

The vision of a man working nearly 100 years ago as landscape architect and conservationist continues to inspire environmental and social efforts.

# The Spirit of Jens Jensen

By Jeanne Townsend Handy

Photo by Tom Handy

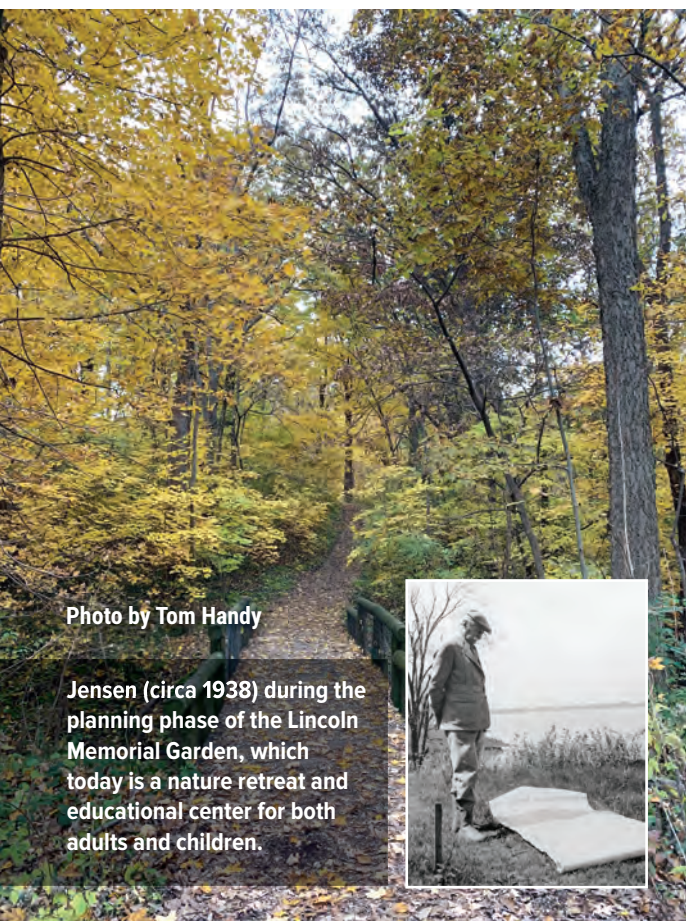


Photo by Tom Handy

Jensen (circa 1938) during the planning phase of the Lincoln Memorial Garden, which today is a nature retreat and educational center for both adults and children.

**IN 2014, I WAS** one of the three thousand people who filled the seats and sat on blankets upon the Great Lawn at the Jay Pritzker Pavilion in Chicago's Millennium Park for the world premiere of the film, *Jens Jensen: The Living Green*. The Pavilion held a 20 x 40-foot LED movie screen upon a stage adorned by immense curls of stainless steel, providing an impressive setting for a film documenting the life of this landscape architect whose work straddled the 19th and 20th centuries. More impressive than the setting was the tale that unfolded. *Jens Jensen: The Living Green* is not only a story of an immigrant's determination to survive and thrive but also a story of one man's vision perched at the precipice of what would become the new field of ecology. It is not only a story about the past but also a story of today and tomorrow, of issues that still require our attention: urban conservation, diversity, effects of green space on physical and mental health, democracy in the form of public parks. For Jensen believed, as do those following in his spirit, that plant choice and placement amount to much more than landscape design.

## THE VISION

*Jens Jensen: The Living Green* follows Danish-born Jensen's immigrant journey as he arrives in Chicago in 1885 where he works his way up from cleaning horse dung from the city streets to designing public parks, including Chicago's largest, Columbus Park, as well as home landscapes for such notables as Henry Ford and the heir to the Schlitz fortune. That he rose from street sweeper to successful landscape architect is amazing but not unique in the chronicles of immigrant success stories. It may not even be entirely uncommon that he fell in love with the prairie landscape found just outside of Chicago in late 19th century Illinois, although not all



people have seen this landscape with kind eyes. What was unusual – visionary – were his prescient ideas about how plant and animal communities evolve together, work together; how they provide physical sustenance to numerous species as well as a type of spiritual sustenance for humans, making it essential for all people. As the film’s narrator would inform us: “Jensen had a core belief that people need the living green or they would shrivel up inside.”

