

# A Bustle in the Hedgerow: Alfred Caldwell and Prairie Living in the Urban Context

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The following short essay is a rumination on the poetic balance between Alfred Caldwell’s flowing landscape and Mies Van der Rohe’s crisp architectonics displayed in their brilliant Lafayette Park project in Detroit. It focuses on one small, enigmatic drawing found on the Planting Plan within the original Construction Documents set from 1958.

## HAWTHORN HEDGE SECTION DETAIL

Tucked in the corner of one of the Lafayette Park construction documents sheets, lies an intricate, yet profoundly simple drawing that embodies the design philosophies inherent to the success of this remarkable urban housing experiment. The Hawthorn Hedge Section Detail located on sheet “P-1” is part of the overall landscape plan

designed and drawn by Alfred Caldwell. In addition to being considered one of the most significant Prairie School landscape architects – held in high esteem by Mies, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Jens Jenson among others – Caldwell was well known for the visionary quality of his drawings, as a highly regarded professor of architecture, and a published poet. His didactic and poetic nature can perhaps explain why this drawing, which could have easily been achieved in less than ten pencil strokes, is instead, a baroque rumination documenting the complexity of the plant’s internal structure in relation to its simple external topiary geometries.

The rigor placed on this relatively minor drawing emphasizes both Caldwell’s demand for a detailed execution of the design as well as his utilization of graphic communication as a didactic tool, allowing the visual metaphor to inform how to build the firm architectonic structure, how to organically inhabit the space of Mies’ urban dwellings, and how

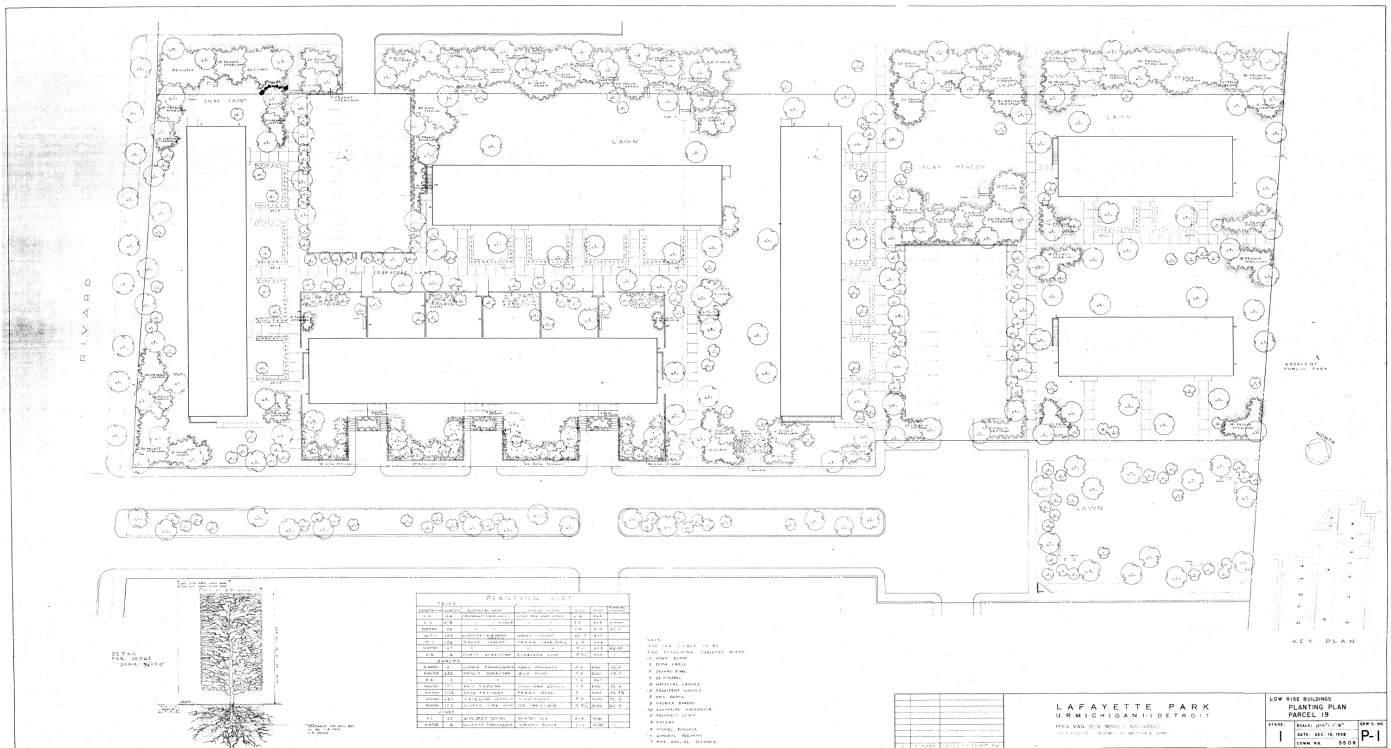


Figure 1: Drawing Sheet P-1, Planting Plan, from the Lafayette Park Construction Documents Set of 1958.

