Urban Natures

Urban Anthropology Unbound

General Editor: **Aylin Tschoepe**, *University of Basel*

Urban spaces are centres for human and nonhuman activity, as well as agents entangled in networks both material and immaterial, real and imagined. Urban Anthropology Unbound unpacks the usual assumptions of an anthropology of urban life and what this means for understanding past, present and possible urban futures. It promotes urban ethnography as a grounded, interdisciplinary methodology to study spatial phenomena as they interface with social and cultural ones, and offers ways to understand, interpret, make and practise urban lifeworlds.

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Urban Natures
Living the More-than-Human City
Edited by Ferne Edwards, Lucia Alexandra Popartan and
Ida Nilstad Pettersen

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Ferne Edwards
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Ferne Edwards
to Marmie
(Phyllis Nellie Edwards)

Lucia Alexandra Popartan
to Camil Ungureanu

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CHAPTER 17

Urban Trees as 'Furniture'?

The More-than-Human Politics of Moving Gothenburg's Mature Trees

Mathilda Rosengren

Introduction

On a September evening in 2017, the City of Gothenburg held a public meeting in its official showroom. Situated by the old harbour, on the top floors of a postmodern high-rise, the venue provided panoramic views of the urban fabric below. The last hours of daylight cast Sweden's second largest city in a palette of matted colours: dark blues for the river mound and canals; pale yellows and reds for brick buildings and rooftops; varying greys for railway and road systems; and, further afield, deep greens for tree-lined streets and parks. These last two chromatic categories were the reason for the public meeting. In 2017, Gothenburg was in the middle of a major infrastructural redevelopment project called Västlänken (the Western link), set to connect suburban commuters with the city centre through a new under- and overground railway system (Göteborgs Stad n.d.). The ambitious, invasive, costly and long-term undertaking had been littered with complaints from its conception. One prominent reason for the discontent was the impact it would have on Gothenburg's mature tree population. Protests had started in earnest when, three years earlier, the urban nature activist group Nätverket Trädplan Göteborg (the Gothenburg Tree Plan Network, or 'Trädplan') discovered plans to fell a considerable number of mature inner-city trees during the Västlänken groundwork (Göteborgs-Posten 2014). It was in many ways thanks to these contestations that this public meeting was taking place. I found myself there as part of my ethnographic fieldwork for my doctoral thesis (Rosengren 2020a), having spent the academic year of 2016/17 conducting participant observation and interviewing planners, activists,

and other relevant actors in the city. This chapter draws on the data and findings from this research.

The municipality-initiated meeting, entitled 'How to Move Large Trees', was intended to inform the public about the projected moving, rather than felling, of mature inner-city trees. These were ones that literally stood in the way of the planned infrastructure – their roots, trunks and branches hindering the expansion of underground tunnels and overground railway lines (Walter 2018: 50). Over three hundred large trees were to be moved, temporarily resettled (mostly in rural nurseries), and then later replanted in the city – though not necessarily at their place of origin (Walter 2018: 78–79). This, the municipality emphasized, was an undertaking of unprecedented scope on Swedish soil – both in terms of the number of trees being transposed and their maturity, many being over 150 years old. Yet, while the City purported that this was an exciting venture, Trädplan, among others, were less convinced. Being uncharted territory in Swedish urban nature conservation, they argued, this was a highly experimental enterprise, and the survival rate of the inner-city tree population was impossible to ascertain. Consequently, Trädplan vehemently opposed the optimistic municipal vision through both legal and physical undertakings, appealing each decision, and staging protests around affected trees.

