What is it like to finally have the world talking about the ideas you’ve spent your career struggling to put on the map? For Industrial Design professor Jay Baldwin, one of the grandfathers of sustainable and ecological design, it’s a very good thing. But luckily for CCA it doesn’t mean he’s going to retire anytime soon.

The 75-year-old Baldwin, or JB, as he is called by almost everyone he knows, became a student of Buckminster Fuller (most famous as the inventor of the geodesic dome) in 1951 after hearing Fuller deliver one of his signature 14-hour lectures. Baldwin soon became a key player himself in the field of ecological, energy-efficient design. He was on the team that developed the first exclusively solar-and wind-powered house; he was among the first editors of the now-legendary Whole Earth Catalog and Whole Earth Review; he created pioneering outdoor recreational equipment with Bill Moss, inventor of the modern camping tent; he invented the Pillowdome to solve the geodesic dome’s persistent leakage problem; he has owned (among many other vehicles) four much-beloved Citroëns, whose design still provokes him to wax poetic; he lives in the hinterlands of Sonoma County in a converted chicken coop; and he puts 2,000 miles per year on his bicycle.

And those are just a few of his endeavors. He is admired by his peers and students for many reasons, not least of which is that, like Buckminster Fuller, he lives life as a great experiment.

“It’s always the extremists that make things happen. I consider JB an extremist of design,” says Remy Labesque, one of Baldwin’s former students who now works at frog design in San Francisco.

Baldwin also has a pretty realistic idea of the public’s attention span and knows that the fight for sustainability will be a long, slow one. The saying about 15 minutes of fame applies to concepts as much as to people, and the emergence
The way JB talks about all of his possessions is amazing. He spends so much time thinking about them, experiencing them. As a designer it makes you think hard about your own possessions and how you relate to them. —Adam Reineck

of terms like “green fatigue” shows that people do lose patience with new ideas, especially ones that take time and energy and diligence to apply to everyday life. But everyone will always need things—objects will never cease to be invented and designed and manufactured—and Baldwin figures on continuing to do his part to make them well, taking into consideration not just the piece of plastic or metal but everything around it, everything that comes before and after.

“In the 1960s you’d never hear the words environment or ecology unless you were really on the ball,” Baldwin says. But Buckminster Fuller had already been thinking in those terms for decades. “Fuller said that we should never waste anything, because wasting material is stupid, but our whole society was—and still is—grossly, distressingly wasteful in everything we do. We waste people, material, oil, effort.

“I can’t remember a time when I didn’t think in these terms. Everyone’s talking about biomimicry now, but Buckminster Fuller punched that for years and years. Nature is not ‘multidisciplinary.' Nature is the whole caboodle. Nature is omnidisciplinary. And we’re part of it. We need to do things as nature does, in the way that is most economical in terms of resources and energy.”

Adam Reineck, another former student, now working at IDEO, says that he is happy to finally be at a place in his career where he can incorporate Baldwin’s philosophies into his work. “A lot of schools focus on a wallpaper aesthetic, just looking at the surfaces of things. CCA allows you to take a much more holistic approach. I went through CCA trying to center all my projects around sustainable design, and JB always offered himself up as a walking library of knowledge, history, and insight. He’s from a different generation than most of the other teachers. In his day they really figured everything out, and they had a lot less to start with. He doesn’t draw—he makes. Because of that he has a much broader skill set.”

What distinguished Baldwin and most of the Whole Earth Catalog crew from other early environmentalists was their embrace of technology. Baldwin never resisted machines and computers and tools, and likewise he never had much interest in living off the land. “Those people found out pretty fast,” he remarks, “that going back to the land means becoming a human donkey. If you’re serious about it you have to raise your own food, make your own toothpaste, everything, and of course no one wants to do that. It’s too much work.

“I really looked into this in the 1970s when I was writing for the Whole Earth Catalog. In the 18th century, the average American woman spent about 30 percent of her waking hours making clothes and cloth. Is that what you want to do with your life? The purpose of technology should be to save us from being human donkeys, or cogs in a machine. I dedicate my design work not so much to saving people time, but to winning them back time for their own use.”

