

12 May 2025

Dear City of Detroit Historic District Commissioners,

I am writing to make clear my strong opposition to Detroit Thermal's application for a project in the Lafayette Park Historic District. I oppose the proposed project because it would irrevocably damage my neighborhood's historic landscape, which is central to our National Historic Landmark Designation.

My family and I are long-time residents of the Lafayette Park Historic District Neighborhood. If living here has taught us anything, it's that our neighbors care about this city, they care about our neighborhood, and they care about each other.

The landscape that extends throughout the Mies van der Rohe Historic District was designed by world-renowned landscape architect Alfred Caldwell. His plan called for a vast quantity of various plantings and Honey Locust trees. At the time, the developer was unsure he had budgeted enough to implement the plan as designed and Caldwell responded that the size of the trees was not what was important, but that the quantity was, and that it would simply take more time for the landscape to reach his vision. In the end, little trees were purchased instead of large ones, and all the plantings followed his careful plan, knowing with time the landscape would grow and mature.

Over twenty years ago, Detroit City Council noted the significance of Lafayette Park in establishing a Historic Designation Advisory Board, which prepared an official study¹ of a proposed "Lafayette Park/Mies van der Rohe Historic District" and wrote that the landscape design was highly significant to the neighborhood in several ways, from its integration with architecture (that complements the minimalist architecture); its urban renewal philosophy (with greenspaces intended to provide a more human living environment); its reduction of automobile impact (with suppressed parking and a network of pedestrian paths); the environmental and social benefits (supporting social interaction by providing shared green spaces); and its historic integrity (despite some changes, the landscape has retained its original character and continues to be a defining feature).

Detroit Thermal doesn't care. They have steamrolled the neighborhood over the past 7 months, treating its residents and representatives with disregard – people who have stewarded this neighborhood, its buildings, and its landscape for more than six decades through their service and investment. And now Detroit Thermal is looking to dig up and bulldoze several key areas of the neighborhood to execute their poorly defined plan. As such, they cannot be trusted with caring for the landscape as part of their project. Despite their plans indicating that they will

provide ‘restoration-in-kind,’ they have demonstrated that they see the landscape as a by-product of their underground work, simply a top fill of dirt, grass, shrubbery, cement, and a few trees, which – at best – could wind up topped off just like any other side of the road patch of ground, consistent with the sites where they almost exclusively work.

I know that my neighbors share this opinion, and many will outline in greater detail the many adverse effects Detroit Thermal’s hastily prepared plans will have on our neighborhood. I want to make clear that historic places don’t happen by chance, or with ease. What’s easy is how quickly they can be lost, so I will close my letter with Alfred Caldwell’s own words about the Lafayette Park landscape:

In August of 1992, Caldwell visited Lafayette Park for the first time since it was completed, and his visit was captured as part of a documentary entitled *Creating Community: Lafayette Park*. As he walked the grounds, he remarked about the variety of landscape and the growth of the canopy trees 35 years after they were planted: “It’s truly wonderful! It’s wonderful to see the world through such a light, and anybody can have it – all you have to do is not to be a moron, all you have to do is to care.”²

Our neighborhood cares. Hopefully, the HDC does too.



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Notes

1. “Proposed Lafayette Park/Mies van Der Rohe Historic District Final Report.” Historic Designation Advisory Board, City of Detroit. Accessed May 12, 2025.
<https://detroitmi.gov/sites/detroitmi.localhost/files/2018-08/Lafayette%20Park%20Mies%20van%20der%20Rohe%20HD%20Final%20Report.pdf>.
2. *Creating Community: Lafayette Park*, Written, Produced, & Directed by June Finfer, Lost and Found Productions, 1999. Accessed May 12, 2025 on Kanopy.com (25:00–27:51).
<https://www.kanopy.com/en/umich/watch/video/63609>.