

# Planting 'Post-Conflict' Landscapes: Urban Trees in Peacebuilding and Reconstruction

## Abstract

For urban forestry and greening professionals, the aftermath of civil and military conflict presents novel opportunities alongside daunting challenges. However, while trees often feature in planting designs, the larger role of 'post-conflict' urban greening is frequently overlooked by policymakers and planners, by academics and by tree and landscape professionals themselves. In this paper, we explore the intersection of urban greening and 'post-conflict' reconstruction. In particular, we explore the role of trees in mediating the relationships between physical urban environments and the less tangible – but no less crucial – dimensions of memory, culture, heritage and identity. The paper comprises four distinct yet interconnected sections. In the first part, we offer an overview of recent scholarship on urban trees in the aftermath of conflict, drawn primarily from the literature on forestry and urban greening. The second section develops an understanding of the symbolic value of trees in conflict and peacebuilding through a review of studies drawn primarily from the fields of cultural geography and landscape studies. In the third section, we deepen the theoretical background by exploring how the concept of 'landscape' might contribute to the work of urban greening in societies emerging from conflict. The final section summarises our findings and identifies areas for future research.

## Introduction

For urban forestry and greening professionals, the aftermath of civil and military conflict presents novel opportunities alongside daunting challenges. As part of broader efforts to rebuild civil society, urban reconstruction and reconciliation initiatives may take a variety of forms at a variety of scales. Although trees often feature in planting designs, the larger role of 'post-conflict' urban greening is frequently overlooked by policymakers and planners, by academics and by tree and landscape professionals themselves. This is surprising given the emotional weight carried by urban regeneration in these contexts. Examples such as the regeneration of Ground Zero in New York, or the Peace Park of Hiroshima point to the high international profile of this work. Outwardly, these initiatives may serve as foci for healing and reconciliation, but contentious politics may lurk beneath the surface. Societies emerging from conflict face many challenges, not least the ongoing struggle for control over meaning, memory and identity in densely populated urban areas. As Simpson (1997, 476) observes: "The sources of social conflict shift over time, taking on new forms and manifestations. In this sense, there is no such thing as 'post-conflict'" (see Muggah, 2005, 240–242). Given the inherent volatility and vulnerability of these contexts, the urban greening sector would be wise to reflect on the broader cultural dynamics that emerge alongside the physical aspects of 'post-conflict' regeneration.

In this paper, we explore the intersection of urban greening and 'post-conflict' reconstruction. In particular, we explore the role of trees in mediating the relationships between physical urban environments and the less tangible – but no less crucial – dimensions of memory, culture, heritage and identity. To this end, we draw on the concept of 'landscape' to bridge the physical and the symbolic dimensions of urban greening, with the intention of drawing theory and

## Keywords:

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practice into closer dialogue with each other. The academic discipline of geography in general – and cultural geography, in particular – has a longstanding tradition of conceptualising landscape as a framework through which power, identity, history and meaning are constituted and communicated (see Wylie, 2010; Mitchell, 2002). By tapping into this rich seam of inquiry, we seek to enlarge an understanding of trees as both material and metaphorical agents in the work of ‘post-conflict’ urban greening. In doing so, we attempt to introduce some useful vocabulary and conceptual frameworks to urban greening professionals.

This paper comprises four distinct yet interconnected sections. In the first part, we offer an overview of recent scholarship on urban trees in the aftermath of conflict, drawn primarily from the literature on forestry and urban greening. The second section develops an understanding of the symbolic value of trees in conflict and peacebuilding through a review of studies drawn primarily from the fields of cultural geography and landscape studies. In the third section, we deepen the theoretical background by exploring how the concept of ‘landscape’ – and its attendant foci on heritage, identity, memory and culture – might contribute to the work of urban greening in societies emerging from conflict. The final section summarises our findings and identifies areas for future research.

## Section One: Trees and Urban Reconstruction

Since the early days of the international urban forestry movement in the late 1960s, its literature has been concerned with the role of trees and urban forests in promoting the welfare of urban residents (Andresen, 1974). Some of this literature has also focused on promoting the welfare of urban residents who have been socially and economically disadvantaged; generally, the movement has been recognised for having something of a ‘social conscience’ (Johnston, 1985). However, there has been little mention in the relevant literature, even in more recent times, of the role of urban forestry in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. This may be due to the reluctance of arboriculturists, urban foresters and others working in this field to express their views on what is potentially a controversial and sensitive subject, both culturally and politically. This is likely to be the case for many of

those working in the public sector or those reliant on this sector for their project funding. In part, this paper aims to demonstrate the relevance of urban forestry to the field of peacebuilding, and to encourage more contributions on the subject.

