Profile from The Minnesota Valley

Anthony Caponi

Anthony Caponi, Professor and Chairman of the Art Department for most of his forty years at Macalester College, is looking forward to his retirement and the beginning of a new phase of creative involvement in his life-long project of making an Art Park.

Professor Caponi is an artist who thinks of art as a way of life. He prefers to make sculpture because it challenges the energy of both body and mind. He built his home and studio the same way he makes sculptures, by direct improvisation with the materials at hand. He combines his love for physical work and respect for nature to shape his grounds into moss-covered sculptures.

Beyond this, he is a teacher with strong convictions, on art, education, and life, which he expresses with poetic flare.

His artistic talents and love for nature; his teaching and administrative experience, his humanistic concerns and inclination to share with others, led to his culminating artistic expression — THE CAPONI ART PARK.
The following autobiographical sketch reveals the pastoral setting that, in 1950, inspired the young artist and gave rise to an idea that evolved into a life-long project of love.

With a wife and child, with no home and no money, with no more than my eyes, I claimed a tract of glacier-shaped hills, populated by my vision of red-sweatered children - climbing trees and picking berries amid birds and squirrels. Confessing my passion to the farmer, I asked his terms for letting me be his neighbor. His eyes scrutinized my incongruous bearing - a foreigner, and art student, a "city teller," claiming kinship with his land. "Are you Italian?" he asked in a German accent. "I suppose you are Catholic too!" he added, while walking on opposite sides of a barbed fence as if to test the feel of being neighbors. Having dispelled doubt, by spitting out his words of reservation, he turned to smile acceptance. "For this land I will ask no more than I paid," said the old man, partially out of guilt for selling me "worthless woods - no good for pasture or farming." I reassured him with matched sincerity. I knew the value of land, as I knew the meaning of scarcity. I knew honesty and the value of good neighbors.

I BOUGHT A PIECE OF LAND
By means of promises and trust -
Promises to creditors and trust in myself
To keep my claim to a nesting place,
With honest labor and loving care.
As naturally as birds and shy creatures
Fence their territory with songs and scents,
I marked an entrance by the road,
To signify HOME and Welcome to friends.
Choosing a spot that least resisted my intrusion,
I set up posts and strings to enclose a home
And me within.
I moved a flexible idea up and down a hillside
Until it felt right.
Just to make sure, I sat down in picnic fashion
To eat lunch by the kitchen counter.

I wanted no more than a caveman's choice of a cave.
I wanted no more freedom than a nomad's mobility of choice.
I wanted no more rights than birds or bees.
I wanted to build a home according to my skills and nature.
Yet, the tall fellow at the bank insisted I change my design of home to qualify for a G.I. loan. He would have helped, on condition I chose to live in a house of an approved pattern - the kind that line up in neat rows on both sides of straight roads and lawns and lawns of monotony.

I had seen enough of uniformed rigidity.
I had seen enough of mankind, standing in straight rows at attention.
I had seen acres of white crosses lined up in geometric patterns, on the fields of Anzio, distinguishable by no more than serial numbers.
I chose the old pattern - family helping family in the spirit of country living. My brother mixed the mortar and I laid blocks below the frost line of Minnesota's winter. By the time the walls showed above the ground I had learned to keep a straight line and make clean joints. Each row of blocks was better than the last. The building grew as most things do, gaining strength as they grow and blooming at the top. My neighbor showed concern for my building too far from the road. My wife worried about the shape and size of our house. My brother saw no sense in building around trees. But, I believed. I knew I should not divide my faith by the number of people who questioned it. Information and ideas may derive from many sources, but a creation comes together in a single mind.

I built my home on the side of a knoll; half buried and still growing in the middle of a clearing, in the middle of the woods. Birches and oaks, sumac and thorns surround my private meadow, where the mower pastures and I chew the cud of green ideas as I follow its even swath over dips and swells, as a sculptor's hand follows the contours of loved shapes. The motor races with my heart and renders me deaf to the world. The scent of green flavors my hours of solitude as I walk my thought for miles to exercise body and soul. Step by step I guide the voracious reaper, churning grass and dead leaves to groom the land and the mind. I make mulch out of weeds and discarded ideas to fertilize the ground and tomorrow's thoughts.
I favor the wild - a bit of nature to tame, with just enough tracking to remind other creatures I share in their domain.

I walk the way of deer, single file with my family, and trust the split-hoofed signs on the ground to lead us through the brush, around trees and swamps, to their hidden clearing.

