

A TENTACULAR GUIDE TO A HYBRID LANDSCAPE: INTERPRETING NARRATIVES IN THE NEBRASKA HAND-PLANTED FOREST

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the importance of interdisciplinary research to foreground latent narratives as a form of interpretation through the investigation of a hybrid landscape — the Bessey Ranger District of the Nebraska National Forest and Grasslands, which is the largest hand-planted forest in the United States situated within the largest contiguous temperate grassland in the world. Traditional methods of landscape analysis could benefit from collaborating outside of the discipline to conduct more lateral and “tentacular” forms of hybrid research. Through the author’s contribution to the book, “A Field Guide to a Hybrid Landscape,” which features photography, illustrative maps, and essays from an interdisciplinary group of scholars, this research challenges the notion of “field guides,” where traditionally they seek to simplify and taxonomize. This field guide strives to do the opposite – by complicating. The narratives uncovered through the development of the book were explored further within a third-year design studio at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in collaboration with the United States Forest Service to critically examine the ecological and cultural implications of the forest through the design of an interpretive trail system. Incorporating narratives through design is something landscape designers and planners must contend with in any project. Understanding and framing narratives in the built environment are explored by discussing the application of “tentacular” methods through mapping, collaboration, storytelling, and design pedagogy that contributed to the development of an interpretive design framework for the Bessey Ranger District.

Keywords:

Interpretation, Forestry, Narratives, Land Management, Non-human

1 INTRODUCTION

Landscapes contain narratives with implications that extend far beyond its borders that often remain latent threads waiting to be unraveled and woven into the way one experiences a place. This story is about a forestry experiment, dendrological anomaly, colonization, and ecological hybrid at the center of the Sand Hills – the largest intact temperate grassland in the world (Scholtz, 2022). The history and emergence of this experiment is complex and layered –, which documents a two-fold, “tentacular,” approach to interpreting the narratives endemic to the Nebraska Hand Planted Forest.

The Field Guide to a Hybrid Landscape is a recently published book featuring photos, maps, and environmental essays documenting various phenomena surrounding the forest. I contributed the maps and illustrations, which attempt to visualize disparate geographical and cultural data, providing orientation in time and space. The Trail Guide to a Hybrid Landscape is a 300-level service-learning studio at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service to develop a trail system plan for the Bessey Ranger District. Both endeavors are preoccupied with the notion of hybrid, which in the book is described as something that is purposely mixed with origins from a tame sow and a wild boar. This metaphor aptly translates to mixture of forest and grassland. As documented in “The Field Guide to a Hybrid Landscape,” historian Robert Gardner describes this novel biome as “a technological forest that is both planted and self-sowing, managed and self-regulating,” a product of both human and non-human forces (Fritz, 2023)(Gardner, 2009).

The multilayered palimpsest of the Bessey Ranger District is unique unto itself, but the novelty and particularity of narratives as they pertain to place is something that landscape designers and planners must contend with in any project. How can an interdisciplinary “tentacular” approach to landscape research and analysis better foreground latent narratives in interpretive design methodologies? Can foregrounding the histories and narratives of place create a more nuanced perception and understanding, and ultimately the people and forces that have contributed to its conception? In this paper, understanding and framing narratives in the built environment are explored by discussing methods of mapping, collaboration, and pedagogy that contributed to the development of an interpretive design framework with the Bessey Ranger District.

1.1 Background

Covered by 97 percent grassland at the time of white settlement, the Nebraska landscape can be described by its horizontality, anecdotally noted for its “flatness” in describing the monotonous drive across the state. But in the middle of the seemingly infinite expanse of agriculture and grassland, emerges a 20,000 acre timber mass known as the Bessey Ranger District and Nursery of the Nebraska National Forests and Grasslands (Figure 1.), colloquially referred to as the Nebraska Hand Planted Forest. What is now considered as some of the strongest bulwarks against the worst consequences of ongoing climate change, the grasslands in the American Great Plains was not always seen as an invaluable resource. The “Great American Desert” was thought to be uninhabitable, necessitating ambitious plans to colonize this landscape. In a speech by Julius Sterling Morton at the opening of the University of Nebraska in 1871, Nebraska was considered “untried land” and insisted that it could be tilled only through the “grandest of material labors (Hickey, 2007).” Little bluestem, switchgrass, sand dropseed, amongst a vast diversity of rhizomatic flora, resisted the tools and machines responsible for tilling the earth into “productive farmland” (Knopp, 2002).