In the academic literature, forestry and ‘post-conflict’ peacebuilding sometimes intersect in national-scale studies of governmental programmes that incorporate tree-planting and reforestation as intentional strategies for rehabilitation. For example, reforestation efforts in Afghanistan are a crucial strand in the country’s long-term recovery. Under the umbrella of ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’, the US military and the Afghan government are attempting to create an economy based on agriculture and natural resources, and to reclaim the country’s long, rich history of forest utilisation (Groninger and Ruffner, 2010; Groninger, 2006). With regard to urban trees and urban reconstruction, however, there has been little systematic study in the established literature. Cheng and McBride (2006, 156) observe that studies of the rebuilding of cities tend to focus primarily on urban planning and architecture, with scant attention to urban forests. Below, we offer a brief summary of studies drawn from three cities with distinct ‘post-conflict’ greening strategies.

### Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

In their study of Sarajevo, Lacan and McBride (2009) explore urban tree damage in the context of military warfare. The siege of Sarajevo was the longest in 20th-century Europe, beginning in April 1992 and ending 44 months later in March 1996. Following the dismantling of the city’s energy supplies, the increasingly desperate residents turned to the urban forest as a last resort. Three-quarters of all trees within the siege line were cut down for firewood, and the city’s parks became makeshift cemeteries. Remarkably, however, the residents and leaders of Sarajevo made plans for replanting even during the siege itself – an act of defiance and faith in the future of their city. Lacan and McBride (ibid, 141) recount the story of a parks employee who not only planted but also hand-watered seedlings, exposing himself to potential sniper fire in the process. After the siege ended, the trees of Sarajevo were quickly replanted. Today, this is reflected in the uniform height and size throughout the urban forest. Lacan and McBride attribute the success of Sarajevo’s rapid recovery

of its urban forest to the city's strong plans for fast, extensive planting.

### Belfast, Northern Ireland

The Forest of Belfast was a pioneering city-wide urban forestry initiative in Northern Ireland that was conceived in 1987 and was most active during the first half of the 1990s (Johnston, 1995). This was a period when Northern Ireland was still engulfed by 'The Troubles': the armed conflict that erupted in 1969 and claimed more than 3,000 lives over three decades. While the origins of the Northern Ireland conflict are complex, they largely reflect the different political aspirations between the Loyalist/Unionist population that seeks to remain part of the United Kingdom, and the Republican/Nationalist population that seeks a united, 32-county Ireland.

The Forest of Belfast project involved a partnership of central and local government bodies, voluntary sector organisations, business interests and



**Figure 1:** Launch of the Forest of Belfast Project with children from Northern Ireland's first integrated school helping disabled children plant trees

community groups (Johnston, 1995; Shimada and Johnston, 2013). The main aims of the initiative were to increase tree cover in the city and to raise awareness of the importance of urban trees and woodlands among its residents. The project organisers brought together community groups, schools and individual residents from both sides of the community divide to take part in tree-planting schemes and a wide range of arts and educational activities. These events and activities were part of a deliberate policy to increase social contact and to build trust and mutual understanding between people from different and often hostile political and cultural backgrounds. To this end, the project harnessed a shared concern for the city's environment, thus building an awareness of trees as vital environmental assets and as symbols of well-being, peace and reconciliation. Trees were conceptualised as a shared resource for all residents, regardless of cultural and political affiliation.

### Tokyo and Hiroshima, Japan

In their study of post-war Hiroshima and Tokyo, Cheng and McBride (2006) documented the restoration of the cities' respective urban forests following the destruction caused by US bombing in the Second World War. They contrasted the impacts of firebombing in Tokyo with the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Their analyses focused on the structure and composition of urban trees, the respective planning processes and the management of surviving trees. Their methodological strategy was based on archival research, discussions with city planners and arborists, and surveys.

Cheng and McBride uncovered two patterns of post-war forest restoration, leading them to conclude that the quality of a city's pre-disaster urban forest is important in determining the possibilities for reconstruction. For Tokyo, an original large-scale urban greenery plan was reduced to a much smaller plan in the face of local pressure to return the city to its original environment, to the extent possible. In Hiroshima, on the other hand, the immense destruction jarred planners and citizens into conceptualising the urban forest as crucial to the reconstruction process. The city's original urban greenery plan became greatly expanded due to a legal framework that drove active greening as a crucial plank of post-war urban reconstruction.

