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A woman with curly hair, wearing a blue and white striped long-sleeved shirt, stands outside a blue van. She is looking towards the right. Inside the van, a man is visible in the driver's seat, looking forward. A straw hat is on the dashboard. The background shows green trees and a bright sky.

NO BUDGET

The humble designs of
Straub Thurmayer

JULIAN AGYEMAN

What a just city would mean

MIDWIN 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.

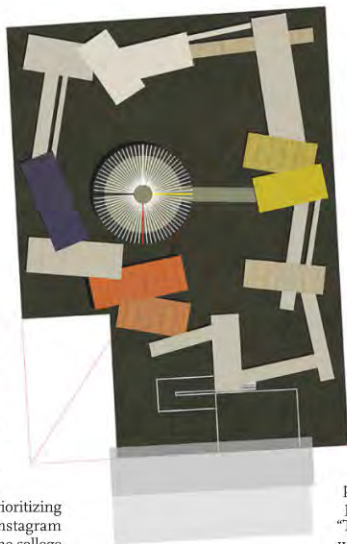
BY BRIAN BARTH

NOTHING EXCITES Anna Thurmayr and Dietmar Straub, ASLA, more than bringing high-concept landscape architecture to places where it is traditionally absent—remote communities, inner-city schoolyards, perurban land awaiting tract homes. But in their case, high concept does not mean high budget or highbrow; if their designs are rarefied, it is in the degree of humility that is expressed. Homeliness becomes a virtue in their work; cracks in the sidewalk become gardens; weeds are welcome. The German designers, who moved from Munich to Winnipeg 12 years ago, once designed a 500-acre, \$320 million botanical garden outside Shanghai. Now professors at the University of Manitoba with a small but intellectually ambitious practice on the side, they intentionally pursue projects with budgets far more modest, if they have a budget at all.

BRIAN BARTH

“WE’VE NEVER BEEN INTERESTED IN STATUS SYMBOLS, TITLES, OR CAREER PATH.”

—DIETMAR STRAUB, ASLA



Thurmayr and Straub’s gardens are built largely by volunteers. Salvaged and repurposed materials are finessed 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 target audience for their work. Schools are a common venue; long, low planks on which to run through the landscape, and perhaps leap 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 sod wall to teach the 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 berm. Thurmayr 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 a such a vehicle, they’ve named it “We call her our Blue Lady.” The couple brought their van-touring lifestyle with them from Europe, and it continues to undergird 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.”

Thurmayr, 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 bosques of aspen

STRAUB/THURMAYR

STRAUB/THURMAYR



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

OPPOSITE
Seemingly random planks and boardwalks form a wheelchair-accessible path through the playground.

RIGHT

An aerial view of the installation at Winnipeg's Casa Montessori and Orff School—prairie grasses set amid sand, logs, and stone for the kids to play with.

OPPOSITE

The designers source many of their materials from surrounding landscapes, whether lawns, downed trees, or industrial relics.



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 wheelchair ramp that rises from a gravel parking lot. This is Zaagaate, a childcare facility at the Dog Creek 46 reserve of the Lake Manitoba First Nation. Adjacent to the community health center, the staff at Zaagaate cares for kids who have a variety of physical, emotional, and developmental challenges. Thurmayr and Straub have spent the past year developing a playground out back that is equal parts avant-garde and down-to-earth.

In a design reminiscent of a child's scribble-scrabble, a zigzagging arrangement 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 races that occur, both wheeled and on 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 arbor—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 Maytwayashing, Zaagaate's program manager. The gazebo "is a sacred place to provide teachings, to give them an identity," she says. "Because of colonization, men have strayed away from their

responsibility to look after that fire, and that's why you see so much chaos within our communities. If you don't manage the fire within the tipi, it's going to get bigger and bigger and you're going to burn the tipi 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 Zaagaate staff. As we do, aspects of Thurmayr and Straub's design process came 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 sailing in a certain direction (Zaagaate's original plan involved the sort of pre-fab play 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 \$11,000

STRAUB+THURMAYR

DIETMAR STRAUB/ASLA





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

Canadian—now have their own design ideas. Thurmayer 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.