Figure 1. Aerial Photo of the Bessey Ranger District. Dana Fritz. "Field Guide to a Hybrid Landscape." University of Nebraska Press. Reproduced by permission of the University of Nebraska Press.

In the 19th century, the "rain follows the plow" myth was used in the justification of settlement of the Great Plains. It was not until the 1880's that University of Nebraska professor of botany, Charles E. Bessey, put this to the test. Could the harsh climate of the plains be geoengineered to ameliorate the unfavorable dry and windy conditions (Overfield, 1979)? And which trees would be most suitable in adapting to this landscape? This aspiration intrigued notable contributors in the field of forestry, such as Gifford Pinchot, eventually piquing the interest of President Theodore Roosevelt who set aside over ninety thousand acres of Sand Hill prairie for the experiment.

The process of planting the forest was a technological and logistical feat, requiring massive amounts of seed with "high germinative power" that was collected from the Black Hills of South Dakota, the Pine Ridge area of northwest Nebraska, and the forests of Michigan and Minnesota (Gardner, 2009). Using homemade seed drills that created holes six inches apart, the first trees were planted in 1902. Over the next several years, nursery managers experienced varying levels of success, dealing with a host of challenges. For example, many seedlings were lost to "damping off", which results due to a fungus that emerges during warm, moist weather. The seeds also needed to be treated to ward off curious organisms like birds, rodents, and insects. Over time the nursery began to see the fruits of its labor. By 1914, the annual field planting had increased to 1 million trees occupying nearly 600 acres.

Today, the success of the forestry experiment is self-evident. Managed by the United States Forest Service, the 20,000 acre green island isolated amongst the undulating grass-stabilized dunes continues to exist in a state of commingling and "altered notions of ecological succession" (Muzika, 2023). While the trees were originally planted in rows, the legibility of this logistical process has been obfuscated due to

natural processes and human influences. Fires are the leading cause of disturbance which continually reconfigure the forest and contribute to its health and composition. At one point, fire presented the largest threat to its existence, but now prescribed burns are crucial to its management.

This is not the only shift in how agencies perceive the forest. Only recently, it has been renamed from the “Nebraska National Forest” to the “Nebraska National Forests and Grasslands.” The change is symbolic of the “focus on the equal and intrinsic value of both forests and grasslands” (Fritz, 2023). The Nebraska Hand Planted Forest is no longer the primary object of concern for the Bessey Ranger District. Where it required a remarkable effort to plant and cultivate the forest, now the Forest Service has shifted to managing the vigorous spread of the eastern redcedar from overtaking the surrounding grasslands. As the forest continually reconstitutes itself, so does our perception of the management of the land. Today, the Bessey Ranger District of the Nebraska National Forests and Grasslands, along with the onsite Bessey Nursery, works toward land and water conservation, grassland restoration, and reforestation in native forest areas devastated by climate change driven wildfires and beetle infestations.

1.2 Field guide to a hybrid landscape

Not only is the forest a hybrid, but so is the book, “Field Guide to a Hybrid Landscape.” The contributors come from diverse backgrounds – Dana Fritz, Professor of Art (Photography) at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln; Katie Anania, Assistant Professor of Art History at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln; Rebecca Buller, Assistant Professor of Practice in Geography at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln; Rose-Marie Muzika, Director of Science at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History; and Salvador Lindquist, Assistant Professor of Landscape Architecture at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln. The book is also hybrid in its format, challenging the notion of “field guides,” where traditionally they seek to simplify and taxonomize. This field guide strives to do the opposite – by complicating.

Dana Fritz, the main author of the book, visually frames and reframes the forest through the medium of photography. The photographs are organized taxonomically to reveal the forces shaping the hybrid landscape, sand/wind/water, planting, thinning, fire, decomposition, and sowing. Katie Anania relates the photographic images to the “feminist counter-tradition of showing the land’s unruly parts” (Anania, 2023). Rebecca Buller writes on the simultaneity of narratives and the ways they are visioned and reenvisioned. Rose-Marie Muzika deliberates on the complicated ecological implications of commingled species in the Sand Hills. Salvador Lindquist supplements the various narrative threads in the book through maps and illustrations by visualizing disparate geographical and cultural data, providing orientation in time and space. The Field Guide to a Hybrid Landscape “offers a critical examination and a case study of this uniquely managed landscape that has implications far beyond its borders” (Fritz, 2023).

