

# New shade of green for the city

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January 6, 2012

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Imagine the cityscape with a green top. Photo: City of Melbourne

**It's out with the old and in with a new tree canopy for Melbourne, writes Megan Backhouse.**

NOW that the solitary, gangly pine tree - 30 metres tall and all that remains of the celebrated Takata Matsubara forest in north-east Japan after the tsunami last March - is dying, all hopes are being pinned to grafting the tree and raising seedlings.

The pine, which until 10 months ago was just one amid 70,000, has come to mean more than its lean trunk and thin crown, something more than its materiality. It has become a symbol of hope and, for a time at least, survival.

Just as trees provide the bones of many private gardens, they help set the tone of the wider public landscape. Like the Japanese pine, this can be because of the emotions we pin to them as well as their physical presence.

When 43 elms in Yarra Park were to be spray-painted blue for the 2006 Commonwealth Games, for example, such was the dismay that the art project was shelved. And, as has been shown time and time again, there is no surer way to prompt an outcry than when councils suggest replacing existing exotic street trees with native ones.

So with the City of Melbourne expecting 44 per cent of its trees to die, or at least be at the end of their "useful life", within the next 20 years, what to do? Architects from Christopher Alexander to Jan Gehl have spoken about how positive urban spaces must provide for people, their feelings and a multitude of uses. Trees are often central to this.

In November the council released its Draft Urban Forest Strategy 2012-2032, setting out how Melbourne can become "a city within a forest rather than a forest within a city" now that more than a century has elapsed since much of Melbourne's open space was landscaped.

To this end, the City of Melbourne's strategy proposes almost doubling public canopy cover to 40 per cent by 2040 and introducing a 5 per cent limit on the proportion of its trees devoted to any one species, as well as limits on the proportion of trees devoted to any one genus or family. While there are currently more than 250 species represented among the city's 60,000 public trees, 21,000 of them consist of elms (12 per cent of the tree population), planes (12 per cent) and river red gums (11 per cent).

On the one hand, these trees help create what we consider the character of Melbourne, but, on the other, the dominance of such a narrow band of species leaves them susceptible to pests, diseases, heatwaves and droughts. Under the strategy, no particular species would ever have such a strong presence in again. But if nothing is done, whole avenues of trees will soon be lost anyway, with more than half of Melbourne's elms, for example, expected to be removed within 10 years.

Dr Greg Moore, chairman of the National Trust's Register of Significant Trees and a senior research associate at the University of Melbourne, says there is a fine balance between meeting the needs of the current population and appropriate planning for the future.

He says the strategy is a bold one that will have a positive impact on the landscape for many generations to come, even though it will require the sacrifice of some "magnificent" canopies for a time.

"People of this time I think have been remarkably short-sighted and given no recognition to the sacrifices of the previous era and not been prepared to make their own sacrifices for future generations," he says.

Trees - ever-changing and ultimately dying, as they do - can never be viewed as a static part of the landscape and, under the strategy, the emphasis will be on increasing biodiversity and introducing a much wider range of plant species (both natives and exotics) with varying life expectancies, growth rates and growing conditions. Green roofs, walls and balconies will also play a bigger role.

Perhaps in a sign of the species to come, when it came to planting additional trees in my City of Melbourne street - currently dominated by elderly elms - earlier this year, residents were given the choice of white cedar (*Melia azedarach*) or October glory red maple (*Acer*



The aspirational end of the spectrum: fully integrated architecture, art, urban design and green infrastructure - Hundertwasser's Waldspirale housing in Darmstadt, Germany.

*rubrum* October glory). It went to the vote and, this being East Melbourne, the North American maple with its autumn colour was chosen.

While the council's strategy acknowledges that trees physically define a space and help define a city's character in the same way as architecture and other aspects of urban design, there is an implicit understanding that personal taste and current fashion for particular species is a moveable feast. The City of Melbourne outlines environmental, economic, social and health reasons for its strategy, but sensibly steers clear of the question of the aesthetic appeal of specific trees.

What it does dwell on though, is how to keep the community informed so the public is more engaged with the city's vegetation and its process of evolution. To this end, an online consultation forum has been developed, a physical forum held, a video produced (it was viewed 800 times in its first two weeks) and submissions sought. The public has until the end of February to express an opinion.