

landscape

LURIE GARDEN: ROOFTOP WONDER

Gathering place, showcase of perennials, poetic symbol of local history

STORY BY ADAM REGN ARVIDSON



If you spent time in Chicago's Lurie Garden when it first opened, it's worth another visit to experience the garden in its maturity. The garden is an explosion of perennials, a gently flowing watercourse, and a network of wood and crushed-stone pathways in the shadows of skyscrapers. This colorful and textural five acres is part of Millennium Park, Chicago's ambitious and multifaceted design showcase completed in 2004. It has ostentatious neighbors — Frank Gehry's billowing stainless-steel music pavilion, artist Jaume Plensa's interactive Crown Fountain and Anish Kapoor's mirror-smooth *Cloud Gate* (affectionately called "the bean") — but the Lurie Garden holds its own by being more subdued, more contemplative.

That's not to say the garden isn't powerful. The 14-foot-tall hedge of cedar, beech and hornbeam trees, structured even before it reaches its full height by a rigid steel armature, is a bold edge that both encloses

Above: Backdropped by Millennium Park's music pavilion, the Lurie Garden reveals a sunny "light plate" (to the left of the main walkway), dominated by prairie perennials and grasses, and a "dark plate" (to the right), with trees, ferns and shade-loving perennials.

the garden and ties it to the grand scale of the city. The main walkway seems to slice straight through and into the earth, exposing rough-hewn limestone and a ribbon of water.

The work of Seattle-based landscape architecture office Gustafson Guthrie Nichol, Dutch plantsman Piet Oudolf, and stage set and costume designer Robert Israel, the garden's design team came together in 2000 to respond to an invited competition. Their scheme, titled "Shoulder Garden" — in part for the way the great hedge dips along its northern edge to seemingly support the "head" of Gehry's pavilion — had deep references to Chicago's history, and a palette of more than



130 kinds of perennials designed to change and evolve through the seasons and over time.

This lush landscape is actually a roof garden, but it is almost impossible to tell. It sits on top of the Millennium parking garage, which in turn sits on top of railroad tracks. The undulating landforms are accomplished with Styrofoam under a layer of soil, since great mounds of dirt would have been too heavy for the underlying structure. The garden is a rectangle split in half by the main walkway, called the “seam” by the designers. This cleaving of the site is highly symbolic. Chicago is a city that was literally raised from the marsh, and the Lake Michigan shoreline has repeatedly changed location and character. Shannon Nichol, GGN’s lead designer for the project within their collaborative office, learned everything she could about that shoreline. She found references to wooden boardwalks that the city installed to raise pedestrian paths out of the shoreline muck. She pored over old maps and pictures, and discovered old seawalls built by the railroad that passed very close to the Lurie Garden site.

The seam represents the boundary between the soft, wet shoreline and the high-and-dry city. From the seam, the land is on one side and the water is on the other. The designers call these halves the “light plate” and the “dark plate,” the latter referencing the water and the marshy past. The dark plate’s perennial beds include ferns, angelicas and other broad-leaved species; there are trees scattered throughout, growing up from the flower beds and pavement. The light plate is open and sunny, with prairie plants dominating. It is home to grasses, spring bulbs, coneflowers, prairie-smoke and not a single tree. Through both plates cut linear (though not gridded) crushed-stone pathways. These paths are set below the undulating surface of the ground, bringing the plants closer to eye level. The contrast

is readily visible. While the light plate is a fine-textured upland, the dark plate is a thick wetland. Or, as an early GGN sketch jotted down, where the dark plate is wild, naughty and hidden, the light plate is clean, noble and prominent.

The seam reinforces this water-to-land metaphor. It is a minimalist boardwalk built literally over the top of a shallow runnel that is exposed on the lake side of the seam. The water edge of the boardwalk steps down to create a seat. Facing the step is the smooth face of the limestone wall that supports the planting beds of the dark plate. Steel bridges cross the water. The seam ends at a large still pool and celebrates the view of the Art Institute of Chicago across the way.

