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The Landscape Totems: Speculations on Growth and Decay

Kristi M. Dykema



Time and change are inevitable, yet not always welcome, parts of building processes. They introduce unknowns and incalculable risk. Kristi Dykema rather suggests that designers not shy away from the challenge, but embrace its creative power to generate landscapes with enduring mythical potential.

In her research effort, “The Landscapes Totems: Speculations on Growth and Decay,” Dykema presents a compelling visual narrative that illustrates the tension between the desire for permanent built environments and

the inability to maintain them amidst human-induced and natural processes of change. Her hand sketches and photographs, sometimes pieced together with masking tape in incongruent and seemingly haphazard ways, create a stunning visual dialogue speculating on the impact of such tension in occupied landscapes over time.

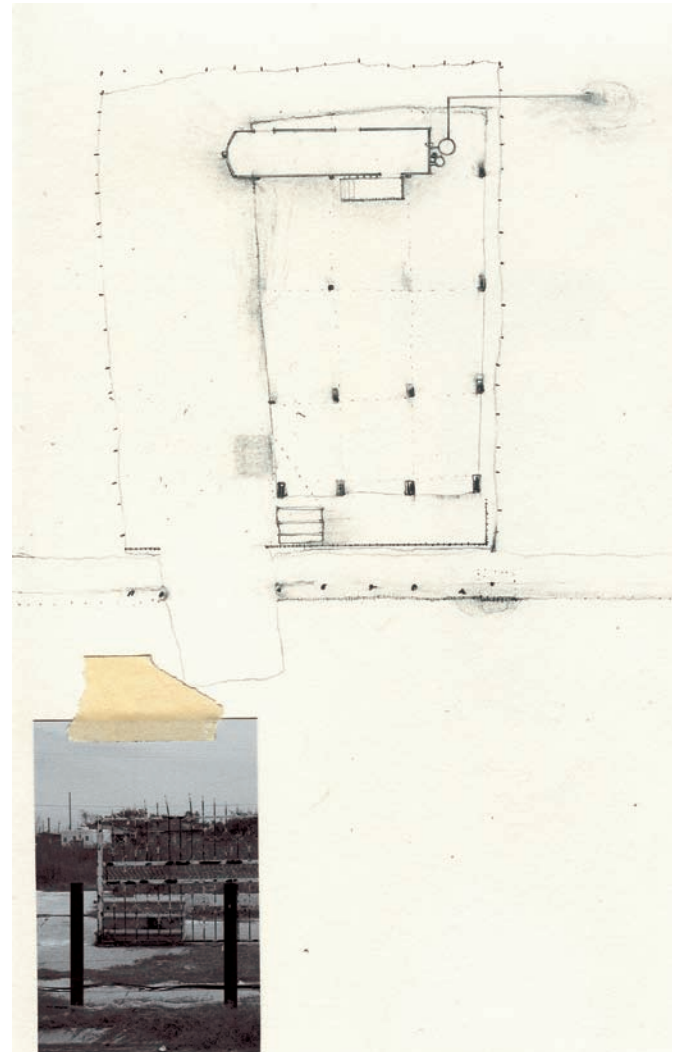
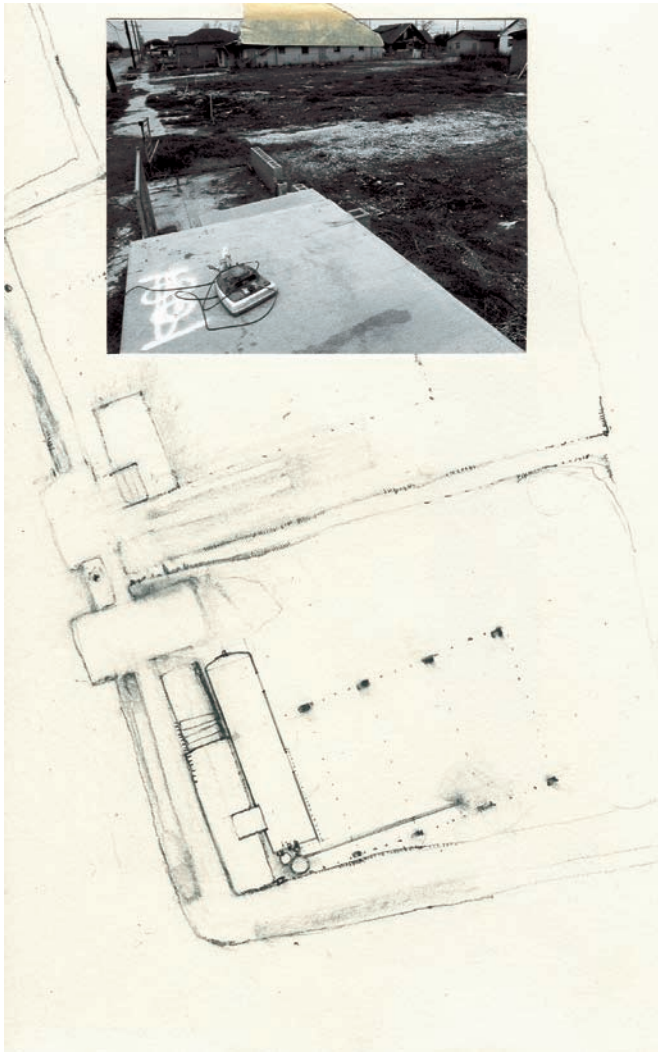
Dykema’s research also aims to illustrate the human capacity to adapt to change through building and design. Its focus is on common yet extraordinary landscapes and the ordinary citizens she terms “Keepers of Place.” But her real audience are the design professions, and through this work she hopes to challenge practitioners to account for the process of growth and decay of built and natural forms.