A multispecies battleground resonating with cities worldwide, this local standoff between municipal actors and urban nature activists sheds light on a larger debate around the rights of urban trees to exist within cityscapes. Found at the intersection between the built urban and its lively urbanities, there is a clear tension in perception between trees as objects that can be readily (re)moved to fit current planning purposes and aesthetics, and trees as lively subjects that have a right to thrive within the city. This tension may be put in relation to how urban environments have lately been proposed as key sites to address the urgency of reshaping human relationships to other-than-human 'natures' in the Anthropocene (Lorimer 2015). According to anthropologist Anna Tsing and her colleagues, 'to survive [the Anthropocene] we need to relearn multiple forms of curiosity' through the 'attunement to multispecies entanglement' (Tsing et al. 2017: 10). Yet, how may such Anthropocene attunements look in practice? As this chapter will show, to 'simply' move a tree unveils complexities of 'being urban' that stretch far beyond anthropocentric conceptions of the city today. Turning Tsing's 'curious' lens to Gothenburg's mature trees, I detect an opening for a concretization of a *more-than-human urban politics* of *ecological killjoys, attentiveness*, as well as *attunements*. It is a politics that upends what being in and of the city in actuality entails, and one where the mature tree emerges as a

particularly pertinent empirical starting point for querying the practical recognition of multispecies entanglements.

Consider the Mature Urban Tree

To consider the urban existence of mature trees means to consider notions of place and practices of more-than-human place-making. It also concerns a relational interspecies taking care and being cared for: the mature tree may require a specific amount of human intervention to thrive in the city but, in return, it may also provide multiple 'cares' to the urban environment and its inhabitants (Sjöman and Slagstedt 2015: 350–54). Not only beneficial as coolers of urban 'heat island', air cleaners, water retainers, and easers of human depressions (Gillner et al. 2015; Marselle et al. 2020), mature and ageing trees also provide invaluable habitats for various urban flora and fauna (Rosengren 2020b). Yet, for these positive impacts to take hold, urban trees must first be allowed to reach a healthy state of maturity (Nowak 2004: 45).

Within the confines of Western dendrology, a tree that is deemed mature is one that has reached its full height and crown size. However, as even the speediest of species require many decades to attain this stature, even under optimal growing conditions, many deciduous tree species will take a human lifetime to mature (interviews and site visits 2016 to 2017, landscape architects, PoNF). A slower ascent to maturity affords the tree with a 'liminal temporality', granting the full-grown tree an intriguing ontological articulation 'between immediately mobile mammality and relatively immobile geology' (Ryan 2012: 108). This dialectical tension between 'static being' and 'continuous becoming' is particularly exposed in contemporary urban milieus, where a partial detachment from seasonal rhythms together with continuous changes to the built environment force the tree within the perimeters of mechanical time and city master plans (Leonardi and Stagi 2019:15). This 'dialogue between trees as living organisms and trees as things' (Braverman 2015: 133) is often riddled with questions of who (human and other-than-human) gets to govern urban space. With anthropocentric city planning mostly working against the ontological demands of inner-city trees, their maturities are thus signs of ligneous tenacity, grit, and considerable chunks of planning luck. Those trees that have managed to stay put in a hundred years or more consequently tell the stories of cityscapes of older planning visions and municipal blind spots (Rosengren 2020b).

As such, mature trees are not only part of the urban landscape as distinctive places – providing the aesthetic, physical outlines of streets

and parks, as well as being habitats to birds, bugs, fungi and lichens – but, as lively, ever-expanding beings, they are part of the relational cluster of human and other-than-human dwellers that invariably inhabit, change with, and make demands on the city. In Gothenburg, this sliding scale between subject and object, being and building, is partly the reason for the tense and often contradictory relationships formed between urban professionals, nature activists and mature trees. On the one hand, the municipal park and nature department (PoNF) has in recent years publicly emphasized the many ecological advantages of allowing trees to age and die naturally in the city (PoNF 2016). Moreover, maturity, stature, and species affiliation of specific trees have on several occasions explicitly altered new building projects. For instance, a municipal planner recounted how the initial plans for a university expansion had to be redrawn in order to accommodate a couple of mature trees. The changes were substantial enough that the planner and their colleagues had jokingly referred to the trees as 'the golden ones' (interview, December 2015, planner, City Planning Office). On the other hand, the dual nature of being conceived of as both 'thing' and 'living being' also 'exert[s] a myriad of tensions into the management of street trees, . . . enabling certain forms of governance to emerge' (Braverman 2015: 133). To consider the mature urban tree, then, also means to consider urban nature governance and governing.

