
Field Trip Guide

Exhibition
March–December 2026

Perennial City

For educators



Overview

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is intended for educators as an additional resource to be used alongside the *Perennial City: Experiments in Urban Gardening* exhibition at the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum. It provides information and background context meant to aid in the development of lesson plans, pre-visit and post-visit discussions, and review of the exhibition itself.

IN THIS EXHIBIT YOU WILL

- Explore the history of Hull-House's urban garden and outdoor recreation initiatives
- Become familiar with the lives of Hull-House residents and immigrant neighbors who were part of green space development in Chicago in the 1900s-1910s
- Experience a historic house museum built prior to the 1871 Great Chicago Fire
- See artwork created by Chicago artists who center their work around urban gardens and land use

THEMES YOU WILL EXPLORE

- Hull-House's experiments with land use
- Who makes decisions about land use
- The future of gardens and shared outdoor spaces
- Community growth and enrichment through green spaces

DURING A GUIDED TOUR YOU WILL

- Learn about Progressive Era history through questions and discussion
- Engage with the exhibition through interactive activities and takeaways
- Observe artwork centered around urban gardens and community enrichment

The Hull-House Settlement

In 1889, thousands of recently arrived immigrants lived and worked on the Near West Side of Chicago, which was then the fastest growing city in the world. Czech, German, Greek, Irish, Italian, Polish, and Russian families shaped the life and culture of this densely populated neighborhood, which over the next decades would also be defined by Mexican and African American communities. Here, three women moved into a residence owned by local businesswoman Helen Culver, who would be the settlement's first supporter.

Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr were college friends, who were inspired by a new idea of public service, to live “with,” not “for,” other people. Mary Keyser, a family friend of the Addams family, joined Addams and Starr at Hull-House and became an important liaison with the neighborhood. These three women embarked on “the scheme,” in Starr's words, to live in solidarity with immigrant communities neglected by the city and exploited by capitalism, who lived in crowded tenements and worked long hours in nearby factories. The ambitious social experiment of Hull-House would transform the lives of both reformers and neighbors as the settlement grew in response to the concerns and aspirations of those it served.

Hull-House became the country's most influential social settlement, expanding to include thirteen buildings, where Addams and her circle of social reformers provided kindergarten and day care facilities; an employment bureau; an art gallery; libraries; English and citizenship courses; and theater, music, and art classes. They championed immigrant rights and improvements to public health. They worked to end child labor, instituted juvenile justice, supported unions, built playgrounds, and advocated for public housing. Over many decades, Hull-House upheld free speech, dissent, and civil rights.

Perennial City

Perennial City: Experiments in Urban Gardening considers the pivotal role played by Hull-House in the history of Chicago's urban garden movement. In 1896, with the formation of the People's Friendly Club by an immigrant group of "landless gardeners," the Hull-House settlement began to support urban gardening. Gardening became a way to improve public health, provide access to the outdoors and the opportunity to grow food, beautify the city, and affirm the value of non-industrial labor.

A decade later, Hull-House resident Laura Dainty Pelham founded the City Garden Association, which sought to make public land available to "tenement dwellers." Pelham brokered a deal with International Harvester, a major manufacturer of agricultural equipment, to lease ninety acres of land near its flagship factory along the West Fork of the Chicago River. There, immigrant families planted gardens as sources of both food and income.

In 1918, the city invited Danish-born landscape architect Jens Jensen to develop a plan for expanding Chicago's West Side parks. Inspired by his involvement with the Harvester gardens, Jensen envisioned a vast network of parks that included green parkways and municipal kitchens. Despite widespread civic support, Jensen's plan for a garden-ringed Chicago would require the city to take possession of property from corporations and individual landowners, something it was unwilling to do.

In the decades that followed, urban gardeners in Chicago have continued to reclaim neglected tracts of land for the common good. *Perennial City* explores the promise of these early experiments and connects them with artists working in the city's gardens today. Community organizations and artists are revitalizing neglected local green areas, challenging property speculation, and exemplifying environmentally sustainable public space. Today, Chicago's gardens still serve refugees and immigrants, provide affordable, local, and healthful food, and model the cooperative vitality of plant life.

Key Concepts

SETTLEMENT HOUSE

A community-based social reform institution where middle-class reformers lived among workers, offering education, cultural programs, and social services while advocating for labor, housing, and public health reforms. Hull-House was one of the most influential settlement houses in the United States.

SOCIAL REFORM

The work of creating changes to an existing system to improve circumstances for people living within it. The process of making efforts to better people's experiences in areas like public health, education, and labor.

RESIDENTS AND NEIGHBORS

Residents and neighbors affiliated with the House all performed the work of social reform. Residents often lived at Hull-House, working within the settlement to develop

clubs, recreational groups, and community initiatives. Neighbors were the people of the community who went to Hull-House programs and used the settlement's services.