1.3 Trail guide to a hybrid landscape

In partnership with the U.S. Forest Service, the studio, “Trail Guide to a Hybrid Landscape,” critically examined the ecological and cultural implications of the forest and how visitors can engage with its legacy through the design of an interpretive trail system. The book, “Field Guide to a Hybrid Landscape,” functioned as a primer and intellectual framework for the studio. At the time, the book had not been published but was in the midst of production. The contributors composed a lecture series that introduced students to the diverse perspectives that they were bringing to the book and supplemented their understanding of the interwoven narratives that define the forest’s history and cultural significance. Students worked collaboratively as a team along with the U.S. Forest Service to better understand how the forest is managed and used by visitors. The existing trail system is limited to a single three-mile hike and a network of ATV trails. At the time, there was a lack of a comprehensive vision and plan for future trails. The final deliverable for the studio included a trail comprehensive plan for the Bessey Ranger District.

1.4 Tentacularity, narrative, and interpretation

According to Dana Fritz, The Nebraska Hand Planted Forest is what “...feminist scholar of science and technology Donna Haraway might call “tentacular,” because it has limbs in history, agriculture, speculation, science, law, recreation, and evolving ideas about climate change”(Fritz, 2023). While discussions about the future of cities and landscapes often revolve around climate issues, these concerns are far from novel. The notion of humanity’s irreversible impact on the planet has been an integral part of scientific discourse dating back to the 1980s. In response to the growing frequency of environmental

emergencies, Donna Haraway presents a compelling perspective in her book "Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene." She advocates for "...making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become - with each other or not at all" (Haraway, 2016).

Haraway introduces the concept of the "Chthulucene" as a framework to advocate not only a new era but a posture that involves what she calls "tentacular thinking" and "sympoiesis," which denotes a collective construction of reality. The term "Chthulucene" derives from the Greek "khthonios," meaning, an origin from the earth. For Haraway, this term serves as an avenue that encourages both imaginative exploration and scholarly inquiry, fostering a deeper comprehension and interpretation of the world at large. This framing, of the Chthulucene and tentacular thinking, offers an alternative to human exceptionalist forms of narrative extraction, where anthropocentric perspectives are prioritized – instead, human AND non-human (or more than human) stories should be considered equally.

According to Sylvie Van Damme, when co-constructed by the landscape architects and researchers from other disciplines, "landscape narratives offer a means for exploring, understanding, and discussing diverse, nuanced, and structured conceptualizations about landscape" (Van Damme, 2018). Van Damme provides a framework for how landscape architects use landscape narratives to capture the "storied texture of place" in the process of design (e.g. green advocate, decorator, structurer, etc.) along time- and context-based concepts. These perspectives provide a solid foundation for interpreting landscapes, although the archetypes assume human-centered stewardship and management of the land, prioritizing narratives for a "value-laden" proposition for development. Haraway, on the other hand, suggests that "human beings are not the only important actors in the Chthulucene, with all other beings able simply to react."

2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This research aims to develop a "tentacular" framework for landscape narrative, through the interpretation of human and non-human kinship, by investigating the Bessey Ranger District in the Nebraska National Forest and Grasslands. How can an interdisciplinary "tentacular" approach to landscape research and analysis better foreground latent narratives in interpretive design methodologies? The frameworks in landscape architecture literature that situate interpretation as a critical facet of design are loosely lumped into the inventory and analysis process of landscape research. The nearest relevant studies focus on environmental wayfinding or place-branding, but this study seeks to incorporate lateral and non-hierarchical forms of interpretation into the design process as a way of integrating the inherent value and histories of a place, beyond an anthropocentric perspective, into landscape design and planning. Methodologically, the proposed framework was developed by way of "research through design," in synthesizing themes that emerged as part of the design of a series of maps for the book, "Field Guide to a Hybrid Landscape", and through the design of an interpretive trail system in partnership with the US Forest Service (Brink, 2017).

3 METHODS

As "research through design," this section expounds upon the design methodology for a series of maps commissioned for the "Field Guide to a Hybrid Landscape" and the development of a trails master plan for the Bessey Ranger District. Both efforts occurred reciprocally and simultaneously, exploring the same context with different expectations for the consequent deliverables; the role of interpretation as a way to reveal and curate underlying narratives was shared, but – while the medium differed in ambition, its presentation contained similarities. A book and a master plan relies on its structure to lead readers through a story or idea, and are at once reflective and speculative. Its speculations are where they differ. The book aims to complicate and raise questions about feminism, ecology, and land management, and more, whereas the master plan concretely proposes trail alignments, interpretive wayfinding, and accessibility as a means of exploring these narratives.

