



Financing the Canopy

Where Agribusiness, Horticulture, and Urban Planning Meet

EVEN THOUGH HOUSTONIANS CAN'T AGREE on much, the protective love for the city's trees feels nearly universal. Live oaks, pin oaks, water oaks, magnolias, redbuds, dogwoods, palms, loblolly pines — they are beloved. As Lars Lerup says in his 1995 essay, "Stim and Dross: Rethinking the Metropolis," "In Houston, the entire foundation of the ground-level ecology is soft, rhythmic, and unstable, held together by the roots of the canopy of trees, creating the absurd impression of a city suspended from the treetops from which its cars, riders, and roads gently swing." Our canopy negates the gritty gray of what could be a concrete jungle and instead covers us with a cape of flourishing nature. A tree is an object rife with hope.

The canopy, however, did not create itself.

Aerials of the Rice University campus at the start of the twentieth century show a nearly treeless expanse. If you squint, the tiny saplings, planted according to the master plan by Cram Goodhue & Ferguson, are just visible. The surrounding neighborhoods took their cue from the campus. John Staub's architectural aesthetic included the planting of lush trees in the 1920s as part of the overall landscape in which he built his homes, as Stephen Fox notes

in *The Country Houses of John Staub*. Trees were an anchor to what *The Houston Gargoyle* called, in jest, Houston's Cradle of Culture — the areas around Shadyside, Hermann Park, and Rice — setting a pattern for the ever-expanding conurbation we call Houston.

The canopy won't live forever, however. Thanks to drought, storms, and just plain old age, trees every year are removed from the landscape, and it's imperative to not only replace them, but to plant more.

"Trees are a funny business," says Barry Ward, executive director at Trees For Houston. "It has aspects of agribusiness, commodity trading, architecture, and construction."

The most cost-effective way to renew and expand the canopy, Ward explains, runs counter to how the landscape industry operates. Tree sellers maximize profits by raising a small number of plant varieties and selling them in large pots. Planting 100-gallon trees may create an instant landscape but it costs the client about seven times as much as 15- to 30-gallon trees and greatly increases the likelihood of tree death. In addition, smaller pots can be handled by volunteers whereas big ones require professionals and machinery.

By making the most of the efficiencies in planting small trees, Trees for Houston has achieved a huge scale. During the 2014-5 season, the organization planted 26,360 trees, or approximately 500 trees a week, including 13,277 trees with green partners, 1,547 trees along bayous, streets, esplanades, trails, and tribute groves, and 1,884 trees at 31 schools.

Impressive as these numbers sound, Ward says, "We need to increase that substantially if we want a regional, metro-wide, demonstrable impact." He dreams of new ways for financing an expansion of the organization's operations, such as credits and exchanges for industries seeking to reduce their impact.

Not cutting down the trees we have would help as well. Right now, Houston's canopy is protected by ordinance; fines of up to \$300,000 can be levied for illegal tree removal. However, the protection program has currently only one enforcement officer, and could use more. Ward notes that fines alone could pay for the additional salaries for the planting of hundreds of more trees.

For a small donation, Trees for Houston will share a (15- to 30-gallon) tree with you. Also, a \$10 membership to the Arbor Day Foundation gets you 10 trees. They start small, but don't stay that way for long. Just think of the cleaner air, the tranquility gained, the carbon dioxide absorbed, your land values rising, and the urban forest growing around you, reminding you of how nature thrives in its slow, constant way, despite everything.