

WHO WANTS TO LIVE IN A NAKED CITY?

Dietmar Straub + Anna Thurmayr

Essay

Trees are sparsely distributed across the Canadian prairie, however, when viewed from above, Winnipeg, Manitoba appears like a city enclosed in a park. Its downtown is like a monolithic butte surrounded by a densely leafed forest turning into a golden wonderland every fall.

This magnificent stock of eight million trees has grown into a unique closed canopy over the past hundred years. On the otherwise treeless plain, the impressive forest provides shelter from an extreme climate, raises property values, and most of all gives shape and form to the city's identity. These trees structure our everyday life physically, and also mentally. We believe Winnipeg's soul nestles in the shade of these century-old trees.

"With trees in space, we can sense the horizon, we can understand distance, we can measure the scale and size of objects in our sight. With a canopy overhead, we may sense the ground not as a surface but as a space, a site of inhabitation, a place to move or to rest. With trees in parallel lines, we may perceive a space for movement, a pointing, a suggestion of speed, a path toward a destination. And when we are close to trees, we find a new measure for ourselves, smaller, or larger, but real and physical. With trees we know space."¹

Shadow Players

Winnipeg is blessed with one of the largest urban populations of elm trees in North America. These American Elms, found in parks and as straight allées lining numerous streets, are part of the city's spatial and social identity forming expansive parasols above streets.

The elms are huge. The elms are significant. The elms are beautiful.

They are the most sustainable "architecture" in town and turned from a "fast-growing weed into a regional and national icon."² These pillars of public and communal life in Winnipeg are essential to the future landscape of Winnipeg. However, this green heritage is in serious trouble. Dutch Elm Disease, the emerald ash borer beetle, and heavy loads of wet snow in October 2019 are slowly stripping us of our leafy garb. Close your eyes and imagine this place naked in twenty or thirty years!

Our focus is not only on the protection of Winnipeg's distinct treeline, but to expand this fantastic green heritage beyond the perimeter of the city to create a "sustainable" future for generations to come.

Nurture The Future

Taking a closer look at Winnipeg's distinctiveness, it should be noted that people consider Winnipeg's Perimeter Highway; a ninety-kilometre treeless beltway surrounding the city and built in 1955, as the border between city and countryside; urban and rural. Although the traditional understanding of being inside or outside the city does still work to a certain degree, this boundary is becoming increasingly blurred. As Winnipeg still attracts people from all over the world, its physical growth is haphazardly expanding past the Perimeter beltway and fraying the outer edges. It seems only a question of time that the Perimeter beltway will fragment into another contemporary, amorphous urban area.

The Perimeter beltway has the same random setup as other cities' outskirts: shopping malls, railway tracks, misguided dreams of luxurious living, rampant industrial areas and some public green. The unstructured outskirts also accommodates commercial complexes, churches, and a whole range of recreational activities simply by offering more space than the city center.

If we read the "text" of this landscape carefully, we will understand some important details: this landscape is a mosaic of microclimates, habitats, expositions, levels, grounds, soils, plants, waters, territories, wildlife, different environmental conditions and human interactions.

Unlike the city centre, there is plenty of undesignated and unsupervised space. Where else can you speed your motorbike or test first-time driving, meet at a campfire or watch stars kiss? The undetermined status of this area encourages spontaneous and adventurous exploration. This landscape with its wide-open unplanned space provides places for Winnipeggers in search of a non-conformist life, the space to unwind in their spare time. The outskirts also provides the last lingering site for urban farming.

Most people don't appreciate or consider this nebulous in-between space, largely because they're stuck in the mould of traditional images that clearly differentiate between urban and rural as two easily separate systems of classification.

Even in the age of movement and rapid images, people still yearn for order and orientation, for prominence, character and clarity. The blurred urban edges of the Perimeter exist simultaneously between extreme artificiality and neglected wilderness, and between provincial privacy and anonymous urban lifestyles. The ability to determine the best use of this space is overwhelmed by a jumble of centralising figurative elements, utterly functionless voids, and the last remains of farmland.

Is there an alternative to these contemporary shapeless "urban periscapes?"