3.1 Mapping the Bessey Ranger District

Mapping the forest and surrounding grasslands required a multifaceted approach to understanding its embedded narratives through fieldwork, collaboration, archival documents, and visualization of disparate geographical and cultural data. In a historical landscape conceived more than a century ago, the stories and data comprising its emergence are scattered. From written correspondence between Dr. Charles E.

Bessey and Gifford Pinchot, to the pressed arboreal bureau of the Bessey herbarium, organizing the book and its accompanied maps stemmed from five years of continuous research conducted by Dana Fritz. The maps came much later in the process, but assisted in supplementing and crystallizing the themes within the book. Ultimately, the maps preceded a taxonomy of “forces” that shaped the hybrid landscape, sand/wind/water, planting, thinning, fire (Figure 2.), decomposition, and sowing. In addition to the maps, contemporary photographs and archival images from the US Forest Service, frame and reframe the nature of the system.

Maps have the capacity to set the condition for new eidetic and physical worlds to emerge. The production of maps for this publication serves to not only contextualize the photographs and narratives, but also to render explicit the territorialization of the great plains. Settlement of this vast land presented the necessity of forestry and agriculture in enabling the cultivation of the semi-arid grassland. Additionally, the process of forestation and its accompanied regional landscape management practices have significant spatial implications over time. Geographical context, forestation as territorialization, and landscape management serve as the underlying themes for the mapping. The development of the maps will use a combination of Geographic Information Systems (GIS), aerial imagery, and historic maps. The maps compile data provided by the US Forest Service and a variety of GIS databases, assembled in ArcGIS, then visualized in Adobe Illustrator.

In addition to standard basemap layers, the Forest Service was able to provide unique datasets including fire events, silviculture, land management, invasive species, pasture allotments, seedling distribution, among others. To provide geographical context, the accumulation of base layers include geopolitical boundaries, hydrology, land use, ownership, and land cover from the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). For forestation as territorialization, the aforementioned layers serve as a base to project planting plans and historic maps provided by the Nebraska National Forest Service (NNF). Lastly, the landscape management maps utilize data from a variety of sources including the National Institute of Invasive Species Science (NISS), the Conservation and Survey Division (CSD), and the Center for Advanced Land Management Information Technologies (CALMIT) of the School of Natural Resources (SNR).

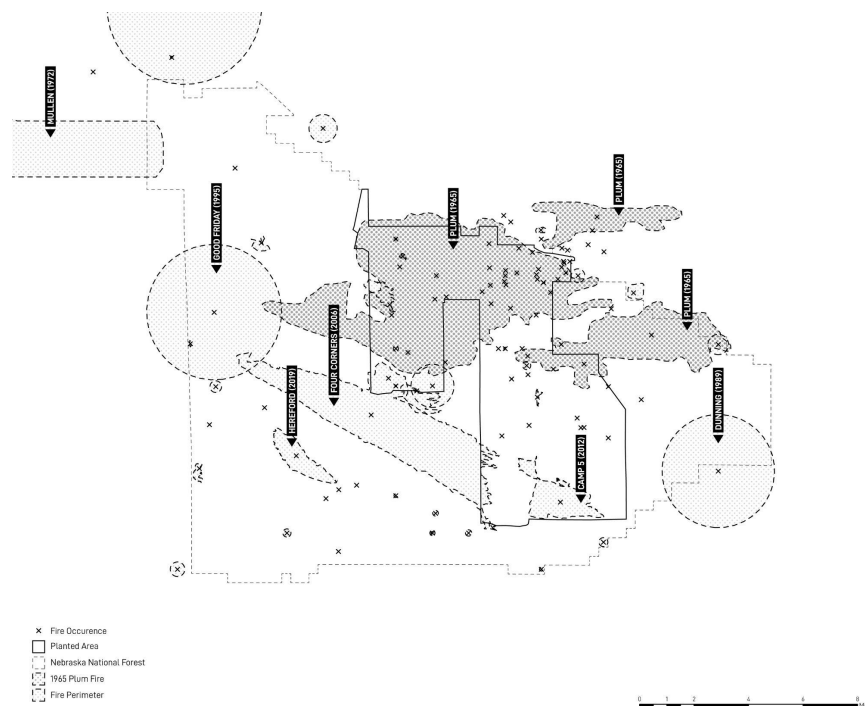


Figure 2. Locations of fire occurrences and extents of major naturally-occurring fire events.