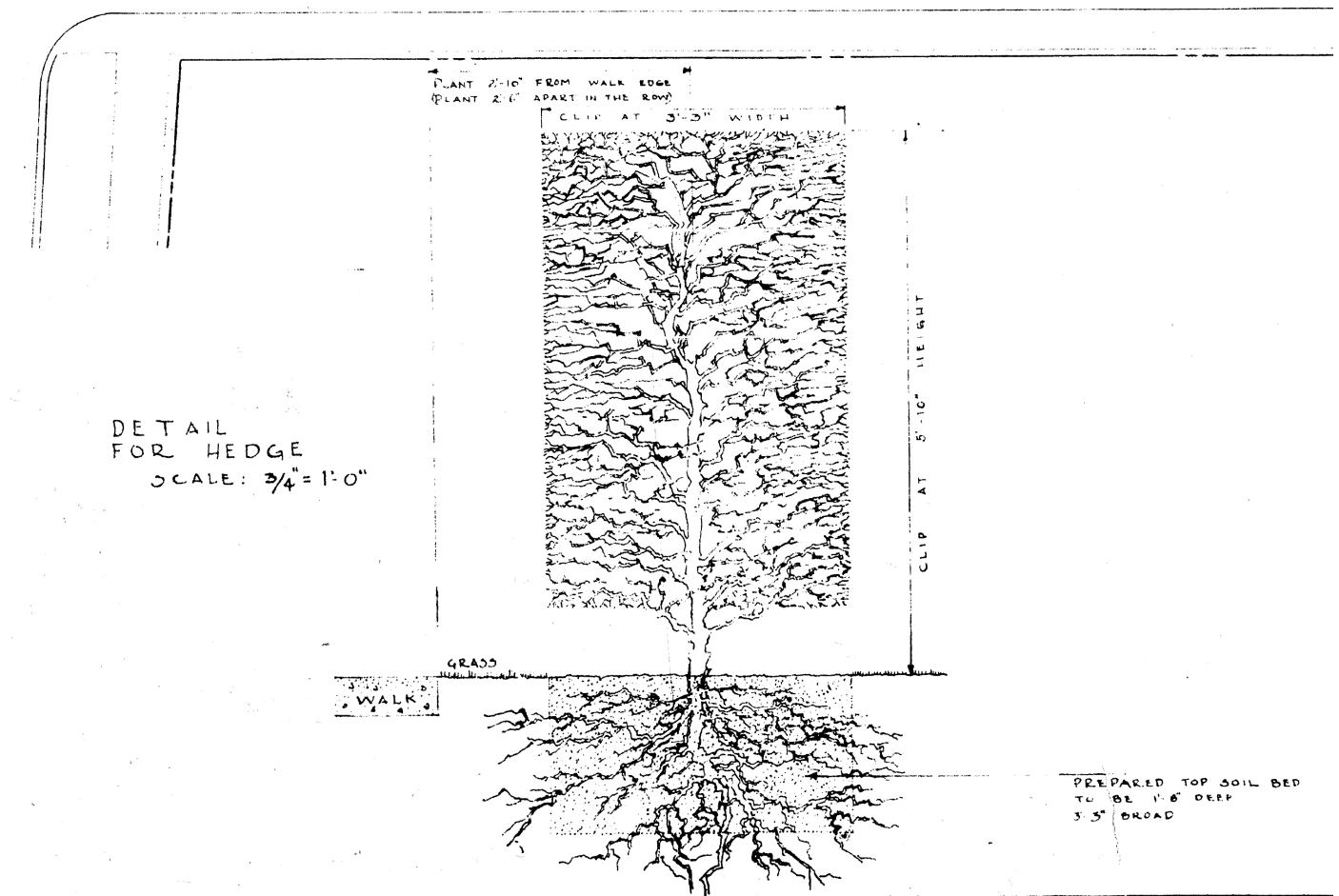


Figure 2: "Detail for Hedge" from the Sheet P-1, Planting Plan showing the Hawthorne hedge treatment.

