

Group Aims To Save Studio For Lover Of Green Space

September 25, 1992 | By Jay Pridmore.

Jens Jensen is well-known to people who frequent Chicago museums. In recent years, designs by the great landscape architect have been featured in exhibits at the Historical Society, Morton Arboretum and the Chicago Cultural Center-proving that Jensen`s naturalistic landscapes still have a healthy public following.

For the time being, however, a new organization called Friends of Jens Jensen has no one place to call home. The group met recently at Garfield Park Conservatory, the great glass house which Jensen helped design.

They have been discussing the restoration of Jensen`s former studio-a small building in Ravinia that is in dire need of work. They have a number of other possible projects on their agenda. Way down on the list-and well in the future-could be the creation of a shrine or museum for Jensen, similar to the Frederick Law Olmstead National Historic Site in Massachusetts.

If an organization of Jensen devotees has an itinerant character, it is apt because Jensen was a believer in open space and the endless, though subtle, variety of natural landscapes in the Midwest. Working in and around Chicago for the first half of the 20th Century, he was one of the first people in our area to promote the idea of ecology and preserving the environment as a vital link with the past.

At the present time, a deep concern for the landscapes of Jensen reside in the Chicago Park District, which oversees several of his more famous designs. One of his most important is on the city`s West Side, Columbus Park which includes a series of ridges, highlighting what Jensen discerned was an ancient glacial beach. Also for this park he designed a pool lined with stratified stone to resemble an old swimming hole, and ``communities`` of native plants, such as hawthorns and wildflowers to resemble the primeval Midwestern prairie.

Jensen believed Columbus Park was the first full expression of the Prairie style," said Julia Sniderman, chairperson of the Friends of Jens Jensen, and head of the preservation division of the Chicago Park District. Prairie-style landscapes often accompanied Prairie houses designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and his followers.

The present-day attraction to Jensen is due at least partially to his involvement in the back-to-nature movement during his lifetime. Among the architect's picturesque customs were "masques"-or allegorical plays-performed in wooded areas by Jensen's own group, Friends of Our Native Landscape which was founded in 1913. Among many other activities before his death in 1951 were his early plans to save the Indiana Dunes.

Maintaining watch over Jensen's legacy, Friends of Jens Jensen has been involved for the last year in a project to save the Ravinia studio where he worked from 1921 on. It was here where he first experimented with council rings, "sun openings" (or small meadows) and other techniques that he later used in private and public landscapes throughout his career.

The challenge of this project, however, is that the small cottage is in disrepair and appears to be falling into an adjacent ravine.

It is also on private property, on land too expensive for a small cultural group to purchase. Nevertheless, the Friends raised money to produce detailed documentation of the house-grants came from the City of Highland Park and the Historic Preservation Committee of Highland Park.

Jensen was such a proponent of saving green space," said Jo Ann Nathan, a resident of Highland Park and co-chair of the group. "I think it is appropriate that we do what we can to save some of his."

Those interested in joining the Friends of Jens Jensen can write the organization at P.O. Box 801, Highland Park, Ill. 60035. Yearly dues are \$35. Notes

- "The American Print: Originality and Experimentation, 1790-1890"

opens Friday and runs through Dec. 4 at the Mary and Leigh Block Gallery at Northwestern University, 1967 Sheridan Rd., Evanston. The exhibition covers a period in which aquatints, etchings and lithographs became an important, and characteristically American, artform quite apart from painting.

Artists represented include Homer, Cole, Hunt, Moran. A major symposium focused on American printmaking will be held at the Block Oct. 17. For more information, call 708-491-4852.

- An installation titled "Street" is open through Nov. 16 in the gallery of the Arts Club, 109 E. Ontario St. Assembled by artist Siah Armajani, he is described as "profoundly democratic" by Arts Club president Stanley M. Freeling.

The installation includes beds, bridges, kitchen tables, sidewalks and other abstract relationships. It invokes a "collapse of boundaries between interior and exterior. . . caused by epidemic homelessness," as described in the exhibition catalog. The Arts Club gallery is open to the public from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Saturday.