As an architecture-trained designer, her research also reflects on her own persistent struggle with abstract qualities such as memory, fear, and evolution. The project is what she calls a “generative” piece, one that enables speculation and lends itself to the creation of designs attuned to qualities that make places singular, enduring, and even timeless.

Above: On Thornton Cattle Station, Australia, a cowboy relaxes after a hard day of mustering cattle. Tomorrow, he will move with the 150,000-head herd to a new location in search of shade and water.

Opposite left: In the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, signs of life return to the ruins left by Hurricane Katrina. The site of a newly installed FEMA trailer reuses a former entry sequence and part of an original foundation.

Opposite right: The drain line from another FEMA trailer crosses a property line, taking space from an evacuated neighbor and initiating a new pattern of growth.



“The Growth Series”

Dykema has pursued these issues broadly, but the project submitted to the 2008 EDRA/*Places* Awards comprised three case studies, termed “The Growth Series.” Dykema selected them from ten places she visited and documented during two and a half years of research.

In Queensland, Australia, she followed a crew of cowboys who spent nine months moving from the north of Thornton Cattle Station to the south and then back again, using only portable steel fences to control their herd. In Lamont, California, she witnessed a small private farm struggling to assert itself against a growing industrial infrastructure that was slowly choking out naturally productive land. And in post-Katrina New Orleans, she

reflected on ways the rebuilding of the Lower Ninth Ward created conditions where the willful abandonment of history had to be confronted.

“The Growth Series” documents these places from both inside and outside. In Queensland, Dykema worked twelve-hour days on the ranch for two months. In Lamont, she picked peaches, cherries, and bell peppers alongside other day laborers. And in New Orleans, she walked the neighborhood with victims of the storm, recalling the lost landscape through their personal memories and stories. Yet, while she was intimately involved in the everyday life of these places, Dykema also remained an outsider. Her photographs and drawings exhibit this tension, ranging from the intimate and highly focused



to the detached and abstract. While the photographs of ranchers rounding up the herd bring the observer dangerously close to the action, her watercolor drawings of the New Orleans regional landscape merely hint at large-scale patterns she observed.

The illustrations in this series portray the story of the landscape from personal and professional points of view. Dykema is not one to take herself out of her work. Rather, she acknowledges her subjective role as both researcher and participant, and attempts to situate her own narrative of the place.

Above: In Lamont, near Bakersfield, California, permanent infrastructure such as this aqueduct helps service farms that employ mostly temporary and season labor.

She attests that the process is at times highly intuitive, while at others, it is challenging. For example, having grown up in part on a cattle ranch, she found the agrarian landscape in Queensland familiar. She describes her ease with the work and the way of life there as having provided valuable research inlets. Meanwhile, in post-Katrina New Orleans, Dykema felt she had lost all bearings. She had a hard time orienting herself to the place, its people, and its lost history and landscape. It took a lot of time, self-reflection, and discomfort to even begin her work there. Nevertheless, the discomfort proved valuable in terms of understanding her design process, which is grounded in professional speculation and personal self-reflection.

Sample Juror Comments—The Landscape Totems

Fritz Steiner: I didn't like Landscape Totems coming in. But the more I look at it, the more I love it. It is obviously a more visual, designer approach to analysis. It's not data driven. It's at the experiential end that you were advocating yesterday, but it does it in such an eloquent, beautiful way. The thinking is so wonderful, and I think relevant.

