NO BUDGET
The humble designs of Straub Thurmeyr

JULIAN AGYEMAN
What a just city would mean

MIDEWIN PRAIRIE
Lost grassland, returned to life

SMELL THE PAST
An L.A. story by the office of SALT
HAVE VAN, WILL GARDEN

THE RADICAL LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE OF STRAUB THURMAYR.

BY ERIKA BEATTY

NOTHING EXCITES Anna Thur-
mayr and Dietmar Straub, ASLA,
more than bringing high-concept
landscape architecture to places
where it is traditionally absent—
remote communities, inner-city
schoolyards, peri-
urban land awaiting tract
houses. But
in their case, high concept
does not
mean high budget or high
prestige; if
their designs are rarefied, it is in the
degree of humility that is expressed.
Homelessness becomes a virtue in their
work; cracks in the sidewalk become
gardens; weeds are welcome. The Ger-
man designers, who moved from Mu-
rich to Winnipeg 12 years ago, once
designed a 510-acre, $120 million
botanical garden outside Shanghai.
Now professors at the University of
Manitoba with a small but intellectu-
ally ambitious practice on the side,
they intentionally pursue projects
with budgets far more modest, if they
have a budget at all.
“WE’VE NEVER BEEN INTERESTED IN STATUS SYMBOLS, TITLES, OR CAREER PATH.”

—DIETMAR STRAUB, ASLA

Thurman and Straub's gardens are built largely by volunteers. Salvaged and repurposed materials are fashioned into benches and play structures. The resulting aesthetic is artful, but not static—they prefer to cultivate spaces over a period of years, prioritizing user engagement over Instagram aesthetics. In addition to the college students they teach, children seem to be a primary audience for their work. Schools are a common venue; long, low planters on which to run through the landscape, and perhaps loops from in order to swing on a strategically located branch, are a recurring motif. At one school site, they repurposed a sod lawn into a walled wall to teach kids about the sod houses that were once common on the Canadian prairie. Now the sod wall is decomposing and will become a rich planting bed. Thurman and Straub celebrate decay, revel in the unexpected, and fully expect that not everything they design will come out as planned.

On a cloudy morning in early June, they pick me up from my hotel in Winnipeg in their 1989 Volkswagen Vanagon camper—“our mobile office,” says Straub, with a strong German accent. Like anyone worthy of owning such a vehicle, they’ve named it “We call her our Blue Lady.” The couple brought their van-traveling lifestyle with them from Europe, and it continues to underpin their practice in aspects both creative—what better way to find design inspiration than to drift at leisure from the comfort of a home on wheels?—and philosophical. “We’ve never been interested in status symbols, titles, or career path,” Straub says. “It was always our dream that everything we own should fit into a VW van.”

Thurman, sitting in the back, is the quiet one. “Dietmar prefers to talk,” she says, “I prefer to draw.” But she is no less philosophical than her husband. “The things the city throws out, we reuse and assemble them in our designs with new meaning. We usually start with no budget and engage the community to do the fund raising. Our projects are built mostly by grandmas, parents, and children, so our designs have to take that into account with construction methods that are very simple. We embrace spontaneity and imperfection. This is a total contrast to what the mainstream of landscape architecture is producing.” She even has a name for their philosophy: “Humble project thinking.”

Dark clouds gather as Straub pilots us north of the city past cattle ranches where hercules of aspen

LEFT: An early concept for the playground at Zaagaate, a daycare facility on a Manitoba First Nation reserve.

DIAGRAM: Seemingly random planters and boardwalks form a wheelchair-accessible path through the playground.
have been neatly pruned by cows nibbling off the lower leaves. By the time we reach the wetlands encircling Lake Manitoba, Blue Lady is sloshing through a June monsoon of hail and high winds. I’m frigid in my T-shirt as we scurry into a metal building with a wrenched car ramp that rises from a gravel parking lot. This is Zasagte, a child-care facility at the Dog Creek 46 reserve of the Lake Manitoba First Nation. Adjacent to the community health center, the staff at Zasagte cares for kids who have a variety of physical, emotional, and developmental challenges. Thaynay and Straub have spent the past year developing a playground out back that is equal parts adventure and down-to-earth.

