Sinners, scapegoats or fashion victims? Understanding the deaths of trees in the green city

James B. Kirkpatrick, Aidan Davison *, Grant D. Daniels

School of Geography and Environmental Studies, University of Tasmania, Private Bag 78, Hobart, Tasmania 7001, Australia

ABSTRACT

The emergence of urban green governance has given prominence to the role of trees in sustainable cities. Earlier ideas of trees as urban adornment and providers of amenity are giving way to understanding of the urban forest as green infrastructure. Urban trees are taking on the normative resonance of 'nature' previously reserved in sustainability discourse for nonurban environments. Yet a governing consensus that urban trees are good is not necessarily accepted by all. Despite extensive research on tree benefits, little is known about social resistance to urban trees. In Australia, anecdotal evidence suggests that many tree lovers perceive a countervailing force of tree haters who are responsible for tree injury and death through acts of revenge, scapegoating, displaced emotion and sheer loathing. This perception frames dislike of trees as social deviance rather than as a legitimate expression of complex intersubjective aspirations and concerns. In investigating the existence or otherwise of anti-arboreal forces, we report on a survey of residents in six eastern Australian cities that explored motivations underlying tree planting and removal. Rather than rejecting trees outright, most respondents expressing negative attitudes towards trees did so in the context of espousing the value of the 'right tree' in the 'right place'. The chief motivations for the removal of healthy trees were aesthetic and lifestyle preferences, linked to wider cultural dynamics of individuation and commodification, followed by moral considerations, linked to wider cultural dynamics related to nativism. The findings suggest that to reduce the turnover of private trees, advocates of the urban forest have to expand their engagement with residents beyond a current focus on technical discourses of tree services and regulatory controls. This expanded engagement needs to account for the full range of subjective factors that influence tree preferences.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

'Don't forget trees are so dangerous to drivers as well. With the number of drivers killed each year by those rouge [sic – rogue] trees, if trees were crocs [crocodiles] you would cull the lot of them. It is not speed that kills, it is the sudden stop at the tree that does it' (**sjc,** Blog posted 4:06 PM February 20, 2010, www.thecouriermail.com.au, accessed February 2011).

1. Introduction

This paper is about the motives that cause people to plant and remove trees on private land in urban areas. More broadly our paper is about cultural perceptions and practices related to urban trees in the context of recent valorising of the green city as environmentally sustainable and economically productive. There is now considerable geographical research investigating the social production of urban nature (Davison, 2008; Heynen et al., 2006a; Hinchcliffe and Whatmore, 2006; Kaika, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2006), including urban vegetation (Franklin, 2006; Heynen et al., 2006b; Lien and Davison, 2010; Pincetl and Gearin, 2005; Perkins, 2011; Wolch, 2007). This research forms one strand in a wider trajectory of non-dualistic social theory that dispenses with oppositional concepts of nature and culture, focusing instead on the dialectical coproduction of socionatures (Braun and Castree, 1998; Haraway, 1991; Latour, 2004; Macnaghten and Urry, 1998).

Research on the social production of urban trees, particularly that conducted under the heading of urban political ecology (Heynen et al., 2006b; Heynen and Perkins, 2005; Kitchen, in press; Perkins, 2011; Pincetl, 2007; Whitehead, 2005), has to date primarily addressed important questions related to the uneven distribution of social goods associated with urban trees, especially in relation to ethnicity and income. For example, Heynen and Perkins (2005) have observed in Milwaukee that neoliberal governance is producing contradictory logics in relation to urban trees. On the one hand, competition between cities for investment capital and skilled workers has seen urban trees promoted by public agencies as a way of enhancing city appeal. On the other hand, neoliberal

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: J.Kirkpatrick@utas.edu.au (J.B. Kirkpatrick), Aidan.Davison@utas.edu.au (A. Davison), Grant.Daniels@utas.edu.au (G.D. Daniels).

reliance for public service delivery on the private sector and civil society has seen decreased public investment in urban trees and increased emphasis on private residents as tree providers and managers. The authors conclude that in 'an increasingly neoliberalised environment, the only people able to address the city's ecological needs are those wealthy enough to own their homes' and that 'more emphasis needs to be placed on the role that the city or state takes in planting and maintaining trees on privately owned property (Heynen and Perkins, 2005, 111–112).

This recognition of the important role of private residents and private property is complemented by evidence that private trees often comprise a high proportion of the urban forest (Pearce et al., 2013). Yet, little research on the social production of urban trees has been directed at residents, with the majority focussing on public agencies, professional land managers and social movements. In particular, insufficient attention has been paid to resident attitudes, perceptions and experiences that may conflict with urban green governance premised on the assumption that tree presence is an unequivocal public good. This assumption is given wider legitimacy by the normative meanings of nature that are central to much sustainability discourse (Braverman, 2008a,b; Davison, 2008). While urban political ecology research has critiqued the social justice outcomes of green governance, it has also contributed to the devaluing and marginalising of negative relations with trees by implicitly sharing the premise that trees are good (Kitchen, in press). Those interested in the social production of urban trees have yet to fully address the implications of posthumanist revisioning of more-than-human agency, including that of plants (Hall, 2011), that has informed much of the wider research interest in socionatures (Whatmore, 2002, 2006). That is, this research has yet to fully address the way in which both instrumental and normative representations of urban trees mask the ways in which urban trees are living entities that exhibit a high degree of interagency with people and with their environments, and exist within complex intersubjective entanglements in the lives of urban residents (Jones and Cloke, 2002; Lien and Davison, 2010).

