

WATER, POWER, TREES



WOULD OUR CITIES BENEFIT IF THE URBAN FOREST WAS MANAGED LIKE A PUBLIC UTILITY?

BY TIMOTHY A. SCHULER

Water, power, and public rights-of-way are among the basic services that most cities provide their residents. Gaylan Williams, ASLA, an arborist and landscape architect, thinks there ought to be one more: trees.

In an essay published on *Planetizen* earlier this year, Williams, who works as an urban designer at the Houston office of Design Workshop, argued that urban forests should be thought of as a form of infrastructure and maintained as a public utility.

“We’re finding room in the public right-of-way to place all of these utilities,” Williams says. “Now that we know more about trees, we should be finding room to have that same [level of] service. Because we can actually measure the quality that a tree brings, in terms of shade and heat reduction and carbon sequestration.”

Right now, urban trees fall under the jurisdiction of various city agencies, from parks and recreation to facilities maintenance, and their care is often reactive, pruned or maintained only

LEFT
Some neighborhoods in Boston have little urban tree canopy. A plan co-led by Stoss Landscape Urbanism will help distribute tree canopy more evenly throughout the city.

after the tree is damaged or when it threatens property or public safety. And that's only the trees on public property. In most North American cities, 60 to 70 percent of the urban forest grows on private land.

Williams says the urban forest, if conceived of as a public utility, would be elevated to the level of other basic services and funded and managed appropriately, no longer mutilated in service of overhead electric lines but given the space and care to grow and flourish. And it would be incumbent on a city's public or private tree utility to extend the urban forest—in the form of parks, plazas, or tree-lined streets—to all residents.

“Right now, electricity takes precedence over any tree because electricity is a basic service that must be maintained. I see them as just as important. They must coexist,” Williams says. “So we have to really think about, how do we ensure equity? How do we make sure that we have tree-lined streets where kids can go out and play in every single neighborhood?”

One need only look to the water-contamination crisis in Flint, Michigan, or the uneven way in which electricity was restored to southern Louisiana after Hurricane Ida to understand that utilities are subject to neglect or bias. But conceptually, the notion of the urban forest as a basic service gets at some of the key chal-



LEFT
Design Workshop planted 175 new trees along 12 blocks of Houston's Bagby Street as part of a 2013 redesign.

lenges that characterize urban tree care, including inconsistent planning and oversight.

“When you think about them as infrastructure, there's kind of an operational, structural question that is pretty interesting, which is, who should really be overseeing this and how do we fund it?” says Amy Whitesides, ASLA, a director at Stoss Landscape Urbanism, which is wrapping up work on an urban forest plan for the City of Boston.

Among the recommendations that Stoss and its co-lead, Urban Canopy Works, are making to Boston is to invest in developing an urban forestry workforce, beginning with a chief urban forester who would oversee the plan's implementation. “One of the interesting things that we've landed on is, if they have to focus on putting money somewhere, staff is where they need it,” Whitesides says. “All the budget in the world wouldn't help them right now unless it meant they could hire skilled people to do the work that needs to get done.”

In some ways, the proliferation of urban forest plans is a sign that cities are beginning to think of and manage their urban forests as an infrastructural system. Jenny Gulick, an arborist with more than 40 years in the industry and a principal at Urban Canopy Works, says that 10 years ago, urban forest plans were virtually nonexistent. Now, cities including Miami, Dallas, and Charlotte, North Carolina, are investing in them, responding both to repeated climate shocks as well as technological developments, which have allowed designers and others to attempt to quantify the economic and ecological benefits of trees.

And yet Gulick and Whitesides caution that viewing trees as infrastructure could be reductive. “The danger is there's this tendency to monetize. If we can say trees bring this much economic value, that's a motivator,” Whitesides says. “But they're so much more than that. And sometimes the 'so much more' has value that is above and beyond the financial.” ●