to circulate within the landscape of Lafayette Park at an urban scale. In the Hawthorn Hedge Section Detail drawing, Caldwell celebrates the organic growth and movement of the trunk, branches, stems and thorns - all confined within the forced rectilinear profile - as much as he does the roots of the plant that spread freely within the soil. The architectural dimension strings instructing the builder to "clip at 5'-10" height" and "clip at 3'-3" width" seem as if they are inconsequential notations, when, presumably they were the only pieces of information for which this drawing was required.

The drawing explores the relationships between urban infrastructure and the experience of nature through juxtapositions of materiality, spatial organization, and circulation at multiple scales. Within this drawing lies a conceptual diagram that elucidates the social, physical and ideological roots for a radically new type of urban living.

#### DIAGRAM AT THE URBAN SCALE

Viewed within the context of Detroit, the significance of the Lafayette Park master plan is understood to be its concurrence of mixed density single and multi-story housing arranged within a low density wooded setting in the middle of the city's urban fabric. Once in the neighborhood, the spatial dialogue between the built structures and

the landscape elements force the pedestrian to view and circulate through the city in a radically different mode. The primary circulation is no longer governed by the rectilinear city street grid, but rather by Caldwell's control of movement via a compression and release of an organic flow through episodes of "hammock" and "prairie" amongst the architecture. The actual streets and parking lots are suppressed up to three feet below the ground floor datum, insuring that automobiles are never within direct view from inside the dwelling units. Not only were the hawthorn hedges utilized to help achieve this visual separation at the master plan scale, but Caldwell's hedge drawing infers this relationship between the urban grid and Lafayette Park's naturalistic experience. At the urban scale, while the physical hawthorns themselves have a limited utility, the drawing serves as a diagram for mediating the city and the dwelling with landscape.

#### DIAGRAM AT THE ARCHITECTURAL SCALE

The hawthorn hedges are a landscape element typical to the front of each townhouse unit within Lafayette Park. When viewed in the context of the building scale, they serve as the visual and spatial transition between the private interior volume of the dwelling units and the public exterior landscape. They provide both formal entry as well as partial visual privacy to the townhouses. In order to aesthetically mediate between the rectilinear architecture and the organic landscape elements, the hawthorns are themselves clipped into a rigid form. They