At points during the story, Jensen’s own voice would drift in, the time-worn recordings sounding almost otherworldly. He spoke of his great fortune to arrive in the city early enough to witness the “large stretches of plains west of Chicago, acres and acres of black-eyed Susans,” in which he sensed a true beauty found only in the context of community. He grasped the complex splendor of an ecosystem before the field of ecology existed. The work of Jensen would eventually become known as the Prairie Style. He called it the American Garden.

Jensen’s naturalist parks were part of his vision of what Chicago, which then ranked thirtieth in the country for available park space, could be. Jensen’s voice drifted in again to urge us toward enlightenment instead of imitation: “And I think that our American culture, which is in its making, will also come out of the soil and it will not come from importation from foreign countries. The one garden belongs to the monarch of the past and the other garden belongs to the democracy of the future.” Parks are for people, not just for nobility or, America’s nobility, the wealthy. When asked in 1917 by a Special Parks Commission to create a plan for increasing Chicago’s west park system, Jensen would propose a design that included a park for every neighborhood and a community garden in every block. This trailblazing plan, although approved by the West Park Board in 1919, would never be realized when political winds changed. Yet in 1928, construction concluded on a West Park Administration building in Garfield Park – complete with a gold-leaf dome, sculptures, marble walls, and terrazzo floors.

Sitting in the dark, the glow from the screen reflecting off our attentive faces, we learned that Jensen put his vision up against

the ideas of what constitutes beauty; he put his vision up against the ideas about who deserves green space; he put his vision up against Chicago’s political powers – and sometimes lost. Yet we were about to hear how, 70 years after his death, Jensen’s influence endures.

## THE SPIRIT

“Why was he so moved?” asked renowned landscape designer, Piet Oudolf, upon taking the stage to address the audience at the conclusion of the film. We now knew that Jensen had also been an early conservationist who worked with others to prevent the destruction of existing habitat and to organize movements leading to the creation of the Cook County Forest Preserve District and the Illinois state park system. Oudolf acknowledged that, yes, people of today are becoming increasingly concerned about the loss of habitats that once dominated the landscape but still he puzzled over how Jensen could have been so affected at such an early time. “I mean at that time nobody was concerned about nature and the environment, but he was moved by what he saw, by the prairies,” he said.

Jensen also believed that parks and diverse habitat need not be exclusive of each other, planting the first native flowers in any park in the country at a time when park administrators focused increasingly on exotic designs. Following in Jensen’s spirit with his “new perennial movement,” Oudolf, a Dutch native, has become well-known for the naturalistic designs he created for New York’s High Line and the Lurie Garden in Millennium Park. Lurie Garden, just steps away from where we sat, exhibits a Jensen-style understanding of the beauty found in plant architecture, in the waving grasses, in the meandering rather than the rigid, in the diversity. While not native in its entirety, the 2.5-acre Lurie Garden contains over 222 types of plants that, as Oudolf claims, “work on people’s senses so they would recognize the beauty of their own native plants.”

Jensen’s crusade for native plants did not stem from a desire to exclude plants from other countries. No, to him plant choice had nothing to do with human-drawn boundaries and everything

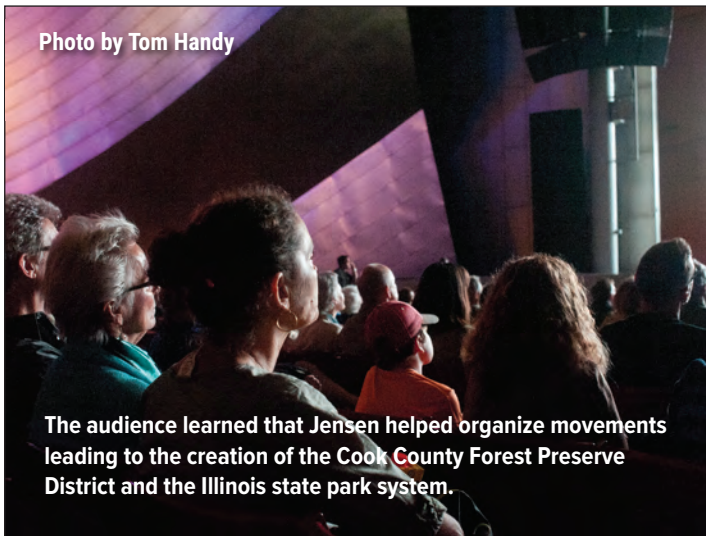
the spirit of Jensen fills the giant  
Chicago movie premiere  
of *Jens Jensen: Bringing Green*.

