

GREAT LAWN VS. GROVE

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MILWAUKEE RUSHES TOWARD A ZERO-SUM CHOICE THAT COULD ERADICATE A KILEY

Dan Kiley developed [his approach to landscape design](#) in the wake of World War II. After designing the courtrooms for the trials of Nazi war criminals at Nuremberg, he explored the classical European gardens such as the Tuileries, Villandry, and Versailles, and [translated](#) their allées, bosques, and hedgerows into modern expressions of landscape design. Channeling this tradition created [“spaces with structural integrity,” Kiley wrote.](#)

“The trees form a mass that’s almost a structure,” says [Joe Karr](#), FASLA, who worked with Kiley from 1963 till 1969. “Dan quite often used plants like an architect would use other materials.”

Kiley’s landscape for Milwaukee’s Marcus Center for the Performing Arts, which sits next to the Milwaukee River downtown, exemplifies these lessons. The Cultural Landscape Foundation’s President and CEO Charles Birnbaum, FASLA, says it’s “truer to the Tuileries as any Kiley landscape that survives today.”

But the Marcus Center is now planning to destroy Kiley's primary landscape feature on the site: a grid of 36 horse chestnut trees. A new plan will replace the trees with a great lawn for large public gatherings, quite contrary to Kiley's design intent. Construction is tentatively slated to start in the spring.



The Marcus Center grove in 1970. *Photo courtesy Joe Karr, FASLA, and the Cultural Landscape Foundation.*

The architect behind the new plan, [HGA's](#) James Shields, has lived in Paris, visiting the Tuileries dozens of times, and says he's "long admired the Kiley grove." But he also says degradation of the plantings over time, Americans with Disabilities Act compliance, and, most important, programmatic inflexibility make it infeasible to save.

The Marcus Center turns 50 years old this year. Kiley's original landscape accompanies a concert hall by the architect Harry Weese, his frequent collaborator. Weese's Brutalist building is austere with a vaguely classical massing—highest at its center, and stepping down asymmetrically. Beyond Kiley's tight grid of trees (sunken below grade a few steps), another grid pattern of grass and pavements orbits the rectilinear forest, making the landscape more and more ordered as it radiates outward from the building. The project has "very blurred lines between the work of the architect and the work of the landscape architect," Birnbaum says. "That's what makes it so successful." This continuity can be traced to Kiley and Weese's close relationship, and also to Karr, who worked in Kiley's office for much of the project, and then moved to Chicago to open his own firm—which often provided landscape design for Weese—as the Marcus Center neared completion.



The Kiley grove in 1986. *Photo by Joe Karr, FASLA, courtesy of the Cultural Landscape Foundation.*

The new landscape will also accompany revisions to Weese's building that move it away from its severe midcentury modern aesthetic, and make it a more public-focused civic center. This entails more windows cut into its blank facade and less dark glass. "From the outside of this place, if you don't know it, it can look like a fortress," says Paul Mathews, the Marcus Center's president and CEO. The renovations are a chance for the venue to become more outwardly focused and attract new diverse audiences, he says. It is "a chance for cultures to intermingle with each other and learn from each other."

These renovations will add a new band of windows that look out to the grove from a bar and lounge area, and Shields says the thick grove will block these views. The trees, he says, haven't been maintained in a way that preserves the patterns of light and shadow below that Kiley intended. Shields and Karr both say that Kiley did not give landscape maintenance instructions to the Marcus Center, but the lack of instructions was not out of the ordinary. "While we used to get dappled light in there during the summer, it's a giant dark mass now," says Shields. "It's an impenetrable forest." Four trees, he says, are so damaged they need to be removed immediately, and the gravel used to pave the grove is not ADA accessible. Even if the Marcus Center had decided to preserve the grove, they're nearing the need for a complete replanting, Shields says. Additionally, the grove is down several steps, and has no ADA-accessible ramp, which the new plan will fix. In isolation, Shields conceded that ADA accessibility wasn't an "overwhelmingly difficult issue." And Karr says it's quite possible to fix the inaccessibility without removing Kiley's grove. "I think it could be done very easily," he says. The space between the grove and the building seems large enough to

accommodate a ramp, as does the east end of the grove, where a large fountain that's no longer functional is to be removed.



