

Attachment to the City: The Role of Trees in Creating a Sense of Place

Jessica Quinton, Faculty of Forestry, UBC

2021-03-07

If I ask you to think about your grandma's house, your favourite coffee shop, or your local park, you will likely have thoughts of what these places look like, the people you see and interact with there, and how you feel about these places. Perhaps when thinking about your favourite coffee shop you remember the smell of freshly roasted coffee beans, sitting on your favourite worn sofa in the corner, and the distant hum of conversations around you. Such an interpretation of this coffee shop is positive and will make you think fondly of it, perhaps even making you wish you could be there right now. Such attachment to your favourite coffee shop is in part due to the sense of place it has created for you.

What exactly do I mean by 'sense of place'? This concept can refer to both the distinctive characteristics of a space, as well as your attachment to and interpretation of a place. A sense of place can be positive, such as the feelings of happiness and comfort you have when you visit a friend's house, or they can be negative, like when you feel fear walking down a dark and unfamiliar street. A sense of place is created not only by the material or physical dimensions of a space but also the social dimensions. You might be attached to a place that is aesthetically unpleasant because you have positive social experiences, such as spending time with loved ones, in this place. Your sense of place can also be heavily influenced by other's interpretation of a space. For example, if your parents spent a lot of time with you outside as a child, you are more likely to have positive associations and attachments to spaces with elements of nature due to your prior experiences outdoors.

So how do trees contribute to our sense of place in a city like Halifax? Research we have done has highlighted the role trees play in creating positive interpretations of places in the city and in fostering residential attachment to such spaces and in the city overall (Ordóñez, Duinker, Sinclair, Beckley, & Diduck, 2016; Peckham, Duinker, & Ordóñez, 2013). In my own research on user perceptions of cemetery trees, many respondents talked about trees contributing to an overall welcoming and peaceful atmosphere in these spaces (Quinton et al., 2019). Indeed, if the trees from our urban cemeteries were removed, they would look and feel much different. Many of the other urban forest benefits previously discussed in this blog series (such as aesthetic improvement, shade provision, enhancing safety, and so on) may mediate the sense of place created by trees through their role in making the spaces more pleasant and welcoming.



Improving residents' sense of place and their attachment to a place can be beneficial not only for individuals but also for the wider community. A person who is more attached to a certain place is more likely to engage in stewardship activities to maintain it. In this way, a sense of place can help with preservation and conservation activities, activism, maintenance, and so on. When designing the Halifax Urban Forest Master Plan (UFMP), the authors divided the city into 111 unique neighbourhoods named after existing neighbourhoods to connect residents to their urban forest through their sense of place, in an effort to promote citizen support for the urban forest (Steenberg, Duinker, & Charles, 2013). Native tree species have been indicated as important to contributing to a sense of place (Hull, Lam, & Vigo, 1994), which was also considered in the development of the UFMP to ensure the maintenance of existing Acadian tree species and ensuring they continue to be planted within the city (where appropriate, of course). You can find some examples of old-growth species in such places as Hemlock Ravine. In the ravine itself you will find a magnificent stand of old eastern hemlocks, thankfully spared from the ravages of Hurricane Juan (see photo). When water is flowing in the brook, and you arrive at a place in the ravine where you can hear no traffic noise from either the Bi-Hi or the Bedford Highway, the experience is idyllic. What a place!

Our sense of place can change over time as the place itself changes or as the way we view and interpret it changes. Places we currently find unattractive and/or

uncomfortable to be in could be improved, and our feelings about them and our attachment to them could become more positive. When we think about Halifax, planting and properly maintaining trees could change our perception of and attachment to certain spaces. For example, planting trees in low-canopy areas could improve the aesthetics, shade provision, and delivery of other desirable tree-related benefits, resulting in increased use of these spaces and improved residential sense of place. However, it is important to note that your sense of place can be different from someone else's sense of place. This is an important consideration when decisions are made about managing our urban forests in an equitable way to ensure everyone in the city feels at home.

It is also worth noting that changes to a place that we have a strong attachment to can cause unhappiness and alter our sense of that place. When Hurricane Juan hit Halifax in 2003 and caused many trees to be knocked down in Point Pleasant Park, necessitating their removal, this was likely devastating to many residents as it fundamentally altered the landscape of the park as they knew it (see the photo taken in December 2004). This is an important consideration in the face of climate change given the expectation that catastrophic weather events will become more frequent and more devastating. The urban forest also faces other pressures, such as the spread of invasive pests, which can alter our city landscapes and potentially our sense of places within it. A good example of this is Waterfront Drive in Bedford where the recent arrival of emerald ash borer (EAB) has necessitated the removal of many ash trees, with more to come. The neighbouring DeWolf Park is now at risk of losing many of its ash trees to EAB. The way we manage our urban forests now not only influences our own sense of place, but it also has the potential to influence the sense of place of future generations.

References

- Hull, R. B., Lam, M., & Vigo, G. (1994). Place identity: Symbols of self in the urban fabric. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 28(2–3), 109–120.
- Ordóñez, C., Duinker, P. N., Sinclair, A. J., Beckley, T., & Diduck, J. (2016). Determining public values of urban forests using a sidewalk interception survey in Fredericton, Halifax, and Winnipeg, Canada. *Arboriculture and Urban Forestry*, 42(1), 46–57.
- Peckham, S. C., Duinker, P. N., & Ordóñez, C. (2013). Urban forest values in Canada: Views of citizens in Calgary and Halifax. *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*, 12, 154–162. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ufug.2013.01.001>
- Quinton, J. M., Duinker, P. N., Gallant, K. A., Steenberg, J. W. N., Charles, J. D., Gallant, K. A., & Charles, J. D. (2019). To tree or not to tree: User and management perspectives of cemetery trees. *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ufug.2019.126385>
- Steenberg, J. W. N., Duinker, P. N., & Charles, J. D. (2013). The neighbourhood approach to urban forest management: The case of Halifax, Canada. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 117, 135–144. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2013.04.003>



