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## Demolition of Dan Kiley Landscape in Milwaukee Announced

Dec 17, 2018 | Jennifer Current

The Marcus Center for the Performing Arts in downtown Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is a masterfully designed campus whose building, by architect Harry Weese, and landscape, by Dan Kiley, exist in harmonious equilibrium. Despite being an exemplary collaboration between these two masters of their craft, the cultural venue recently unveiled plans to obliterate Kiley's grid of horse chestnut trees for the sake of a more flexible outdoor space.

### History

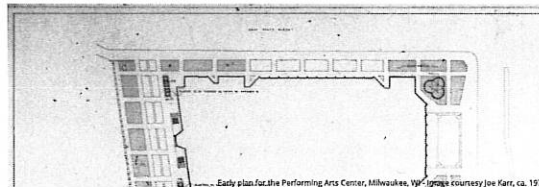
In 1965 landscape architect Dan Kiley and Chicago architect Harry Weese were working together on the design of an arts complex at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. The two men had just completed their work on the IBM Headquarters in Milwaukee. During this period of fruitful collaboration, Weese was 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.



Marcus Center for the Performing Arts, Milwaukee, WI - Photo courtesy Joe Kart, ca. 1970

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 architectural 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.

His plan for the center's grounds, located beside the Milwaukee River, called for a grid of grass rectangles set within the pavement surrounding a central, trapezoidal plaza. That central space, sunken three steps below the adjacent walkways (recalling the better-known South Garden at the Chicago Art Institute (<https://tclf.org/sites/default/files/microsites/kiley-legacy/ArtInstChicago.html>), designed and constructed from 1962 to 1967), mimicked the conversation pit of the famous Miller House and Garden (<https://tclf.org/landscapes/miller-garden?destination=search-results>), which Kiley had completed with architect Eero Saarinen in Columbus, Indiana, in 1957 (and which became a National Historic Landmark in 2000). The interior of the plaza was covered in crushed stone and planted with 36 horse chestnut trees laid out in a 4 x 9 grid. The meticulously placed rows of trees are slightly more than eighteen feet apart on the eastern end of the plaza, increasing to just over 21 feet apart on the western end. The careful spacing created the illusion of a perfect rectangle, masterfully disguising the slightly trapezoidal shape of the plaza.



Early plan for the Performing Arts Center, Milwaukee, WI - Photo courtesy Joe Kart, ca. 1970

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The grid of horse chestnuts also speaks directly to Kiley's time in Europe, specifically in Paris, France, where, as has been noted, he was the landscape architect of the garden of the Tuileries (also planted with horse chestnut trees), the imperial palace on the right bank of the Seine. What Kiley recognized there—and translated to great advantage in Milwaukee—was “a language of form used to conduct the movement of daily life...a language with which to vocalize the dynamic hand of human order on the land—a way to reveal nature's power and create spaces with structural integrity,” as he put it. He would also recall that his experience at the Tuileries opened his eyes to “the spatial and compositional power of the simplest of elements—this was no less than living architecture.” The Performing Arts Center's plaza in Milwaukee is a virtual illustration of these thoughts and words.



Marcus Center for the Performing Arts, Milwaukee, WI - Photo by Joe Karr, ca. 1970

Complementing the simple bosque of trees are twelve-foot-high pylon lights designed especially for the project by Wesse. The concrete benches that fill the plaza today, however, are not original to the design. Keeping true to the idea that urban life could and should happen spontaneously and unprogrammed, even within a highly ordered landscape, Kiley specified that moveable tables and chairs be set among the trees, allowing the plaza to function as an extension of the Performing Arts Center's interior spaces. The use of moveable tables and chairs did not enter the mainstream of landscape design until 1967, with the opening of Paley Park (<https://tclf.org/landscapes/paley-park/?destination=search-results>) in New York City; the use of these furnishings at the Marcus Center was thus a pioneering effort to create a flexible outdoor space.

**Threat**

On December 7, 2018, the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts unveiled its vision for a reimagined campus, which called for the Dan Kiley landscape to be obliterated. The Marcus Center reportedly seeks to create a more open and flexible campus in order to help generate revenue and host more events. To achieve this, the current design proposes to replace the grove of horse chestnut trees with a large lawn intended to be used as a viewing area for outdoor performances. Moveable seating would be included on the lawn—an ironic nod to Kiley's original design, which included just that within the planted plaza, whose shade-giving trees would surely be missed, especially as temperatures, already on the rise, are only projected to increase in the coming decades.



Marcus Center (left) and the Tuileries Gardens (right) - Photos by Joe Karr, 1986 (left) and Charles A. Birnbaum, 2014 (right)

The center's press release states that the grove of horse chestnuts now sees little use, calling it a “black forest” that exudes “really dark shade.” The press release also states that Milwaukee County has committed \$10 million to the project, which also calls for changes and additions to Wesse's building. The project is expected to take from three to five years to complete and is slated to begin in Spring 2019.

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. Moreover, Kiley's work on the nearby Cudahy Gardens at the Milwaukee Art Museum (<https://tclf.org/sites/default/files/microsites/kiley-legacy/CudahyGardens.html>), opened to the public in 1998, was his last fully realized public commission. 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, and one that should be carefully weighed against the center's plans, especially given its stated mission to provide “the best of cultural and community programming.”

**What You Can Do to Help**

This important public space is leased by the County of Milwaukee to the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts, and there should be public input before it is erased forever. At the very least, citizens and design professionals should be allowed to review and voice their opinions about the plans. There has, however, been no indication that either the county or the center itself will provide such an opportunity.

Contact the following individuals and organizations to raise their awareness of the impending destruction of the Dan Kiley landscape:

**Milwaukee County Executive Chris Abele (e-mail (<https://county.milwaukee.gov/EN/County-Executive/Contact>))**  
 Milwaukee County Courthouse, Room 306  
 901 N. 9th Street | Milwaukee, WI 53233  
 (Ph.) 414-278-4211

**Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission (e-mail (<mailto:hpc@milwaukee.gov>))**  
 Subject: Don't demolish the Dan Kiley landscape at the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts  
 Zaidler Municipal Building  
 841 N. Broadway, Room B-1 | Milwaukee, WI 53202  
 (Ph.) 414-286-5712 | 414-286-5722

**Milwaukee District 4 Alderman Robert Bauman (e-mail (<mailto:rbauman@milwaukee.gov>))**  
 Subject: Don't demolish the Dan Kiley landscape at the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts  
 841 N. Broadway, Room B-1 | Milwaukee, WI 53202  
 (Ph.) 414-286-2221

Jennifer Current is a professional landscape architect practicing in Milwaukee and has taught landscape-architecture history and design at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, U.W. Milwaukee, and the Illinois Institute of Technology.