In Hiroshima, the handful of trees that survived the bombing subsequently held deep emotional and symbolic importance for the city's traumatised residents. Hence, it is not surprising that a major thrust of the post-war greening plan reflected a desire to replant the trees destroyed during the war. A major linchpin of urban reconstruction was the creation of the Hiroshima Peace Park, designed as both a memorial to the victims and a statement against nuclear weapons. In 1950, city officials sponsored a design competition for the park; the winning design included a 100-metre wide, tree-lined 'Peace Boulevard' running west to east and symbolising the road to peace (see also Gough, 2000). In the next section, we turn to a deeper discussion of the symbolic iconography that both underpinned and emerged from reconstruction projects like these.

## Section Two: Arboreal Iconography

Over the 20th century, tree planting emerged as an important material feature of memory and memorialisation, leading Gough (1996, 74) to introduce an area of scholarship that he calls 'arboreal iconography.' In excavating the symbolic power of trees, he points to the devastated European battlefields of the First World War. Lone trees served as crucial reference points on the flattened terrain of Flanders and Picardy, to the extent that engineers physically re-located distinctive trees to frustrate enemy gunners, and camouflage experts designed fake trees as observation posts. In this way, battlefield trees earned notoriety that long outlasted the war, investing the lone tree with the symbolic weight of wartime iconography. Many decades later, a similar phenomenon resonated with the people of post-war Hiroshima, who reported deep devotion to the trees that had survived the bomb blast (Cheng and McBride, 2006).

Given their symbolic weight, it is not surprising that trees should also have emerged as key features of peacetime landscapes. In particular, this was true for the practice of memorial landscapes that emerged in the aftermath of the First World War. For example, the practice of 'honour avenues' became an alternative memorial format in Australia, where great distance separated grieving families from their soldiers' burial sites. Tree-lined streets were created, with each tree symbolising a fallen soldier, emphasising in arboreal form a landscape of order

and planning. These avenues created the effect of soldiers lining the road, with military precision. Stephens (2009) argues that honour avenues function as narratives, with the trees commemorating particular meanings such as willow for grief or cypress for death (see also Gough, 1996: 73). More broadly, Gough (2000) asks whether tree planting may have replaced memorial building in the rhetoric and culture of commemoration.

Linked to the discourse of commemoration and the memorialisation of conflict is that of the memorialisation of peace. As we seek to argue in this paper, the arboreal peace iconography is fraught with challenge – often in stark contrast to the simplistic, healing intentions for which it is invoked. Hiroshima, Japan, serves as a useful illustration. As a 'peace city,' Gough (2000, 218) argues that Hiroshima functions simultaneously as a "reliquary, funeral site, civilian battlefield, and a locus of political and social debate". Its regeneration forged the long-standing peace iconography that persists to this day, and nowhere more than in the symbolic weight of the Japanese cherry tree. This tree – alongside other species planted as part of Hiroshima's urban regeneration – occupies a place of honour in what Gough (2000, 219) describes as "the peace movement[']s ... strict lexicon of appropriate 'peace vegetation'". This lexicon now forms a universal language. For example, the twinned peace parks in Seattle, USA and Tashkent, Uzbekistan (formerly the USSR), created in the late 1980s as the Cold War thawed, feature flowering cherry orchards that ostensibly serve as icons of a nuclear-free world. In the 1990s, following the siege and subsequent reforestation of Sarajevo, struggling city officials turned to the international community for donations of tree stock. From Japan came the gift of flowering cherry trees (Lacan and McBride, 2009, 141). This gesture can be read as much as a symbol of solidarity as of material donation. Yet beneath the now well-established iconography of this particular peace tree are memories of deeper ideological conflict embedded in the history of Hiroshima's 'post-conflict' planting. In the post-war reconstruction of their city, Japanese residents felt uneasy with the American design of the memorial buildings, exacerbated by concern that their grounds of trauma would be desecrated by hordes of fee-paying tourists (Cheng and McBride, 2006). The Japanese cherry tree thus carries a more disturbing dimension that complicates its benevolent universal symbolism of peace and healing. In cities where discourses of

memory, commemoration and heritage are ripe for contestation, the over-simplification of arboreal peace iconography poses challenges not only for planners but also for the residents who must live day-in and day-out in these landscapes.

