

Forest Home Library Site's Green Space and Trees

The Forest Home Library has functioned as more than just a beautiful, light-filled building. The people-centered design also includes important urban green space surrounding the building, which supports public health in multiple ways.

Neighbors continue to pass through and pause in this welcoming green space, which is essentially an elegant “vest-pocket park.” Two Cor-ten steel pergolas provide sustainable and enduring shade. A meandering path beneath the one in front invites people to enjoy respite, whether while strolling through the site as a natural spur (as people still do) or by pausing on an adjoining seat wall that is part of the site’s infrastructure.

Several mature trees provide shade and mitigate high temperatures common in concrete-laden cities, what is known as the “Urban Heat Island Effect.” The Trust for Public Land’s mapping of Milwaukee (as part of its annual ParkScore ranking of all park spaces) identifies this area as being a moderate-to-high “heat island.” (link to ParkScore map of Milwaukee’s green space and heat islands: <https://parkserve.tpl.org/mapping/index.html?CityID=5553000>)

Demolishing this building and its campus will eliminate green space in a dense neighborhood in which parks, even pocket parks, are not plentiful. The proposed development could also diminish tree canopy significantly. Much has been written about how reductions in urban tree canopy correlate with increased crime, in addition to aggravating climate-crisis issues.

In a webinar conducted last month by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Professor Vivek Shandas of Portland State University’s “Sustaining Urban Places Research Lab” spoke about the role of green space in promoting physiological and mental health, as well as environmental equity. He expressed concern about the predictable impacts of “turning green space into gray space,” whenever open space and trees are replaced with structures and other concrete. Shandas said this is especially a problem in marginalized neighborhoods, where green space is rarely re-established once it’s removed. He said that community engagement and “multi-solving” in the development process are needed to reverse “systematic patterns of a long history of disparities of access to green space.”

Sources

“Today’s Green Space - A Health, Climate & Equity Solution Briefing,” on November 19, 2020, webinar hosted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

“Healthy Neighborhoods Study” conducted by Conservation Law Foundation: <https://www.clf.org/healthy-neighborhoods-study/>

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