



## LOESS IS MORE

### IN IOWA, SITE DESIGN PLUS STORYTELLING BY RDG.

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Just north of Omaha, Nebraska, near the small town of Missouri Valley, Iowa, an interpretive center will tell you all about the Loess Hills. This narrow band of hills flanking the eastern edge of the Missouri River floodplain was formed by wind blowing fine glacial dust. The hills are, in essence, dunes without a sea. The interpretive center is situated among rolling grasslands and includes, as most such roadside centers do, videos, interpretive signs, interactive displays, and signposted trails. But the making of all those interpretive elements was managed by a landscape architect.

The client, in this case the Harrison County Conservation Board, would normally have hired the site work, the video, and the signs separately. But, says Dolores Silkworth, ASLA, a landscape architect with the firm RDG, based in Omaha and Des Moines, Iowa, “We offered this idea that we could do all of those little pieces and more.” RDG has an artist on staff and a videographer. “We discussed how we were all storytellers,” Silkworth says. “Dave [Dahlquist] tells stories through art; John [Hansen] tells stories with video; landscape architects tell stories by applying things to the land.”



#### TOP

In the Iowa Loess Hills, RDG created an integrated multimedia suite of interpretive elements, including trail bollards.

#### LEFT AND BELOW

Interpretive signs are designed to teach about the hilly prairie landscape.





**ABOVE**  
The firm chose certain plants and animals to highlight across installations.

The three attended most design meetings together. They were also joined by John T. Price, a local author whose 2004 book, *Not Just Any Land*, takes an in-depth look at American grasslands through the eyes of other writers who chronicled them. The team created an integrated suite of elements. A trail system winds through the prairie and is lined with seven illuminated bollards of cut steel. The bollards are topped with medallions representing the landscape's key species, like the Great Plains skink, the bur oak, and the northern grasshopper mouse. Those same animals appear in an illuminated interactive display in the building. A video, produced by Hansen and featuring text by Price and narration by Dahlquist, completes the system by again referring to those key species and showing—in all seasons—the landscape through which visitors may walk.

That video, which plays on request in the center's amphitheater, is the first RDG has produced on commission for a client, and the design team members think it allowed them to tie the total interpretation together more effectively. Whatever experience people choose when they visit—walking, reading, viewing—they get the same basic message. “Hopefully, no matter the audience,” Silkworth says, “[people] might actually remember the Great Plains skink, or one or two other things unique to the Loess Hills.” The text weaves historical accounts and Price’s own writing together in a question-and-answer format. During daylong charrettes with the client, that text was refined and the main messages were teased out. Fire appears in the video and also in the cut metal bollards. The trail highlights the abrupt slopes typical of the hills and even includes “cat-step” stairs: limestone risers with gravel behind that reference a type of erosion that tends to occur on these steep, fine-grained soils.

“Wanting to tell a story is part of our nature,” says Dahlquist. In Harrison County, RDG strove to tell the complete story of the Loess Hills by combining stone, metal, lighting, art, writing, trail design, graphic design, and film. The experience was especially transformative for Silkworth. “We will never go back to being disciplines that only talk to ourselves,” she says.

The video is available on YouTube. ●