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Comments on the Alfred Noble Library

Dear Livonia City Council:

We are the Michigan Chapter of Docomomo, which stands for the “Documentation and Conservation of buildings, sites, and neighborhoods of the Modern Movement.” Docomomo Michigan is a regional chapter of Docomomo International, an organization whose goal is to promote the study, interpretation, and protection of the architecture, landscape, and urban design of the Modern Movement. We educate and advocate for the appropriate protection and preservation of Michigan’s cultural resources from the mid-twentieth century. We are writing this letter to oppose the proposed demolition of the Alfred Noble Library in Livonia.

The Noble Library is an iconic example of twentieth-century architecture in the Detroit Metro area. It was designed by Gunnar Birkerts with his Birmingham, Michigan-based firm, Gunnar Birkerts & Associates, and constructed in the early 1960s. Birkerts (1925-2017) was an internationally renowned architect who worked for Eero Saarinen and Minoru Yamasaki before opening his own practice, and was the recipient of numerous awards in his career, including numerous Honor Awards from the American Institute of Architects, a Gold Medal from the Michigan Society of Architects, the Michigan Artist of the Year Award, and the Arnold W. Brunner Memorial Prize in Architecture from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Locally, Birkerts is known for many projects, including the South Wing addition to the Detroit Institute of Arts (1964), the University of Detroit-Mercy’s Fisher Administrative Center (1966), the 1300 Lafayette East Apartments (1963), the University Reformed Church (1964) in Ann Arbor, and the demolished Church of St. Bede (1966) in Southfield.

The leading journal *Progressive Architecture* deemed the Noble Library “a resounding architectural statement” in a positive review of the building in 1969. The author and later architectural critics admired the building’s unique triangular form for its accommodation of function and orientation to natural light. The library reflects the simple geometric forms, unembellished planar surfaces, and a minimalist modern style that Birkerts favored, and these qualities can be seen in his most famous works like the Federal Reserve Bank (1968-73) in Minneapolis, the University of Michigan Law Library Addition (1974-81), the United States Embassy (1989-96) in Caracas, Venezuela, and the National Library of Latvia (1989-2012).

The Noble Library is a significant example of mid-century modern architecture that needs to be protected, and Docomomo Michigan is concerned about its potential demolition. We encourage the city to investigate the rehabilitation of the building for a new use. Although its original use has ceased, the Noble Library is a valuable building worth preserving and can once again be an asset to the city. We have not seen any evidence that the library building is irreparable; in fact, the mold and water damage reported in the interior is common to vacant structures and can easily be remedied. Structurally, the building is sound, and has decades of adaptive use ahead of it. Having the building listed in the National Register of Historic Places could open the door to grants and tax credits to support rehabilitation of the building for a new use. We therefore encourage the City of Livonia to work with the State Historic Preservation Office to fully document the structure and with potential developers towards creating a new use for the library that respects the design of the original building.

Signed,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Dale Allen Gyure".

Dr. Dale Allen Gyure

On behalf of the Executive Board of Docomomo Michigan