

THE TREES AND DESIGN ACTION GROUP (TDAG)

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Chairman TDAG
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It would be fair to say that our urban trees are under threat as never before. An inquiry and report in 2007 by the London Assembly Environment Committee “*Chainsaw Massacre*” highlighted the loss of street trees in London indicating that more trees are being cut down than are replaced or newly planted. Particular victims are the larger structural trees, such as the London Plane, which contribute to London’s international reputation as a green, tree-filled capital. What is happening in London appears to be happening in many other urban centres throughout the United Kingdom.

A recent book on the history of urban trees¹ reminds us that street trees are a comparatively recent introduction to the urban realm. Anyone living in a medieval city would have regarded street trees as a strange idea – surely trees belonged in gardens behind houses. This view did not change until the nineteenth century after, for example, Haussmann’s² major reconstruction work in Paris and the introduction of the tree-lined boulevard. As Lawrence explains *planting trees along city streets came slowly to Britain*. In London, the most significant early planting of street trees followed the establishment of the Metropolitan Board of Works in 1855 which replaced local parishes and boards in overseeing all major public works carried out in the metropolis. These included the Victoria Embankment in the 1860s and Northumberland Avenue in the 1870s. The planting of street trees was common practice by the end of the century. Percy J. Edwards³ describes how street trees were planted and demonstrates that there was a clear understanding of not only how to ensure that trees survived and thrived but also how to guard against settlement and unevenness of the paving. It is clear that the benefits of trees in the urban realm were also recognized from improving air quality, providing shade to local identity and improving value – benefits that we recognize today and need even more now and for the future than in the 19th and 20th centuries!

Unfortunately, many of our urban trees are taken for granted...until they are gone and the full impact of their loss is exposed and so we must seriously plan now to ensure a legacy of urban trees, particularly the larger structural trees, for future generations. Indeed, as other speakers will no doubt confirm, the anticipated changes to the climate mean that we

¹ Henry W. Lawrence. *City Trees: A Historical Geography from the Renaissance through the Nineteenth Century*. University of Virginia Press (2006)

² Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann (1808-1891) directed improvements in the City of Paris during the Second Empire of Napoleon III.

³ Percy J. Edwards, Clerk of the Improvements Committee in *History of London Street Tree Improvements 1855-1897* London County Council 1898, quoted in Lawrence pg. 242-243

will need even more urban greening and greater levels of tree canopy cover in our cities than ever before.

It was this concern that prompted Lovejoy to call a meeting that led to the forming of the Trees and Design Action Group (TDAG). The first meeting identified a gap in guidance that would enable planners, designers and developers to ensure that the right decisions were made regarding trees from the earliest stages of the development process. It was quickly agreed that the group would focus initially on London and would work under the London Tree and Woodland Framework. The importance of the Trees and Design Action Group is that it is a “not for profit” organization with members across a range of disciplines and viewpoints including the Forestry Commission, Transport for London, Design for London, CABE Space, Trees for Cities, The Tree Council, the London Parks and Green Spaces Forum, the Royal Parks, the London Tree Officers Association, various local authorities throughout London, the Landscape Institute, Urban Design London, various developers and land owners, a range of designers (architects, landscape architects and urban designers), representatives of the insurance industry and utilities, tree growers, researchers and others – those from every area which can influence urban trees are welcome to join the TDAG. Although many of us are based in London we see the issues that we are trying to resolve as being relevant across the UK with local variations to suit.

The Trees and Design Action Group has set out its Mission Statement and terms of reference which incorporate a 10 Point Action Plan covering the following issues:

- 1 To ensure integrated solutions to the urban realm:** joined up thinking is essential so that actions are congruent.
- 2 Policies and Tree Strategies:** it is essential that the London Tree and Woodland Framework and borough tree strategies are underpinned by legislation. The inclusion of appropriate trees will then become one of the requirements of planning and should mean that trees shown in planning applications are delivered. This may require more funding at the early stages to undertake the necessary research and site investigations to ensure that trees can be planted where shown on drawings and so avoid “surprises after planning” when it is often discovered that trees cannot, in fact, be planted as shown!
- 3 Evidence based understanding and research:** it is important that research used by the group and recommended to others has been verified and is appropriate for UK conditions.
- 4 Education & Public Awareness:** there are many tree myths around and it is important to counter-act these. This is where, for example, initiatives such as the Joint Mitigation Protocol between the London Tree Officers and the Insurance industry on the value of trees (CAVAT) should be helpful in highlighting the value

of the tree and reducing the rush to blame trees for every incidence of subsidence in building foundations. Apparently the tree is not the sole cause of subsidence.

- 5 Value (Economic, environmental and social), Funding and Revenue:** one value of trees has been identified above. In economic terms the presence of trees is seen as increasing property values and more research on this is to be welcomed. As supporters of urban trees we see many possibly more important values in trees, especially the effects on increasing health and well-being for both people and the environment, but increased economic value is an indicator that everyone can easily subscribe to and so this may be the best indicator at this stage to both protect and promote trees.
- 6 3-Dimensional urban realm:** there are a series of contradictions that need to be resolved to ensure that trees can actually be planted. For example, underground services. Why have underground services and access to them been allowed to expand to such an extent under our urban roads and footways that there are increasingly few opportunities for finding space to plant larger structural trees? Why is there not more investment in service tunnels to contain services? Why has so much pavement width been lost to roads, that there is not sufficient room along many streets for trees and pedestrians? Not only do we have difficulty in understanding our three – dimensional urban spaces in terms of space underground, but we do not appear to understand the space needed for tree canopies to spread above ground and, of course, the fourth dimension which is that trees are living elements which grow and increase in size over time both above and below ground!
- 7 Development cycles:** Trees live for more than the usual 30 year development cycle. Many trees are planted on structured landscapes and so can only be regarded as semi-permanent as they will be removed when wholesale redevelopment of a site takes place. It would be encouraging if development sites identified areas where trees can be planted in terra firma in locations which enable them to survive subsequent redevelopment cycles and so grow to maturity.
- 8 Density:** the pursuit of increasingly high densities often means that there is less open space for planting trees. However climate change adaptation strategies could determine ratios of built to natural environments on development sites and also provide tree canopy cover requirements.
- 9 Public realm management and funding for aftercare and maintenance:** this is a major issue for both the public realm and the care and management of trees. To be effective this may need a funding source beyond the revenue gained from borough residential ratepayers.
- 10 Townscape:** the visual impact of trees is subjective. There is no methodology or criteria for considering trees in the townscape and it would be helpful to explore this issue and develop specific guidance. There are many issues and one that is current is

the question of “viewpoints” and how trees may or may not obscure or change views of important buildings. It is interesting to note the way in which reactions to this have changed over time. In his seminal work, Gordon Cullen⁴ described “discovery” or the unfolding of views as the pedestrian moved past trees to see the building beyond. It is important to remind people that neither we nor our eyes need to be static and that we are able to move in various ways throughout the public realm, so our viewpoints are constantly changing.

The Trees and Design Action Group is currently developing guidelines for a range of issues relating to trees. At the present time the group is finalising framework guidelines relating to the Value of Trees and Trees in New Developments. It is intended that these will be followed with guidelines on street trees and trees in car parks among others. The intention is that the guidelines will be available on a web site with cross-referencing to other relevant documents, research and organisations.

If anyone would like to contribute or know more about the TDAG please contact: Jim Smith, London Tree and Woodland Framework Manager (jim.c.smith@forestry.gsi.gov.uk) or Martin Kelly, Managing Director at Lovejoy London (mkelly@lovejoylondon.uk.com).

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⁴ Gordon Cullen *Concise Townscape* (1961)