A Moveable Tree, or 'Trees as Furniture'

The Västlänken project – in which any tree's individual value was secondary to urban development – exposed contentious structures of governance and governing in Gothenburg, arguably culminating in the costly and time-consuming moving of hundreds of trees. In early 2017, I visited one of the founders and coordinators of Trädplan (interview, January 2017, nature activist, Nätverket Trädplan). Referring to the recent tree policy of PoNF (2016), they expressed their frustrations with the municipality's one-sided approach to its mature inner-city trees, treating them like 'furniture':

> For example, there is not a lot [written] about old trees but plenty more about new plantations . . . There is not much about how to value old trees, [or] that they have social, and health and recreational values and a cultural value, and so on. There's nothing. . . like, it [the municipality's position on trees] isn't clear, rather it is 'blah, blah'. Kind of, 'well, it is nice with old trees but the city must evolve' and you should look upon a tree 'like furniture in the urban room!' . . . And what that means [is]: furniture

> is something you can kind of move around, and then you don't speak about trees as nature that is alive and in harmony with us, where respect [towards the tree] is shown.

According to this activist, the municipality approached urban trees as part of space but rarely of time, with their mature stature and long-term urban situatedness counting for little in current planning processes. If hindering a certain development or vision, as 'things, or, in the case of urban life, as street furniture' (Braverman 2015: 133), the trees were seen as easily discarded or replaceable, denying in the process their embedded pasts as well as potential futures. In such vision, the power to decide over, to govern, urban space explicitly lay in the hands of human beings – it was a quintessential anthropocentric politics for (some) humans by (some) humans.

Clearly, to treat urban trees simply as moveable objects implies a restriction of their agential capacities. It is an infringement of what Tsing calls their relational 'freedom to act', which 'depends on the bodily form [they have] inherited' (2013: 30). Simply put, the uprooting of a tree also uproots its former ontological ability to act within an urban landscape. The relational spatio-temporal demands and accommodations that it has made to its environment as part of a more-than-human urbanity are consequently severed. Nevertheless, the notion of the non-agential, 'moveable tree' is not confined to Gothenburg, urban space, or the twenty-first century alone. At least since antiquity, trees have been moved and replanted. In those days, horticulturalist Harold Davidson notes, moving trees of a mature stature came with a sense of trepidation:

> Although we have little information on the early history of tree moving, it is known that the Greeks and the Romans must have moved large trees, as it is recorded in their writings that when they wanted to designate something that was impossible or at least difficult to perform, they said, 'it was like transplanting an old tree'. (Davidson 1969: 16)

Despite these difficulties of tree moving, or 'transplanting', the practice has persisted, and various methods and apparatuses have been developed to make it a less temperamental undertaking (ibid.: 17).

The desire to bend a landscape to an anthropocentric aesthetic speaks 'of the human control of nature, and of a grace born of power' (Dean 2015: 163). So, perhaps it is unsurprising that trees over the millennia have been transplanted as part of displays of power over 'Nature' (and, by proxy, other human beings). The moving and replanting of trees has been used to emphasize the extravagant properties and powers of mon-

archs, to exhibit the 'exotic Other' from European colonies in botanical gardens, as well as to assert new urban ideals of modernity (Davidson 1969: 17; Dean 2015: 163). Today, there are few technical limits for moving mature and older trees (Pietzarka 2016: 169). Contemporary transplanting practices have thus made potential 'furniture' of trees of almost all ages and sizes. A mature tree's century-long commitment to, and agency in, a place – its 'faithfulness to its milieu' in the words of plant philosopher Michael Marder (2014: 222) – can consequently be undone in a matter of years. Nowadays, the question for municipalities is not whether moving a mature urban tree is feasible but, rather, if it is worth it (Jim 2013).