Thurmayer 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 stints with several German firms, they formed their own practice in 2000, an operation now named Straub Thurmayer Landscape Architects, which is staffed solely by the two designers.

Over bottles of Erdinger beer at their dining room table in Winnipeg’s Wildwood Park neighborhood, a postwar subdivision built in the vein of New Jersey’s Radburn community (homes front on pedestrian-only green space, with vehicular access via rear alleyways), they show me images from their portfolio, as

their two teenage children wander in and out. Thurmayer 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, lichen, snow, forks, knives, straws, salt, and marshmallows torched to varying degrees of burntness—to communicate their concepts.

Straub typically makes the early sketches for a project, which Thurmayer then shepherds through design development and construction drawings. She is fond of combining digital imagery with handmade strokes, an approach she terms “ad-

“NOT ENOUGH LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS LEAVE THE DRAFTING TABLE AND COMPUTER SCREEN FOR THE SHOVEL AND PRUNING SHEARS.”

—DIETMAR STRAUB, ASLA

vanced doodling.” They are deeply averse to 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 arte povera, 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, Thurmayer says. “High-res pictures of a landscape that is shining and glowing are not what we’re going for.”

Thurmayer 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 screen for the shovel and pruning shears.” And they are extremely selective with the clients they accept—while they don’t seek to control outcomes, they are unwilling to compromise values. “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, deviating 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 balked 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 pro bono 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 Thurmayer 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, unmortared cobblestone surface. Seeking material to create mounds at a Montessori school garden, they turned to a nearby sugar beet processing plant where they’d discovered huge white hills of



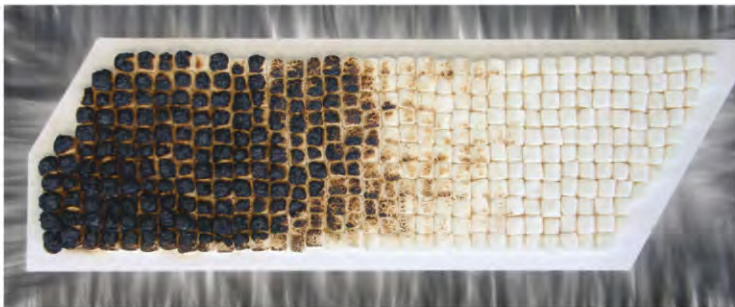
crushed limestone, a processing agent turned waste product that was free for the taking. In their design specifications, they’ve been known to list locations on nearby rivers where contractors can go to collect the large driftwood logs they’ve indicated for benches.

“You don’t find the kinds of materials we like to use when 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

ABOVE
Winnipeg’s Salvage Supermarket, where one can find treasures such as this well-used ice cream shack.

BRIAN BARNETT

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“WE EMBRACE SPONTANEITY
AND IMPERFECTION.”

—ANNA THURMAYR

bygone era, or an entire ice cream shack made of plywood that looks as though it dates from the 1970s (they nearly purchased the latter for a project in downtown Winnipeg). “These kinds of things are hard to specify,” he says, with only a trace of irony.

At a quarry outside Winnipeg, Thurmayr and Straub show me the limestone slabs that they’ve specified for paving a courtyard currently under construction on the University of Manitoba campus. These are not your average flagstones—they are a foot thick or more and 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, clambering 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 geometric, straight-edged shapes of typical flagstone, the uneven edges of the limestone slabs leave wide crevices—a tripping hazard in the eyes of some, but a gardening opportunity in the eyes of Thurmayr and Straub. They intend to fill those spaces with a coarse growing medium and install the sort of plants one might find growing naturally in rock crevices.