Arriving with every step, I stop to prune limbs and thorns, but mostly, we stop to browse with our eyes; pretending not to notice the stirring of leaves, or the low-nesting cardinal hiding everything but her beak. The blue jays, keeping ahead of us from tree to tree, noisily announce our presence.

The deer are not surprised to see us coming around the last bush, but as if to make sure they stiffened in a leaping position, with every head facing us, with every ear cupped in our direction. Having made a point of questioning our rights and intentions, doe and fawn followed the buck into thicker woods, in not too harried a trot.

Nothing I ever do is more fulfilling than playing at work - collecting rocks and making home with my children.

I make walls of boulders around the base of green knolls for no more reason than seeing a durable material along-side the tender grass.

I collect what glaciers rolled into shape and left unburied, as granite skull.

I carry their dense roundness and lean them on each other, along paths and walks, to mark a new way with rudiments of the past.

Choosing the better side of each face, I place the heavy stones side-by-side and over each other, with just enough space between for the children to fill with their choice pebbles.

Family and stones fill my space and time.

Labor and love cement my walls.

**THE MORNING ARRIVED ON TREETOPS.**

*With it a winged sun alit on a branch*

*And played teeter-totter beside my window,*

*Balancing body with the bouncing branch;*

*Making one thing of purpose and pleasure,*

*An oriole braided and secured the strands*

*From which to hang his Babylonian Garden.*

*I know the pleasure of making things;*

*The weaving of beauty with practical shapes.*

*Surely he studied my home and playground.*

*He might have sensed,*

*When he chose to be my neighbor,*

*How much I care*

*For one who adds a song to his labor.*
CONCEPT

Continuing the tradition of gardens and sculptures, Mr. Caponi has redefined what was once the exclusive privilege of the aristocracy to meet the contemporary needs of the average person as well as the sophisticated art patron.

In our complex world, where man's wholesome being is dissected by overspecialization, Mr. Caponi has conceived a place where man, art and nature come together to evoke a sense of beauty and a state of relaxation; a place where a soul may indulge in the restoration of the spirit in silent contemplation.

The unique concept of the Art Park is that the land itself is treated as a work of art. The concrete and dirt paths are linear drawings, retraced and animated by every person who walks on them. The rock walls and shaped earth, the articulated lines and forms, are the sculpture into which conventional works serve as details of the organic whole. POMPEII, a 150 ft long relief sculpture, made up of a series of 17 bronze panels recessed on a hillside, is an example of this principle of organic unity. The hill itself is the sculpture. The bronze panels on its side animate the hill, suggesting an archaeological excavation - only partially disclosing what the whole hill contains.

The general concept of the Art Park allows for informal interplay between viewer and sculpture. A visitor may be walking on what he perceives as grass or rocks only to realize he is standing on a sculpture. It is this touch of intimacy and discovery that no existing museum can duplicate. This concept assumes that the aesthetic experience of art or of any object of beauty, should arise spontaneously and in relationship to its environment. Art should be approachable and enjoyed at varying levels and pace, by children and adults, the uninitiated and the knowledgeable.
What began as a personal vision and a one-man labor of love grew in scope to the point of catching the attention of the City of Eagan in 1987. At that time, Macalester College (Art Department) and the Minnesota Museum of Art were invited to explore the possible participation of those institutions in the educational program of the Caponi Art Park.

Formal efforts by the City to help Mr. Caponi began with Mayor Bea Blomquist and continued through Mayor Vic Ellison’s administration, at which time, Chuck Lowry, Director of the Dakota County Parks, also took an interest in the Art Park and offered his cooperation. The formulation of a joint project between Mr. Caponi and the City finally started taking shape in early 1990 when Mayor Tom Egan, City Administrator Tom Hedges, Park Director Ken Vraa, and the City Council Members held a general meeting at the park site. The City recognized that the project is regional in scope and national in importance because of its unique blending of art and passive recreation in a park setting. The City also recognized that it could not independently fund such a project. It was then that a new and realistic approach was adopted.

On November 8, 1990, the Eagan City Council unanimously and enthusiastically approved a resolution that the City of Eagan enter into a formal working partnership with Mr. Caponi to create a public art park and that the City take a leadership role in establishing a non-profit foundation to oversee the acquisition, development, and administration of the park in pursuit of Mr. Caponi’s aesthetic and educational philosophy.