Contesting the Moveable Tree

In Gothenburg, tree transplanting is filtered through value systems heavily weighted towards what is considered economically viable, in a shorter-term sense.[1] Furthermore, although the technical tools and knowledge for moving mature urban trees do exist, the commitment in terms of pre- and post-planting care to ensure a tree's survival after a move can be a labour-intensive and drawn-out process (up to two years pre-move and six years post-planting) (Pietzarka 2016: 172; Trafikverket 2017: 11). Also, if a tree is past its prime (that is, it has passed maturity), or becomes infected by plant pathogens when roots and branches are cut during the pre-move preparations,[2] it is unlikely that it will survive a move (Walter 2018: 76, 91). Consequently, according to forest botanist Ulrich Pietzarka, '[t]ransplanting large trees is regarded as exceptional, because it is time-consuming, expensive, and it holds some risks that are difficult to calculate' (Pietzarka 2016: 175) – it is both easier and cheaper to simply replace mature trees with younger, nursery-cultivated ones.

Heeding this exceptionality, what pushed the City of Gothenburg to move not just the odd affected tree but as many as three hundred of various ages, species and sizes? Early in their campaign, Trädplan warned those responsible for Västlänken that to count on only moving twenty-five trees, as was the initial projection, 'would not get [the City] far' in saving any trees (Göteborgs-Posten 2014). The activists instead called for Västlänken itself to be amended to fit the needs of the trees. At this point, the impact on Gothenburg's mature trees had also started to concern architectural historians at the municipality (Göteborgs Stadsmuseum 2014; Göteborgs Stad 2015). They primarily sought to protect the cultural-historical values of an affected nineteenth-century inner-city

area, and so suggested a temporary move of valuable trees. This second argument aligned more neatly with the municipal notion of trees as 'furniture', and in 2015 the municipality trialled lifting some mature trees in the area to explore the venture's feasibility (Trafikverket 2015). Happy with the result, in May 2017 the amended 'Tree Plan' for Västlänken asserted that three hundred trees would be moved (Trafikverket 2017) – clearly prioritizing the economic and cultural-historical value of the trees above the ecological ones (Walter 2018: 88). This failure to further account for the ontological urban being of each tree came to a head at the aforementioned public meeting (participant observations, September 2017, public meeting, City of Gothenburg).

The meeting consisted of three presentations by professionals with theoretical and practical experiences of transplanting trees: a Canadian tree-moving expert; an academic from the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU); and a commercial tree consultant. They all held brief, systematic presentations where they described the common procedure for moving mature trees, and outlined examples of when such transplanting had succeeded. Nevertheless, despite their joint efforts, during the Question and Answer session it became apparent that many in the audience were unconvinced by the proposed undertaking. Drawing on data derived from scientific journals, Trädplan questioned why the experts had failed to address the specific situatedness of Gothenburg's trees – an omission that made the activists concerned that the transplanting would not work in practice. The network's ability to translate scientific text into effective protests, the coordinator of the group relayed to me, allowed Trädplan to come across as more than emotional 'tree-huggers' (interview, January 2017, nature activist, Nätverket Trädplan). Rather, they vocally presented an alternative perspective and political vision of the ontic-epistemic right of trees to the city, exposing the fact that none of the presentations had anchored their expertise to the actual situation facing Gothenburg's trees. The presenters had spoken in the modestly optimistic, and speculative, terms of a commonly employed planning discourse, but they did not fully address the local spatio-temporal conditions – of climate, soil, and expansive urbanizations, as well as the exceptional number of trees being moved – right in front of them.

