

# Destroying the chestnut grove at the Marcus Center appeals to Milwaukee's pragmatic side. But does it make design sense?

[Mary Louise Schumacher](#), Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Published 6:00 a.m. CT Jan. 15, 2019 | Updated 8:55 p.m. CT Jan. 16, 2019

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A grove of horse chestnut trees is shown Jan. 16, 2019, at the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts. (Photo: Michael Sears / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

I stole a few minutes inside the grove of chestnut trees at the [Marcus Center for the Performing Arts](#) a few weeks ago — not knowing plans were quietly being made for its destruction.

Stepping down a few steps, the stone crunching beneath my feet, I felt a concoction of things: sheltered, delighted, grounded and transported, like the passage through C.S. Lewis' wardrobe into an unexpected wood.

That pulse-lowering dose of nature in the heart of the city stands in contrast to what it's now up against, the pragmatic and urgent arguments the Marcus Center is making to destroy this seminal work of landscape architecture by Daniel Urban Kiley.

"We will definitely take the blame for destroying it," said Jim Shields of HGA, the architect on the project. "We understand we're doing that."

I fear how this design-vs.-practicality discussion may turn out. Milwaukee is a down-to-earth community. But let's run through it, shall we?



A man naps under the chestnut trees next to the Marcus Center for Performing Arts on the last day of the Morning Glory Fine Craft Fair on Aug. 12, 2012. (Photo: Milwaukee Journal Sentinel files)

In one corner, we've got the Marcus Center and Shields. They say the Kiley grove has grown dark and underutilized. It's showing its age, they say.

"You know the mission of the Marcus Center is to bring music and performance to a really broad audience, and we wish the grove would contribute to that in some way, but it doesn't seem to do that," Shields says. "To my knowledge, no one has ever tried having an art performance in the grove, and it's been 50 years."

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So, they will rip out the sunken garden and trees and replace it with a rectangle of grass. They are calling that a "great lawn" and will plant big, 24-year-old locust trees at its edges, where Kiley's chestnuts grow now.

The plan is part of a reimagining of the whole campus on the occasion of the center's 50th anniversary. The revamp involves modifying Harry Weese's modernist structure to make it more transparent, architecturally and otherwise. They'll replace the dark black glass, build a terrace on

the river and punch a hole in the south face of the building for a glassy atrium with views of the skyline.

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

It also will mean new fountains and an attention-getting, five-story projection wall, where people on the street can take in various art forms, including live performances of the Milwaukee Ballet.

What does all of this get them? Well, it's fundamentally about building excitement outside, including through free performances and events, in order to get people interested in the revenue-generating art produced on stage inside, no easy feat in our Netflix era.

They paint a pretty compelling picture of families picnicking in the grass, with clear views to the outdoor Peck Pavilion. Milwaukeeans will be able to glimpse *actual* human activity inside an otherwise deadened, impenetrable building, they say. And towering projections of pirouettes may inspire people to pop in and pay for tickets.

Before we go much further, a bit of context is warranted. The Marcus Center is about to lose an important tenant, the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, which is decamping in 2020 for its own venue, the Warner Grand Theatre on West Wisconsin Avenue. That leaves holes in the arts center's budget and programming schedule — and a need for new audiences.

I get it, and I sympathize.

Now, in the other corner, we have design. The formal ingredients of Kiley's grove are deceptively simple. Just a sunken garden, a grid of trees and places to sit. It's so simple, in fact, that it's hard to articulate how remarkable it is.

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So let me enlist Tom Cruise. He filmed a culminating scene for last year's "Mission Impossible" blockbuster in Paris' Tuileries Garden. In the scene, a romantic turning point, no one's hanging from a helicopter or a cliff. No expensive stunts or effects are required. Cruise simply takes a few steps into the Tuileries grove, leaving bright sun for a space washed in cool green. The intimacy sings on screen.

Tom Cruise is back for another mission in "Mission: Impossible – Fallout." USA TODAY

That was the sensation — into a chapel-like place — that informed Kiley's work. It's the very garden that inspired his intimate hideaway for Milwaukee.