The Marcus Center today. Photo by Zach Mortice.

The lawn that will supplant Kiley's horse chestnuts will have a row of nine trees on either side, a mild echo of Kiley's original arrangement. (Shields says that landscape architects with the [engineering firm GRAEF](#) are working on the project.) The focus of the new design will be a multistory stair tower wall, which will become a media screen for installations that Mathews hopes will enable the organization to offer more free public programming.

The urge for cultural organizations to increase visitor numbers with crossover programming is a common trend, perhaps best exemplified by the National Building Museum's annual [Summer Block Party installations](#) in Washington, D.C. The immersive experiences in the museum's cavernous atrium have become a huge draw. But at the Marcus Center, Birnbaum says, "It's a generic approach. It's a program-driven, tabula rasa approach that does not put a value or a depth of understanding on what is there now."



The Kiley Grove today. *Photo by Zach Mortice.*

Also driving the landscape change is retracting public sector funding. The Marcus Center expects to see its already fading annual appropriations from Milwaukee County drop to zero in just the next few years, under strain from [swelling pension commitments, among other expenses](#). The current funding agreement will see public contributions drop by \$50,000 each year. Additionally, a major tenant, the [Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra](#), will settle into a new venue next year, taking with it a block of programming and funding. These anticipated rounds of belt-tightening have prompted the arts center to be more “mission-driven” and “as lean as they can,” Shields says. Maintaining the Kiley landscape that is “of no use to you,” Shields says, would become an extravagance they can no longer afford.

And if HGA’s slate of interior renovations is aimed at making more money, their landscape changes are focused on first gathering a broader audience and their wallets, at the expense of the Kiley grove, which has not played a large role in directly accommodating artistic programming. It’s a sacrifice Shields is willing to make.

“I think there are definitely some professionals in my role that would resign over a thing like this one,” he says. “I weighed that, but decided that it was something I wouldn’t do.”

Shields believes in the Marcus Center’s social mission, especially considering Milwaukee’s infamy as [the nation’s most racially segregated city](#). “Frankly, I have more attachment to what the Marcus Center has

been able to achieve as a social and cultural institution,” he says. “I’m more attached to that, and I value it more than I do that preservation of the Kiley [landscape.]”



Pere Marquette Park, just across the Milwaukee River from the Marcus Center. *Photo by Zach Mortice.*

Marcus Center administrators are right to look for ways to bring their city together, just as they’re right to focus on establishing more riverside civic–front yard space in the city’s downtown. But maybe accomplishing both of these things while preserving the Kiley grove doesn’t require looking very far away at all.

Pere Marquette Park is located just across the Milwaukee River from the Marcus Center, and is connected to it by two pedestrian and vehicular bridges. It’s owned by Milwaukee County, which currently leases the Marcus Center site to the arts venue. It’s a broad green, several times larger than the Kiley grove. Why not use Pere Marquette Park as an art-centric great lawn gathering space (especially since they share the same landlord), and spare Kiley’s landscape? “I don’t think it’s feasible,” Mathews says. “They’re different kinds of spaces. It’s pretty much open space out there, and they’re going to keep it that way.”

Shields’s professional ethics allowed him to stay on the job, but it also required him to plan for future flexibility. Digging up the grove is “not an irrevocable move,” he says. He intentionally placed no infrastructure below the grove’s footprint so that it can relatively easily be replanted. But this flexibility seems to be an implicit argument for the grove’s preservation: Shields says it could be replanted in a week for only about \$750,000.



The Marcus Center today, as seen from Pere Marquette Park. *Photo by Zach Mortice.*

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