Steven Skov Holt, distinguished professor and former Industrial Design chair (also the one responsible for bringing Baldwin back into the CCA fold in 1997—Baldwin had taught here for a couple of years in the 1960s), vividly remembers the day back in the 1970s when his “cool aunt” gave him a copy of the Whole Earth Catalog. “They

CCA is lucky to have JB. I learned everything I know about sustainability from him. He offers so much to people, and asks for nothing in return. —Leslie Speer

Baldwin’s shop truck holds more than a ton of tools and serves as a neighborhood workshop, enabling people without tools to get things done. It opens in about 10 minutes and carries its own power supply.
JB is such a huge asset to CCA. He’s a repository of wisdom. He’s an aggregator of everything he comes across. He takes everything in and excretes knowledge. If you get everyone together in a room who’s ever taken a class from JB, you’d have a huge, amazing group of people, but JB’s time at CCA is only a small facet of everything he’s done in his life. JB’s life is huge. He is a walking monument to his own vast experience. —Remy Labesque
With its vents open, Baldwin’s 760-square-foot Pillowdome stays cooler inside than outside, without air conditioning.

There have probably been a number of times JB has come to a fork in the road: teach and influence students, or go in a commercial direction. He has relentlessly chosen exploration over exploitation.

Steven Skov Holt
defined tools in the widest possible sense: not just tools from the hardware store, but tools for life, tools for work, tools for treading more softly on the planet. The Whole Earth Catalog is one of the great books of the 20th century.”

Baldwin consciously carries on Buckminster Fuller’s fundamental optimism and his passion for teaching; among his major writing projects has been the book Bucky Works, which translates Fuller’s ideas for students today. But he definitely isn’t interested in continuing Fuller’s massive compulsion to self-document. (Fuller’s archive, now housed at Stanford University, comprises more than 1,200 linear feet of papers.) Baldwin’s legacy will be vast, but the majority of it will not be written down; it will be knowledge passed on verbally, in the form of stories.

Labesque recalls, “I first knew I wanted to go into industrial design after a four-hour conversation with JB on the sidewalk in front of his car, when I was in CCA’s Pre-College Program. We had this really long talk about life. Whenever you talk with JB about design it ends up being this broader conversation about the world. Since then I’ve had a number of similar chats walking JB to his car. You think you’re going to be with him for five minutes, and it turns into two hours.

“JB can monologue for hours on end. A friend of mine once described him as an infinite loop of information, which you can access at any point. A never-ending spiral of stories, anecdotes, advice. It’s always hard to remember a whole JB story because the end of each one segues into the beginning of the next.”

Leslie Speer (former ID associate chair, and Baldwin’s longtime peer) calls his method of teaching traditional, cultural. “JB teaches in an old way, meaning really old, like on the scale of millennia. He’s a storyteller. He’s not lecturing, there’s no PowerPoint. He’s telling stories based on his real-life experiences. Students may not realize until years later how much information he was revealing to them. The way he does it, they don’t feel like they’re being taught.”

“It is important to have faculty of all ages in a department,” agrees Skov Holt. “JB is old enough to be basking in the golden years of retirement, but he’s energetic enough to be one of his students.”

Baldwin is sturdily built, very tan, with very white hair. Labesque calls him “the most spry 75-year-old I’ve ever met. He looks like he’s 56. He’s always got a good tan.” He gives the impression of someone ready to withstand harsh sun, strong winds, driving snow. It’s easy to imagine him in his element: camping, working with tools, living in a greenhouse, building things. In his Pre-College classroom, he climbs over and around students’ projects, occasionally getting down on his knees on the concrete floor to take a closer look at something. He is full of encouragement, praising their work, turning their cardboard maquettes around and around in his hands. He doesn’t hesitate to point out what he thinks is the most advanced project in the room, but he does it in a way that inspires, rather than intimidates. When he speaks, he speaks directly to a person, but in a voice that welcomes those nearby to listen and join in. He tells stories about tools, hammocks, freezing weather. He is offering guidance but also giving the students the freedom to experience the problems that all designers encounter when translating a concept into full scale.

“Most of these kids haven’t made anything before,” he observes. “Some of them are playing it safe. Others are going for it very aggressively. They make mistakes and need to back up, and that’s OK. They are finding out what’s inside them.” I tell my students that this is a great time to be a designer because we are being forced, at last, to be economical and not waste. So, if our cars are inefficient, which even the Prius is, let’s quit jabbering about it and actually do something. There’s a lot for designers to do: Use less stuff, use it better, make less of a mess, don’t abuse people. That’s my meat, and I love it.”