Sowing the Seeds in Our City

I read the email on my phone, “Dear Tree, if you are that big round beautiful low hanging tree, I think you are my favourite tree. Such beauty on such an ugly road. Keep up the good work.”

The recipient of this ode was a golden elm that stands on Punt Road near the banks of the Yarra River. The tree was given its own ID and email address by the City of Melbourne in 2013 along with 70,000 other trees so people could report on their condition. Instead, in what the City deemed an “unintended but positive consequence”, the trees received thousands of love letters, queries and thanks from their human admirers.

This golden elm proved to be one of the most lovable, receiving more correspondence than any other tree.

Standing beneath it, there did seem to be an endearing personality sprouting in its presence. The trunk was cracked and creased with age, but it was covered in moss, and the rain from earlier in the day gave it a soft feel. Its branches shot into the sky, curving under their own weight back down to the ground below, some laying so low I lost sight of them under the leaves and soil before they popped back up about half a metre away. Squeezed in the nooks of its branches, folds of white fungus grew, and ladybugs walked along its bark looking for these caves of sustenance. The traffic of Punt Road was busy, but the leaves blocked its view and the squeaky calls from bell miners in the distance were just loud enough to overcome the hum of rush-hour.

Spending a moment with a tree in Melbourne was not something I’d done often, and I was struck by the stillness that this elm embodied. The green spaces and trees of this city

seemed to be more of an aesthetic, or at most practical, feature of the streets. I'd paid little sincere attention to them and instead strayed hours out of the City to get my nature fix. Yet, thousands of Melburnians were openly professing a connection to the urban forest that I had only endeavoured to find in a national park. Their admiration of our green spaces suggested a different perspective on what nature is and the prevalent features of Melbourne.

Take Tom Harris for instance, a budding horticulturalist who invariably looks at the natural world with a scientific eye, but not without sentiment. To him, Melbourne is a functioning ecosystem, albeit an ecosystem unfamiliar to many. "We're in a different era of nature and part of this new era is the urbanised aspect," he said.

That nature is a constant in our lives, city or no city, means connection is within reach provided we reassess our outlook of what nature is.

Tom sees an overexposure to nature through the phones in our hands and the numerous screens in our houses. Nature documentaries and Instagram feeds are windows into dense forests and savage oceans, but they also belittle the nature present in our day to day lives. "That's not around us, that's not what we're living so we can't associate with it."

Although we may find ourselves disassociated from nature, Tom emphasizes that Melbourne is an ecosystem and, whether we think about it or not, we are an integral part of that network. "I think we're still living off this idea of what nature was not what nature is now or what it has to be in order to still function."

What now exists is a plethora of native and introduced species, wide open park lands and condensed chaotic bush, vege patches and backyard gardens all working together to sustain this strange and imaginative ecosystem.

“We’re never going to bring it back to beautiful forests everywhere and live harmoniously with nature,” Tom said, “but we can create a new normal where it’s entwined with our lives.”

That an ecosystem has emerged within the city is both impressive and unsurprising. Melbourne, like most large cities, was built on land rich with natural resources, plant-life and wildlife. The abundance of wetlands, grasslands and forests, aided by the heavy rainfall associated with the area, were inhabited for millennia by the tribes that made up the Kulin Nation, the original custodians. The settlement of what was then called Naarm saw the slow denigration of many of these ecosystems in favour of urban expansion and development. The resurgent ecosystem that Tom refers to did not simply sprout from the cracks of this newly urban environment, rather it was a by-product of the popular culture at the time and continually evolving government policies.

During Victoria’s founding as a colony in 1851 and Melbourne’s growth into a city around the same time, the popularity of science in Britain and its colonies was profound.

Science and culture were seen as concomitant, and botany (an especially popular field of science at the time) was unique in its accessibility to the general public. The 1871 Board of Enquiry into the Melbourne Botanic Gardens acknowledged that the park would not have an exclusively scientific objective but “should also be a place where the whole colony could study.”

It was to be “a model of careful and thorough cultivation, of well-planned scientific effect, and of art skilfully applied to the embellishment of nature.”

This perspective on Melbourne's green spaces stayed relatively constant throughout most of the 19th and 20th centuries until 1968 when Melbourne Metropolitan designated nine areas (now 12) outside the urban growth boundary whereby the land would be preserved and exempt from creeping urbanisation. These spaces, known as the green wedges, encompass Melbourne from the basalt plains of the west down to the Mornington Peninsula. Their establishment marked a shift in the City's attitudes towards its green spaces. Nature was no longer a living museum to study and admire but a struggling entity that required active conservation and consideration from the people that lived alongside it.

In 2017 the Future Melbourne Committee endorsed the Nature in the City Strategy, re-evaluating our relationship with nature even further. The strategy acknowledges the City as an ecosystem and hopes to "actively foster connections amongst people, plants, animals and the landscape." The end goal is to "create the legacy of a resilient, balanced and healthy natural environment with a community that is connected to nature and place."

The most significant shift in this strategy is that the concern is not just directed at the urban forest but also the people who engage with it.

In these policies, people are no longer just observers of nature but recipients of all natures benefits.

The health and wellbeing of inhabitants is linked to the health and wellbeing of our forests.

Health psychologist Melissa Hatty studies the link between connecting people with nature and biodiversity conservation behaviours, with a specific focus on understanding how to nurture connection with nature among the Victorian public. Her research reflects a similar understanding of nature to that of the City; that our relationship with our environment is reciprocal.

She believes the positive effects of a walk in a national park can be felt within an urban forest provided we choose to notice we're in a natural environment. "Connecting involves things like paying attention and noticing nature, appreciating nature's beauty or peacefulness or tranquillity, feeling a sense of awe or joy or wonder about nature," she said. In return, we may experience improved mood, altruistic inclinations, greater life satisfaction, even a decreased risk of cardiovascular issues.

The benefits may even cover the whole community. A 2012 study in Baltimore found a 10% increase in trees in a neighbourhood reduced crime by roughly 12% after socioeconomic factors and population density were accounted for. "The general trend among people, particularly in industrialised societies like Australia, is that nature does make people happy and communities more cohesive and untroubled," Melissa said.

Planted in 1938, the golden elm in its maturity now extends over the entire reserve it sits in. Its weighty canopy a far-cry from the sapling that stood in its place 83 years ago.

Per year the City of Melbourne plants 3000 more trees in the urban forest, some will only last a few months but others, like this golden elm, may age into maturity and bear significance on generations to come.

Leaving the tree, I passed through the Royal Botanical Gardens around the corner. The collection of over 8500 plant species was no doubt impressive but what grabbed my attention foremost was the people within the garden gates. Lockdown had deserted the streets, but among this greenery people strolled, ran, sat and talked with one another.

To call these areas an oasis of nature may be a slight stretch, but it's worth remembering that as the tree population declines around the world, within Melbourne this number is steadily climbing. It seems the opportunities to spend time in nature are only a block away.