

LANDSCAPE LEGENDS: Alfred Caldwell

Once in a great while, the rare person is born who holds true to their ideals and principles no matter what. For a long, long time, that person's voice may only be a cry in the wilderness, unrecognized, ignored, even scorned. In the end, that person has usually achieved little financial gain but is hailed as a visionary, as a courageous pioneer, as the lone person who was right all along.

Alfred Caldwell is such a person.

There are easily seven reasons that you should know the name, Alfred Caldwell. If you are a gardener at any level of expertise, an architect, an urban planner, a civil engineer, a construction superintendent, a poet, a philosopher or a man in love with his wife, then you will appreciate the life of Alfred Caldwell, for Caldwell has been

all those things. Caldwell—now age 94—is one of this century's Renaissance men, a maverick in a land of conformity, a man from whom we could each learn many lessons.

While now quite frail, Alfred Caldwell still commutes between his farm in Bristol, WI, and the Chicago campus of the Illinois Institute of Technology [IIT], where he has been a favorite faculty member among the students since he first began teaching there in 1945.

In his lifetime, Caldwell has had the incredibly good fortune which comes of being outspoken, opinionated, and having a “penetrating imagination”. He has also suffered the terrible consequences which come of being difficult, demanding, and a “thorn in the side of politicians and bureaucrats.”

No question that life would be difficult for a landscape architect who has the temerity to jab with his cane at a flower bed composed entirely of red Impatiens and yell, “Rubbish!”. This is a rebel who would lose his job (frequently) and fall into poverty for being passionate, for never being able to make a point and walk away from it, or for being unable to compromise with his politically sensitive employers. Throughout his travails, however, he was always buoyed by his passionate love for his wife, Virginia.

Always ahead of his time, he publicly attacked

the concept of the centralized city (1945); the [unethical] loss of the design for the campus of IIT to the architectural firm, *Skidmore, Owings and Merrill*, rather than to Mies van der Rohe (1960); Chicago's urban renewal program and the flight to the suburbs (c. 1960); southern California building design (c. 1966); and the poisoning of the planet with pesticides and agricultural chemicals (1967). Even while destitute, he readily cashed in his life insurance policy to ensure that native plants be obtained for his Chicago Park District designs.

In the words of University of Kansas associate dean Dennis Domer in his excellent new book, *Alfred Caldwell: The Life and Work of a Prairie School Landscape Architect*, “Caldwell worked in the shadow of some of the most celebrated masters of design in the twentieth century. Wright, Jensen, Mies, [city planner Ludwig] Hilberseimer, and [California architect] Craig Ellwood had greater public stature than Caldwell, but all of them recognized his great understanding of nature, his superb drawing ability, knowledge of construction, experience in building, and capacity to envision vast urban spaces. At one time or another, they all sought to bring him into their employ or under their influence, and they fought to keep him. Some unabashedly used his work as their own. Caldwell was the hidden glue that sustained modern design, and [he has] never gotten his due.”

Caldwell's abilities as a landscape architect are evident in many landscapes to be found around the upper Midwest. Go see them! Study the materials and construction Caldwell used when designing *Eagle*



Jens Jensen and Alfred Caldwell, around 1945.
(Courtesy of Alfred Caldwell, via Dennis Domer).

Point Park in Dubuque, IA [1936]; the *Lincoln Park Lily Pool* [whose political-ly incorrect name is *The Rookery*; 1936]; *Promontory Point* in Chicago's Burnham Park [1946]; Detroit's *Lafayette Park* [1955-56]; and the garden and plaza-level plan at Chicago's *Lake Point Tower* [1965], among many others. You will come away with a clear understanding of the natural yet refined beauty of the "prairie school" of landscape design.