Prodding this blind spot, the activists' contestation was met with considerable dismay by the presenters: the Canadian expert mumbled something about not having read the papers cited, then grew silent. The SLU academic briefly criticized the studies that the papers were based on, and then went off on a decontextualized tangent about the right to academic freedom. But, out of the three presenters, it was the consultant who seemed the most unsettled. Turning to the activist who had posed

the question, he snapped: 'Excuse me, but what kind of background do you have? Do you know anything about this?' (the activist quietly replied that they used to be a secondary school biology teacher). Defending the activist, the coordinator of Trädplan cut in and said: 'We demand respect. You cannot speak to us like this'. This was met with dispersed cheers, and an old man shouting: 'These are two-hundred-year-old trees!' After the meeting had finished, the consultant came up to the activist and apologized for having, so to say, 'spoken in affect'.

Affecting a More-than-Human Urban Politics

In a country where the ingrained sociocultural and political norm is to strive for broadly consensual, almost depoliticized agreements (Giersig 2008: 130), this fraught exchange exposes the affectual underpinnings of any provocation that fundamentally questions the anthropocentrism in urban planning. Firstly, by using the same methods as the experts to make their point, thus forming an 'ecological claims making' out of 'science' and 'reason' (Lachmund 2004: 247), Trädplan seemingly destabilized the presenters. Secondly, the activists hit a raw nerve by exclaiming concern for, instead of faith in, the potential of a mature tree to recuperate after a move; scepticism, instead of marvel, towards the techniques being adopted; and disputing, instead of accepting, the expertise of the presenters. As such, it was not solely an unsettling of epistemology – of a collective, accepted idea of how to 'know' trees – which brought the consultant into the realm of affect. It also involved differing ontological perceptions: when faced with a diverging perception of urban trees, grounded in an articulated multispecies empathy as much as ecological know-how, the consultant had to confront not just the science upon which he based his expertise, but also his own, individual conception of the trees themselves.

Consequently, it is probable that it was the questioning of this 'ontic-epistemic conditioning' (Colman 2017: 11) that triggered the outburst. To reassess his own standpoint, the consultant would have had to see both the trees he was encountering on an everyday basis, as well as the ones he dealt with professionally, in a different light: he would have to perceive them as beings rather than 'furniture', with the right to make claims to the city in ways that did not always serve humans. Responding to the activist's contestation 'in affect' could be read as an attempt to return to a more comfortable status quo where trees were alive, yet moveable and expendable, and human priorities ultimately trumped any other-than-human claim to urban space. This affective reaction to Trädplan's ontic-epistemic provocation resonates with feminist scholar Sara

Ahmed's notion of the 'feminist killjoy' (2010: 39) as someone exposing the inherent patriarchal injustices at the core of their society. By refusing to play along with a hegemonic belief system that they fundamentally disagree with, the feminist killjoy frequently meets outright rejection or belittlement from their surroundings. Similarly, according to its coordinator, Trädplan had often faced scorn when they had opposed the dominant, anthropocentric notions of the urban in favour of a more complex, multispecies levelling of agency and belonging in the city. In standing up for a certain more-than-human urbanity, Trädplan (along with the mature trees themselves!) thus became Gothenburg's 'ecological killjoys'.

In Gothenburg and elsewhere, accounting for affective engagements then remains central to how a more-than-human urban politics may be developed. For, if following Ahmed, in taking on the role of the ecological killjoy by affectively disputing your anthropocentric surroundings, you may also obtain a greater freedom to act. The experience, she argues, 'of being alienated from the affective promise [of society] gets us somewhere. [Killjoys] can do things, for sure, by refusing to put bad feelings to one side in the hope that we can 'just get along' (Ahmed 2010: 50). In Gothenburg, by refusing to 'just get along' with the vision of Västlänken, it seemed that both Trädplan and some mature trees (due to their cultural-historical and ecological values) had acquired some form of political clout. The municipal decision to move hundreds of trees can be perceived as an attempt to mitigate these negative sentiments – and perhaps distract from the five hundred trees that were still being felled (Trafikverket 2017: 19). As landscape architect Maria Walter asks after extensively assessing the municipal documents related to Västlänken's transplanting venture: 'Is [one reason for the moves] that the public need placating?' (Walter 2018: 93). For transplanting a tree is obviously not an immediate death sentence, like a felling is. Although most reasons for the Västlänken moves were motivated by human desires to shape urban space, there were still aspects of care for the ontological needs of the tree embedded in the transplanting practices: aside from the *affective* dimensions, it calls for a certain *attentiveness* to the aforementioned dual characterization of urban trees, and of an *attuning* to their spatio-temporal and agential demands.