Developing an Interpretive Trail System

The maps and essays provided a spatial orientation to the various natural systems that define the Bessey Ranger District. In the LARC 311 design studio, students were tasked with the development of a

master plan that leverages these systems by incorporating latent narratives into the design of a trails master plan in partnership with the US Forest Service. The studio was organized into four phases, *Forests and Federal Agencies*, *Uncovering the Bessey Ranger District*, *Trail Guide to a Hybrid Landscape*, and *Scales of Interpretation*. In *Forests and Federal Agencies*, we uncovered how the US Forest Service negotiates the often conflicting interests of their multiple-use mandate, which states that “the resources and uses on public land must be utilized in a balanced combination that will best meet the needs of the people” (Multiple-Use and Sustained Yield Act of 1960). This differs from preservation, in the sense that the US Forest Service must manage forms of resource extraction, like timber production, while maintaining recreational use. Students developed a series of brochures that mapped a selected case study, researched its context, categorized its human and non-human constituents (Figure 3.).

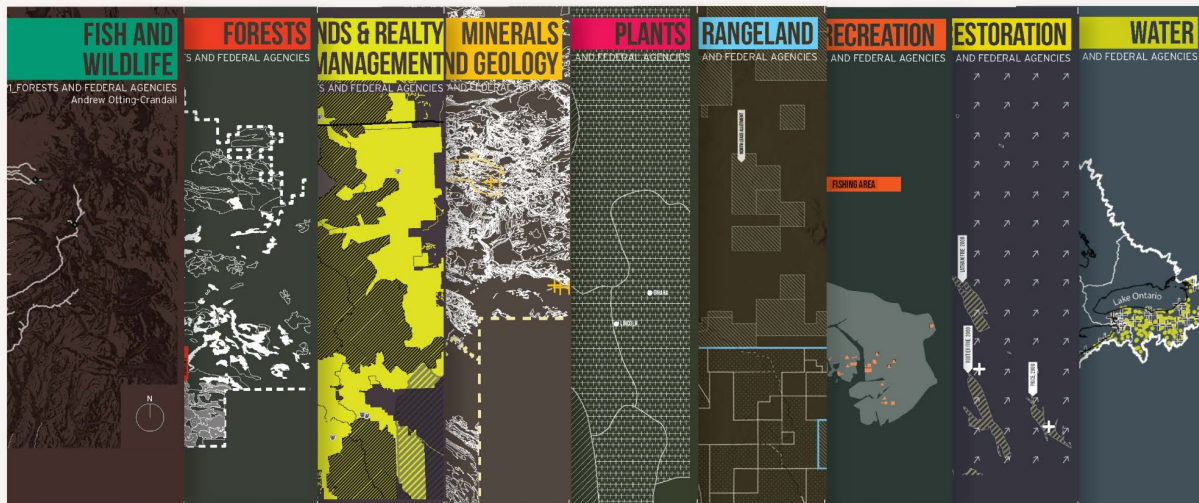


Figure 3. Land Management Case Studies and Brochures. Wijdan Almamari, Jace Armstrong, Olivia Berck, Jake Essink, Sean Kelly, Stella Lepkowski, Josiah Nolting, Dennis States, Andrew Otting-Crandall, and Alyssa Winkelman. Reproduced with student’s permission.

In *Uncovering the Bessey Ranger District*, the studio was organized into five research teams, Land Management, History, Recreation, Environment, and Ecology. Each team developed a narrative atlas that both mapped and described the various phenomena that underscores the hybrid landscape (Figure 5.). The narratives uncovered as part of this process provided a deeper understanding in which to situate a system of trail alignments. In the third section of the studio, *Trail Guide to a Hybrid Landscape*, was conducted in collaboration with the US Forest Service, who provided a series of goals and objectives as well as suggestions for potential trail alignments. These alignments were then adapted in conjunction with a variety of narratives that emerged from the atlases (e.g. indigeneity, prescribed burns, silviculture, nursery production, etc.). And lastly, in *Scales of Interpretation*, the trail alignments were further expanded into a variety of experiences occurring at a multitude of scales, emphasizing how the narratives would be revealed. One group designed a wayfinding system in both digital and analog modalities that each alignment in the trail system would adapt depending on narrative. Other groups designed overlooks, water access, equestrian camps, boardwalks, and more.