Neglect of negative experience of urban trees by researchers stands in contrast to widespread anecdotal evidence in popular culture that trees elicit strong emotional reactions, negative as well as positive, from residents. In particular, it is evident that many of those who profess love for trees believe that there is a countervailing force of those who actively hate trees and who are responsible for tree injury and death through acts of revenge, scapegoating, displaced emotion and sheer loathing. It is to the question of to what degree such anti-arboreal forces exist that this paper is directed, with particular focus given to reasons for the removal of healthy trees on private land. In what follows, we critically assess the emerging green city consensus that trees are not simply useful but normatively good. We then review anecdotal and historical claims about the existence of negative attitudes to trees in the Australian context, before turning to the results of a survey of residents in six eastern Australian cities. The results of these analyses contribute to a more nuanced understanding of subjective elements related to urban trees in western cities and have implications for how urban greening agendas are conceived and implemented.

2. Trees and the good city

The large and rapidly growing quantitative research literature on trees in cities is predominantly focussed on establishing the many benefits they provide (e.g. Dobbs et al., 2011; Millward and Sabir, 2011; Morris and O'Brien, 2011; Nordh et al., 2011). Much of this literature calls for a systemic appreciation of the urban forest as a core component of urban ecosystems, encompassing all land tenures and uses, to replace past management focus on individual trees as a source of urban adornment and amenity (Dobbs et al., 2011; Dwyer et al., 2003; Nowak et al., 2001).

Research into the benefits of trees is closely allied with the maturing over the past three decades of the professions of arboriculture, urban forestry, urban ecology and urban environmental management (Carreiro et al., 2008; Konijnendijk, 2008). This alliance has had considerable influence at the level of municipal government, not least through efforts to place a monetary value on public tree services (McPherson et al., 1997, 2005; Soares et al., 2011). A remarkably wide range of different policy agendas, such as biodiversity conservation (Goddard et al., 2010), water management (Pataki et al., 2011), childhood health (Faber Taylor and Kuo, 2009), and social justice (Heynen et al., 2006a,b), are ensuring that recognition of the variety and importance of tree services continues to grow. Such interest in the urban forest is set to increase further over the next decade as trees become a central component in urban design strategies to ameliorate the causes and effects of global warming (Poudyal et al., 2011; Solecki et al., 2005).

Trees are thus in the process of being conceived by many urban designers, planners and managers as vital 'biogenic' or 'green' infrastructure in the making of liveable and sustainable cities (Pataki et al., 2011; Pincetl, 2010). Irus Braverman's (2008a) qualitative study of municipal tree professionals reveals, however, that unlike other forms of urban infrastructure, trees are likely to be valued for more than their utility. She describes an on-going

> transformation of the utilitarian discourse on trees, which focuses on the benefits of trees and greenery, into a normative discourse whereby trees are not only considered good, but are also represented as loved by everybody. This transformation is not only the result of top-down governmental policies, but it is also a consequence of longstanding romanticist views of nature in the city, furthered by environmental organizations, local communities, and individual activists (Braverman, 2008a, p. 82).

This normative discourse is not solely focussed on trees, but rests on a sentiment shared by many advocates of urban sustainability who contrast an "urban world [that is] grey, paved with concrete and asphalt, and/or brown, polluted by industry, automobiles and waste" with "alternative 'green' urban worlds" (Wolch, 2007, p. 373). Like many previous utopian discourses on the city (Fishman, 1977), this ideal of the green city is offered as a way of bypassing the usually messy business of conflicting interests that attends urban development via a "universal appeal that transcends temporal, spatial and cultural divides" (Jim, 2004, p. 311). As Perkins (2011) points out, however, urban forest agendas are no less politically and culturally laden than any other attempt to regulate and direct the attitudes and behaviours of urban residents.

Emerging consensus within systems of urban governance that trees are morally as well as instrumentally good and that love of trees is widespread, if not universal, raises important questions about the actual diversity of social attitudes towards trees, particularly in the context of urban forest strategies that seek to integrate management of private and public trees. For example, the normative discourse identified by Braverman is evident in the environmental justice argument that, "since urban trees positively affect quality of life, the spatially inequitable distribution of urban trees in relation to ethnicity and race is another instance of urban environmental inequality" (Heynen et al., 2006b, p. 3). Yet there is evidence of ethnic variation in affiliation with urban trees that has its origins in cultural more than socio-economic factors (Fraser and Kenney, 2000; Perkins, 2011), raising the prospect that urban forest advocacy may contain cultural biases that could themselves contribute to social injustices. There is also the possibility that efforts to empower disadvantaged communities, through vegetating apparently degraded urban spaces, may actually disempower some groups by displacing existing uses (Whitehead, 2005).