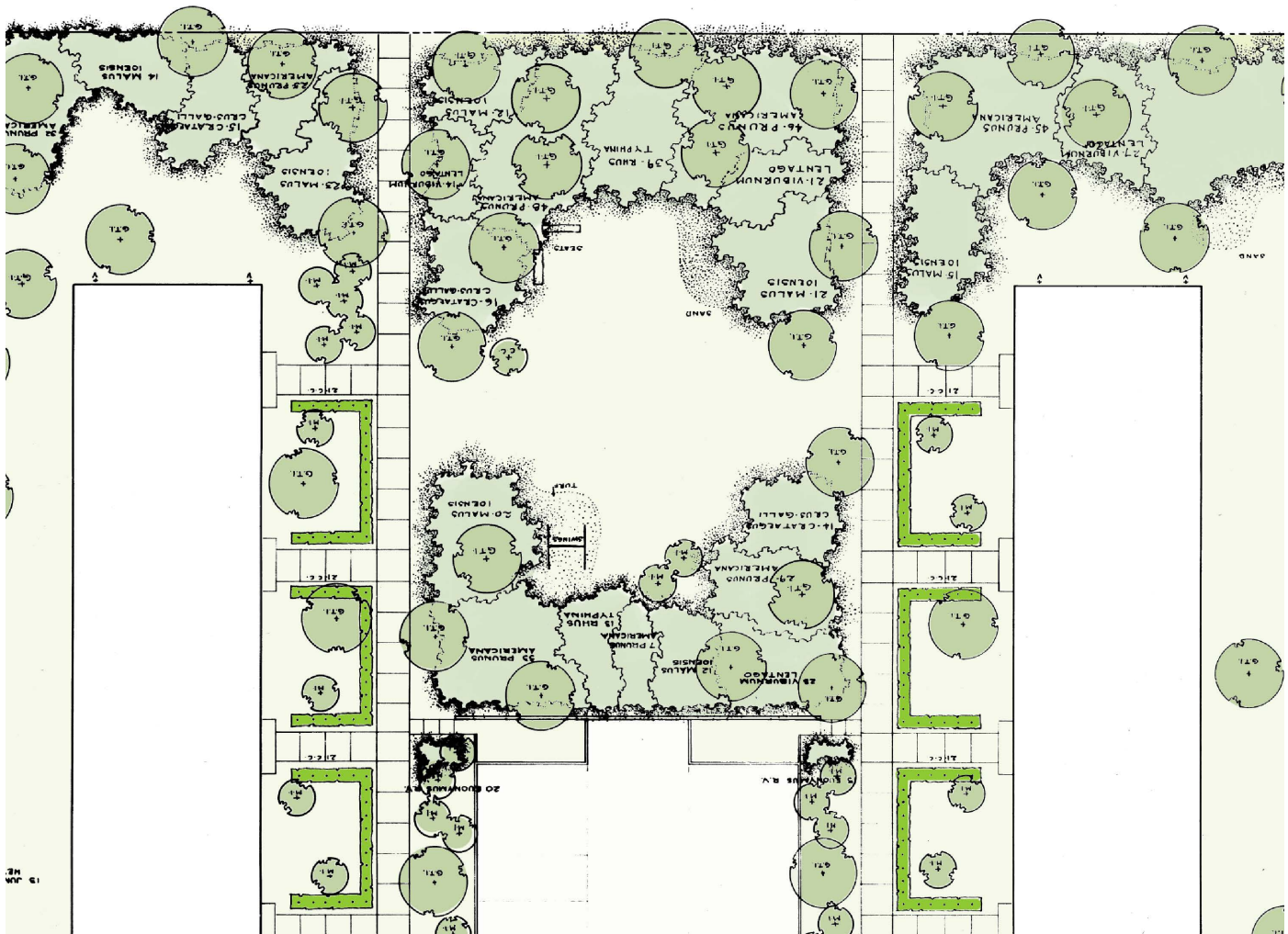


Figure 3: In Alfred Caldwell's 'Prairie School' landscape design for Lafayette Park, The Hawthorne Hedges are the only planted elements to receive a manicured treatment, thus mediating between Mies' rigid architecture and the exterior context..

are the only components within Caldwell's entire plan that require such manicured treatment and, as such, necessitated a detail drawing in order to insure the correct execution of the design. Caldwell, however, illustrated more than the simple instructions for how to properly clip the bushes.

#### DIAGRAM AT THE SCALE OF THE DWELLING UNIT

In order to understand the significance of the drawing at the scale of the individual dwelling, one can transpose this graphic image of the upon the basic townhouse unit's Floor Plan – in fact, the proportions of the hedge section are similar to the module used by Mies throughout Lafayette Park. By taking the intricately rendered hedge as a simple metaphor for the paths of movement inside the dwelling unit, this drawing suggests that the organic life inside the building and the life outside, in the landscape, are irrevocably linked to one another. Mies' architecture supports this principle, and acts not as a barrier separating humans from nature, but as a formal and conceptual transition between different programmatic and environmentally conditioned uses of the same landscape. The design of the glass walls that form the physical building envelope serve to isolate the tempered air of the interior while maintaining the visual and spiritual connection to the exterior.

#### CALDWELL AND MIES

When graphically compared to the Lafayette Park Planting Plan rendering, for which the majority of sheet "P-1" is dedicated, Caldwell's Hawthorn Hedge Section Detail drawing visually represents the complete inverse of Mies Van der Rohe's building lines - a rigid box containing landscape vs. empty boxes contained within the landscape. This does not suggest that Mies and Caldwell were working under antithetical principles, but rather illustrates their complimentary tectonic expressions regarding the integration of architecture with its landscape. Furthermore, Mies never intended for Lafayette Park's highly refined architectonic forms to be experienced as naked objects in a field. It is only when viewed in contrast with the imprecise and lush foliage that his subtle handling of materiality and proportion can be fully appreciated. Caldwell regarded Mies as "a humanist in the age of science and technology." While the steel and glass boxes of this style of modernism appear guided by strict geometries and a machine(d) aesthetic, Caldwell understood the profound spatial and social implications defining the relationships between urban living and nature, further reinforced through Mies' architecture.

