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Historic Preservation Committee, City of Milwaukee
City Hall, Room 301-B
200 E. Wells Street
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53202

April 1, 2019

Re: Support for relating to the Permanent Historic Designation of the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts at 929 North Water Street in the 4th Ald. District.

Dear Chair and Commissioners,

Milwaukee Preservation Alliance is writing to the Historic Preservation Commission today to voice our support for the Resolution (File #181570) relating to the Permanent Historic Designation of the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts (MCPA) at 929 North Water Street in the 4th Ald. District.

The Wisconsin statute (s. 62.23(7)(em)) regulating local Historic Preservation ordinances states "it is declared a matter of public policy that the protection, enhancement, perpetuation, and use of improvements of special architectural character or special historical interest or value is a public necessity and is required in the interest of health, prosperity, safety, and welfare of the people."

The statute doesn't demand preservation in amber but wants to "Effect and accomplish the protection, enhancement and perpetuation of such improvements and of districts which represent or reflect elements of the city's cultural, social, economic, political and architectural history". Its policy is to "Safeguard the city's historic and cultural heritage, as embodied and reflected in landmarks and historic districts." This policy will "Stabilize and improve property values, Foster civic pride in the beauty and noble accomplishments of the past" and "Protect and enhance the city attractions to residents, tourists and visitors, and serve as a support and stimulus to business and industry". MPA would argue that nothing in this language prohibits the Marcus Center from pursuing their goals to make the Marcus Center a place that is more inviting, accessible, diverse and sustainable.

The City of Milwaukee Ordinance sites criteria for designation. MPA agrees that the Marcus Center meets four of ten criteria.

e-1. Its exemplification of the development of the cultural, economic, social or historic heritage of the City of Milwaukee, State of Wisconsin or of the United States.

MPA Comment: It is important to show the evolution of Milwaukee cultural and civic thinking; that "in a city filled with 19th century treasures, the city, the county and the War Memorial Development Committee selected a modern design, brutalist in style, for the construction of a performing arts center, and a unique design for the landscape based on geometry, linear forms, and crisp edges with a simple planting consisting of a grove of trees." Per the study report "Milwaukee left behind its traditional roots to look to the future." Though changes have occurred to both the grove and the building, none of those alterations compromise the representation of that cultural period.

e-5. Its embodiment of distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen.

MPA Comment: To date alterations to the Weese building do nothing to completely negate distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen. This building would not be built today, nor would it ever be thought to be a 21st Century construction. It remains an embodiment of its time. Similarly, Dan Kiley's landscape grove of chestnut trees, set within an overall grid of squares, continues to be simple in form and plant use. The modern landscape design continues to complement the flat planes and expressive volumes of the Marcus Center. Kiley's use of trees, linear rows and geometric forms are characteristic of his landscapes. Most if not all updates made over the years are reversible.

e-6. Its identification as the work of an artist, architect, craftsperson or master builder whose individual works have influenced the development of the city.

MPA Comment: In comparison to other Weese construction in Milwaukee, Harry Weese showed Milwaukee with the Marcus Center that modernism can take on many different faces. Despite alterations, the Marcus Center remains a Modernist construction. Dan Kiley likewise gave Milwaukee something new, a landscape that reflects the geometry of the Marcus Center. It utilizes nature with its trees and grids of turf but nature here conforms to specific patterns, very different from the landscape treatment of our past public parks and parkways.

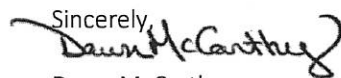
e-9. Its unique location as a singular physical characteristic which represents an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community or the city.

MPA Comment: The Marcus Center and the Kiley landscape continue to stand out on their site in the heart of Milwaukee's downtown. The Marcus Center remains monumental and does not resemble anything around it. It remains a destination building and the Kiley landscape with its grove of horse chestnut trees, despite ill-considered changes is still highly recognizable, a welcoming spot to enjoy outdoor performances, providing the kind of amenity not found elsewhere downtown.

The Permanent Historic Designation process has been the only venue for public input on the future of the Marcus Center, a landmark which clearly lives in the hearts and memories of the Milwaukee community. This designation process energized members of the community to speak out passionately about the significance of the Marcus Center. The designation process engendered amazing essays, op-eds, and articles written by talented and knowledgeable journalists, architects, historians and preservationists, sharing their insights and articulating the brilliance of the designs that elicit such community passion, and why it matters. These writings offer ideas that deserve consideration. They offer resources and recommendations to meet both the public interest and a successful Marcus Center future.

The Historic Designation provides guidelines to enable the contemporary use of the Marcus Center while protecting these unique representations of a period in the evolution, development and history of Milwaukee.

Milwaukee Preservation Alliance strongly supports the Resolution relating to the Permanent Historic Designation of the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts.

Sincerely,


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