

Culture Club: Renovating Jens Jensen’s Landscape At The Clearing

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By [Door County Pulse](#), [Peninsula Pulse](#) – July 7th, 2016



University of Minnesota landscape architect students working on the Lodge Meadow Terrace renovation. Submitted.

by Mike Schneider, Executive Director of The Clearing

For the last several years, a talented team of landscape architects and others has been working on an important project at The Clearing – the renovation of the landscape on that part of the property referred to as the “central campus.” This is the area where most of The Clearing’s historic buildings are located, including the Main Lodge, Mertha’s Cabin and the West Dorm, which is the building that includes the property’s original pioneer cabin as part of its structure.

The central campus landscape, especially the plantings, had taken a back seat to other, more pressing facility-related projects over the past several decades, most notably repairs, maintenance and renovations

on the old buildings, along with the construction of new buildings, including the Jens Jensen Center in 1997 and the Workshop in 2007. [A new building is currently underway—the Forge at The Clearing. It will house classes in forging (blacksmithing) and other metal craft and will be completed this fall.]

It's ironic, at first glance anyway, that the thing for which Clearing founder, renowned landscape architect Jens Jensen, is best-known – creating landscapes in his signature naturalistic “prairie style” – is the thing that has taken the longest for us to give the attention it deserves. But years have a way of turning into decades, and there was always something else that needed the time and effort that was available (the money, too), and work on renovating the Jensen landscape was delayed one year after another.

In addition to having to “wait its turn,” work on The Clearing's central campus landscape has the added challenge of there not being a Jensen plan from which to work. We're not sure whether a master plan for this area ever existed, but if it had, and it probably did, it would have been destroyed in the 1937 Easter weekend fire that destroyed the first lodge, the south wing of which was Jensen's home. All of his personal effects were lost in that fire. We do have a Jensen plan for the kitchen garden in front of the current lodge, which was built in the early 1940s. We used that plan to redo the kitchen garden in 2012. But for other campus landscape projects, we've had to do our best to “interpret” what we think Jensen might have done.

To that end, we have, over the past several years, had the good fortune of assembling an outstanding “Jensen landscape team” to help guide our work. The team includes Bob Grese, Professor of Landscape Architecture at the University of Michigan. Bob literally wrote the book on Jens Jensen (*Jen Jensen: Maker of Natural Parks and Gardens*), has been involved at The Clearing for about 20 years and teaches a class here called Landscape Design: Through the Eyes of Jens Jensen. Darrel Morrison, a retired professor of landscape architecture who taught at both the University of Wisconsin – Madison and the University of Georgia, is another member of the team. He has been involved at The Clearing for more than 40 years and, along with Bob Grese, is considered an expert on the Jensen landscape style.

In more recent years, landscape architect Nancy Aten, who studied under Darrel Morrison, has been very involved with our landscape-related work, and has led the team on several important projects, including the renovation of the kitchen garden in 2012, the renovation of the West Dorm plantings in 2014, the design and installation of the campus entrance landscape (the area between the campus parking lot and the buildings) in 2015 and the renovation of the Professor's Quarter's terrace area this year, a project that is ongoing. Nancy, more than anyone, has breathed new life into the central campus landscape.

Other members of the team include Clearing Assistant Director Erik Rinkleff, yet another talented landscape architect, Nancy Aten's husband Dan Collins, and a series of Summer Landscape Architecture Interns from the University of Minnesota's graduate landscape architecture program. For the past seven years, The Clearing has hired a first-year graduate student from this program to work at The Clearing for the summer on landscape-related projects. This year's summer intern is Rachel Valenziano. Rachel has done much of the work on the Professor's Quarter's terrace area, and will continue to do so over the course of the summer. I have also been involved in all of the landscape projects at The Clearing, to the extent that my horticulture and native plant knowledge is helpful.

The work on Jens Jensen's Clearing landscape will be ongoing and never-ending, just as it should be. Landscapes are living, breathing organisms. They grow and change over time. And they are subject to both human and natural influences, either of which can be for good or for ill. With Jens Jensen as our guiding light, and a landscape team that is sensitive to his work and legacy at The Clearing, we are confident that it will be for good.

Peninsula Arts and Humanities Alliance, Inc., which contributes Culture Club throughout the summer season, is a coalition of nonprofit organizations whose purpose is to enhance, promote and advocate the arts, humanities and natural sciences in Door County.