For arboriculturists, planners and other practitioners, there may be an easy tendency to reach for trees like the Japanese cherry tree as symbolic shorthand for peacebuilding. The temptation may be enormous, particularly in high-profile urban contexts. However, the shadows lurking behind the ubiquitous 'peace tree' should make us pause. One need not scratch too deeply below the surface to uncover more ambiguous, potentially disturbing resonances of trees. Some examples of this date back many centuries. The ancient Greeks had long observed that willows appear to cast off their blossom before fruit had set and, more significantly, that these trees seemed to reproduce more by suckers from their roots than by seed (Davies, 1988, 37). This was undoubtedly the starting point for the mythological belief that the living willow tree is the murderer of its own fruit, and that both life and death are at work in this tree. Apart from its many life-affirming connections, the fig tree also has an unhappy association with death because of the belief this was used in the suicide of Judas Iscariot, following his betrayal of Jesus (Carey, 2012). A similar and more recent association of trees with the bleaker aspects of the human character can be found in the lynching trees of the southern United States in the 19th and early 20th century (Harris, 1984). By mutilating and then lynching African-American people, white Americans were performing a rite of exorcism designed to eradicate the 'black beast' from their midst, to render them powerless and emasculated. For many black people in the United States, these trees and their 'strange fruit' continue to evoke dark and painful memories.

Moreover, the religious resonance of trees is a rich yet unexplored arena that bears further academic attention. For example, in Islamic eschatological theology, heaven ('The Garden') and hell ('The Fire') each hosts a paradigmatic tree. The heavenly tree of *Sidrat al-Muntaha* bears high symbolic value, as evinced by its location nearest to Allah. In stark contrast, the feared tree known as *al-Zaqqum* is located as far as possible from Allah, in the deepest, hottest and most punitive part of the Fire. This tree contains highly poisonous resin, thorns, bitter fruit and, in later medieval depictions, the heads of demons in its branches (see Rustomji, 2009). Like the Japanese

cherry tree, the tree of *al-Zaqqum* can also serve as universal shorthand, albeit for very different purposes.

The examples above suggest myriad ways in which trees resonate deeply in the cultural psyche. In the next section, we deepen our understanding of 'arboreal iconography' by positioning it in wider frameworks of culture, heritage and landscape.

### Section Three: Contested Landscapes

Jones and Cloke (2002, 4) argue that trees inhabit "an extraordinary range of symbolic places within human imagination", bound up as they are in a range of ecological, sociological, economic, cultural, political and material formations (ibid: 57). In short, trees play a pivotal role in landscapes of human culture and identity. The conceptual framework of 'landscape' has been developed most fruitfully within the discipline of cultural geography. Although cultural geography is a contested arena, with an abundance of vying approaches and research interests, at its heart is a fundamental concern with how cultural groups create landscapes that, in turn, shape their cultural identities. As Norton (2006, 21-22) paraphrases: "identity is not simply a matter of *who* we are, but also *where* we are" (original emphasis).

Although landscape is a basic organising concept for the discipline of geography, 'landscape' itself is a fiercely contested term. The word is an English rendering of the German composite '*landschaft*.' The first part, *land*, refers to the area that supports a group of people; the second, *schaft*, refers to the moulding of a social unity (see Wylie, 2010). Together, they refer to group activities and experiences that occur in a particular place. Within cultural geography, landscapes are pivotal and shifting foci of inquiry between people, place, culture and identity. Over the past century, geographers have complicated the concept of landscape enormously, from 'a transparent window through which reality may be unproblematically viewed' (Moore and Whelan 2007, x) to an interpretation of landscapes as material and metaphorical sites of representation. With regard to discourse around urban greening and 'post-conflict' planting, it may be most useful to conceptualise landscape as 'culturally charged' (Matless, 2000, 142).

An understanding of landscape and identity as socially constructed resonates with an understanding that multiple values exist in the cultural landscape,

thus giving rise to multiple interpretations. Contested meanings and values in landscapes can have profound effects on identity, particularly with regard to territorial claims. As Hardesty (2000) explains, people invoke their own cultural and social images in the creation of cultural landscapes. These landscapes reflect and form the continuous process of 'world-making' (ibid, 171), changing as people themselves and their cultures change.