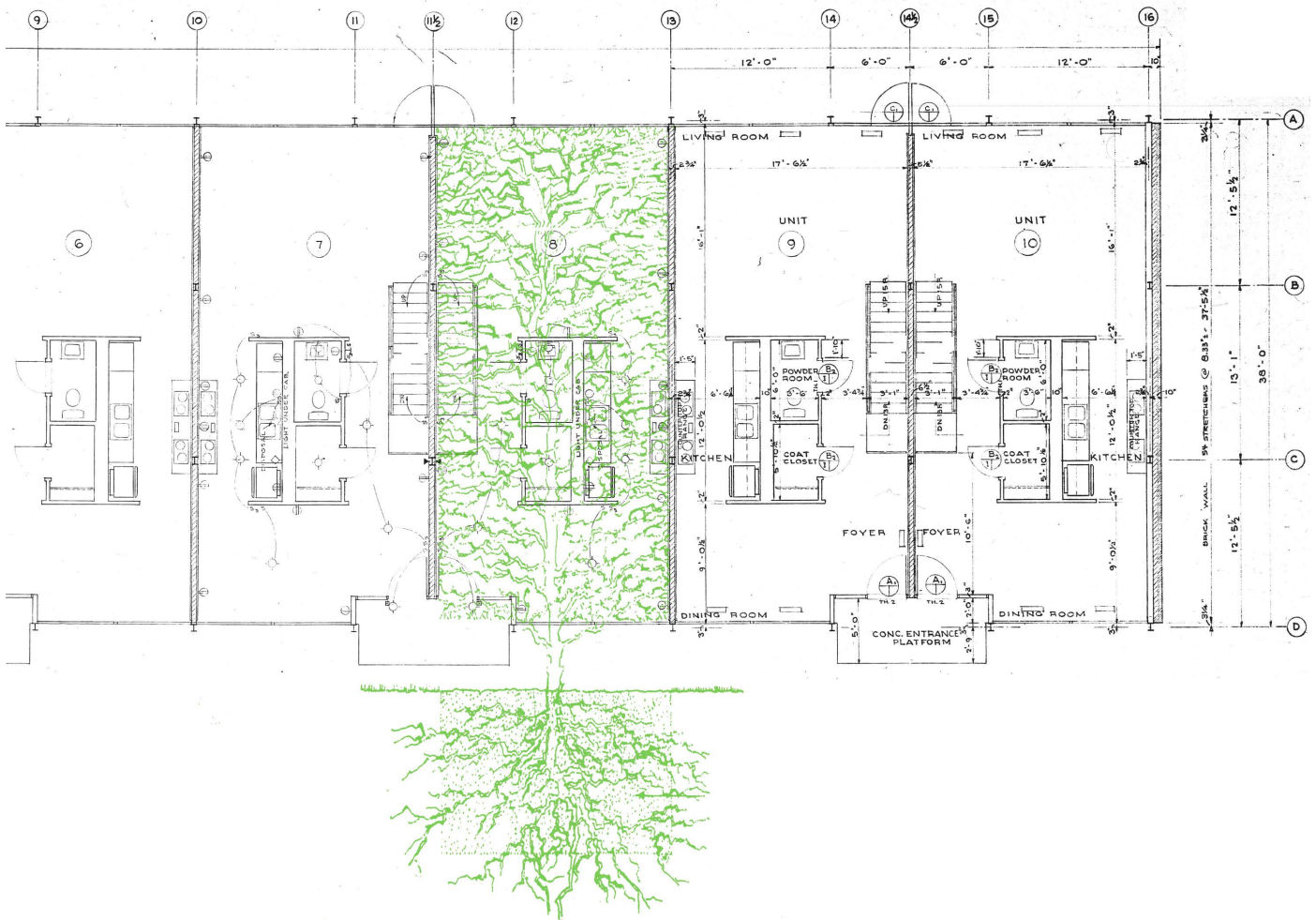


Figure 4: Collage of Caldwell's Hawthorne Hedge with Mies' Lafayette Park townhouse floorplan.

### NATURE AND ARCHITECTURE

The nurturing of these relationships between urban housing and landscape, as executed so skillfully at Lafayette Park, were paramount in the practice and teachings of both Caldwell and his fellow designers. In his essay, 'Nature and Architecture', Caldwell writes of the potential for urban dwellings to become the root of a new type of architecture for the "free citizens". He states that "every house can be a poem...built of steel and glass, a crystal house, built like a pavilion in a garden...as much a part of nature as if the trees and flowers were actually in the house – or from the insideness of such a prism looking out: delicate springtime, full leaf of summer, vibrancy of autumn, purity of new snow...such a house could be so natural that it could actually be a growing house."

