Alfred Caldwell

The Last Master

by Dennis Domer

At his home in Bristol, Wisconsin, Alfred Caldwell—dreamer, poet, philosopher, architect, civil engineer, city planner and distinguished professor of architecture—died on July 3, 1998, at the age of 95. He was the last representative of the Prairie School landscape architects.

Although perhaps best known for his masterful drawing abilities and his intense relationship with
Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Caldwell completed several landscape projects that sealed his reputation as an uncompromising genius.

Among them was his landscape of Lafayette Park (1955-1963), an urban renewal housing project near downtown Detroit that Mies designed with the developer Herbert Greenwald. It was considered a model for the burgeoning urbanization.

Possibly the most notable of his projects was the landscape for Lake Point Tower (1965-1968) in Chicago. It was designed by architects George Schipporeit and John Heinrich. Yet Caldwell’s outside design work and his unrelenting, blistering critiques of Chicago’s urban renewal projects got Caldwell fired.

Forty years earlier, Caldwell’s vision of urban renewal was forming quickly. Frank Lloyd Wright implored Caldwell to join him in his endeavors at Spring Green. Like Wright, Caldwell was an independent, fiery genius and showman. While Caldwell did not accept his invitation, Wright’s philosophy and organic ideas strongly influenced Caldwell’s subsequent architecture, particularly his pavilions and landscaping for Eagle Point Park in Dubuque, Iowa.

Yet Caldwell’s impact on landscape architecture was not limited to the Midwest. One of his most important
works was in southern California, where he spent several influential years.

After Caldwell’s stint with Schipporeit and Heinrich, he was hired to the School of Architecture at the University of Southern California and was perfectly suited to bring clarity and purpose to architectural education during the turmoil and dissonance of the Vietnam War.

Introducing himself as the original hippie who had worn bell-bottom pants in the 1930s, Caldwell was noted for his anti-establishment views, and was, according to Mies, a leftist. Caldwell taught construction, philosophy, literature and history at his design studio. Most of the students gravitated to him, “soaking it up like sponges,” as one would state 30 years later. One of his biggest supporters was Craig Ellwood, the most notable southern California architect of the Miesian school during the 1960s. Caldwell worked on many projects with Ellwood, one of which was the landscaping for the Arts Center College of Design in Pasadena.

It was Caldwell’s landscape design for the Lily Pool in Chicago’s Lincoln Park that thrust him into a promising career early in his life and into the minds of some of the most recognizable names in the world of architecture.

A fateful afternoon at the Lily Pool in 1938 began a long relationship and a turn in his career; Caldwell became acquainted with Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Walter Peterhans, and Ludwig Hilberseimer. Mies was the most famous of the Bauhaus modernists who had come to Chicago to found the school of architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology. He asked Caldwell, through Peterhans, if the Lily Pool was the work of Frank Lloyd Wright.

The Lily Pool left a lasting impression on Mies, who remembered Caldwell when he graded the drawings that Caldwell submitted as part of his architect’s examination in 1940. Caldwell’s work was so good that Mies asked him to make drawings for Hilberseimer, who needed illustrations for the books he was writing on city planning. Caldwell’s drawings appeared in Hilberseimer’s The New City, The Nature of Cities and Entfaltung einer Planungsidee.

The roots of Caldwell’s design theories trace back nearly four decades before his
prominence in the mid-century. Caldwell, who had left the University of Illinois as a student of its landscape architecture program, later remarked that "no lifted word, no beautiful infallible phrase ever disturbed the pedagogical cemetery."

He and his wife, Virginia Pullen, returned to Chicago shortly after they married in 1923. There Caldwell took up a landscape practice. With offices in the Wrigley Building, Caldwell worked on small buildings and landscape projects until he decided that he had "only been trading dollars and needed to learn something first."

A family friend suggested that he apply for work with the Prairie School landscape architect, Jens Jensen. Like those who came before him—Andrew Jackson Downing, Frederick Law Olmsted, H.W.S. Cleveland, William Le Baron Jenney and Ossian Cole Simonds—Jensen made the natural environment a metaphor for landscape design. He was an early ecologist who founded the Friends of Our Native Landscape in 1913 and designed landscapes for such personalities as Henry Ford.

Jensen became Caldwell’s mentor. Between 1924 and 1929, Caldwell completed various jobs for Jensen, including landscapes for the Harley Clarke house in Evanston, Illinois (1925), the Harrold Folsheim house in Ravinia, Illinois (1927) and the Edsel B. Ford house in Grosse Pointe Shores, Michigan (1926–1932).

During that period, Caldwell also began his publishing career with his first article, "In Defense of Animals," which appeared in Jensen’s journal. Caldwell and Jensen quickly became friends and would continue to carry on an extensive correspondence until Jensen’s death in 1951. In a letter of reference written in 1934, Jensen described Caldwell as "an artist—a poet." Caldwell called Jensen "the great symbol of his life."

In 1936, Caldwell won a national W.P.A. design award for Eagle Point Park, and Franklin Delano and Eleanor Roosevelt visited the site during the presidential campaign of the same year. Upon seeing Caldwell’s work, President Roosevelt remarked that "this is my idea of a worthwhile boondoggle." Caldwell was subsequently fired from the job, just as he would be fired from most of the jobs he would ever have. The Dubuque Park Board chairman reportedly fired Caldwell for giving “too much attention to details,” and Caldwell replied with his
As emotional as he was brilliant, Caldwell resigned his professorial position at the architectural school of the I.I.T. in 1960 to protest Mies' dismissal as architect of the campus. This gesture led to a job as head of a special projects office at the Chicago Department of City Planning, where Caldwell chaired a think-tank composed primarily of young architects and planners who had graduated from I.I.T. and had developed projects for Mayor Richard Daley's political machine.

At the end of World War II, during which Caldwell worked as a civil engineer for the War Department, Mies hired Caldwell as the first full-time American faculty member at the architecture school at I.I.T. He granted Caldwell a Bachelor of Architecture degree in 1945. Three years later, Caldwell received his Master of Science in City Planning under Hilberseimer. Mies assigned Caldwell to teach the second and third year of architectural construction, the cornerstone of Mies' modern curriculum, as well as architectural history. Caldwell, who taught those courses from 1945 to 1960, became a legendary professor and had a powerful influence on the post-war generation of Chicago architects.

While he had been writing philosophical essays regarding landscape and city planning for quite some time, he gained national attention in 1945 when he published what was considered his most provocative essay, "Atomic Bombs and City Planning," which appeared in the Journal of the American Institute of Architects and examined the problem of centralized industrial cities in the age of the bomb.

Caldwell then was hired by George Donoghue as a senior draftsman in the Chicago Park District, where he worked until 1940. Caldwell worked prodigiously, possessed masterful drawing abilities, displayed a thorough knowledge of indigenous plants and created large sets of landscape drawings (fully detailed with Latin and vernacular plant names) for Montrose Park, Northerly Island, Promontory Point at Burnham Park and the Lily Pool.

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