Dennis Frenchman: It's poetic too. I can't argue these points.

Jane Weinzapfel: As a nonresearcher, a nonacademic, someone taking data and making it understandable to me and useful is a gift. [This] is poetic and beautiful. I'm glad I saw it. But when I walked away, and I get further and further away, I remember its beauty, but not actual talk about urban places.

Susan Szenasy: But in terms of importance....

Leanne Rivlin: The [projects] are so different. The productions are so different. I like something that is

poetic to be considered by people.

Susan Szenasy: I would like to advocate for Landscape Totems, in terms of resonance of beauty and poetry and living lightly and thinking about how you use the land and how you leave it behind. It puts all of that back into our consciousness. I think it opens you up a little bit. There's something to be said about poetry, because it's so missing. Everything is so rational, and you really need a leader once in a while to think about

Storytelling Places

Dykema's work concentrates on the mythical qualities of landscapes, or what she calls the "mythography of place." These are the stories that have been passed down about the land over time and that become embedded in places. In that regard, the jury commented that what distinguished this work as a contribution to the field of design research was its innovative use of storytelling to capture the complexity and beauty of landscapes in moments of change and extreme tension.

While in the field, Dykema noticed that storytelling became a means of getting to know places and people in a way rarely offered by traditional design methodologies. In Queensland, she often swapped stories with local ranchers about their common experiences of working cattle and training horses—comparing her experience on the M Cross Ranch in Texas to theirs. Over late-night campfires, bonds of trust were built, while she also gained a familiarity with the place through stories told and feelings expressed. At each site, Dykema's collection of tales, drawings, and individual observations helped to uncover the raw emotions that often lay just below the surface of the places she observed. It was her goal to uncover this layer so it would serve as additional evidence of existing conditions and the collective attachments, hopes, and dreams of communities.

For Dykema, stories and myths are not just evidence of present views of place, but also provide a basis for theories about future ones. In her submission, Dykema quotes the University of Aberdeen Professor of Religious Studies Robert Segal: "Myths need theories as much as theories need myths. If theories illuminate myths, myths confirm theories." In her assessment, myths are what remain in the face of change—the essence of place. "The mythic cannot be lost in a hurricane; destroyed by fire, or weathered away," says Dykema. "In fact, quite the opposite is true; the

myth gains the most ground in those periods of change."

In gathering the material for her submission, Dykema not only synthesized but also created landscape stories. Her pieces interweave depictions of the landscapes' past, present, and imagined future to establish mythical narratives that leave their audience with impressions, rather than hard facts, about places. Her work evokes personal emotional reactions, like those of the jury who referred to it as "eloquent," "poetic," and "beautiful." Dykema says she hopes her reflections will help designers to tap into their own intuitive processes, grounded in knowledge about the timeless qualities of places.

Intuitive Foundations

Dykema's early experiences established her lifelong fascination with landscapes, particularly agrarian ones. Her extended family owned a cattle ranch in the Texas panhandle on which she often worked and spent holidays and vacations, as she still does. She describes life there as temporally and rhythmically distinct. It is a place centered on rituals of the seasonal movement of cattle. There, the herd is rounded up on horseback twice a year to "cut out and ship" the yearlings, and in the spring to brand and vaccinate the calves. The herd is counted and checked once a week in the summer, and daily after the calves are born and in the winter.

Dykema's early awareness of the particular qualities of this landscape, which she describes as "a long way from nowhere," was informed by literature as well as personal experience. One of her favorite bedtime stories, "Through Time and the Valley," told of her uncle, the author John Erickson, and his travels on horseback through her native Canadian River Valley. The photographer Bill Ellzey, her uncle's childhood friend, traveled with him, providing a photographic complement to Erickson's words, but also

the larger concept that poetry or something like this can express. So if there is a mix in the awards, maybe one could be poetic to add a little punch.

Fritz Steiner: The other thing is, working with architects, landscape architects, and designers, they always say, "I can't do research." Research has sort of been pigeon-holed.

Dennis Frenchman: It's social science.

Fritz Steiner: It's either social science or it's—in-

creasingly, with sustainability—tech-y. And what this shows is an original approach to research that grows out of creativity, out of a designer's approach. And it's not in isolation to literature. In fact, they do a nice job of linking it to—much the way the guidelines say—to literature. And it's original. It's new. It's grounded in ideas that J. B. Jackson and others put out there, but J. B. Jackson never expressed it visually.