At the quarry, they lead me to an unquarried section to see the plants growing in the cracks of a large flat expanse of limestone—a natural patio. Straub waxes poetically about the patterned marks left by glaciers (this particular stone is called “Glacial Rub” limestone). And he declares 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 Thurmayr like



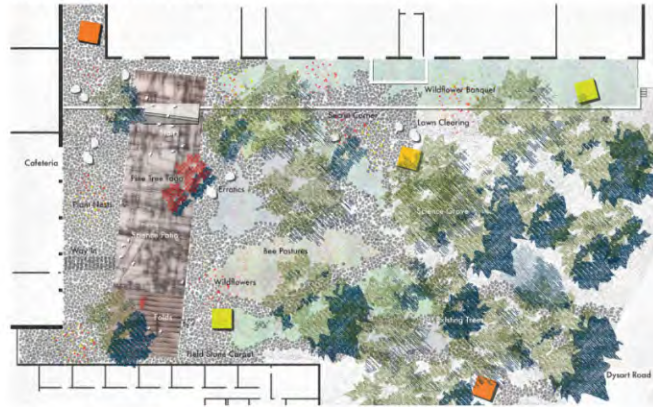
INSTANT GARDEN, WINNIPEG



STRAUB THURMAYR

STRAUB THURMAYR, TOP; LEFT, DIETMAR STRAUB; ASLA, BOTTOM AND INSET

SI(L)ENCE COURTYARD, UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA, WINNIPEG



ABOVE AND LEFT
A new courtyard at the University of Manitoba campus will be paved with foot-thick boulders.

RIGHT
A spontaneous “installation” in a weedy pond at an abandoned quarry: three hazel branches lashed together and filled with canola blossoms.

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 pillowy white grid across the yard. Here and there sandbags were emptied, refilled with soil and manure, and planted with pumpkin, zucchini, cucumber, tomato, and nasturtium seedlings. The installation spanned one playful day; total cost: C\$300.

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 WY Garden, the project won the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects Jury’s Award of Excellence in 2019.

“We live in times where 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

GONE, NEVER TO RETURN



STRAUB THURMAYR, TOP LEFT; DIETMAR STRAUB, ASLA, LEFT, INSET, AND BOTTOM

FOLLY FOREST, STRATHCONA SCHOOL, WINNIPEG



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.”

Thurmair and Straub allude 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 Thurmair’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.

Nadia Amoroso is an assistant professor of landscape architecture at the University of Guelph and the editor of the recent book *Represent-*

ing Landscapes: Analogue, to which Straub contributed. She places them in a pantheon of norm breakers. “It’s like when Martha Schwartz and Ken Smith started doing their more colorful, low-tech installations in the 1980s. Some saw Martha’s Bagel Garden and thought, *that’s a bit strange*. But at the same time, it’s

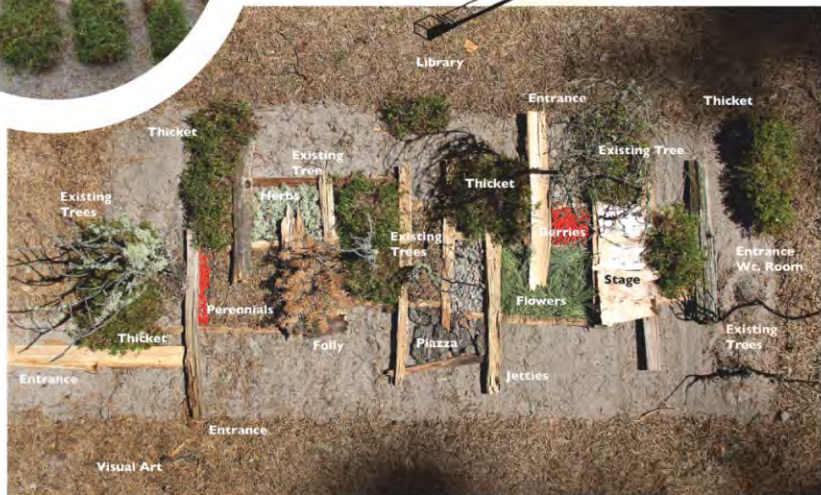
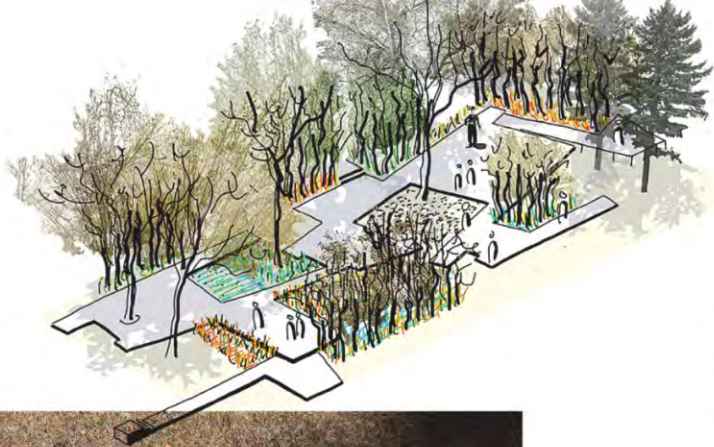
iconic— something that’s been written about, something we study in school. I think it’s the same with their work. It is a kind of art, and not everybody appreciates certain kinds of art.”