The promise of intellectual, spiritual, and physical growth of the human families that reside in these homes, in synchronicity with the growth of the landscape throughout the seasons, is what Caldwell planted in this little Section Detail drawing in the corner. The faithful execution of these drawings is evident in every household within Lafayette Park today.

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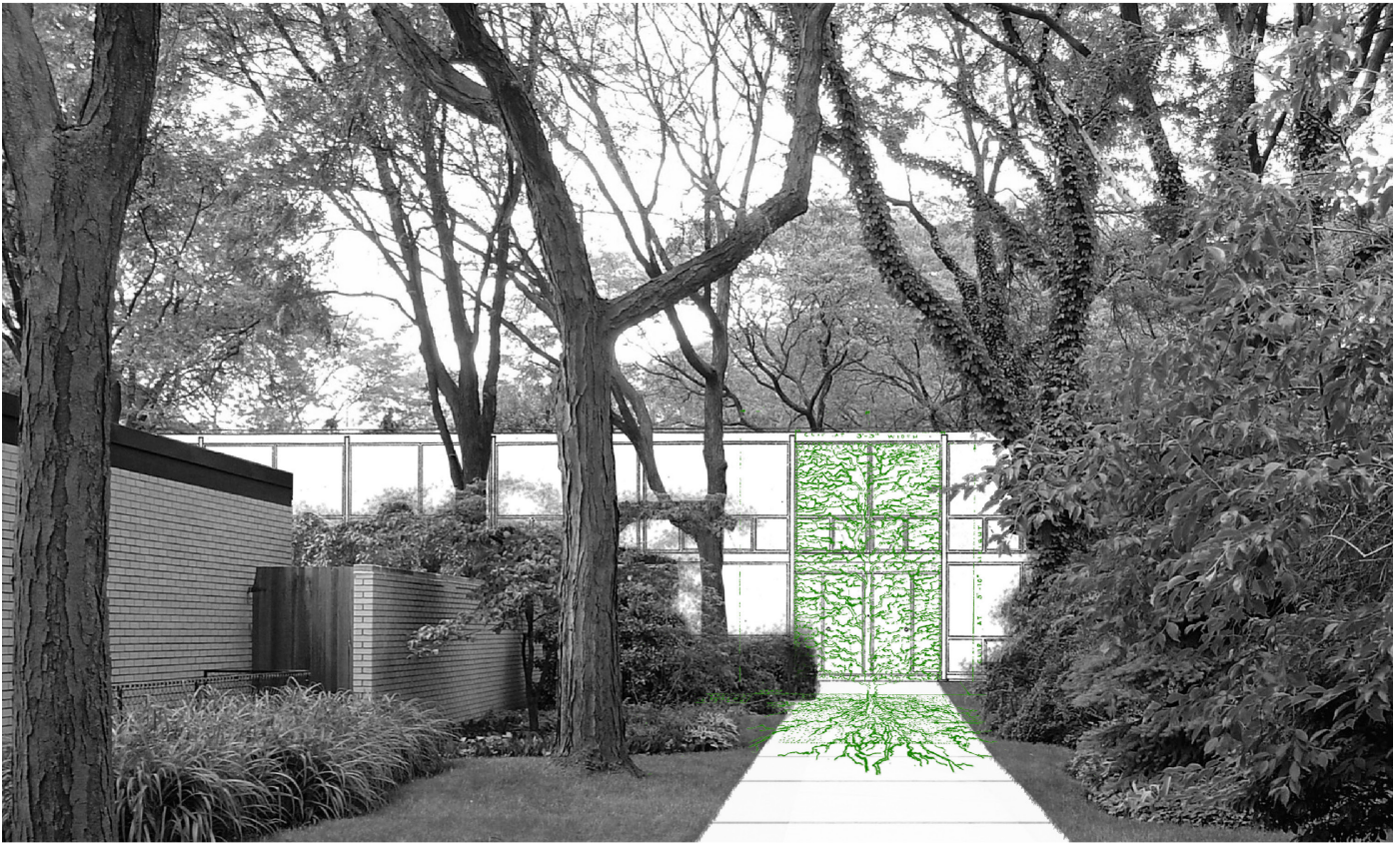


Figure 5: Caldwell writes: every house can be a poem...built of steel and glass, a crystal house, built like a pavilion in a garden...as much a part of nature as if the trees and flowers were actually in the house...