Also, look, if people aren't coming for the art, maybe don't blame the trees. Consider that in the heyday of Rainbow Summer, a free outdoor concert series that took place on lunch hours in the Peck Pavilion, the Marcus Center was a vibrant gathering place. Crowds readily spilled into Kiley's grove.

The horse chestnut trees can live for centuries, too, by the way, according to Joe Karr, a Chicago landscape architect who picked out each of Kiley's chestnuts by hand more than 50 years ago. And while some trees may "outlive their useful life," as Shields argues, there are countless formal gardens in Europe that are properly cared for for centuries, too.

But Europeans know how to care for their historic gardens, properly pruning and replacing trees as needed. Kiley's grove, on the other hand, "is definitely not cared for ... and shows obvious signs of neglect," says Jennifer Current, a landscape architect with Quorum Architects who has studied Kiley's work.

"The thing that's exciting about landscape is how it changes over time," says Mo Zell, chair of the school of architecture at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, who was concerned about the grove's destruction. "So in spring, the tree canopy creates a different kind of atmosphere or

spatial condition than in fall with all of the changing of the leaves. Even the growth over time is part of that.”

Also, what’s so “great” about a rectangle of grass, which will need mowing, anyway? Do we really need more lawn in downtown Milwaukee? Grassy places to enjoy live music abound, including right across the river in Pere Marquette Park. Red Arrow Park, which is across the street, also offers grass, people watching and places to sit. Why destroy something unlike anything else in the city, what my predecessor Whitney Gould likes to call the most New York thing in Milwaukee, for something we have in abundance?



A grove of horse chestnut trees is shown in 1969 between Kilbourn Avenue and the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts. This photo shows the exterior looking northwest from the corner of North Water Street and Kilbourn. (Photo: Milwaukee Journal Sentinel files)

Shields’ half-hearted homage is perhaps the worst-case-scenario, a generic ghost of the Kiley-Weese collaboration for the Marcus Center’s grounds. It would make more sense to hire a landscape architect of Kiley’s caliber and create something wholly new, which is far less desirable than the most obvious choice.

The obvious move here is to restore the grove like an original artwork, which is precisely what it is. One might expect to have to school a corporate steward on the point, but the fact that an *arts* center is failing to protect this gem is especially disheartening.

The Marcus Center could follow the good examples set at [Ford Foundation in New York City](#) and the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, or the Gateway Arch, in St. Louis. Both sites

have Kiley landscapes that were recently restored in a way that honored the original design intent.

We don't need to be precious about a restoring Kiley's grove here, either. Updating the grove, making it accessible for those with disabilities and accommodating the Marcus Center's programmatic needs seems quite doable. A different kind of tree could be even be considered, if need be, Current and Karr say.

Shields' pair of glass fountains — touchable and facing each other — and that large projection wall, also read like an underwhelming remix of the ingredients at Millennium Park in Chicago, the public space that has for better and worse become an essential reference point for anyone designing places today. If art is called for, please hire an actual artist or two.

Finally, it is worth noting that Kiley's final project was the Cudahy Garden on the grounds of the Milwaukee Art Museum, completed in 2001, a site that also suffers from neglect and modification, [detailed by Tom Bamberger](#), a writer for Urban Milwaukee, in 2014. Our city is home to two important works that bookend a remarkable career.

“The City of Milwaukee has a rich history of importing some of the greatest talents that the country has to offer in terms of the built environment,” said Charles Birnbaum, founder of the Cultural Landscape Foundation. “Whether it's the original parks that engaged (Frederick Law) Olmsted or postwar-era architects like Weese and (Eero) Saarinen or landscape architects like Kiley, there was a profound commitment to civicness, world-class public spaces and cultural destinations.

“I think what's happened in recent years in Milwaukee, as in a lot of cities, is there are limited resources and difficult decisions have to be made ... and yet it is possible to manage change in a landscape like this without destroying its significance.”

So there you have it, the pragmatic need for excitement and audiences in one corner and the civic, design-minded case in the other. The simple truth is, they are not at all in opposition.

*Mary Louise Schumacher is the Journal Sentinel's art and architecture critic. Keep up with the culture and get [her weekly newsletter, Art City](#). Email her at [mschumacher@journal sentinel.com](mailto:mschumacher@journal sentinel.com).*

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