

Urban Trees Enhance Recreation Opportunities

Peter Duinker, Halifax Tree Project

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From Wikipedia, we get this conception of recreation:

"Recreation is an activity of leisure, leisure being discretionary time. The "need to do something for recreation" is an essential element of human biology and psychology. Recreational activities are often done for enjoyment, amusement, or pleasure and are considered to be "fun".

It is a reasonable question to ask how and why do trees enhance recreation opportunities in cities. One can think of plenty of situations where trees are not part of one's outdoor recreational pursuits. We can't have trees scattered all over the North Common in Halifax (as much as I ponder that delightful prospect!!) or else sporting recreation such as baseball, soccer, cricket, and much else could not take place there. Or consider Nova Scotia's beaches, some of which we can consider urban - who goes to the beach and turns one's back on the ocean to marvel at the trees behind the beach? There may indeed be trees there, but the whole idea of being at the beach is to enjoy, and perhaps even recreate in, the water.

For me, there are complications in scoping the concept of recreation so that it does not include doing things one declares one has to do (e.g., walk the dog twice a day) as well as things one does to promote one's health (e.g., jogging daily or having a good, brisk walk). Both these categories of activities can have strong recreational components, but I do not want to talk here about making choices for activities specifically because we feel an obligation to do certain things for our health or that of other organisms. I want to focus on things we do simply because we get pleasure and enjoyment from doing them.

First let's consider two iconic places in Halifax as destinations for recreation. The Public Gardens, founded in the 1860s, is an abundantly agreeable place to spend time away from sidewalks, cars, trucks, and buildings. Can you imagine what the Gardens would be like if there were no trees there? Of course there would be flowers of all sorts, lots of grass, pathways, the band shell, and Griffin's Pond - but would it be as gratifying a place for respite from grey infrastructure as it is now with a vibrant tree population? I should think that people are far more excited to be there with trees in place than without.

Point Pleasant Park is an interesting study in urban forest development. At the time (1749) of Halifax's founding as a bastion of British defences in North America, the Point was a magnificent example of mature Acadian forest sheltered from the ravages of sea winds (think of the opposite at Peggys Cove not far away). During the first decades of Halifax, virtually the whole Point was cleared of trees - for building materials, for fuelwood, for space to build fortifications, and for visual contact with the other fortifications around the Halifax Harbour. Even in the 18th century, Point Pleasant was a place of recreation for the Halifax residents who wanted to picnic along the waterfront, observing the daily parades of sail in the harbour,

confident in the knowledge that behind them were swarms of military staff keeping the locale well guarded. It did not really matter at the time that the woods were essentially gone - what mattered was safety during recreational activity.

As the 19th century gave way to the 20th, the woods of Point Pleasant were allowed to regrow. Many small plantings of trees were implemented, as evidenced by the 15+ non-native tree species, but the majority of the trees that grew in the Park (established in 1866) were naturally regenerated.

In September 2003, Hurricane Juan laid waste to roughly three-quarters of the mature trees in the Park. For safety and aesthetic reasons, the blown-down trees were cleared from the Park. When it re-opened in June 2004, many tears were shed as regular visitors were unable to recognize their beloved seaside woodland. HRM queued up a comprehensive planning process to create the Park's first-ever plan (of which I was a co-author). On several occasions during the planning process, the people of Halifax were asked to express their preferences for the Park's future. All notions of building up the Park with infrastructure for amusement and active recreation were rejected in favour of the overwhelming ask to just give us back the woods! And, among other things, that is just what the Point Pleasant Park Comprehensive Plan (NIPpaysage Landscape Architects et al., 2008) does.

Why did people want the woods back? One tenable hypothesis is that people anchor their preferences in something recent and good. Perhaps if, at the time of the hurricane, Point Pleasant Park were a sort of popular "Disney-North" amusement park and that got heavily damaged, people would have clamoured to rebuild it. I will posit here that people really, REALLY like having a substantial patch of semi-natural recreational woodland, steeped in military history, so close to the city centre. The Park is a heavily visited recreational ecosystem, deeply appreciated by residents and visitors alike throughout the year.

So far I have focused on parks as recreation destinations. And well I should, as my experiences visiting and living in other countries suggest to me that parks, both large and small, both inner-city and suburban, contain the majority of the trees that many urban people around the world can enjoy. My visit to Athens was certainly enjoyable in the context of history, but there was little tree cover to experience (see photo). Same with my visit to Venice (see photo). On the other hand, I spent some summer months in Rome (see photo), and thankfully my time there was centred south of the Colosseum where the tree canopy is relatively abundant. And I adore Winnipeg, despite its flatness, for the huge population of American elm trees across its neighbourhoods (see photo).

If I go out for a recreational walkabout in Halifax and don't visit a park, I will choose either the waterfront so as to experience our most wonderful downtown harbour or I will saunter in the well-treed streets of the peninsula's residential districts. Sure, I am drawn to trees because of my vocation (a vocation I chose because I love trees), but on what grounds, if recreational walking is my activity, might I choose, say, Kempt Road, or Quinpool Road, or Wright Ave. (Burnside), or Chain Lake Drive (Bayer's Lake)? These are roadways that are overwhelmingly dominated by built infrastructure, most of which has absolutely zero architectural appeal. And while we are at this, check out Titanium Crescent (on Google) in a new subdivision to the southwest of the

Halifax peninsula - how long will it take before that is a pleasant street for a recreational stroll?

Let's finish the examination of the recreational value of trees by returning to the North Common. I do love that ecosystem, having played some serious fastball there in the early 1980s. My observation in closing is that hundreds more trees could be planted into it without detracting at all from the sports spaces. Indeed, I think the North Common would become a much more attractive place for passive recreation if it had way more trees. Choosing good locations for them, and wisely choosing species, would be paramount.

Reference

NIPpaysage Landscape Architects, Ekistics Planning and Design, P.N. Duinker, Black Spruce Heritage Services, Form:Media, and LandDesign Engineering Services. 2008. Point Pleasant Park Comprehensive Plan. Halifax Regional Municipality, Halifax, NS.





