



The Resilient Urban Forest - New Light through Old Windows?

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Editorial

Human beings have had a long, deep cultural relationship with trees, woodlands and the landscape. This relationship transcends national cultures, and happily sits as an equal alongside our scientific, economic, ecological and our spiritual relationships. Trees have been a vital component of our cultural relationships with our landscapes since time began. That said, there is some evidence that this happy relationship between people, trees and their landscapes began to break down in the post-industrial times of the 20th century, as our scientific and economic cultures tended to gain the upper hand.

Initially, our relationship with trees and woodland was perhaps more to do with survival and shelter, but very quickly the relationship became an economic one, where trees provided many of the essentials of life - building materials, household materials, fuel, chemicals and other raw materials, etc. Clearly the old forestry adage that 'the wood that stays is the wood that pays' can be traced back a very long way in history, and was as relevant then as it is today. The manner of the pay-back has differed over time however, and it was perhaps only in the later years of the 20th century that we began to fully appreciate the payback from the urban forest to our urban way of life, and how fundamental it was, and is going to be, to our urban futures.

Many of the towns and cities in Western Europe are at a point in their urban system life cycle where they are beyond the stage of stable maturity and have entered a cycle of decline. In an attempt to reverse this, many have embarked upon a frenzy of marketing and promotional activity to 're-invent' themselves. The essence of reinvention is about changing existing perceptions but, contrary to the popular rhetoric, people are not flooding back into our cities. There is still a net migration of people from our city centres to greener suburban areas, where the 'quality of life' is deemed to be higher - and there are more trees. The late Hubert Humphrey hit the nail on the head when he said 'We are in danger of making our cities places where business goes on but where real life, in the real sense, is lost'.

The concept of urban forestry, recognised as a specific scientific domain in the later decades of the 20th century, began to address these issues. It was deemed to be integral to the form and function of urban areas; it was acknowledged to assist in creating healthy and economically successful communities and liveable places both for people and wildlife, and began to be recognised as critical infrastructure for successful urban areas, on par with utility, transport and the built environment. That said, good ideas can take a while to be absorbed into the body politic, but three recent initiatives in the UK have placed urban forestry centre stage, and have begun to shine new light through old windows.

The first of these initiatives is a proposed Northern Forest, which will stretch from Liverpool in the west of the UK across to Kingston-Upon-Hull in the east, and will be based upon the five existing Community Forests that cover that area. The proposal is to plant 50 million trees over the next 25 years in urban, peri-urban and rural areas. Existing tree cover across the north of England is low - some 7.6% woodland cover, as opposed to the UK average of 13% and an EU average of 44%. The area has a population of some 13 million, which is expected to increase by 9% over the next two decades, involving the building of 650,000 new homes and corresponding infrastructure to support this amount of development. The Northern Forest, supported by HM Government, will supply the green infrastructure, and greatly assist in providing a significantly improved quality of life for all. One of the key issues is to plan, design, implement and manage a resilient urban forest, as only about 14 species of tree are currently planted in urban / peri-urban areas. With the increasing risk of pests and diseases attacking the tree population, a much larger spectrum of species is being proposed [1].

This leads on to the second initiative, which is an online reference of Tree Species Selection for Green Infrastructure. This has been a joint venture between the Tree Design Action Group (TDAG), Myerscough College and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, and has put on line the good, the bad and the ugly attributes of some 280 tree species that can be successfully planted in urban areas in the UK. The guide sets out the principles

of urban tree selection, and advises on the arguments for enhancing ecosystem services through intelligent tree species selection. The guide will remain on line; as new research becomes available which can be added to or augment the guide [2].

The last initiative is HM Government's publication 'A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment'. Published earlier this year (2018), the plan outlines the Government's approach to all things environmental, and specifically articulates the need to create more urban green infrastructure, and to plant many more trees in and around our towns and cities. It specifically mentions The Northern Forest, and has supported the project by awarding it £5.7 million to get the project off the ground. The Prime Minister also gave a television interview specifically supporting the concept of urban forestry and the Northern Forest in particular [3].

Although these initiatives are very much UK-based projects, similar initiatives can be found throughout Europe, Asia-Pacific countries and beyond. Trees, and particularly urban trees, are beginning to be recovering their primal place in urban green

infrastructure in general and urban place-making in particular. The benefits that trees can bring to people's wellbeing are now well documented, as are their ability to mitigate the effects of the urban heat island, reduce carbon and other pollutants from the atmosphere. The difference however is that, in contrast to times before, the urban forest is not being seen as a mere 'green cosmetic', but as a structural component that provides an effective organisation of space in our urban futures. Truly new light through old windows.

References

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