It’s not unusual to see people lounging on the boardwalk with their feet in the water, as if they were sitting on the edge of a dock. In fact, the garden has become perhaps the most popular site for simple relaxation in downtown Chicago. According to Lurie Garden director Jennifer Davit, the site sees 4 million visitors per year. That’s due in part to the garden’s management. It is actually curated like a perennials museum, with Davit and her staff — in consultation with planting designer Oudolf on big changes — altering and improving the plantings over time. While the structure of the seam was always an attraction, today the plants provide the necessary counterpoint. And the hedge is already nearly to the top of its armature, completing the intended sense of enclosure.

Davit says the visitation exposes people to the garden’s environmentally sustainable maintenance: no chemicals, limited water and the use of compost tea for fertilizer. Davit, who began in March, hopes to expand programming at Lurie on both green gardening and design. “This is an excellent place where you can learn lots of different design principles in a small setting,” she says. “We’re an outdoor

Opposite: Crushed-stone walkways encourage close-up views of a riverlike swath of salvias. **Right:** Piet Oudolf designed the plantings to look good in every season, considering color, bloom time and plant forms. Teaming up in this springtime scene are dark lavender-blue *Amsonia* ‘Blue Ice’, light blue *A. tabernaemontana* var. *salicifolia* (willowleaf blue star) and *Geum triflorum* (prairie-smoke).



timeline: lurie garden

1836

Chicago’s downtown lakefront is set aside as a public open space, one of the earliest such designations in the country

1909

The “Plan of Chicago,” commonly referred to as the Burnham Plan, envisions a vast Beaux Arts park space between the city and the lake

1917-1929

Elements of Grant Park, the green space now south and east of Millennium Park, is designed and built

1997

To settle a lawsuit, the Illinois Central Railroad deeds to the city the land that will become Millennium Park

2004

The Lurie Garden and the rest of Millennium Park officially open

2009

20,000 bulbs planted, bringing garden’s total to 120,000 and extending flowering season before perennials bloom

2010

Millennium Park expects 4,000,000 visitors. Garden’s summer events include guided walks, lectures, hands-on demonstrations, family festivals and picnics

classroom for focusing on design.”

Perhaps the most significant challenge to the designers — and the greatest success of the design — has been location. The Lurie Garden sits right between Millennium Park’s major event space (the music pavilion) and the entrances to the subterranean parking ramps. What’s remarkable is that all the historic symbolism, the exquisite plantsmanship and the subtle detailing don’t interfere with the movement of thousands of people at once through the park site at large. The seam and the two other major pathways (one cutting through the eastern edge of the dark plate and another just outside the western hedge) are almost completely unobstructed but still manage to feel more like plazas than sidewalks.

The Lurie Garden is successful for those moving through and those who decide to linger, which is perfect reference to the city itself. Chicago was a city that grew in place, despite the challenges of its landscape. It has also always been a city of innovation: the skyscraper built with an iron-and-steel skeleton, the Ferris wheel and the elevated electric train, and now this organic addition. ✎



DESIGNER PROFILE: SHANNON NICHOL

Shannon Nichol was born in 1974 and grew up in a house on a logging road near Washington’s Mount Baker. Throughout her childhood she had ready access to the wilderness, and hiked and built forts in the nearby woods. She went to the University of Washington intending to study civil engineering. On a whim, she also enrolled in an introduction to landscape architecture evening course taught by renowned landscape architect Richard Haag, designer of Seattle’s Gas Works Park. Her early years exploring the Pacific Northwest landscape must have flooded back, because right away Nichol decided she wanted to be a landscape architect. Nichol met U.S.-born but Europe-based landscape architect Kathryn Gustafson while still in school, during an internship with a firm in Seattle. Gustafson, who had previously designed such acclaimed projects as the Square of Human Rights and the Shell Petroleum Headquarters, both in France, was beginning to seek work back in her home country. In 1999, Gustafson, Nichol and Jennifer Guthrie founded Seattle-based Gustafson Guthrie Nichol — the firm responsible for the Lurie Garden. While Gustafson is without a doubt the big name in the partnership and is often given near total credit for the Lurie Garden, Nichol was the principal in charge of that design. Nichol stresses, however, that the three GGN partners bring their different sensibilities to every design project. The Lurie Garden sports Gustafson’s sculptural elements — the gently rising landforms, the soft but ridged hedge wall — but is organized around Nichol’s historical discoveries: the seawall, the boardwalks, and the movement between city and lake.