

Commentary—Trees Important in Creating Greener Cities

In recent decades, the idea of adding trees to the urban landscape in many of America's major cities has had a positive impact on multiple facets of the health of city dwellers.

By Austin Kennedy

URBAN ECOLOGISTS searching for ways to improve the health of city dwellers have turned to the idea of trees. Trees not only have positive impacts on traditional measures of health such as air quality, but also improve the lives of the population by improving pedestrian safety, and the aesthetics of the city. All of these factors have been shown to impact the overall well being of citizens.

Trees improve the safety, aesthetics and living conditions of street life

It was not until celebrated author and activist Jane Jacobs (1916-2006) began her series of observations in New York City, which culminated in her seminal work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, that the idea of urban ecology began to have a major impact in the public policy arena (“Jane Jacobs”).



Author and activist Jane Jacobs

Without actual professional training, Jacobs used her keen observation skills along with common sense to foster a new way to understand the complex issues of urban planning. According to the Project for Public Spaces, “Jacobs approached cities as living beings and ecosystems” (“Jane Jacobs”). In this sense, she felt that each part of the city was like an organ in the body.

Trees are a great way to connect the various components of urban life while having a

positive effect on the physical, spiritual and social “health” of a community because they improve the safety, aesthetics and living conditions of street life.

In discussing the importance of trees, it is important to first realize that their value in the urban landscape has been recognized. Urban Ecologists searching for ways to improve the health of city dwellers have increasingly turned to the idea of trees. A group in Fall River, MA, for example, has begun raising funds to plant street trees in the town (“Basketball game...” 4). Mayor Salvatore Panto of Easton, PA has also started an ambitious effort to plant trees along the roads of his city (Panto). These groups are pushing for urban trees because they impact the urban environment and the city dwellers living there in several beneficial ways.



Easton, PA Mayor Salvatore Panto

The impacts trees have on the health of an urban environment have been well documented. According to a December, 2008 Lafayette Technology Clinic report, the addition of street trees reduces air temperatures in the summertime and increases oxygen levels in the air (*Urban Ecology...*). Trees also have a profound effect on water runoff. According to the same report, “Reducing runoff in Easton [PA] would help decrease soil erosion, flooding and water contamination, rising water temperature and possibly the need for costly storm drain installations” (*Urban Ecology...*). These environmental changes have direct impacts on the health of city dwellers.

The improvement in the health of the city environment helps improve the physical health of citizens. By improving air quality and temperature, residents can breathe in cleaner air and walk around more freely in the summer time. This helps them get exercise and avoid dangerous toxins. Also, the reduction in the need for costly repairs to storm drains can help the holistic health of residents. Money that would have been spent on storm drains can be used to invest in

education or other social programs which can have a positive impact on the wellbeing of the citizens.

In addition to helping the local environment, street trees can have a major effect on public safety, which in turn has a multifaceted impact on the health of individuals. These improvements are important because they are felt by every community member, rather than a select few who live near a park or business development and reap its benefits. "Planting street trees as bump-outs or bulb-outs helps slow traffic... and increase pedestrian visibility" (*Urban Ecology*...).



Street tree bump-outs

Bump-outs specifically are a great option because they do not impede on pedestrian sidewalk traffic, and do not cause damage to the sidewalks itself which can harm pedestrians on their strolls.



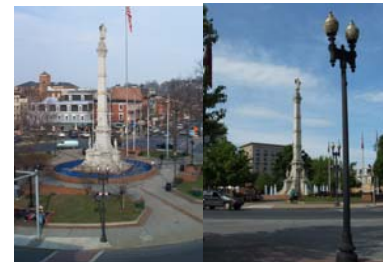
Sidewalk damage without bump-outs

Tree bump-outs also help to realize many of the goals of the New York City Streets Renaissance, such as making streets easier to cross, and helping sidewalks to better accommodate citizens since the trees are not in the way ("What Makes..."). These improvements again can in turn improve the health of all city dwellers by making a stroll around town safer and a more common occurrence.

Unsafe conditions in Easton and Philadelphia made some Jane's Walkers from Lafayette College hesitant to walk downtown or along the sides of busy roads. Improvements in safety conditions by slowing

down traffic patterns such as bright orange cones in the Easton downtown circle have allowed pedestrians to walk on the sidewalks with less hesitation and get more exercise than before. In contrast, the Benjamin Franklin Parkway which leads up to the Philadelphia Art Museum, is not designed with these safety enhancements and was reported to be somewhat terrifying by the same students.

The sense of safety trees provide, like the improvement in the environment, has a positive impact on social health, allowing pedestrians to feel less stress walking down the streets, and get to their favorite pocket parks or open areas by foot. The ability to access "third places" outside of work such as pocket parks, benches, monuments and quiet areas to read and reflect has been shown to have a positive effect on overall health (Frumkin 261).



Winter (l) and summer in Easton

Finally, street trees can substantially affect the aesthetics of the city for both drivers and pedestrians. Walking down the streets of Easton during the winter time, for example, is a completely different experience than walking during the spring and autumn. During the winter trees are barren, and flowerpots sit empty. During the spring, flowers bloom and crisp green leaves fill the branches. During autumn, various shades of orange, red and yellow leaves accent the streets.

This contrast of the seasons was also evident from walking through Philadelphia. The same walkers from Lafayette College were surprised to look at Google Maps Street View images that were taken during the summer because, compared to their winter Jane's Walks, the trees in full bloom stood out and made a huge impact on the aesthetics of the city.

Also, students noted how the diversity of tree types in Philadelphia was a nice contrast to the monotony of tree choice in Easton, and that the trees took away from the idea of a concrete jungle. In both cases, trees improved the aesthetic appeal of the city, and attract diverse fauna such as

birds and squirrels (*Urban Ecology...*).



Winter (top) and summer in Philadelphia

Another advantage of the aesthetics of trees is that they can be arranged to fit “planned green” spaces or simply accent “open green” places (Nathan’s Philadelphia Jane’s Walk observation). In this sense, they can be the main component of a green space, they can accent a community garden or they can accent a wide open space, such as lined rows of trees along a soccer field. All of these spaces can bring back the “third place” idea mentioned previously, or bring a diverse community together to fight for a common

cause such as the Liz Christy Garden in New York City (Von Hassell 91).

Although not obvious at first, trees can have one of the most far reaching impacts on the overall health of a city. They help improve environmental quality, pedestrian safety and aesthetics, which in turn help improve the mental, physical, and spiritual health of citizens. They are a simple solution that urban ecologists have increasingly turned towards because of their qualitative and quantitative benefits to health.



Liz Christy Gardens, NYC

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- Philly (summer): http://farm2.static.flickr.com/1369/1216532794_cdf6ed7a6e.jpg?v=0
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