ABOVE AND INSET
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.

WESTWOOD COLLEGIATE, WINNIPEG



ABOVE AND RIGHT
Early iterations, rendered in a medley of different media, of a courtyard at a Winnipeg high school.

OPPOSITE
One iteration was worked out with found materials during a family trip in the designers' VW bus.

Judy Lord, the former editor of *Landscape/Paysages* (the dual-language magazine of the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects), recalls being on the hunt for a cover image for the summer 2017 issue titled "Messy" ("Anarchie" was the French translation). Having followed Thurmayer and Straub's work for years, she knew just whom to call. They sent her a photo from their Montessori school project, a feral-looking

site characterized by irregular grassy mounds, some of them eroding, and a jumbled garden of rocks, sand, and logs where the kids play.

"I love their sense of anarchy—the off-kilter symmetries, the unstructured fun, everything defying physical order, being unresolved and dynamic and ambiguous," Lord says. "On the surface, their work seems to defy all the rules, but underneath

the seeming lack of structure is a very clear, carefully thought-through message. They force you to think in a new direction and say, *well, why not?*"

While an elegant design lurks beneath the occasional chaos of each of Thurmayer and Straub's projects, it is not the product so much as an armature on which gardening is meant to occur. Gardening not just in the sense of caring for plants (though

"IT WAS ALWAYS OUR DREAM THAT EVERYTHING WE OWN SHOULD FIT INTO A VW VAN."

—DIETMAR STRAUB, ASLA

their landscapes definitely require gardeners more than maintenance crews), but in a broader meta sense: the inhabitants of a space, through trial and error, who are cultivating something nourishing within it. In the course of each project, at least one such gardener, usually someone connected to the site who becomes its guardian, custodian, and champion, generally emerges, ensuring that it is cared for and that the resources required for its ongoing care and evolution are obtained.

At Winnipeg's Strathcona School, the site of Thurmayer and Straub's Folly Forest landscape, I meet a teacher who has become the garden's unofficial caretaker, planting trees to replace ones that have died and spend-

ing hours on hot summer days watering them by hand. I also meet the recently retired principal, Anastasia Sych-Yereniuk, who lists the many objections from school district officials that she helped fend off as she worked with Thurmayer and Straub to convert the 50-year-old asphalt schoolyard into a whimsical forested play space. Located in a neighborhood with high unemployment and the lowest median family income in the city, the schoolyard doubles as a neighborhood park—wonderful, except that the beating the saplings take during bouts of after-hours mischief has made establishment difficult.

"You can't imagine the pain that we felt each time a branch was pulled off. It was like losing a kid," says Sych-Yereniuk, as we stand atop one of Thurmayer and Straub's signature mounds, surveying the happy chaos of recess below. "This garden has become a family." ●

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DIETMAR STRAUB, ASLA, TOP LEFT; STRAUB, THURMAYER, TOP RIGHT; AND BOTTOM

BRIAN BARTH