COMMUNITY ENRICHMENT

The collective process of improving social, environmental, and economic well-being through participatory action. It relies on the collaboration of people to identify needs, develop solutions, and put into action new practices. The goal is to create a sustainable, thriving community. Examples of this include volunteering time to help meet needs in under-resourced services, donating resources, creating uses for vacant spaces, and maintaining spaces used for community gathering. The Hull-House playground was an effort in community enrichment.

LAND STEWARDSHIP

Land stewardship refers to the management of land without ownership. It includes caring for land,

revitalizing neglected local green areas, and determining practices that safeguard its preservation. Members of the City Gardens Association were land stewards, as they were using property that belonged to the International Harvester company to create their urban gardens. The People's Friendly Club members were also using borrowed land for their gardens, a project which encouraged familial and intercultural connections.

URBAN GARDENS

Urban gardens are a type of green space within cities stewarded by members of the neighborhoods in which they exist. There are different uses for these gardens, including providing food, beautifying neighborhoods, and as spaces for gatherings or for teaching about gardening. They are usually collective efforts within communities and can thus be considered an example of community enrichment, fostering greater connection between people. The proliferation of urban gardens during

the Progressive Era was due to the efforts of organizations and settlement houses like Hull-House.

BENEFITS OF GREEN SPACES

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency identifies many benefits of green spaces, including:

- Opportunities for community gathering and recreation
- Improved physical health through the promotion of outdoor activity
- Improved mental health and lowered stress levels when time is spent outdoors
- Vegetation and open space in densely developed areas
- Decrease in noise and air pollution

Experiments in the Outdoors



The residents of Hull-House had two major driving beliefs that guided many of the programs they created: that everyone should have access to recreation and play, and that being in nature promotes health and wellbeing. During the early 1900s, Hull-House began many initiatives meant to create opportunities for access to the outdoors. From 1909 to 1920, Hull-House operated an open-air school on the roof of its nursery building for children with tuberculosis. Students received access to medical care, hot meals, regular classes, and participated in outdoor activities like gardening and exercise. Pictured here, boys and girls tend to their rooftop garden: modest planters overflowing with flowers and vegetables.



In 1893, the residents of Hull-House came into possession of a set of tenements across the street from the settlement complex that were in deep disrepair. The residents demolished the tenements and in 1894, transformed the vacant lot into a playground, giving neighborhood children a safe and structured place to play. It was Chicago's first public playground.

The Bowen Country Club



Settlement workers believed that during the summer, when the heat and pollution were at their worst, children should be given a break from the city in favor of wide open rural green spaces. In 1912, Jane Addams and philanthropist Louise De Koven Bowen (1859-1953) founded the Bowen Country Club, Hull-House's summer camp.

Located on seventy-two acres of land in Waukegan, Illinois, the camp boasted woods, orchards, and vegetable gardens whose harvests were used in daily meals. Children could explore, play, and take outdoor classes taught by Hull-House residents. For more than fifty years, the camp welcomed up to 1,000 children and their mothers every summer.

The “Landless Gardeners”



The first collective urban gardens in Chicago were tilled by immigrants and supported by the Englewood Branch of the Chicago Bureau of Charities beginning in 1895. The gardeners formed the People's Friendly Club, which gathered biweekly at Hull-House on Sunday evenings to sing, play music, and for educational programs tied to the growing seasons. When the Bureau could not raise the funds to maintain the plots, the gardeners—now rendered “landless”—continued to meet at Hull-House led by resident Laura Dainty Pelham, forming the settlement's first multi-generational family social club. In this photograph by Lewis Hine, women and young people from the People's Friendly Club gather to sing on a Sunday evening.