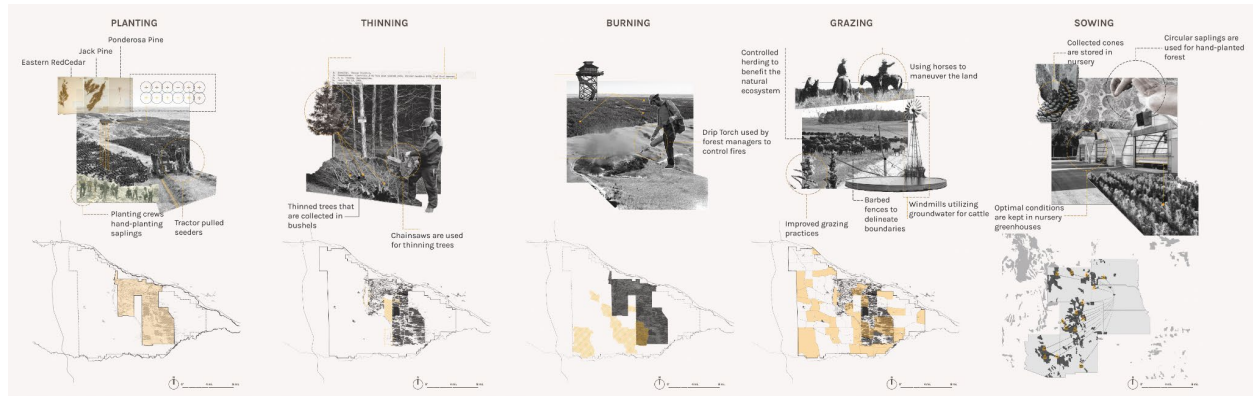


Figure 4. Collages produced for the land management atlas. Jake Essink. Reproduced with student's permission



Figure 5. Adaptation of collective environmental wayfinding system. Wijdan Almamari, Jace Armstrong, Olivia Berck, Jake Essink, Sean Kelly, Stella Lepkowski, Josiah Nolting, Dennis States, and Alyssa Winkelman. Reproduced with student's permission.

4 RESULTS

Interpretation is a crucial aspect of the design process as it allows designers to uncover latent narratives and convey the meaning and significance of a particular site or space to the public. Through the design of maps for the Field Guide to a Hybrid Landscape and the development of an Interpretive Trail Guide for the Bessey Ranger District, the following framework emerged as a way to incorporate interpretation effectively into the design process through human/non-human and time- and context-based perspectives.

The standard design process for interpretation is one that is familiar with most landscape designers and planners, and the provided framework is a simple modification of typical protocol (Table 1) (Fairclough, 2018; LaGro, 2001; McHarg, 2005; Nassauer, 2012; Potteiger, 1998). The first step in incorporating interpretation is to conduct thorough research on the site and its history. This includes studying the physical and cultural context of the site, conducting interviews, browsing archival documents, and reviewing relevant literature. Once the designer has a clear understanding of the site and its history, the next step is to develop a narrative or set of themes. This narrative should be based on the research conducted in step one and should be closely aligned with the site's existing narratives and themes. It should also be relevant to the

intended audience and should be able to convey the meaning and significance of the site in a clear and compelling way.

With the narrative or themes in place, the designer can then begin to develop guiding principles that inform the later design of particular site elements such as materials, colors, and forms that align with the narrative, as well as incorporating visual cues and symbols that help to communicate the content to the public. Design principles emerge from an understanding of identity and values. The final step in incorporating interpretation into the design process is to create an environmental wayfinding system, trail alignments, site layout, site components, and other interpretative tools that help to communicate the narrative to the public. This includes creating educational signage and interactive displays that provide information about the site and its history, as well as incorporating digital and/or audio and visual elements that help to bring the narrative to life.

Table 1. A standard framework for interpretive design.

