

December 12, 2020

To the honorable chair and commissioners:

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The Milwaukee Preservation Alliance strongly supports permanent historic designation of the former Forest Home Library and concurs with HPC Staff's finding that **the building qualifies under Criteria e-1, e-5, e-6 and e-7** of the City's Historic Preservation Ordinance, Section 320-21(3) of the Milwaukee Code of Ordinances. That the Forest Home Library – which stands as one of Milwaukee's finest and most innovative examples of Mid-Century Modern architecture – satisfies and exceeds the criteria for designation is abundantly clear.

Along with my work for the MPA, I also serve as Vice President of the Society for Commercial Archeology, a national preservation nonprofit focused on architecture of the 20th Century. From this position, I can personally attest to the architectural caliber of the Forest Home Library, a building that, through its expression of structural form and deliberate break with historicist styles, is as direct an expression of architectural Modernism as exists anywhere in the country.

This 1966 masterpiece was designed by prominent local architecture firm von Grossmann, Burroughs, & Van Lanen and was awarded the American Institute of Architects Wisconsin Chapter Honor Award and American Institute of Steel Construction Design Excellence Award the following year. The AIA praised the building as “an alive and creative solution to small scale public architecture” displaying a “great deal of competence in technology” (e-5).

Chief among the building's technological innovations are its pioneering use of Corten (or weathering) Steel. This special steel framing, engineered to weather to a patina, would have been significantly more expensive than traditional steel at the time and evidences the importance of the building as a true work of public art. The first use of this technology as an architectural element was just two years earlier at the John Deere World Headquarters in Illinois, designed by internationally renowned Modernist master Eero Saarinen. The early use of Corten Steel on the Forest Home Library appears to be the first in Milwaukee. This innovation combined with its high style of modernism would influence architecture in Milwaukee moving forward and make the building the most significant Milwaukee library of the 20th Century (e-7).

Critically, the time is right for Milwaukee to protect its Modernist resources. The Forest Home Library, as a beautiful example of mid-century library architecture designed by a significant architect and demonstrating “innovation in architectural design” (e-7) is the right building to serve as the city's first individually designated Modernist resource. The only Modernist building in Milwaukee that currently has historic designation is in fact another library, the 1953 former Finney Library, which is included in the Sherman Boulevard Historic District and does not have the architectural distinction of the Forest Home Library.

Buildings from the recent past have always faced challenges to preservation based on changing tastes. Victorian architecture of the late 1800s was demeaned as Art Deco came into vogue in the 1920s. Art Deco itself suffered at the hands of Modernism in the 1960s. Modernism has already too often suffered the same fate as its predecessors. A strong international movement for Modernist architectural appreciation and preservation has existed for decades however, and current preservation practice demands that Modernism be evaluated with the same respect shown to older buildings. The preservation

organization Docomomo (short for the Documentation and Conservation of the Modern Movement) is currently active in 71 countries. Twenty regional chapters exist in the U.S., including surrounding Milwaukee in Chicago, Michigan, and Minnesota. As the leading international voice for Modernist preservation, Docomomo states that Modernism was an artistic and architectural movement that embodied the unique early 20th Century notion that artistic works must look forward to the future without overt references to historical precedent; that Modern design emphasized expression of functional, technical, or spatial properties rather than reliance on decoration; and that Modern design was conscious of being modern: it purposefully expressed the principles of modern design (<https://www.docomomo-us.org/explore-modern/explore-the-register/how-to-evaluate-modern>). The HPC staff report demonstrates that the Forest Home Library is a textbook “embodiment of distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type [Modernism]” (e-5).

Further, the Wisconsin State Historic Preservation Office also noted the Forest Home Library’s importance in 2018 by determining it potentially eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

In addition, it is important to note that the building maintains an incredibly high degree of integrity in all areas: location, design, settings, materials, and workmanship. Having served a single user for its entire life, no changes of note have been made to the building over the course of its 54 years. Historic photos used to promote the building’s construction are indistinguishable from the building’s appearance today. Additionally, the building remains in excellent, usable condition (remember that the Corten steel is purposely supposed to look rusty).

I will conclude with a quote from the 1967 essay, *Public libraries in Denmark*, which demonstrates – according to Nan Dahlkild’s Summer 2011 *Library Trends* journal article “The Emergence and Challenge of the Modern Library Building” – how Modernist libraries “characterized the spirit of the time, and the idea of the library as a modern architectural and social “Gesamtkunstwerk,” integrating perfectly intentions and physical form”:

One day success is achieved. Suddenly a new library is there—broad, low, flat-roofed—standing as if it had sprung up in the night, all ready to receive its readers. A cultural centre of local life, a source and focus at one and the same time. Literature and art are bound together. . . . The building. . . is in itself a manifestation of the architecture of its time.

As the most intact, innovative, and significant example of Modernist library architecture in Milwaukee, the Forest Home Library is eminently deserving of our protection, and MPA strongly urges the Commission to grant it permanent historic designation.

Thank you as always for your hard work on behalf of the people and places of Milwaukee.

Respectfully,

Jeremy Ebersole
Executive Director
Milwaukee Preservation Alliance