Promontory Point (in Burnham Park)

Address: LAKE MICHIGAN at 55th Street
Date: 1937
- 1926 completion of limestone breakwater now the “promenade”
- 1936 completion of limestone “stepped” revetment by WPA
- 1937 completion of Alfred Caldwell’s landscape design

Style: Prairie School
CHRS Rating: CHRS - “orange”
National Register: “Eligible”

Does a “Concrete-Industrial Complex” exist in the city of Chicago?
For the past three years, the Chicago Park District and the Army Corps of Engineers have repeatedly thwarted community efforts to retain and repair the existing historic limestone revetment at Promontory Point, despite the fact that the Hyde Park community refuses to accept the Corps’ unsightly and uninviting concrete and steel design. Although an independent study written by an esteemed coastal engineer proves that not only will preservation of the limestone have as long a design life as the proposed concrete replacement, but that it will actually be cheaper to build. Still, the Park District and Army Corps insist on wasting tax dollars on their dubious concrete plan. Therefore, the question must be asked, who benefits? The taxpayers or the concrete industry?

Architecture:
The existing promenade and revetment system is made of rough split limestone blocks in the finest “prairie school” tradition. Natural materials are used as a gentle transition between the power of raw nature and the beauty of the built environment, between Lake Michigan and the City of Chicago. The wisdom of the Prairie School has been proven over the last 70 years as the Point has become the most popular place in Chicago for deep-water swimming, the closest thing we have to a natural seacoast.

Alfred Caldwell learned the “prairie school” landscape aesthetic from Jens Jensen, the master. The upper park is a classic “meadow” surrounded by low horizontal trees. Through the trees one can see glimpses of the lake on three sides and above the trees to the west are the neighboring buildings. These softened views are intended to draw persons gently through the park. It remains a place of neither passive formality nor frantic activity. Caldwell’s immediate previous project was the world-famous Eagle Point Park in Dubuque, Iowa, a stunning complex of prairie-style stone buildings and constructed limestone outcroppings, sited on a cliff high above the Mississippi River. His next project after Promontory Point was the Lily Pool in Lincoln Park. The Chicago Park District has received many national awards for its recent renovation.

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History:
Promontory Point was conceived as part of Daniel Burnham’s Plan of Chicago of 1909 and was created by the construction of a limestone stepstone block revetment and subsequent landfill in the 1920’s and ‘30’s. This particular revetment design is unique to Lake Michigan and once was the shoreline treatment for most of Chicago’s lakefront --until the Chicago Park District’s recent demolition and replacement project. In 1937 Alfred Caldwell, who had worked under Jens Jensen, the architect of Chicago’s great West Parks system, designed Promontory Point. Working in the prairie school idiom, Caldwell used hundreds of native trees and plants in an informal arrangement that suggested the indigenous midwestern landscape.

Threat:
In the 1980’s Chicago’s shoreline was threatened by high Lake Michigan water levels. The Chicago Park District, the Army Corps of Engineers and the City of Chicago developed a plan to rebuild the limestone step revetment along the lakefront. They signed a Memorandum of Agreement in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards to ensure that the project would protect the historic value of the structure. However, when construction actually began in the 1990’s the public was appalled -- long unrelieved stretches of steel and concrete where the historic limestone had been. After all but two sections of the lakefront had been ruined -- Promontory Point and Diversey-Wellington -- the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency halted the project. But in July of this year the IHPA was swept under by a riptide of political pressure and endorsed the concrete and steel reconstruction. Congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr, has carried through the House an amendment that would restrict federal funding to the preservation of Promontory Point. The amendment awaits action in the Senate.

Although the park and revetment have received little maintenance over the years, they remain faithful to their functions and to the spirit of the Prairie School. The community has raised more than $100,000 to hire consultants who have proven that the revetment and park can be preserved, safely and affordably and with outstanding access for persons with disabilities. The community has long recognized the place of Promontory Point in Chicago’s past and has struggled to save this historic value for future generations. The Chicago Park District should do the same.