



## Who Speaks for the Trees?

I always find this a curious time of year, the first week of a new year, marked by pine trees slumped over the curb. Just a week ago, those trees were center stage - brought into our homes, decorated with lights and gifts laid at their feet. Now alongside recycling bins, soon to become mulch for flower beds this Spring.

What is this strange relationship we have with trees? Why have our customs and traditions become so wrapped up in them? It seems a backyard is not complete without a treehouse for the kids. And yet, it is often the parents that derive the most pleasure from them, daydreams of more youthful days.

Front yards landscaped with ornamental cherries blossoming to mark the start of summer, maples bursting in shades of yellow and red at summer's end. It is no surprise neighborhoods filled with trees hold higher re-sale values than those without.

Which makes me wonder, why do developers spend time and money clearing lots of trees, only to re-plant new ones after homes are built? A homebuyer must wait years for the day when these young trees will mature, once again spreading canopies of shade reminiscent of the older trees long gone.

I can only imagine it is a matter of convenience - a clear, flat lot is far easier to drop a house onto, than siting a house amongst trees, accounting for roots, falling branches, veiled sunlight. In the eyes of a builder, trees are obstacles. So little consideration for these assets offering value to a property.

Last Fall I was disheartened by one such builder on a lot I had considered speculating myself. It was filled with giant oaks and white pines that had another century or two of growth still in them. Two acres of awe inspiring heights, each one trying to outdo the next, reaching for the sky.

I had visions of a house nestled and protected by such sentries, echoing the songs of birds throughout the year. But, it was not to be. Instead, they were felled, every last one, site cleared to the very edges. The lot became a barren patch surrounded by wooded properties on all sides, an open wound crying out for cover.

Root balls pulled out, branches stripped off, trunks piled up as pick-up-sticks waiting to be loaded and carted off to the mills. Such is the beginnings of the wood floors and cabinets in the homes we build. It calls to mind a story I read as a child, of a tree giving everything it had for the needs of a growing boy.

Aside from the many offerings the tree made, it always struck me as one sided. There must be a better way of doing things. But, I am reminded of a comment made once by a friend, "these proud trees, appreciated and brought to a full potential by our use, worthy of their mighty size and strength."

Maybe this is as it should be. Trees cleansing air to breathe, then cooling it with shading leaves, finally harvested for wood to build. Yet, this may be over-simplified. Home to birds' nests, burrowing squirrels, clinging lichen, tunneling larvae, trees are a microcosm of life far beyond our narrow human demands.

The lungs of the earth, their tips stitching together a bridge between clouds overhead and earth under our feet. These trees can be handled in a smarter way, a more fitting and respectful relationship. There was a time when builders knew trees by characteristics unique to each species, strengths and weaknesses to build from.

Evergreens on the northwest side of a house, to shield cold winter winds. Deciduous trees to the south for shading summer heat, then allowing warm sunlight through when needed, after the leaves have fallen. With a little thoughtful consideration, a house can be constructed that fits to the landscape, not the other way around.

And in the long run, isn't this best? If our communities are to last, we will need to consider the things around us, the things we use to make our homes. If we do no more than exploit, we will soon find our lands desolate, just as so many legendary forests have gone by civilizations of the past.

Where today are the Sycamore stands that once lined the waterways of America? Where are the Oaks of Europe, the Cyprus of Asia, the Acacia of Africa? They have vanished as snow before a summer sun.

The lifespan of a tree is measured in centuries, but can be taken in a day. Such acts take years to undo. How can a storied life be ended with so little concern? Are we so distracted we no longer notice what is missing?

With a new year upon us, consider preserving the trees that enrich your home. If you find yourself looking for a new home, take a closer look at the trees standing on the properties you consider. Your home will be the better for noticing, as you become more attuned to what the trees have to say.

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