

Hope is a Tree: The Urban Forest

Ken Baker, November 24, 2023

There is little that's "natural" about a city. Not the houses, store fronts, schools, factories, hospitals, or City Hall itself.

Not the cable, gas, and power lines, the water and sewage conduits, or the stormwater sewers. Not the sidewalks and roads, nor the bus, car, and bicycle traffic they carry.

And certainly not the trees lining the city's streets or shading its suburban lawns. What business have they growing out in the open, away from the dense, light-limiting forests in which they evolved over so many millions of years?

City planners sometimes talk about two types of critical infrastructure necessary for a thriving, livable city. Hard (or fixed) infrastructure is its "built" environment, the physical structures that carry people, materials, and information from one place to another. Soft infrastructure refers to the social and economic institutions providing the services that maintain quality of life in the city.

The urban forest, a town's treescape, is neither and both of these.

Trees are not "built" in the sense of the steel, concrete, and fiber elements of a city's transportation, sanitation, and telecommunication systems, but they are nonetheless built and maintained by human agency. Neither are trees a human institution, although the services they provide residents are manifold and quantifiable.

Study after study shows that greened streets contribute to increases in residents' health and sense of community, enhanced real estate values and retail sales in downtown areas, reductions in crime and domestic violence, extended life of street surfaces, cleaner air, lowered household energy expenses, and improved management of stormwater runoff.

(Note: Ken is a retired Professor of Ecology from Heidelberg University and a member of the Tiffin Shade Tree Commission. This is the second in a six-part monthly series on urban trees.)

A Public Domain photo of an urban street lined with trees:



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