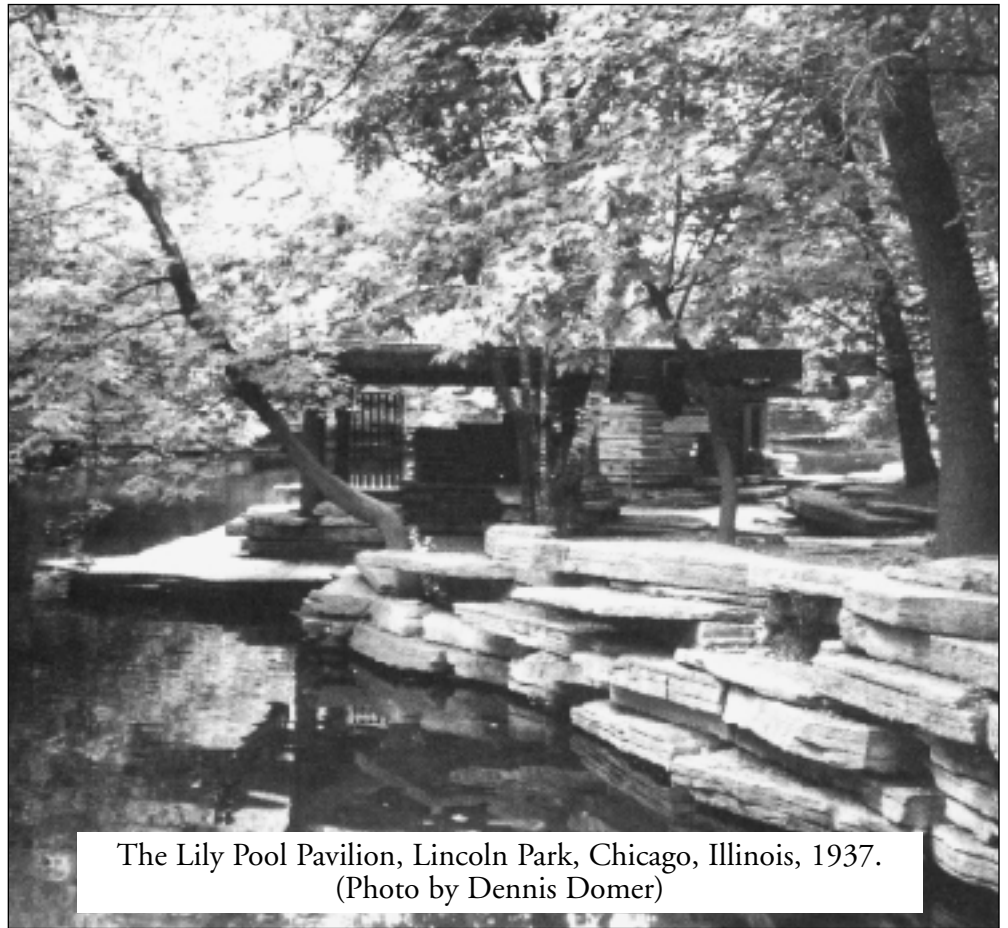
As Caldwell said about his design for the *Lincoln Park Lily Pool*, "A small elongate lagoon, made riverlike in character, flows through the garden. This river, in a sense, has cut a channel through limestone, and the ledges are intermittently revealed. A waterfall at one end is the river's source. The entire garden is planted as a forest. A stone walk winds through the forest near the water's edge. Wildflowers cover the ground each side. Sumach, aspen, and crabapple cling to the ledges, anchor in the crevices. The white blossoms of hawthorn and plum overhang the river. In April, the Juneberry [Serviceberry] blossoms are white in the white birch..."

Caldwell has been a hard-working visionary all his life, and has no intention of backing off. As Domer states, "Caldwell's life is itself a masterpiece of modernity, and many aspects of that work have yet to be fully explored. Caldwell is still working as a prairie school landscape architect, cutting new paths through the woods and making new clearings on his farm. He has just built a new bridge and added a hand railing to the council ring. He is still dreaming, living for the creative moment, and waiting for his next chance".

Thank you, Alfred Caldwell, for a lifetime of staying true to the idea of the native Midwest landscape, and educating us about our own heritage and future with such passion and vigor.
—R.L.



Alfred Caldwell:



The Lily Pool Pavilion, Lincoln Park, Chicago, Illinois, 1937.
(Photo by Dennis Domer)

"Alfred Caldwell is our living link to the landscape gardening tradition of Jens Jensen and Ossian C. Simonds. He kept the fires of the Prairie School tradition alive, and that strong interest in the idea of a regional landscape was continued and has now been improved upon in the contemporary designs of Midwestern native landscape architects such as J. Clifford Miller, Frank Haas, Jim Patchett, Steve Christy and others.

But in terms of ecology, Caldwell was there first."
—Scott Mehaffey, landscape architect, *The Morton Arboretum*

The Life and Work of a Prairie School Landscape Architect
edited by Dennis Domer [The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD], 1997. \$39.95. Available at *Prairie Avenue Bookshop*, 418 S. Wabash, Chicago, IL 60605 (312) 922-8311.