

8 April, 2019

Dear Ald. Johnson:

As former architecture critics for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and longtime Milwaukee residents, we urge you to uphold the Historic Preservation Commission's recent designation of the Marcus Center site as a historic property.

We are taking the rare step of writing to elected officials— something we have never done— because we believe there is a significant public interest here that has not been given its due. This site, especially its completely free and open-to-the-public oasis of green space in the middle of a rapidly redeveloping downtown, is beloved by many. Designation will ensure that everyday Milwaukeeans will have a voice in what happens as the Marcus Center reinvents itself.

Designed by two modernist masters, architect Harry Weese and landscape architect Dan Kiley, the site most assuredly meets four of the criteria for designation, including cultural, economic or social heritage; association with an architect or master builder; characteristics of an architectural type (in this case, a lighter version of the monumental style known as Brutalism); and recognition as a visual landmark. The collaboration between these two giants of 20th century urbanism is one that any cosmopolitan community should celebrate.

Since the site was developed in 1969, it has been a center of cultural life in Milwaukee and contributed richly to our sense of place. With its sunken, rectilinear grid of 36 horse chestnut trees, the Kiley grove on the southern edge of the building is a serene sanctuary on a busy street—a leafy outdoor room that serves as a gentle counterpoint to the bold strokes of Weese's building. Studies show that such spaces add economic value to nearby property.

We concede that both of the major components of the Marcus Center site are not the same as they were 50 years ago. The building has seen its crisp Travertine skin replaced with blander stone cladding; its entrance is now glassy and canopied; and other changes have altered the relationship of solids and voids. Also, some of Kiley's chestnuts are now failing, due to poor maintenance, and the grove is not user friendly to people with disabilities.

But these are not fatal to historic designation. Many other landmarked buildings have undergone significant modifications, including the headquarters of our own former employer, the Journal Sentinel, and the Scottish Rite Masonic Center, whose elegant Art Deco facade from 1936 encases an entire Romanesque Revival church from 1889. Yet such buildings, like Weese's Marcus Center, remain important exemplars of their time and place, allowing us to "read" the passage of time in the built environment.

Also, the accessibility problems with Kiley's chestnut grove can be fixed with the addition of gentle ramps, discreet railings, and permeable paving that would provide a stable surface and let water percolate—the sort of reasonable accommodations that are made all the time, as the Americans with Disabilities Act provides. The failing trees can be replaced with new ones, as has been done with other Kiley installations and with cultural landscapes around the world. The restoration option would be far better than the Marcus Center's preferred substitute: a flat lawn lined on either side with rows of locusts.

For guidance on how such a renovation could be sensitively accomplished, the U.S. Department of Interior's guidelines for restoring historic cultural landscapes could be a starting point. And the Marcus Center could consult with Joe Karr, who worked with Dan Kiley on the project and still lives in Chicago.

In short, designation will not freeze this property in amber. Rather, it will give the public a say in what happens to it. And it will ensure that as the Marcus Center renews itself, it has broad civic buy-in, which is essential to the longterm viability of the facility. Indeed, an unfortunate side effect of the current plans for the site is the ill will that they have generated. We have heard expressions of dismay and outrage about those plans from people throughout Milwaukee, and from as far away as California, Georgia, Florida, New York and Chicago (many who retain ties to Milwaukee). Some of these people are potential donors to the Marcus Center who echo what one told us: "I'm not giving one red cent if that chestnut grove is destroyed." In that light, how ironic that many of the center's proposed changes are being made to appeal to big donors!

As a measure of the national attention this issue is drawing, an effort is under way to get the site listed on the National Register of Historic Places. If that happens, as seems plausible, any effort to tear out the Kiley grove would give the city a black eye—just what it doesn't need as it prepares to host the Democratic National Convention in 2020. So, if the Marcus Center succeeds in overturning the designation, it could be a case of winning the battle but losing the war.

We can foresee the outlines of an intelligent compromise here, in which the Kiley grove is restored and made accessible and the Weese building, already altered, could get some sensitively designed improvements that will accommodate the Marcus Center's program needs while retaining (and perhaps returning) more of the building's integrity. Let its talented architect, Jim Shields, who has shown his skill with many other challenging projects, work with the Preservation Commission in taking that next step.

Thank you for taking the time to consider our arguments. We would welcome the chance to talk further with you.

Sincerely,

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