Susan Szenasy: I like Fritz's point about breaking

through to looking at research in a new way. I like that idea of reintroducing something that designers and architects can bring to a research problem, because now all of society is looking at the design model. How do I make my business into the design model because it seems to be so much more productive than the old models.

Dennis Frenchman: You could also argue that we have already premiated a serious piece of social science



Sample Juror Comments—The Landscape Totems

in a traditional way of doing it. I'll put the cards on the table about that. Maybe one could take a more romantic turn.

Susan Szenasy: There we go, we've got a vote!

Fritz Steiner: There are two other things about Landscape Totems. The more I look at it, the more I saw that person also addresses serious issues. So the beauty almost obscures that they are looking at the Gulf Coast. They are looking at landscape, at art....

And I think of all the ones we've looked at, this is the best put together entry for us. It's not recycled in any way. It was designed for this award.

Jane Weinzapfel: But it is not overprecious. I love the tape in the photographs. It's a photograph of a process. You can imagine there are several hundred more of these.

Dennis Frenchman: OK, let's go for this. Can I just add one thing, maybe pile it on your point—you

sold me, of course...I'm a designer—which is when you approach research, you're only supposed to do it analytically, sit up straight, and maybe, as you said, read the conclusions. But in this one you can sit back get really emotional about it. Research can also pull on that aspect, because in the end you are trying to motivate people to action no matter what the methodology might be. And this actually really makes you want to start thinking about Louisiana and

telling a story about landscape in its own right. Dykema uses a similar literary and photographic style. But her work is less about documentation and more about speculation on future change.

Erickson encouraged Dykema's landscape studies by introducing her to other writers, such as John Graves, Wendell Berry, and John Brinkerhoff Jackson. One juror immediately recognized Jackson's influence in her work, commenting that it seemed "grounded in ideas that J. B. Jackson and others put out there, but J. B. Jackson never expressed it visually."

Dykema's mastery in visually representing the landscape was cultivated at the University of California, Berkeley's Department of Architecture. There, she was strongly influenced by the work of her advisor, Professor Renee Chow, who stressed the need to investigate phenomenological aspects of design that were personally as well as professionally compelling. In Dykema's words "she forced me to ask less self-referential questions," a perspective that she credits for helping her to investigate the "common language of spaces and place." While at Berkeley, Dykema was awarded the prestigious John K. Branner Traveling Fellowship to complete a master's thesis, which formed the foundations of her award-winning project.

A Long Journey Home

Dykema now lives in Baton Rouge. As an assistant professor at the Robert Reich School of Landscape Architecture, Louisiana State University, she is trying to push the limits of landscape architecture through multidisciplinary work. Her design studios encourage students to make use of various methodologies and sources of information, including literature, geography, and, of course, local stories.

As a newcomer to the professional world of landscape design, Dykema feels that her work reflects her life as a

newcomer to the professional world of landscape design. The story in "The Landscape Totems" is embedded with her own story and her desire to finding her voice and make a difference through her teaching, research, and design. "Right now, I'm trying to figure out how to be part of the larger field. I need to find my place in it. I'm looking for ways to speak to other designers," she says.

At the same time, she wants her work to contribute to the building of stronger communities, with a stake in their own place. After completing drawings for "The Landscape Totems," Dykema sent them to the communities in which she worked, hoping that they would help people to see their places in a new way and inspire change.

Dykema remains open to the possibilities of such change in her own endeavors. While she is working on making the project into a book and an exhibition, she accepts that her work, like the landscape, is often beyond her control. But like the landscape, it also offers her an opportunity to tell a story that can change the way that people see both the world around them and the memories of places that endure.

— *Willow Lung Amam*

All drawings and photos are by Kristi Dykema.

Opposite: On Thornton Cattle Station, cowboys construct outdoor rooms and corridors using portable steel fences. Every other day for nine months, the fences are taken down and rebuilt in new sites on the one-million-acre farm. The activity imprints patterns on the land.

New Orleans in the way that I think a lot of people there actually think about it, in these kind of evocative senses of place that wouldn't come through in social science research.

Susan Szenasy: But they also, without slavishly documenting it, they talk about what is there from observation. They know where the wind comes from, and how the land lays, and all of that. So it is all there without it being this sort of tight research type of thing.

Jane Weinzapfel: I like the connection to novels, other research. The quotations were quite provocative in themselves and they made a really good connection.

Fritz Steiner: It's really smart.

Dennis Frenchman: And to draw the connection between the West and New Orleans is interesting. So the technique can expand landscapes which are completely different as types.