



Left: Grandma was here - volunteers of any skill and commitment level got involved in building, while learning and laughing together.
Right: Site plan - if you believe in childish creativity it doesn't take much to provide a stage for illusions and sustainable learning.

RADICAL PLAY IN A NON-DOMESTICATED ENVIRONMENT

Dietmar Straub

Professor / Department of Landscape Architecture

We learn best through our own experiences. When you MAKE something on your own it facilitates relaxed and particularly lasting learning. MAKING THINGS can be quite some fun, too.

In parallel with my teaching at the University of Manitoba, I maintain an active creative practice with Professor Anna Thurmayer. The work of Straub Thurmayer Landscape Architects reflects the reality that projects do not require millions of dollars or to use vast amounts of resources. Low budgets typically create challenges in the composition and selection of materials, however, our projects use a pioneering approach in their budgeting, execution, and outcome, proving exemplary value.

Silent Strength

The academic environment at the University of Manitoba provides great freedom for working directly with communities. My community-engaged approach to learning, designing, and teaching is characterized by continuous interaction with people

and an intensive exploration of their environments. This practice requires patience, time, and commitment from all sides. It promotes processes in which speculative ideas and uncertainties are explored through design.

Working closely with the community inhabiting a chosen site, coupled with a 'sound measure' of strong local ties results in a personal and intimate relationship with the project and empathy throughout the design process. This process integrates research inquiries and allows the construction of fresh theories and the ability to test new methods.

This practice shapes a resilient intellectual culture with a critical view of established tools, methods, and processes. It is a significant contribution to a body of knowledge and experience that feeds back into the professional world of landscape architecture.

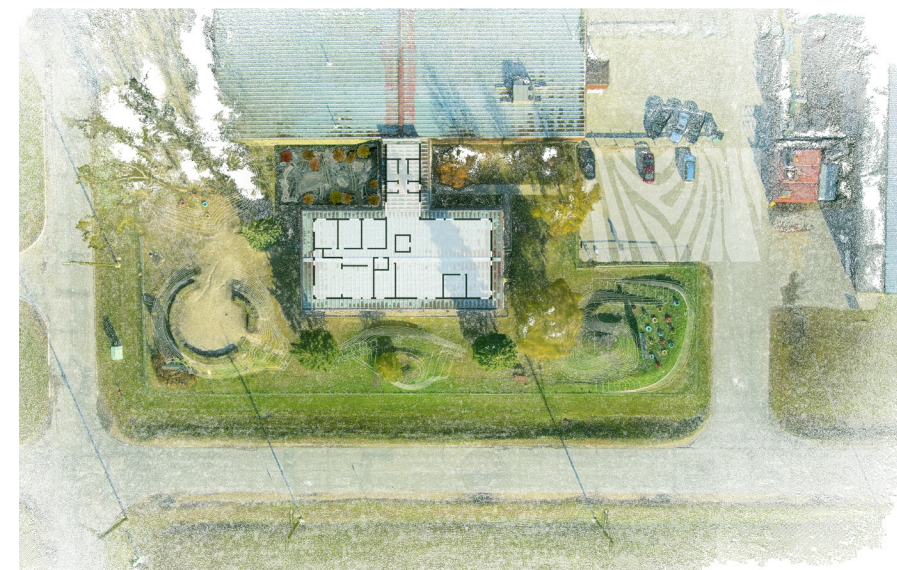
A Sense of Anarchy

Our pro-bono community work has allowed us the luxury of radically ignoring the conventional professional procedure. In projects we have collaborated on which transform outdoor environments, we have applied our notion of 'Radical Play' through spatial design practice. Lessons inspired by Arte Povera and Bricolage informing a theoretical design philosophy providing a base of expertise that can be applied at every scale of urban design. Translated from Italian, Arte Povera means 'poor art'. Here, the word 'poor' refers to an experimental situation in which the simplest means, found objects, 'poor' materials, and new processes are used to create narrative and social spaces. Bricolage refers to a practice where the protagonists meet everyday needs by using locally available resources.

Crafts and Design

I have frequently invited students to gain hands-on experience in our outreach projects. They have been involved in tree-pit construction and asphalt painting. They have dug in Winnipeg clay, compacted Manitoban limestone, hammered in stones, bricks, logs, and asphalt, and used brushes and paint rollers. I have used this model to narrow the gap between theory and practice and to create a closer relationship between outreach and teaching.

I have completed my journeyman degree (Landschaftsgärtner) in landscape industries and I love to share craftsman's skills and knowledge as a way of informing design and design decisions.



I have been influenced by the good old Bauhaus education in the 1920s, in which preliminary courses thoroughly prepared students for professional design careers. Inventive experiments with a wide range of materials such as glass, wood, metals, and ceramics were at the core of the Bauhaus education. 'Landschaftsgärtnerei' (German for landscape gardening and design) was not part of their curriculum. They placed great emphasis on innovatively combining crafts and fine arts techniques. I think the Bauhaus design education's workshop-centered concept still functions as a timeless inspiration for passionate design education.