In a design reminiscent of a child’s scribble-scribble, a zigzagging section of wooden walkways forms a wheelchair-accessible path around the perimeter. The kids are on a field trip the day we are there, but one can imagine the mazes that occur both wobbled on and foot, along this track. Inside the track, there will soon be edible and culturally identified plants, plus an assortment of sticks and stones to play with; mounds of soil or sand to get dirty in are also planned. Everything has been built with off-the-shelf lumber and assembled by tradesmen from the reserve, including a just-completed gazebo-like structure that the tribe refers to as a ceremonial arch—a modern incarnation of a traditional structure with an opening in the center of the roof to allow the smoke of a sacred fire to escape.

Soon the kids will light the inaugural fire, says Mary Maynayashang, Zasagte’s program manager. The gazebo “is a sacred place to provide them with meaning,” she says. “Because of colonization, men have strayed away from their responsibility to look after that fire. And that’s why we see so much choice within our communities. If you don’t manage the fire, it’s going to get bigger and bigger and you’re going to burn the tips down.” But, she adds, “If you give children a spiritual foundation, you strengthen them emotionally, mentally, and physically.”

We spend a couple of hours talking this way with Zasagte staff. As we do, aspects of Thaynay and Straub’s design process come into focus. They prioritize relationships with people clients, visitors, and the relationships of those people to the landscape, above tangible outcomes. While they set the playground falling in a certain direction (Zasagte’s original plan involved the sort of preschool playground equipment you might find at a McDonald’s), their clients at the Dog Creek 46 reserve—a tiny community of around 900 people with a median income of about $10,000
“NOT ENOUGH LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS LEAVE THE DRAFTING TABLE AND COMPUTER SCREEN FOR THE SHOE AND RULING SHEARS.”

—DIETMAR STRAUB, ASLA

ABOVE A natural limestone outcrop serves as inspiration for patio design.

Canadians—now have their own design ideas. Thurmayr and Straub seem content to be along for the ride.

Lawrence West, the director of the community health center, says that, in his view, conventional play equipment “limits the kids’ imagination” rather than sparks it, “but with this design we can always change how the landscape is used. The point is to have something interactive, to tie our kids back to the land.” That feeling is shared among all parties present. “Whether we’re German or Anishinaabe, we are all children of the earth,” West says.

Thurmayr and Straub met while studying landscape architecture at the Technical University of Munich, where they worked with Peter Latz, a pioneer in the transformation of postindustrial landscapes. After starting with several German firms, they formed their own practice in 2009, an operation now named Straub Thurmayr Landscape Architects, which is staffed solely by the two designers.

Over beers of Erdinger at the dining room table in Winnipeg’s Wildwood Park neighborhood, a postwar subdivision built in the vision of New Jersey’s Rathsam community (burns front on pedestrian-only green space, with vehicular access via rear alleys), they show me images from their portfolios, as their two teenagers wander in and out. Thurmayr and Straub are digitally proficient, but blend computer-generated imagery with video, projections, and tactile physical models—not built with the standard laser-cut foam, but hand-assembled with berries, pine needles, licorice, snow, rocks, knives, straws, salt, and marbles/balls topped with varying degrees of burnish—to communicate their concepts.

Straub typically makes the early sketches for a project, which Thurmayr then shepherds through design development and construction drawings. She is fond of combining digital imagery with handmade strokes, an approach she terms “advanced doodling.” They are deeply aware of the 3-D renderings that have become ubiquitous showpieces for selling design ideas. Rather, their style of visual representation at times borders on fine art. Bricolage and art poetics, two artistic movements characterized by compositions of found materials, and often by a pointed subtext about the excess of consumerism, are explicit influences on their work. Thurmayr says, “High-res pictures of a landscape that is shining and glowing are not what we’re going for.”

Thurmayr and Straub have completed 10 projects since moving to Winnipeg, though they reject the notion that a landscape can ever be truly complete. Straub, who grew up on a farm, considers himself a gardener first, a designer second. He says, “Not enough landscape architects leave the drafting table and computer screens for the shoe and ruling shears.” And they are extremely selective with the clients they accept—while they don’t seek to control outcomes, they are unwilling to make compromises. “Show-off landscapes are something we abhor,” Straub says. “Design should not aim to make a spectacle of itself or celebrate the clients’ prestige, but simply strive to give the space its own energy by injecting a sensual feel.”