Towards a More-than-Human Politics of Attunement, or a Conclusion of Sorts

What would it take to view urban space as belonging as much to trees as it does to humans; to value their right to make different, yet equally

valid, ontological imprints on the urban landscape? Summing up the case of Västlänken, Walter concludes that the 'efforts made [to protect] the trees in the project is yet another proof of the high values the trees inhabit [in Gothenburg]'; despite this, she adds, we nevertheless 'do not refrain from appropriating [the trees' remaining urban] grounds' (Walter 2018: 92). As a conclusion of sorts, my final proposition of this chapter returns to Tsing and her colleagues' (2017: 10) call for curiosity through attunements to 'multispecies entanglements' as key to surviving the Anthropocene. As seen in the Gothenburg activists, one entry point for such attunement is the cultivation of a less anthropocentric, but more affective, attentiveness to the other-than-human urban. In practice, this implies *perceiving* trees as infinitely more than street furniture, and as nothing less than lively urban beings in their own right. To attentively perceive urban trees in this way, in turn, encourages us to change with, to *attune* to, the trees. Such attunement means to grant a tree the agential and subjective qualities it is normally denied in the city – 'to invest it with the ability to look at us in return' (Benjamin 2015: 184). It is in this subjectification, I believe, that a more-than-human urban politics may emerge in full, calling on us to acknowledge and subsequently engage with the continuous multispecies negotiations and lopsided reciprocities that already exist in the urban landscape – ones that other-than-human urban dwellers, forced to respond to ever-increasing urbanizations, are already all too familiar with.

Here, the transplanting of Gothenburg's mature urban trees presents a situated example of how to begin to interrogate such philosophical and conceptual propositions of future multispecies cohabitation. The moving of the urban trees started in the autumn of 2017, and by the winter of 2018 most of the mature trees had been moved or felled. This was a tense time in the city, with affects and emotions running high: from Trädplan holding peaceful vigils for the old trees being felled, to a layperson physically attacking a professional worker as they were prepping trees to be moved (Vianden 2018). Yet this was also a period when municipal workers, intentionally or not, attuned their professional gaze to finally *perceive* Gothenburg's tree population, only to discover that 'now they [the trees] are everywhere!' (Fieldnotes, February 2017, municipal employee). Finally, in January 2021, some of the temporarily resettled younger trees were retransplanted at new, final 'homes' within Gothenburg, with the intention to return most of the remaining older trees to their former grounds by 2026 (Rosholm 2021). So far, with most transplanted trees still in good health, the municipality is claiming the undertaking to be a success. But whether it is the dawning of a novel more-than-human approach to the city, or not, still remains to be seen.

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Notes

1. The City of Gothenburg uses the so-called 'Alnarp model', *Alnarpsmodellen* (Östberg, Sjögren and Kristofferson 2013). Developed by the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU), it functions as national guidelines on how to compensate a tree in urban environments (Trafikverket 2017: 8). The value of urban trees is determined through the current price of equivalent trees at commercial plant nurseries, without any other forms of 'subjective evaluations' (Walter 2018: 29).
2. As was the case in Gothenburg when some trees due to be moved were attacked by *Phytophthora ramorum*, a pathogen responsible for causing sudden oak death (Walter 2018: 76).

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