

CHANGING THE CITY: PRACTISING THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE

A COMMENT FROM MAURICE ROERS*

I have a work colleague, an arborist, who has a cartoon that hangs above his desk entitled *"The man who tried to plant a tree."* In it, a well-intentioned, yet beleaguered man is stooping to plant a tree in sterile suburbia. On all sides he is beset by detractors who are berating him for such a foolish idea: *"You'll block out my sunlight!" "It'll drop leaves in my yard!" "It'll clog up the drains!" "You're creating a traffic hazard!" "It'll grow into the overhead wires!" "The roots will pull up the footpath!"* Woe to the man who tries to plant a tree.

On my desk, I have a framed letter from a member of the public. This particular resident had read about an aspect of one of my projects that had generating a bit of press. The concerned citizen concluded his letter, *"This city was fine until you came here. YOU are the unaesthetic clutter that is ruining our city!"* Woe to the man who tries to plant a tree.

I start with these couple of anecdotes because I think that they illustrate beautifully the challenges faced by so many of us who embark on the mission of trying to improve our cities. Ideas on how to improve the city are all around. Planting street trees are symbolic of this. "You know what the problem with the city is? Not enough green. The city would look so much better with more trees. Why don't they think to plant some trees?" I don't disagree. Surely doing such a simple thing, so obviously right can't be all that tough. Woe to the man who tries to plant a tree. I've been a city planner now for seven years; nine if you count the two that I spent in graduate school studying to be one. I like to think that I've been in the game long enough now to have a bit of perspective on the career, but still young enough to remember why I got into in the first place. And in that time, I've become a firm believer that great cities only come about by actually getting ones hands dirty and making them great. It is true, you get the city you deserve.

A common fallacy amongst young planners, and perhaps the public in general, is the belief that most problems in our cities exist because the solutions simply hasn't been thought of before or considered by the right people. "Why don't they think to plant some trees?" As I've come to find, so often it's not that the solution hasn't occurred to people before, it's that no one has had the courage of conviction or the commitment to see it through; to do it. And it is here that I think more planners and those involved in building our cities need to engage; in the doing. How do we do it? I believe by continually linking the possibility of our plans

to the practice of implementing those plans; by practicing the art of the possible.

It is all fine and well to say that our city would be a better place if more trees were planted. It is another to plant trees. Planners are in a unique and privileged position to bridge this gap. In fact, it is our daily job to ensure that tomorrow's city is better than today's. How do we do it? By having the courage and openness to get our hands dirty. Our hands are not dirty when they have only produced a nice looking map. Our hands are not dirty when they have only written some lofty words. Our hands are not dirty when they have only handled a slick rendering. Our hands are dirty when they have held those of the architect, the landscape architect, the engineer and the contractor in the implementation of a plan. Our hands are dirty when we have worked with the accountants, the property developers, and the lenders to get funds allocated for our plans. Our hands our dirty when we have walked elected officials, community boards, and the public through what we are trying to achieve, and then walked them through again.

Knowledge of city planning techniques and the ingredients that make a well-designed city are invaluable, but they are most valued when they are linked to the processes, people, and practices that make them happen, when the art of the possible is practiced. In my time working on Christchurch's Central City, I've found the greatest planning successes to have been in those projects where planning has taken a broad as well as deep perspective. Successful when a broad range of topics and perspectives have been embraced when formulating plans. And successful when plans have a depth that consider high level objectives all the way through to the details of implementation.

So, woe to the man who tries to plant a street tree. Woe to the man, because his good intentions are not enough. His intentions, coupled with a willingness and commitment to see them through, are needed. I commend city planning to anyone who has an interest in improving the places in which we live. There are few jobs where your main task is to think creatively about how to make tomorrow better than today. But to be effective, you need to be prepared to roll up your sleeves. We get the cities we deserve

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