They don’t mind breaking rules, deriving from building codes, and otherwise disregarding the status quo when it impedes what they feel is important. They have at times threatened to walk away from jobs when clients have halted at their approach. “Sometimes I have to play the role of an asshole,” says Straub, who acknowledges that this is not a viable business model for a landscape architecture firm. Much of their work is pre-bonded and tied into their work as professors. “When you don’t ask the client for money,” he says, “you can ask them to take risks.”

Poured concrete and manufactured landscape products are scarce in Thurmayr and Straub’s gardens. In lieu of pavers, they often use small fieldstones—sourced from farmers outside the city who pile them up at the edge of their fields—to create a bumpy, unmetalled cobblestone surface. Seeking material to create mounds at a Montessori school garden, they turned to a nearby sugar beet processing plant where they discovered huge white hills of crushed limestone, a processing agent turned waste product that was free for the taking. In their design specifications, they’ve been known to list locations on nearby rivers where contractors can go to collect the large driftwood logs they’re indicated for benches.

“You don’t find the kind of materials we like to use if you go to a trade show,” Straub says, as we wander through Salvage Supermarket, an enormous building materials junkyard where one can purchase rusted metal panels in random shapes and sizes, industrial-size scales from a
WE EMBRACE SPONTANEITY AND IMPERFECTION.

—Anna Thurnay

At a quarry outside Winnipeg, Thurnay and Straub show me the limestone slabs that they’re specifying for paving a courtyard currently under construction on the University of Manitoba campus. These are not your average flagstones—they are at least two feet thick and more than several feet across, weighing up to a ton each. These will be a bear for the contractors to install, but the designers were adamant that thinner stones not be substituted. The thickness will not be visible to students walking across the courtyard, but Straub, climbing atop a pile of the slabs, insists that, at least on some level, they will experience it: “You feel grounded when you stand on one of these stones.”

Stones this big are made stable by their own weight, eliminating the need for cement to set them. Unlike the geometry, straight-edged shapes of typical flagstone, the uneven edges of the limestone slabs have wide crevices—a tripping hazard in the eyes of some, but a gardening opportunity in the eyes of Thurnay and Straub. They intend to fill these spaces with a coarse growing medium and install the sorts of plants one might find growing naturally in rock crevices.

At the quarry, they lead me to an unmarked section to see the plants growing in the cracks of a large flat expanse of limestone—a natural patio. Straub waxed poetically about the patterned marks left by glaciers (this particular stone is called “Glacial Rub” limestone). And he declared it unreasonable to think that people can’t walk across something similar in public spaces, as long as accommodations are made for those with difficulty walking over rough surfaces (narrow tongues of concrete will provide wheelchair access throughout the campus courtyard garden). Pedestrians will stamp out plantings in some places, but vegetation will flourish in the less-tread areas. If wild plants, even those considered weeds, gain a foothold in the cracks—what’s wrong with that? Straub and Thurnay like.

ABOVE
A formed row of monoliths, arranged in the shape of a client’s front yard, served as an early conceptual design (and shade study) for the W2 Garden.

OPPOSITE
The marshmallows represented the white sandbags that comprised the ground cover for the garden’s final iteration.

INSTANT GARDEN, WINNIPEG

Image 1: RT Studio
Image 2: Christopher Campbell
cracks in pavement and they like the things that grow there. The traditional bed-path dichotomy implies a separation from nature that they think is the real hazard, not tripping.

A latent beauty resides in Thurniay and Strand’s landscapes. It emerges sporadically in small vignettes, and sometimes in big seasonal flourishes. One evening they take me to a home on the Red River near downtown Winnipeg, a rare residential installation in their portfolio. The clients, after seven years of collaboration on their garden, are close friends. The yard glows like a wildflower meadow in the late spring dust, with orange tulips rising above smooth ripples of grass. A family of rabbits scamper about. Giant slabs of upcycled wood

resting on boulders form boardwalks, benches, and a picnic table, all tied together by plain rather than bolts or concrete. Squint your eyes and it looks like driftwood piled randomly on rocks amid a grassy riverbank. The vintage lumber, which cost $500 at Salvage Supermarket (I imagine one of the smaller slabs would go for $5,000 in Brooklyn), has been treated in blue and apricot-orange shades with a nontoxic linseed oil paint that has faded artfully, like a sunset over water.

