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CITYSPACE

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Tree-mendous Assets



Tree of life: Besides their environmental benefits, trees make for lively streets that attract pedestrians. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

Chopping down street foliage paves the way for blight.

by Joanne Aitken

Until recently there was a tree in front of 1520 Walnut St., where a new Benetton opened late last fall. It was one of many planted a couple of years ago as part of the Center City streetscape improvements. The tree was cut down when the Benetton renovations began and when work was complete and the sidewalk repaired, the tree pit was paved. One of the workers told me the tree would not be replaced because the owner didn't want it there. A representative of the building's owner -- Benetton in Washington, D.C. -- told me that they had had to repair damage to the sewer line, which they assumed was caused by the tree's roots. They have no plans to replace the tree now that it is gone since it would obscure their storefront -- as if cars on the street and not pedestrians on the sidewalk were the audience. A shortsighted view, when you consider how much better the street looks with even immature trees or how inviting it will be to window-shop some future July day when the canopy is full grown. What a waste of the money spent on public improvements if individual owners can undo them one piece at a time.

But just how important is this one tree? Possibly very. Its presence is a part of our legacy as William Penn's "greene cuntry town" and recognition that trees clean our air and cool our planet, promote psychological health and make for attractive and interesting streetscapes that draw people. And its loss is a sign of something more

insidious.

Gray Smith, AIA, local architect and civic gadfly, says that blight is caused -- at least in part -- by the failure of government to enforce regulations. An overflowing Dumpster or the loss of a tree may seem individually insignificant, but it suggests to others: "Why bother? If they can get away with it, I can. No one cares." Consequently, undesirable but seemingly insignificant events accumulate into a significant force that, at some point, becomes ruinous.

Fortunately, there is a more hopeful flip side to this syndrome, in which seemingly insignificant improvements accumulate to become a significant force for positive change. A parallel scenario to the Benetton tree played itself out about a year ago at 45th and Baltimore in University City, where a Sunoco station occupies the visible triangle at a Y intersection. There, three good-sized ginkos softened but couldn't obscure the station, which is impossible to miss on this neighborhood street. Even so, the owners decided to add two suburban-sized signs -- presumably legal, though why they should be at this location is another matter -- and chopped down two of the ginkos to ensure their sightlines.

Perhaps the station owners did not realize they needed a permit to remove healthy street trees. Certainly they underestimated the passions of this neighborhood, where in the last few years alone volunteers have planted more than 800 new street trees. Within hours the neighborhood listserv was alerted. Soon Sunoco headquarters were contacted



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ereafter the owner agreed to mitigate the damage with smaller but

own and in an ideal world it wouldn't take neighborhood vigilance to
to the Fairmount Park Commission, which has oversight of
Philadelphia's urban forest, it is not an ideal world. Street trees all over the city come down illegally, without permits, to
meet an owner's private needs or desires with no thought for the public realm. The Park Commission is willing to work
with owners to meet construction needs, but it is not inclined to allow healthy street trees to be removed, and it has
power to require tree replacement if it knows that one has been removed illegally. Unfortunately, in some instances --
such as the Benetton on Walnut -- that power seems to be limited to moral suasion.

The good news, as one of the Park Commission employees told me, is that people are more convinced now than ever of
the value of our street trees, so the problem isn't so bad as it once was. But the bad news is that the Commission can't
keep watch over all the trees itself. It needs the assistance of our eyes and ears and welcomes our calls if we think
something's amiss. I would add: The street trees were put on Walnut Street to improve the public realm. These trees
are one small but telling component of Center City's rebirth and important for its continued health. An individual
owner's unilateral decision to remove one of them stinks. If all we have is moral suasion, use it. Call someone at the
city to complain. And the next time you go into Benetton, ask them to replant the tree.

*Joanne Aitken, AIA, Associate at Dagit/Saylor Architects, is a past president of Philadelphia AIA and member of
Philadelphia's Design Advocacy Group.*



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