

Michael L. Jacobs, PLA

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

2324 Norwalk St., Hamtramck, MI 48212 | Phone: (517) 214-2799

May 13, 2025

To:

Detroit Historic District Commission
Coleman A. Young Municipal Center,
2 Woodward Ave. Suite 808
Detroit, MI 48226
Phone: (313) 224-1762

Dear Commissioners of the *Detroit Historic District*,

As a Landscape Architect with over twenty years of experience working in municipal, commercial and residential settings, I am writing regarding the steam line work proposed at the Lafayette Park Townhouses. This letter outlines the significance of the landscape at Lafayette Park, as well as providing specific recommendations for *Detroit Thermal*.

Landscape and Design in Detroit

Detroit, as with many industrial cities, has experienced extensive change to its physical environment, posing unique landscape architecture and planning challenges and opportunities. The success of recent large-scale landscape planning efforts such as *the Detroit Riverfront, the Dequindre Cut Greenway & Joe Louis Bike Trail, City of Detroit Park Improvements, Belle Isle Improvements, Downtown Detroit Public Space Improvements*, along with well-established urban farming, public art and environmental land use efforts, speaks to Detroiters' appreciation for our unique landscape, and the expansive social opportunities afforded by these spaces.

Lafayette Park, although conceived at a much different time, exists in this same category of ambitious, distinct and beloved large-scale landscapes within our city. Sixty years in, the original design plan for Lafayette Park and more specifically, the Lafayette Townhouses, has come to full fruition, demonstrating the thoughtful design of urban planner Ludwig Hilbersheimer, landscape architect Alfred Caldwell, and the renowned architect Mies Van Der Rohe. With the original trees now reaching maturity, it is clear the vital role *landscape* plays in creating the environment so many families in Lafayette Park have come to love dearly.

Lafayette Park as a Cultural Landscape

Lafayette Park serves as a model for successful design, one that can be studied, emulated and enjoyed by all. The endless slew of visiting architects, students, and design fans attests to the development's significance beyond Detroit. It is a cultural destination for many within the region, state and across the globe. This has been solidified by its *National Historic Landmark* designation.

Within Detroit, the connections are more personal, as so many of us have family, friends, and/or our own experiences in Lafayette Park. The countless stories Detroiters have of Lafayette Park attests to its distinctly memorable environment, as is displayed in the book *Thanks for the View, Mr. Mies: Lafayette Park, Detroit*.

Many in Detroit still have connections to the site's previous existence as Black Bottom, a vibrant and largely black neighborhood of traditional streets & blocks. The demolition of this neighborhood is what cleared the way for the development of Lafayette Park. In Detroit, these auspicious beginnings are broadly acknowledged and presented through numerous exhibits and archival work, such as that carried out by the *Black Bottom Archives*.

Lafayette Park as an Environmental Landscape

While the development is famous for its modern architecture, the highly designed natural landscape is what establishes the indistinguishable sense of place, with the forest-like tree canopy and the garden-esque grounds setting the tone. The landscape design serves furthermore, to knit the community together, offering generous public walkways, gathering spaces and garden spaces where neighbors can engage with their surroundings and with one another. The lush natural environment creates a safe, soothing & family-friendly atmosphere.

Immediately, upon entering the neighborhood, one realizes they are entering into a distinctive environment, like walking into a forest. The airy tree canopy ascends above, diluting the sights and sounds of the city. The air is palpably softer and cooler. Light is dappled by the delicate branching and foliage of the Honey Locust trees. Understory trees thrive beneath this dappled shade, allowing for a lush, multi-layered landscape of flowering trees and shrubs. The intensity of this landscape is amplified further by the reflective floor-to-ceiling glass facades of the architecture. A vibrant range of green, yellow, blue and brown hues abound throughout the neighborhood.

Hedges, shrubs and ornamental trees work to establish layers of privacy, providing visual screening and sound buffering between residential units, public walkways, parking, and play areas. These landscape features are all original to Landscape Architect, Alfred Caldwell's design and concept.

Landscape Management

While landscape is omnipresent in the Lafayette townhouses, the steam pipe access point currently proposed sits at the heart of the development, a space most treasured by residents – a shared commons featuring a children's play area, as well as an intimate and serene arboreal garden, both original to the design and maintained with great care for over 60 years. Since its beginnings, residents of the Townhouses have shown their appreciation for the landscape and have shouldered the costs to keep it meticulously maintained.

In addition to maintenance, responsible construction planning & management is essential to protecting the character of the site & neighborhood, especially one with such cultural significance. One underlying objective that needs to be reinforced in this setting, is the importance of protecting all existing site elements and conditions, including buildings & structures, as well as landscape. The landscape at Lafayette Park is of particular importance as it has taken 60+ years to grow and establish – this cannot be replaced.

Recommendations for Detroit Thermal:

1. Present a *Due-Diligence Study* of existing steam line infrastructure and R.O.W. alignments. Demonstrate why this specific line was selected over the next best alternatives (along a roadway or through the adjacent park, for instance).
2. Provide a detailed site *Landscape Survey & Inventory* identifying all existing trees, shrubs, planting beds, lawn areas, as well as hardscapes and ornamental paving. (Show these elements at appropriate scale – namely the tree canopy drip lines, as the extent of the canopy above mirror the extent of the tree's root systems below grade).
3. Provide a detailed *Construction Access Plan* for each area, accounting for grade elevation changes, curbs, and existing tree and landscape locations. Identify the path of least disturbance for construction vehicles to access each work location.
4. Provide a *Site Protection Plan* showing tree protection fencing locations and details, soil erosion and sedimentation controls, and any other protective measures.
5. Provide a *Demolition Plan* identifying in detail all site elements that will be impacted by construction activities and access.
6. Provide a *Site Restoration Plan* detailing how all impacted site elements will be replaced and/or restored

Sincerely,

Michael Jacobs, *PLA*
Landscape Architect