This is the garden’s second incarnation. The clients weren’t sure what they wanted at first (they’d contacted Thurniay and Strand just after their home had been built; leaving them with a front yard consisting of an empty patch of earth), so the designers
suggested something temporary. It was the end of the spring melt season on the river, which meant unneeded sandbags were ubiquitous in the low-lying parts of Winnipeg. They obtained a large quantity for free and spread them out as a thick mulch, forming a pillow white grid across the yard. Here and there sandbags were emptied, refilled with soil and manure, and planted with pumpkins, zucchini, tomatoes, and nasturtium seedlings. The installation spanned one playful day; total cost: $100.

Not all the neighbors loved the garden as much as the clients did, especially by the following spring when the sandbags began to disintegrate. Code enforcement officials came knocking. The present meadow planting soon took shape, but the tall grasses also violated local codes and neighbors’ aesthetic tastes. As the landscape matured, however, visits from code enforcement ceased and neighbors began coming by to snap photos. Known as the W3 Garden, the project won the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects Jury’s Award of Excellence in 2011.

“Our love in times when the massive consumption of resources and the constant production of waste can no longer be tolerated,” wrote Straub in an essay about the project. “This forces a radical paradigm shift for designers of built environments”—toward a “culture of improvisation, repairing, and recycling.” Landscape architects, he continued, “have a responsibility to find and implement creative responses to this self-destructive exploitation of limited resources.”

FOLLY FOREST, STRATHCONA SCHOOL, WINNIPEG

Thurmayr and Straub allow to feeling like black sheep in Winnipeg landscape architecture circles, their designs viewed as interesting but impractical. Yet the list of awards they’ve won over the past decade (despite claiming to despise the glam-shot culture of design awards) runs more than a page long. And if Thurmayr’s recent appointment as the head of the University of Manitoba’s Department of Landscape Architecture is any indication, their idiosyncratic approach has found a receptive audience. Breaking norms, after all, is often the only way to change them.

Nadine Arsenault is an assistant professor of landscape architecture at the University of Guelph and the editor of the recent book Apprenticing Landscape: Analogue, to which Straub contributed. She places them in a pantheon of norm breakers. “It’s like when Maria Schwartz and Ken Smith started doing their more colorful, low-tech installations in the 1960s. Some saw Martha’s Bagel Garden and thought, ’That’s a little strange. But at the same time, it’s iconic—that’s been written about, something we study in school. I think it’s the same with their work. It’s a kind of art, and not everybody appreciates certain kinds of art.’”

ABOVE AND LEFT Folly Forest was planted after cutting out random geometric shapes in the asphalt surface.

LEFT Snow Academy offered students an unusual opportunity to design and build an ephemeral winter landscape.
Without a doubt, the ultimate dream is to have a peaceful, self-sufficient retreat. But what if we could have it all? What if we could take a small footprint, build a sustainable home, and still enjoy the luxury of living in the great outdoors? This is exactly what one family did when they transformed their once-forgotten property into a cozy, off-grid paradise.

The journey started with a simple dream: to live in harmony with nature, while still enjoying the comforts of home. The family decided to build a small, energy-efficient house, using sustainable materials wherever possible. They chose a tiny home design, which allowed them to minimize their impact on the environment.

But building a house is only part of the story. They also had to create a self-sufficient system to power their home. They installed solar panels and a wind turbine, which provide most of the energy needed. They even harvested rainwater for their daily needs, reducing their reliance on the grid.

One of the most unique aspects of their home is the garden. They planted a diverse range of crops and vegetables, which not only provide fresh produce but also support local wildlife. They even installed a composting system, which helps to reduce their carbon footprint.

Living in such a peaceful environment has been a dream come true. The family enjoys spending their days exploring the natural world, while knowing that they are living in harmony with nature. They have learned to appreciate the simple pleasures of life, and have found that living in the great outdoors can be a rewarding and fulfilling experience.

In conclusion, it is possible to have it all. With the right mindset and a little bit of hard work, anyone can turn their dreams into a reality. So why not start planning your own sustainable retreat today? Your future, your home, and your well-being might just be waiting for you in the great outdoors.