Method	Objective
1. Research and Discovery	Visit the site
	Interview and engage with familiar actors/communities
	Search archival documents
	Review relevant literature
	Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary coordination
	Collect cultural and geographical data
2. Narrative Development	Identify landmarks
	Develop themes
	Map cultural and geographical data
	Assess remarkable visual qualities
	Discuss identity with diverse collaborators
3. Designing Principles	Clarity: Clearly convey the main message or theme of the interpretive
	Relevance: Relevant to visitors, and connect with their interests, needs, and
	Authenticity: Accurately reflect the facts, stories, and values of the place or
	Engagement: Involves visitors in active and interactive experiences that allow
	Flexibility: Allows for different levels of interpretation, different audiences,
	Accessibility: Considers the needs of visitors with disabilities, diverse
	Sustainability: Minimizes impact on the environment, and ensures the longevity
	Evaluation: Includes a process for assessing the effectiveness of the interpretive
4. Scales of Interpretation	Design for a multitude of scales
	Design visual quality of physical infrastructure
	Design digital or audiovisual infrastructure
	Distribute physical infrastructure that best facilitates visitor experience

The framework is documentation of the approach used for understanding and incorporating the underlying narratives of the Bessey Ranger District, but the hybrid approach to research extended beyond the standard design process, particularly through research and discovery. Several themes emerged through engagement with interdisciplinary scholars who analyzed the landscape through alternative perspectives (Anania, 2023; Buller, 2023; Fritz, 2023; Muzika, 2023). The themes introduced complexity to the understanding of both time- and context- based narratives in the Bessey Ranger District influencing the design and planning of an interpretive trail guide.

Table 2. Research themes, human and non-human concepts, and kinship.

THEMES	HUMAN CONCEPTS	NON-HUMAN CONCEPTS	KINSHIP
Time			
Origination	Indigeneity, Gaia	Complex System, Homeostasis, Succession, Evolution	Emergence
Disruption	Settler Colonialism, Dispossession, Homesteading, Land Cession, Territorialization, Deforestation	Species Endangerment, Land and Habitat Fragmentation, Ecosystem Augmentation	Subjugation
Production	Industrialization, Preservation, Extraction, Agriculture	Degradation, Species Commingling, Disturbance, Distribution	Extraction
Recognition	Climate Justice, Climate Change, Activism, Land Sovereignty, Feminism, Art History, Ecosystem Management, Conservation	Novel Ecosystems, Migration, Transformation	Acknowledgment
Context			
Management	Land Ownership, Extraction, Recreation, Restoration, Water-use, Planting, Sowing, Grazing, Thinning, Burning	Hydrology, Sustenance, Wildfire, Succession, Interspecies/Resource Competition	Interdependence
Recreation	Accessibility, Landscape Appreciation, Leisure		Appreciation
Environment	Amenities, Infrastructure, Shelter, Prospect	Soil, Water, Wind, Fire, Weather	Cohabitation
Ecology	Conservation, Research, Ecosystem Management, Education	Migration, Species Entanglement, Biological Diversity, Carbon Sequestration, Grassland, Forest, Riverine	Protection

5 DISCUSSION

Narratives are often adapted to “give meaning to physical and social phenomena and relations in their professional projects” (Van Damme, 2018). Building off of Van Damme’s narrative archetypes, the interpretive themes were organized into two primary categories, time and context. Themes were selected via the research and discovery process identified in Table 1, leveraging the interdisciplinary background of the contributing authors to the “Field Guide to a Hybrid Landscape.” Of the selected themes, human and non-human concepts were distinguished to further complicate the approaches to interpretation. Lastly, key words were selected to identify the relationship between the concepts. The goal of differentiating and complicating the themes was to challenge the traditional notion of a field guide, which simplifies and orders

phenomena into neat categories. The reality of many landscapes is a much more nuanced and entangled web of narratives, which may carry great importance to develop a deeper understanding of place. This framework for identifying both human and non-human concepts as well as their kinship could be a useful tool for deepening the discovery of narratives for landscape architects as part of landscape research.

Uncovering and incorporating the qualitative attributes of landscape in the profession of landscape architecture is not a new phenomenon; however, adapting narratives to construct a shared image of place is an emerging mode of practice and is suggestive of a shift in today's global socioeconomic context (Porter, 2017). Place branding is the process of creating and managing the reputation and image of a place, usually a city, region, or country, in order to attract residents, tourists, investment, and talent. It is a way to differentiate a place from others and create a unique identity that resonates with target audiences. The branding of a place can be based on its natural or cultural attributes, its history, or its vision for the future. Place branding strategies often include the development of logos, slogans, and campaigns that communicate the key messages and values of the place. The goal of place branding is to create a positive perception of a place that will drive economic development and social cohesion.