Renowned landscape designer Piet Oudolf worked “in the spirit of Jens Jensen” to design the Lurie Garden in Chicago’s Millennium Park, “bringing the prairie to the city.”

Photo by Tom Handy

to do with the association of plants with insects and birds and animals, with soil and geology, with climate and wind – factors that are many and varied and have nothing to do with artificial boundaries but instead acknowledge co-evolution and community. And Lurie Garden has confirmed Jensen’s ideas of gardens as communities, having become a haven for numerous species, including more than 60 bird species as well as many crucial pollinators.

Piet Oudolf concluded his address to the audience, stating: “I like to think that I work in the spirit of Jensen, and he said that these gardens are the gardens of the future, and he was right. That’s what I try to bring back – that sort of spirit that he had at that time, and I feel that I can do something in this time.” Oudolf is not alone in looking to Jensen to find motivation for doing something “in this time.”



Carey Lundin, the film’s director and co-producer, took the stage next and spoke of Jensen’s ideas about landscape as equality and democracy, of the power of green space. Just as Jensen had intuited the interconnections of ecological communities so, too, did he recognize the physical and mental benefits of green space long before confirmation by scientific study. “He advocated for green spaces for everybody in the city... because the living green is what changes our lives, it makes our lives spiritually better, it makes us physically stronger and makes us emotionally clearer about what we’re doing,” Lundin declared.

The film revealed that during Jensen’s time in Chicago, he not only witnessed acres of black-eyed Susan’s but also the horror of the impoverished neighborhoods with children playing in sewage-filled streets alongside dead animals. Jensen would see the prairie plowed under, rampant growth, increasing density, and immigrant neighborhoods sitting alongside expanses of factories. Just as he saw the dignity and importance of the neglected prairie species, so too did he believe underprivileged communities were deserving of attention and respect and green space. Lundin continued: “Jensen believed people need to see the living green every single day if possible and shouldn’t have to travel very far to do it.” It is a belief that established the path Lundin has pursued since her work on the film.

In a recent Zoom conversation from her home in Los Angeles, Lundin described to me how her goals in life have changed because of Jensen. She has used the film to spark discussion between educators and teenagers and environmental leaders about diversity – not only in the landscape but in the conservation field itself. She has gained insight into the challenges of underserved children, which may include guns, gangs, and crossing gang lines to reach a nearby park. “Not only do they have polluted environments, they can’t even get to the parks unless they jeopardize their lives,” she told me.

Lundin became inspired to join a collaboration that included NeighborSpace, the Student Conservation Association’s “Jensen Crew,” and many others, to create the Jardincito Nature Play Garden in Chicago’s Little Village, a place where children can play and explore nature in their own neighborhood. She continues her Jensen-inspired pursuits today and plans to again use viewings of the movie and Jensen’s powerful example to renew and reinvigorate discussions about conservation leadership, diversity, and motivation.

Perhaps this Danish-born immigrant from an era long past seems an odd hero for today, but along with revolutionary ideas Jens Jensen possessed a fierce tenacity, an ability to buck the odds and a willingness to fight and lose and fight again. Despite being ousted from his West Park Board position and replaced by someone more politically connected, despite the dismissal of his farsighted plan for neighborhood parks, Jensen persisted. In his seventies, he established The Clearing in Ellison Bay, Wisconsin, a place for future landscape architects to learn, as he stated, that “landscaping becomes an art when man and nature work together.” He would also travel to Springfield, Illinois, to create, free of charge, plans for the 63-acre Lincoln Memorial Garden that 85 years later is a living testament to Jensen’s crucial concepts, with its acres of mature trees and prairie openings and its focus on youth naturalist education.

“Why was he so moved?” asked Piet Oudolf. Still we wonder and are grateful for the places he created that today represent his inspiration in full maturity, from Columbus Park to the Lincoln Memorial Garden, both now on the National Register of Historic Places. We are grateful for the pioneering places tied to his vision, from Lurie Garden to Jardincito Garden, as well as for the people working in Jensen’s spirit, pressing forward toward the goal Carey Lundin expressed as she spoke from the stage in 2014: “We want to be able to inspire the next generation of conservation heroes.” ■



## BIOS

Jeanne Townsend Handy holds an M.A. in Environmental Studies and is a member of the Society of Environmental Journalists. As a freelance writer, she enjoys exploring the science and dedication underlying habitat restoration and protection efforts.