

Home and Horizon in the Work of Jens Jensen

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Our horizon shifts when our home changes. When the landscape architect Jens Jensen moved from Denmark to Illinois (via brief stays in Florida and Iowa), he was astonished by the rich color of the Midwest landscape. Its seasonal variations were remarkable in comparison to the subtle hues of his native Danish home. In Jensen's later writings, he explored specific flower color variation within individual tree species from Illinois to Wisconsin. This increasing awareness of place through travel and observation contextualizes home within multiple geographic scales. In his landscape architecture Jens Jensen used plant material, spatial arrangement and an understanding of ecology to reveal home as nested within a larger horizon.

Jensen promoted ecological awareness through groups such as *Friends of our Native Landscape* and the *Prairie Club of Illinois*. On his own travels he was often accompanied by the ecologist and designer O.C. Simmonds. Together they identified native plants and recorded the forms and organization of the prairie landscape. Jensen's convictions about the use of native plants in the built landscape were born from experience and conversations with peers such as Simmonds and local residents excited by a desire to more fully understand their home.

Jensen's early planting successes and failures as a laborer for the West Park Commission in Chicago strengthened his understanding of Midwest ecology and led him to develop what Wilhelm Miller in 1915 entitled the *The Prairie Spirit in Landscape Gardening*.¹ The prairie spirit was reflected in the landscape architecture of Jensen, the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan, the art pottery of Teco and the poetry of William Cullen Bryant. Loosely grouped as the Prairie School, a community and dialect of conversation developed that responded to the palette and function of the surrounding landscape. Within broader discussions of modernism, they defined home through an amplified reading of the land and promoted it as a type of critical regionalism.

A cultivated prairie opening west to the sunset, sheltered council rings, crabapple paths at prairie borders, programmed park edges and prairie rivers repeatedly appear in Jensen's work. He used these constructions in public commissions such as Columbus and Humboldt Parks in Chicago to instill an understanding of the particular geography, climate and orientation of the site. I emphasize 'constructed' in describing such work because it was not a simple imitation of pre-existing conditions. Jensen modified the ground and used planted form as a stage for the changing seasons, the shifting sunlight and a multiplicity of occupations. Familiar formal elements such as rose gardens, sheltered walks, music stands, swimming pools and places to rest linked to a broader landscape experience while ensuring the parks' life and maintenance.

Jensen layered the experience of the landscape. By opening a long view across the prairie to the western sun and planting sugar maples or sumac at the horizon line Jensen walks our thoughts to the cosmos beyond. The connection between the color of the native trees and the universal experience of a setting sun unveils the specifics our own home while encouraging the thoughtful consideration of other constantly changing homes. In Jensen's words,

The understanding that other people in other places are developing what is within them, that they are showing their ability and their understanding in this higher sense of human relations, makes one's world rich.²

The cultural geographer Yi Fu Tuan establishes the concept of a cosmopolitan hearth with similar language;

Knowing places other than our own is a necessary component of the concept of 'cosmopolitan hearth.' The unique personality of our small part of the earth is all the more real and precious when we can compare it with other climes, other topographies. Perhaps this is another way of saying that exploration (moving out into the cosmos) enables us to know our own hearth better.³



When I look at early 20th century photographs of Jensen's public and private projects I see inside the landscape. I am drawn through the clearings; past the crabapple and haw forest edges and into windows of forest occupation. By returning to places such as Columbus Park I believe we can understand the power of landscape architecture as a societal representation of home. I hope that as world citizens we can ultimately welcome a layered occupation that is understanding and inclusive of other homes along a circular horizon.



1. Miller, Wilhelm *The Prairie Spirit in Landscape Gardening* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1915).
2. Jensen, Jens *Siftings* (Chicago: Ralph Fletcher Seymour, 1939) 5.
3. Tuan, Yi Fu. *Cosmos & Hearth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) 183.
photograph taken at Columbus Park in the Fall of 2006 (Ryan Moody)