Place branding has been subject to critique for several reasons. One of the main criticisms is that it is often used to promote a sanitized and superficial image of a place that ignores or hides its problems and complexities (Anholt, 2007). This can lead to a lack of authenticity and credibility, and can create disappointment and mistrust among visitors and residents when they experience the real place. Another critique of place branding is that it can be used to promote a homogenized and generic image of a place that erases its unique character and cultural heritage (Kotler, 2002). This can lead to a loss of identity and distinctiveness, and can also contribute to the displacement of local communities and cultures. Another critique is that place branding is often used to promote a place as a commodity and a product, rather than as a home for people. This can lead to a focus on short-term economic gains, rather than long-term social and environmental sustainability.

Finally, place branding can be criticized for being a top-down process that is designed and managed by a small group of stakeholders, rather than being a bottom-up process that involves the participation and input of the whole community (Karavatzis, 2004). This can lead to a lack of ownership and engagement among residents and stakeholders. Interpretive design, on the other hand, is the process of creating design solutions that help visitors understand, appreciate, and connect with a place by providing them with information, context, and experiences that reveal the stories, values, and significance of the place. Interpretive design can include various forms of media, such as signs, exhibits, audio guides, and interactive installations, as well as design elements, such as trails, overlooks, and seating areas, that enhance the visitor experience. Interpretive design is often used in cultural and natural heritage sites, such as national parks, historic sites, and museums, but can also be applied to other types of places, such as urban environments and public spaces.

Both place branding and interpretive design can contribute to the promotion and enhancement of a place, but they have different goals and focus on different aspects of the place. Place branding focuses on creating a positive image of a place that will attract investment and visitors, while interpretive design focuses on providing visitors with a deeper understanding and connection with a place. Place branding is more of a marketing tool, while interpretive design is more of an educational and cultural tool. While there are criticisms of place branding, it can also be a useful tool for creating a positive image of a place that can attract investment and tourists, and promote economic development and social cohesion, when implemented with a holistic, inclusive, and authentic approach. The challenge is in how designers can celebrate the qualities of place that define it without reducing them to a form of private exchange and homogenizing the way one experiences it.

Additionally, place branding and interpretive design are wholly focused on an anthropocentric perspective. The curation of image is intended to appeal to human sensibilities about economic development, recreation, education, and so on. The goal of this research was to explore methods for expanding forms of narrative recognition to be inclusive of human AND non-human stories and our kinship to one another as a deliberate form of advocacy. We live in a symbiotic system with complex interdependencies, and the way we engage with these kinships should be foregrounded through the design of our landscapes.

6 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research explores the role of interpretation in landscape architecture through the investigation of a hybrid landscape, the Bessey Ranger District of the Nebraska National Forest and Grasslands. The unique history of this hand-planted forest serves as a case study for understanding the importance of interpreting the narratives of a place for the benefit of visitors and to establish a deeper understanding of human and non-human interdependence. The research revealed eight time- and context-based interpretive themes, including origination, disruption, production, recognition, management, recreation, environment, and ecology, which were explored through a design studio collaboration with the United States Forest Service. The resulting Trail Guide for a Hybrid Landscape exemplifies how mapping, collaboration, and pedagogy can be used to reveal the histories and narratives of a place in order to create a more nuanced perception and understanding of the landscape.

The multilayered narratives of the Bessey Ranger District is unique unto itself, but the novelty and particularity of narratives as they pertain to place is something that landscape designers and planners must contend with in any project. Understanding and framing narratives in the built environment is crucial for creating a sense of place and educating visitors about the people and forces that have contributed to its conception. The design principles for interpretive design provide a framework for revealing the stories and histories of a place in an engaging and meaningful way.

Our landscapes are ever-changing, whether it be through human intervention or natural ecological causes. According to Rose-Marie Muzika, “The early-twentieth-century goal of the Nebraska National Forest was to create a diverse forest from nearly “nothing.” On this Sandhills tabula rasa the botanists, foresters, and ecologists generated a brew of a variety of species to cover the otherwise unpromising terrain – a novel ecosystem, hitherto unknown. Climatic changes, too, create novel ecosystems, in that some species do not persist under changing conditions, while others flourish and expand.” In October 2022, towards the end of the production of the Field Guide to a Hybrid Landscape, a wildfire – referred to as the Bovee Fire, scorched roughly 5,000 acres, or nearly a quarter of Nebraska’s hand-planted forest. Stewards of this landscape must now face tough questions about the fate of this cultural landscape. Should the forest, a human intervention, be restored? Or should nature take its course and allow the forest and grasslands to contend with its own ecological processes? These questions are open for interpretation, but the answer will be forever-logged as part of the ongoing narrative of the Nebraska hand-planted forest.

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