KEY MOMENTS FROM THE EXHIBITION

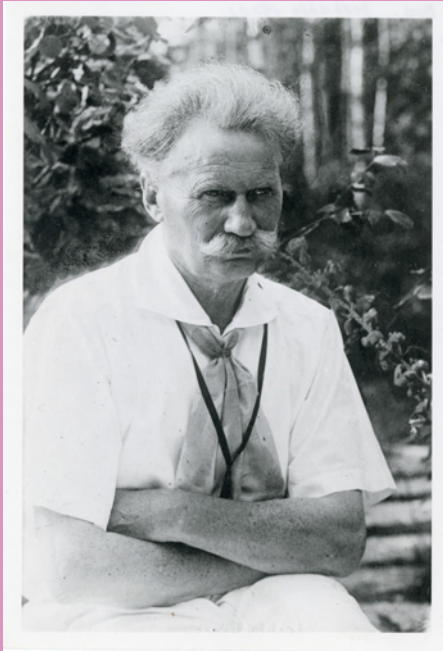
Land to Be Used, Not Owned

Actor, teacher, socialist, and social reformer Laura Dainty Pelham (1849-1924) founded the City Gardens Association at Hull-House in 1909. Pelham sought to provide immigrant gardeners with plots of land as a means of improving health and beautifying the city. A charismatic public speaker and ambitious organizer, she negotiated with the agricultural equipment company International Harvester to repurpose unused land. Through this deal, one hundred immigrant families rented company land. They used it to cultivate crops as a source of income, as well as for their own tables. Plowing, seeds, and an “expert superintendent” were offered to help with the endeavor. Within a year, through the association’s efforts, four hundred families were renting land, spread out in numerous areas across the city.



(left) Wallace Kirkland (1891–1979). Laura Dainty Pelham, ca. 1900s-1920s. Hull-House Photograph Collection: Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois Chicago. 0000.0273.0531
(right) “A ‘mess’ of turnips.” Harvester World, International Harvester. Vol. 6, no. 11, 1915. Photograph. Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

Advocate for Urban Gardens



Danish-born Jens Jensen (1860-1951) served as a board member of Pelham's City Garden Association, designing plans for its gardens and a pavilion as a respite at the center of the Harvester Gardens. He believed in cultivating the natural growth of native plants rather than imposing formal architecture upon gardens. At the turn of the twentieth century, as superintendent of Chicago's West Park System, Jensen brought his vision of native wildflowers to the redesign of Garfield Park, Humboldt Park, Douglass Park, and Pulaski Park. Jensen went on to design the new Columbus Park, and many public green spaces throughout the city.

Facing a severe lack of green space on the West Side of Chicago, the Commissioners of the West Park District hired Jens Jensen in 1918 to develop an expansion plan for the park system. In the plan, Jensen warned that the South Branch of the Chicago River—where the Harvester Gardens were located—was in grave danger of further industrialization. He urged commissioners to secure riverfront land for parks as soon as possible. Jensen's proposal, which called for reclaiming industrial tracts of land well beyond the Commission's authority, was never realized. Disillusioned, Jensen turned away from public projects to his own private practice.

Olly Costello



Olly Costello is a queer illustrator, muralist, urban food growing enthusiast, and community seed saver. They help coordinate the Rogers Park Seed Library, a free repository of vegetable and native plant seeds for the city and have painted several murals on the north side of Chicago. For over fifteen years, Olly has been growing food as a part of a yard-sharing project, where private landowners share their unused yard space with neighbors who lack access to growing space. They illustrated *Prisons Must Fall* by Mariame Kaba and Jane Ball (Haymarket Books, 2025), a children's book that presents solutions to harm that do not involve incarceration with an emphasis on practicing compassion, meeting people's basic survival needs, restorative justice practices.

KEY MOMENTS FROM THE EXHIBITION

Carlos Flores



Since 2014, Flores's art practice has intervened in Chicago's Southwest Side, addressing environmental justice, displacement, and migration. In 2023, as Chicago Park District Curator-in-Residence, Flores worked with design firm Human Scale to create and activate a new pavilion structure in Marquette Park, one of the city's largest green spaces, providing a platform for neighbors and artists to reclaim public space. Flores founded Contra Corriente in 2022, an artist-run festival that connects artists, environmentalists, and community organizers to resist environmental racism.

Pre- and Post-Visit Questions

PRE-VISIT QUESTIONS

- Have you ever planted anything? Did you get to see it grow? How did it feel?
- Where is your favorite outdoor space? Who do you visit this space with?
- What does access to green space provide? How do you feel when you walk in a park, visit a lake, go on a picnic, etc.?
- What does it mean to “own property”? What are some examples?
- Who does public land — like parks, nature trails, forest preserves — belong to? What could keep people from using and accessing these spaces? How can we expand access to it?

POST-VISIT QUESTIONS

- What communities are you part of? How are you involved with your communities?
- What does community care look like?
- Where/what are the spaces where community care happens?
- How are people today trying to tackle the same issues that Hull-House tried to solve?
- What does that work look like?
- What are some ways we can connect roles in community to parts of a garden or ecosystem?

Knowledge Review

- How did Hull-House participate in community enrichment? How did they do this using outdoor spaces?
- How were urban gardens a good place for exercising civic duty and pursuing social progress? Is that still the case?
- How would you define the type of community organizing expressed through urban gardens?
- Why do you think the City Gardens Association partnered with International Harvester? Do you think this was an effective choice? In your opinion, who did this agreement benefit?
- What might have been some of the potential limitations of the CGA-International Harvester partnership?
- What problems did Hull-House try to solve with greenspace? What sorts of green spaces did they create?

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