To illustrate how I apply this approach at the University of Manitoba I shall refer to a project designed and realized in Manitoba.

Vibrant Daring Ephemeral Wild

The Casa Montessori & Orff School is a small prairie school that offers an authentic Montessori program in Winnipeg. The school moved to a new location in an industrial area seven years ago. Following the relocation, the school has worked with myself and Anna Thurmayer on a plan to improve the exterior environment according to the school's pedagogical concept. The resulting project is a collaborative effort between landscape architects, children, educators, families, and university students. The children used their imagination and creativity to visually represent their dreams for a natural place to play.

Fundraising for Fun Rising

With the children's voices in mind, Anna and I produced design concepts, details, images, text, and several design portfolios for fundraising over two summers. Fundraising events were organized in collaboration with the PAC and the University of Manitoba students. The educators, students, and families raised the money, supported the work, and pitched in to help. After more than three years of collaboration with parents, teachers, and children the idea was ready for practical execution.

Students Involved

I invited my university students to participate in my research and to gain hands-on knowledge, as I believe that digging in the



Left: Play Plate - this project achieves beauty and learning through the life and health of a 'non-domesticated' environment.

ground and having some mud underneath one's fingernails serves as an unforgettable treasure trove of experience. The students were paving field stones, constructing sod walls, painting car tires, sculpting earth, and teaching children. The only complaint heard was that the students would have to move back into the studio because of the forthcoming winter.

Learning and Laughing Together

The result is a spatial experience that does not employ the typical design and technical methods of landscape architecture. As a form of 'hands-on architecture', it encourages children, students, teachers, and families to get involved without drifting into arbitrariness or losing its sense of design. The 'hands-on architecture' was characterized by the application of construction techniques and materials which allowed volunteers including children, teachers, students, and families of any skill and commitment level to get involved in building while learning and laughing together.

Glacial Library

All materials used in this project resonate with or even originate from the Manitoban landscape that experienced millions of years of sediments deposited, removed, and then deposited again. We made a glacial archive that was formed by ice and streams accessible on-site by decrypting history and the stories recorded in the materials. All applied materials quietly tell the complex relationship between the prairie landscape form and its formative processes. Reading and experiencing the materials gently hints at the postglacial history of Manitoba's landscape 'biography'.

The Journey of Materials

Many thousands of years ago gigantic ice masses moved stones from the far north, perhaps even

originating as far as the Hudson Bay. We then collected these erratic blocks and fieldstones from prairie pasturelands. Quarry operators donated alluvial sands and unscreened overburden which glacial melting water had deposited close to the city thousands of years ago. A former sugar beet factory provided industrial 'waste' of crushed limestone that had been used in the sugar beet processing. This sedimentary material is rich in fossils and documents the impressive diversity of organisms that inhabited Ordovician seas. We got permission to transplant endangered tall grasses from a restoration area and using cultural knowledge of building houses out of tall grass sod, we dropped hints of this lost nature into the school's landscape. The whole site is a stage for illusions and can be interpreted as a place of study or as a field of magical dreams.

The Worth of the Worthless

The key to this project is the reuse of found materials and their transformation within a new context. The whimsical bricolage plays a major role in the design. The Montessori project used a small budget, employed resources carefully, and was high risk with easy and fast implementation. The worth of the worthless obtained an important meaning in this context.

Non-Domesticated Environment

The Montessori project is a pro-bono design. It achieves beauty and learning through life and the health of a 'non-domesticated' environment. The children love to explore movement through the now rolling landscape and feel free to dance, skip, and leap as they travel across the various textures of the 'historical' land. The low budget was a challenge but also an opportunity to explore fresh and uncommon ideas.

A Place for Welcome and Lived Integration

We live in a time of thrilling but also challenging tumultuous change in which a return to social solidarity, tolerance, and participation increasingly gains in importance. We see landscape architecture as having the potential power to manage social conflicts and migration, establish debates, and to live democracy.

The physical transformation of the outdoor play space was built with a belief in childish experimentation and creativity. Materials and spaces are activated and deactivated by the children, fluctuating freely between permanence, messiness, and a sense of the temporary.

Before the transformation, teachers often observed aggressive play in chasing games and fighting over possessions. Now, children are seen working together and having adventures of their own making in different areas of the playscape. The new playground proves that a naturalized environment increases creativity, co-operative play, and provides a stage for Radical Play and sustainable learning. In light of current global challenges, the school has become an important meeting point for the families and a place of tolerance and autonomy.

Top: Post Glacial Topography - there is no conventional play structure, we feel it is not needed. Bottom: Moments of Happiness - materials and spaces are activated and deactivated by the children.

All images and drawings by Straub Thurmayer Landscape Architects and Stadtplaner.

