

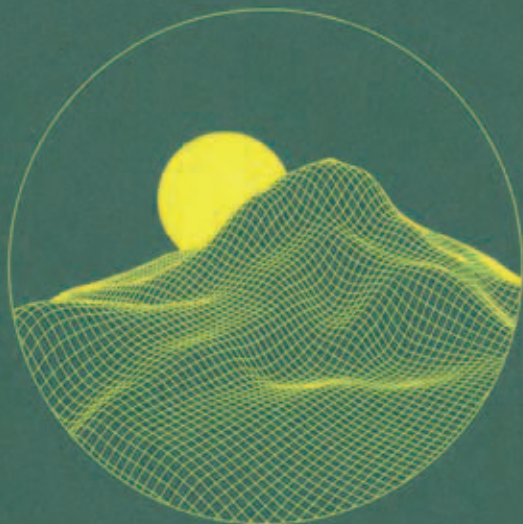
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ABSTRACT

IDEAS, FACTS AND FICTIONS

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LAND IN SIGHT

The rural future



*And other stories about the
quantification of culture,
crystal balls for financial bubbles
and the anti-jetlag pill*

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MORE TREES!

Hardly anyone plants trees anymore. A reluctance to think in the long term and alleged restraints are preventing some property owners from doing so. And in the open countryside, the municipalities have degraded the tree to the status of a nuisance. And yet the ancient Egyptians were already aware of the twin benefits of trees: they are not only beautiful, but also practical. A plea for more trees.

By Guido Hager

It does not always have to be beeches, birches and sycamores. After all, there are oaks, poplars and field maples as well. But why are there not more trees being planted despite the great choice? They are, after all, useful in a wide variety of ways. Trees have always had a mythological and symbolic meaning and even today can shape the identity of our towns. The oak, for example, stands for steadfastness, the poplar for vanity. Tree-lined streets provide a common framework for different architectural styles and have a favourable effect on the microclimate. They make walking to school or the shops more pleasant; they provide shade and reduce noise, not in decibels, but emotionally. And what children especially like is that the autumn leaves of the different trees all make a different rustling sound.

Private property owners scarcely plant any trees anymore. One reason for this is the amount of land surrounding a single-family home. In towns and agglomera-



tions this is only around 400 m² on average. But the problem could be solved by clever planning, for example, by erecting a U-shaped, two-storey building that gives out onto an open space for plants. This would make it possible to use 16 m² for planting a tree and still have a living space of 140 m². There are few people, however, who are prepared to adapt the architecture of their house to accommodate a tree. The tree will remain relatively small during a person's lifetime, so to most people the effort does appear to be worth their while. Especially as a tree, once it is big, will create a lot of shadow and leaves, and this does not fit into modern living concepts. But this way of thinking is too shortsighted. Is it not the huge trees that make these old exclusive residential areas such wonderful places to live in? And not only for the human residents but also for flora and fauna. The holes and branches are excellent places to live and to love. The trees are populated by squirrels and jaybirds. If there were a tree growing on every property in

all the newly built detached housing estates the journey through the towns and suburbs would be a pleasure again. Berlin shows us how this could be done. On the 800 m² site of a former petrol station in the middle of the densely populated Schöneberg district an idyll has been created by planting eight fully grown pines and three cherry trees. The petrol-station building from the 1950s was extended to include a two-storey gallery annex; the roof that used to be over the petrol pumps was preserved and now serves as a garden pavilion. Herbs and flowers proliferate in the gravel, and there is moss growing in the shadowy places. The centre of the garden is a long water basin. If the proprietor wants it to be so, it is also possible to plant trees in the middle of town.

BACK TO THE BEAUTIFUL

And what happens where there is no building going on? Do we need more trees in the open countryside? Let us take Switzerland as an example. Granted, it has the best forest protection laws, and natural reforestation is increasing because many steep slopes are no longer used for farming. There are numerous other laws that regulate the way the landscape is to be treated. Only, the visual component is not taken into account. Why doesn't the tourist industry stand up for the promotion of its most important good, the visually intact "beautiful" landscape? In the past this was done manually, by farming, which has left its mark on the finely structured landscape. Today, apart from steep hills inaccessible to machinery that are turning into woodland again, trees and shrubs are being removed everywhere to make room for the largest possible machines. Outside the forest, the tree has ceased to be important; it can now be found only where it is not in the way. And the places where

new trees are now being planted are along new motorways, railway lines or quarries. Their purpose is to make good to some extent for the big, ugly inroads that have been made into the landscape. The argument to plant trees for mere beauty's sake because the eye needs somewhere to linger, or because a finely structured landscape offers a greater wealth of experiences would hardly win a political debate in a local council. Farmers claim that the shadow thrown by trees is disturbing. And avenues of trees along rural roads are felled because drunken car drivers might drive into one of them. In the argumentation the useful finds no counterpart in the beautiful.

A TREE FOR EVERY GARDEN

And yet it is trees that lend a landscape its structure. Together with the fence, they are considered to symbolise the garden, and hence the cultivation of land and settling down. A tree marks a place in a landscape that can be seen from afar – in other words the garden or the property. Those who plant a tree have arrived. But their importance far exceeds the symbolic: trees have always also been planted for their usefulness as well. They provide protection from the wind. Whatever farmers or city dwellers may think, the fact that they provide shade is actually one of their best sides. The ancient Egyptians combined the useful and the beautiful in the best possible way: their gardens had pergolas overgrown with shade-giving vines and houses next to ponds with fish and ducks, all sheltered by high walls. Spending some time in the garden before a meal quickened the appetite, and afterwards there was time for a nap to digest the meal. Not so in more recent times. The French baroque garden and the classical English landscape garden banned the kitchen garden to the so-called "potager",

where it was surrounded by walls. Thanks to its geometrical design it retained its beauty and its usefulness because the walls stored the heat and provided protection against wind and burglars. But there was no room for large trees. Why cannot we learn from the ancient Egyptians? They had a good life with their large fruit trees planted so that the beds received sufficient sun. We should plant our trees in our gardens so they can cast their shade to cool a seating area or a flat roof in summer. Used in the right way trees can improve our quality of life.

I am waiting for the law that will oblige every owner of a plot to plant a large tree. It would be even better if the motivation for this came from within. Imagine a big demonstration – not against the felling of trees but for the planting of trees.

Guido Hager is a Swiss landscape architect. He runs the Hager Partner AG office in Zurich. After training as a landscape gardener and studying landscape architecture at the University of Applied Sciences in Rapperswil (Hochschule für Technik), he set up his own office for landscape architecture and worked as a part-time assistant at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zürich). For more than twenty-five years, Hager has devoted himself to the topic of the garden. His most recent projects include the Pestalozzi Park in Zurich, the Rudolf Bednar Park in Vienna, the Public Park in Tripoli as well as the park of the University of Zurich. He recently published the book "Guido Hager – Über Landschaftsarchitektur" (2009).