Clockwise from top left:

1. Leafy Wonderland. Imagine Winnipeg without trees and you would see a naked city. Photo by Anna Thurmayr.

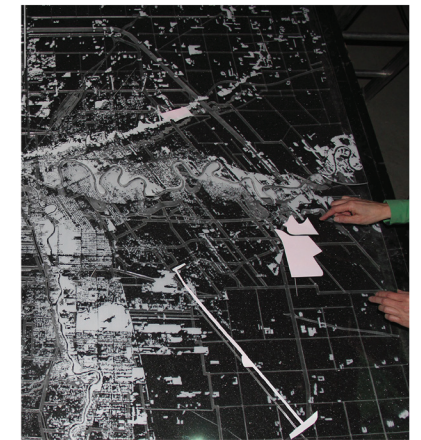
2. Missing Shadows. People consider the treeless Perimeter Highway in Winnipeg as the border between city and countryside. Photo by Anna Thurmayr.



Tree Gardens Foresting The Edges

In a fresh response to this vague spatial phenomenon, our investigation examines the role of landscape architecture in "rurban periscapes"—the transitional space that is neither city nor countryside, merged with our passion of maintaining and developing municipal tree canopies.

We applied this research and design enthusiasm with the planting of 20,000 trees as an indispensable component of our design for the Chenshan Botanical Garden in Shanghai, China. In 2005-2006 we succeeded in winning the international landscape and urban design competition for the 206 hectares garden that was part of the 2010 Shanghai Expo and is among the largest botanical gardens in the world.³ All the other nations' pavilions dispersed after the show, yet the new Chenshan Botanical Garden continues to flourish in the Songjiuang District; about thirty kilometers from the city centre. In the manner of an urban pioneer, the Chenshan Botanical Garden colonizes agricultural land and expands the city. Central Park in New York, the English Garden in Munich, and the Buttes Chaumont in Paris are all planted outside the cities' centres before becoming green oases within the urban fabric. Visionary cities plant trees first!



We believe that planting voluminous tree gardens along the Perimeter Highway offers a Winnipeg-based response to the global erratic phenomenon of blurred urban edges, as well as to the complex dilemma of climate change. Tree gardens filled with rich habitats of diverse flora and fauna, testing fields acclimatizing trees and storing water, and a place for people seeking recreational destinations are our vision for Winnipeg. These multi-layered transformations potentially prepare the peripheral landscape for the arrival of the encroaching city.

We co-taught a design studio at the University of Manitoba and tested this approach for Winnipeg's perimetric landscape. The students of this design studio had to propose new treescapes at strategically favorable positions along the Perimeter. By carrying out minimal, yet powerful, space-shaping interventions in the existing landscape, it was possible to develop a robust framework that offers a future urban open-space culture mainly based on trees.

Towards An Ecological Central Park In Winnipeg's Periphery

This forward-looking landscape strategy could act as a deliberate system of coordinates to navigate Winnipeg's changing outskirts. The intentional placement of trees could define the boundaries of the amorphous urban area. The exploration of the diverse values of trees, their ecological, spatial and social capacities speaks to the simple strategy to employ trees in response to critical current issue like global climate change and migration on a local scale. Tree gardens are a meticulously researched vision for tapping the potential of a city's periphery to become an ecological Central Park before people and their desire for "urbanity" to arrive. There is definitively a need for landscape architects and trees in the "rurban periscape!"

References:

This essay refers to thoughts presented at several conferences by Dietmar Straub and Anna Thurmayer.

1. Hilderbrand, G. R. Editor (1997): *Making a Landscape of Continuity, The Practice of Innocenti & Weibel*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, p. 34.
2. Campanella, J. (2003): *Republic of Shade, New England and the American Elm*, Yale University Press.
3. Chenshan Botanical Garden Competition Team: Auer + Weber + Assoziierte Dipl. Ing. Architekten, Straub + Thurmayer Landscape Architects, Valentien + Valentien Landscape Architects.

Clockwise from top left:

1. Chenshan Botanical Garden Shanghai. Eight years after the inauguration. Imagine this view in a hundred years. Photo by Fan Yujia.

2. Tactile Model. A small-scale tactile model carved by binary numbers makes Winnipeg "accessible" on a table. Photo by Dietmar Straub.

3. Foresting the Edge. This forward-looking landscape strategy exploits the potential of Winnipeg's periphery to become an ecological Central Park before the city arrives. Photo by Dietmar Straub.

