To have, within blocks of each other, two public projects that bookend the civic career of one of the most important postwar landscape architects is of great cultural significance for the City of Milwaukee—a distinction that once forfeited can never be regained.

Dan Kiley continued to practice until his death in 2004.

Other Cultural Significance of the Site

The Marcus Center for the Performing Arts has been a part of Milwaukee County's War Memorial complex. A Flag Day celebration is held each year at the Peck Pavilion to honor veterans for their service.

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