A full sensory experience: Aesthetics of the urban forest

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When I was conducting fieldwork for my master's thesis, I asked people what was important to them about trees in Halifax cemeteries. One of the most common answers I received was "They just look nice" (Quinton et al., 2019). It's not just in cemeteries where the beauty of trees is appreciated; previous research conducted in Halifax has found that residents and visitors alike appreciate the aesthetic contribution of trees in various urban environments, including streets and parks (Ordóñez, Duinker, Sinclair, Beckley, & Diduck, 2016; Peckham, Duinker, & Ordóñez, 2013). The aesthetics of urban trees are closely related to the feelings they evoke within us, such as a sense of peace and calm.

What is it about trees that contribute to a pleasant urban aesthetic? For many, it is the visual element. Trees—particularly their leaves—provide a nice contrast to the seemingly endless stretch of grey we find in cities. However, trees contribute to the aesthetics of Halifax beyond this. How about the sound of leaves rustling in the wind? Or birdsongs from some of the winged inhabitants of trees? What about the smell of flowering trees in the spring and summer, or the musky scent of fallen leaves in autumn? Let's not forget the texture and sound of crunching leaves and pine needles beneath your feet. A wide range of sensory experiences is provided by our urban trees.

These sensory experiences can change across landscapes and through the seasons, providing us with a series of novel aesthetic encounters. For example, this is the time of year when the leaves turn from green to varying shades of red, orange, yellow, and brown before falling to the ground. It's the hallmark of the autumn season and what makes it my favourite time of year. For a truly spectacular and nearly luminescent autumn display, check out the sugar maple in front of the IWK Health Centre on University Avenue (right).

Of course, it isn't just autumn when trees enthrall us with their beauty. The other seasons have plenty to offer, whether it's the sight of snow on coniferous trees or bare deciduous branches, buds and flowers in the spring, or a lush canopy in the summer. When May rolls around, take a walk down Tobin Street in the South End, and you might be able to spot this cherry tree in blossom (see below). You can also see a whole line of cherry trees along Park Avenue in Dartmouth.


Single specimen trees like those pictured above can draw our eye because their sharp colour and texture stand out from their surroundings. However, the visual layering of trees when they exist in groups or lines can also provide a rich experience due to the variety (or similarity) of shapes, sizes, colours, and textures. The lane of trees pictured below can be found between Howe Hall and the Killam Memorial Library on the Dalhousie University campus. You may also remember the photo of tree-lined Kline Street from our blog post about the American elm. Walking through a tree-lined street always gives me a feeling of peace and calm because of the way the trees form an

almost cocoon-like tunnel. Beyond street trees, you can venture to Point Pleasant Park, where the trees combine with the other surrounding vegetation to provide a sense of 'wildness' or 'naturalness' that can make it feel like you've left the city.
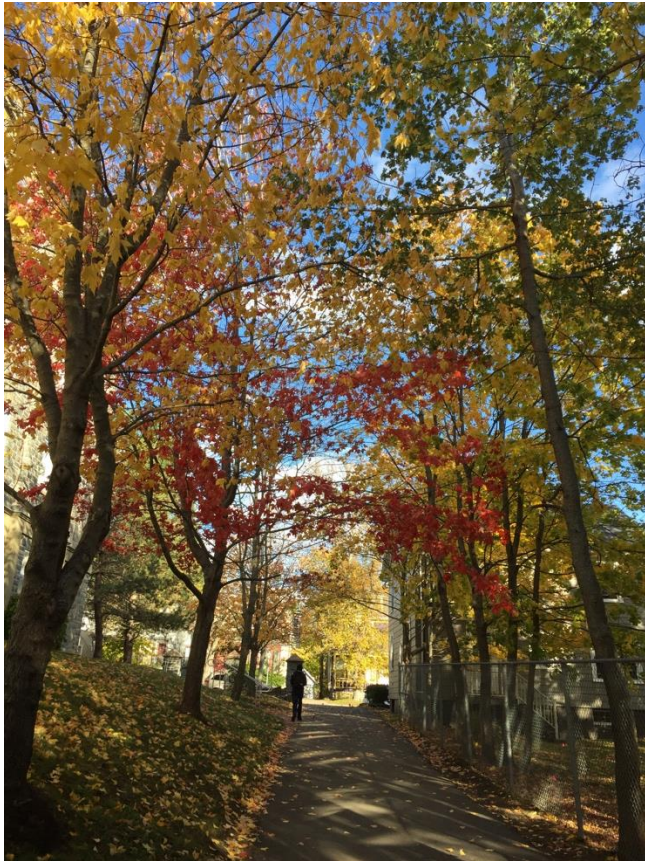
Urban trees can help create an experience of naturalness, like in Point Pleasant Park, but they can also contribute to other atmospheres. For example, the tree pictured below in the Fort Massey Cemetery helps create a spooky setting that is sure to be appreciated by some—particularly around Hallowe'en. Similarly, the weeping beech in the Camp Hill Cemetery contributes to a somber and reflective experience. The trees in these settings are integral to our aesthetic experience of these two urban cemeteries.
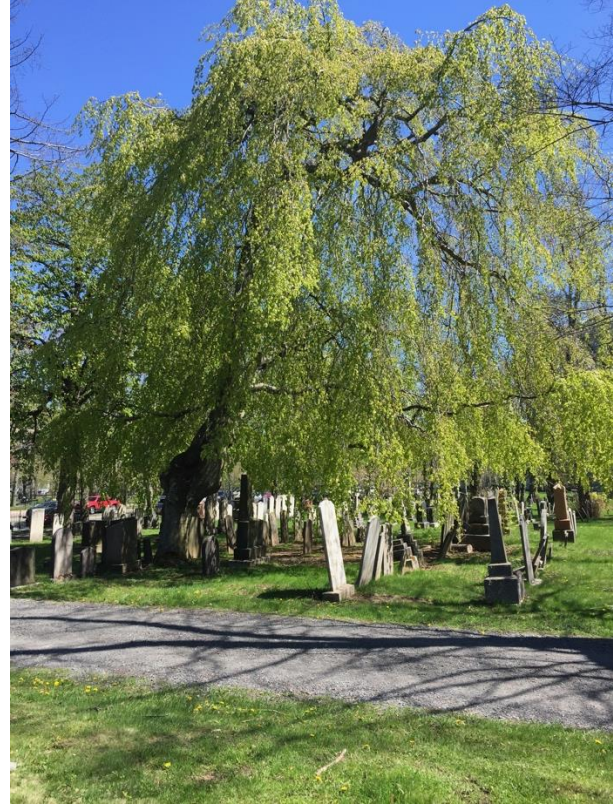
Whether considering individual trees or the urban forest as a whole, or whether it's the sights, smells, sounds, or feel: the urban forest of Halifax can provide a wide range of aesthetic experiences throughout the year. Trees can help to soften the harshness of the built landscape of our cities and create a wide range of aesthetic experiences, which in turn can influence our feelings when in these landscapes. This benefit of urban trees is one that we can all connect with in some way.

References

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