



HIGHLAND PARK, ILLINOIS

# The Becker Estate

*Jens Jensen & the Vanishing Prairie Style*



Legendary landscape architect Jens Jensen designed the Prairie Style grounds of the Becker Estate (1921-1927) on a breath-taking 20-acre site set high on a clay bluff above Lake Michigan. However, A. C. Becker was a hard-working businessman, and Jensen – mindful of his client’s need for a calming home environment – chose not to exploit the dramatic potential of the site. Jensen’s Prairie Style was, in essence, a Midwestern regional variant of the Picturesque Style overlaid with Arts and Crafts elements. Today, the Becker Estate remains a pre-eminent example of Jensen’s work, a living “text book” of the Prairie Style and one of the few surviving restored homegrounds of its size in the Chicago region.

## HISTORY

The grounds of the A. C. Becker property have attained significance as one of the finest remaining Prairie Style landscapes. As articulated by Wilhelm Miller in *The Prairie Spirit in Landscape Gardening* (1914), the Prairie Style’s pragmatic wisdom was anchored in the Great Lakes/Midwestern regional native landscape and enhanced a Picturesque design approach with sustainable plantings and local materials. The Becker Estate brought together virtually all of the elements of this movement. Jensen and his protégé Marshall Johnson developed a ravine path system with moraine-style stone outcroppings, a gentle view down a “long meadow”, a quiet reflecting pool sited in a grove of trees, and a calming entry drive that wound through the woodland. Midwestern native woody plants and rustic bridges and features supported the tranquility of the site. As a formal element, Jensen also included a walled formal garden with native flagstone quartered pathways, a contrast he also employed in designs at Evanston, IL, and Indianapolis.



The Becker Estate design developed in part out of Jensen's campaign to preserve the Indiana Dunes as public parkland. The dunes were on the south shore of Lake Michigan and a distinctive regional landscape. However, many citizens feared public ownership and access so soon after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. As an homage to the Indiana Dunes, Jensen recreated its conditions as an element of this design. Later, due in great part to Jensen's efforts, the Indiana Dunes themselves went into public ownership: today, they are open to visitors as the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore and the Indiana Dunes State Park.

The house was renovated in the 1950s, with International Style windows. Fortunately, much of this new work is on the lakeside of the grounds and away from the majority of the Jensen landscape: this new work could be removed. Between 1988 and 1998, landscape architect Steve Christy restored many features of the Becker Estate, and garden designer Doug Hoerr reestablished the formal garden. In the 1990s the site opened (on a reversible basis) as an educational resource for tour groups of interested professionals and enthusiasts.

Of Becker Estate's original 20 acres, a 17.5-acre core still remains. Today, it is the finest of the three large-scale Jensen-designed North Shore estates threatened with subdivision. The others are Harry Clow's "Landsdowne" (1911, with an earlier house by architect Benjamin Marshall) and William V. Kelley's "Stonebridge" (1916, with a house by architect Howard Shaw). The property presently is in receivership, and it is anticipated that the current owners will dispose of the Becker Estate at the best price possible.

## THE THREAT

The preferred "highest and best" re-use North Shore bluff estate properties is subdivision: "vacant" land on or very near Lake Michigan is valued at 1.5 to 2 million dollars per acre. The Becker estate lies just north of the Lake Shore Country Club and its sought after golf course, an attractive inducement for would-be buyers of smaller tracts. Developers, real estate agents and contractors could profit by building a dozen or so luxury "mansionettes". In addition, neighbors would be concerned to see public access so close to their property -- especially if it remains uncontrolled. Local attitudes differ on the tax revenue implications of sub-division: the property has been at a reduced level on the tax rolls, so further loss would not be noticeable; however, subdivision would boost tax revenues.

Fortunately, both the landscape architect (Jens Jensen) and the architect (Howard Van Doren Shaw) have national as well as regional reputations. Both the house and grounds have a high level of significance, and the landscape retains an extraordinary level of integrity. Several preservation initiatives are being explored including the purchase and endowment of the Becker place as a park and study setting, perhaps with a high-end not-for profit "bed & breakfast" inn to defray costs. Alternatively, a small group of investors would like to rehabilitate the estate, building small number of private homes on the least significant parts of the landscape and selling the historically significant portion to the City of Highland Park for one dollar. The City has been supportive of this approach, in which it would maintain the historic core for public access and education. One less likely possibility would be public acquisition of the land by the Lake County Forest Preserve, the State of Illinois, or the National Park Service. However, cultural and historic values notwithstanding, the greatest financial profit would come through subdivision.



## HOW TO HELP

Write or email the City of Highland Park to work with developers and preservationists to save the Becker Estate and its Jens Jensen landscape. Voice your support the City's effort to work with potential developers to purchase the historic landscape core for one dollar and to maintain it for public access and education.

### Further Reading

Jensen, Jens. *Siftings, the Major Portion of The Clearing, and Collected Writings*. R. F. Seymour, Chicago, 1956. Contains selections from Jensen's writings, including some from *The Clearing*. *Siftings (1939)* was re-edited by and republished in 1990 by Johns Hopkins University Press as part of the *American Land Classics* series, with a foreword by Prof. Charles E. Little and an afterword by Darrel G. Morrison.

Birnbaum, Charles, et al, eds. *Pioneers of American Landscape Architecture*. McGraw-Hill, 2000.

Eaton, Leonard K. *Landscape Artist in America : The Life and Work of Jens Jensen*. University of Chicago Press, 1964.

Grese, Robert E. *Jens Jensen: Maker of Natural Parks and Gardens*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.

Miller, Wilhelm. *The Prairie Spirit of Landscape Gardening*. Republished, with introduction by Christopher Vernon. University of Massachusetts Press, 2002.

### Web Resources

[Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois](#)

[Jens Jensen Legacy Project](#)

[Teaching w/ Historic Places: Chicago's Columbus Park](#)

### Site Address

A.C. Becker estate  
405 Sheridan Road  
Highland Park, IL 60035