

SIGNS AS YARD ART IN AMARILLO, TEXAS

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ABSTRACT. The city of Amarillo, Texas, is unusual in that more than 5,000 art objects in the form of signs are displayed on individual properties. These signs represent a unique partnership between the public and a wealthy individual, Stanley Marsh 3, who subsidizes them. Through a field survey of 723 signs and a questionnaire mailed to 98 residents with signs in their yards, we explored use of the signs for communal and individual expression. The field survey found a higher concentration of signs in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods and in Hispanic areas than in high-income and non-Hispanic neighborhoods. The questionnaire revealed that residents used signs for both individual and communal expression and that most residents with signs liked them. Dissatisfaction among a small percentage of residents with signs suggested that the vast number of signs may have compromised their initial uniqueness. *Keywords:* Amarillo, authored landscape, communalism, individualism, signs, Texas, yard art.

In 1990 the artist Stanley Marsh 3—who uses “3” because he considers “III” too pretentious—placed in his front yard a sign similar in size, shape, and height to a warning sign, but it read, “Road Does Not End.” He created this sign after seeing a traffic sign that read, “Road Ends 300 Feet.” He realized that signs are invasive and send negative messages, and he decided that signs could be used to display art (Rodriguez 2002). Thus began a campaign to place sign art throughout the city of Amarillo, Texas. From a few initial signs with a blue dot or a picture of Marilyn Monroe with “Marilyn” inscribed beneath it the effort mushroomed into an eight-year campaign that generated more than 5,000 traffic-style signs distributed across the urban landscape (Marsh 2001). Using a field inventory and survey of Amarillo residents with signs, we analyzed the clustering of signs in this unique, “authored landscape” and examined what the signs mean to residents.

Marsh’s signs have some parallels with such roadside entities as the ubiquitous Burma Shave or Mail Pouch signs, but Marsh intended his signs for art, not commerce. They also have some parallels with Zurich’s and then Chicago’s 1999 display of painted “Cows on Parade,” which many cities imitated both with cows and with other animals. San Jose, California, for example, used fiberglass sharks; Cincinnati, Ohio, displayed pigs; and Santa Fe, New Mexico, exhibited horses in equally eye-catching but temporary public displays of art. Chicago had smaller numbers of its art objects (262) on view in public spaces downtown for four months (Sullivan and others 1999).

Amarillo, in contrast, has thousands of permanent signs—roughly one for every fourteen households in the city—on commercial, agricultural, and residential property. Though a radical of sorts, Marsh adopted an approach used by many wealthy

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