In places recovering from violent conflict, the fraught politics of heritage – like those of memory – are embedded in contested landscapes. Indeed, Moore and Whelan (2007) point out that as loci of both power and resistance, cultural landscapes should be considered a key element in the heritage process. The transformation of contested landscapes – for example, through urban forestry programmes – inevitably creates encounters between conflicting narratives of cultural heritage. Ashworth and Graham (2005, 4) are emphatic that heritage is not merely the study of the past. Instead, they define heritage as “concerned with the ways in which very selective material artefacts, mythologies, memories and traditions become resources for the present.”

Given the complexities that surround heritage and its role in the creation of identity, the potential for contestation is rife, and nowhere more so than in urban societies recovering from violent conflict. For these societies, deeply entrenched narratives of heritage may anchor people to place in the past, present and future. Conflicts arising from contested spaces may at their heart be rooted in contested ideas about the identities of place. As the process of peacebuilding transforms contested landscapes, new possibilities emerge as to how people imagine these places and their relationships to them. In societies recovering from violent conflict, the transformation of contested landscapes opens up possibilities for new ways of thinking about place.

Urban forestry and greening professionals can have a vital role in creating new urban landscapes that will make a positive contribution to the 'post-conflict' processes of peacebuilding and reconstruction. However, that work should be undertaken in close collaboration with specialists in other disciplines who can advise on the design of landscape proposals that will have a generally positive rather than a potentially divisive impact on the wider community. There is already some tradition of this type of collaborative

approach in the urban forestry movement, but it needs to be developed much further to meet the challenges of the future. When designed and implemented with sensitivity, community tree planting schemes and the resulting urban treescapes have a unique ability to bring communities together in a spirit of common purpose, in the process creating a landscape that reflects a shared environment and heritage. However, if that sensitivity and collaborative approach is not present, then the treescapes created could be highly contentious and likely to reinforce and entrench the perspective of one particular community at the expense of others.

## Section Four: Conclusion and Directions of Travel

In this paper, we have sought to excavate the terrain between urban greening and 'post-conflict' reconstruction through the lens of landscape. In doing so, we have attempted to draw the themes of culture, identity, heritage and memory into direct dialogue with the material aspects of urban greening. Rather than seeing these themes as the hinterland of 'post-conflict' urban reconstruction, we argue that urban greening must grapple with them as central elements of social sustainability. At its heart, this is a dialogue not just about trees, but about the ongoing cultural and symbolic relationship that a society will forge with its urban forest – a dialogue comprising multiple 'arboreal encounters' in the process of peacebuilding (Shimada and Johnston, 2013).

With violent conflict and civil strife engulfing many urban areas around the world, and with some urban societies now emerging from recent conflict, we hope that this paper will encourage the increased use of trees and urban forestry projects in reconstruction and reconciliation efforts. However, we also caution against the uncritical celebration of 'peace trees' and other forms of standard arboreal iconography. Urban foresters and greening professionals need to take seriously the symbolic complexities of trees in 'post-conflict' landscapes, and to engage seriously with discussions about heritage, place, identity and imagination.

The time is ripe for new strands of research to emerge from these crossroads. Of great value would be an emphasis on participatory research with culturally distinct communities to explore their perceptions of trees in relation to urban planning.

Some research has been undertaken in this area recently (e.g., Johnston and Shimada, 2004) but far more needs to be done. Such research also needs to be undertaken with a range of different communities and with different planning scenarios to help establish some of the basic principles of theory and practice that should underpin the field.

As part of this body of research, and given the role of religion as both a source of conflict and a potential resource for reconciliation, we encourage studies that will focus on the voices of faith communities. For example, in the wake of the controversy around the rebuilding of Ground Zero, participatory research with Muslim communities about the role of trees in their theological tradition would provide valuable insights for planners and greening professionals about the role of mosques in urban spaces. Moreover, by its very nature, participatory research methodologies attempt to ground those 'being studied' into the very heart of civic engagement – a vital component of urban reconstruction and peacebuilding.

Around the world, urban forestry and greening professionals are already engaged in developing tree and landscape schemes for the benefit of 'post-conflict' urban societies. Many are aware of the potential opportunities and challenges that can be encountered; as a result, a growing body of relevant experience and knowledge in these matters is being accumulated. This work must be researched and recorded, so that the principles of good and innovative practice in diverse situations can be shared for the benefit of others engaged in this work. New research projects on this topic must also be developed to build on our existing experience and knowledge. As an essential part of all that, urban forestry and greening professionals must work closely with specialists in relevant subjects such as cultural geography, heritage landscape and conflict resolution in order to enrich the discourse on these matters, and to give language to these challenges and opportunities.

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