

HKILA response on the tree toppling incident on 19 July 2012

We express our sympathy to the citizens injured in the tree toppling incident happened on 19 July 2012, in which a large Chinese Banyan tree located at Park Lane Shopper's Boulevard, Tsim Sha Tsui fell down. We consider such kind of mishap could be avoided if quality streetscape planning and design, comprehensive greening strategy, proper tree maintenance and tree care approach are in practice. A comprehensive review on our city's current streetscape design and planning, in particular, urban street tree planting strategy is therefore necessary.

Urban Street Tree Planting in Hong Kong

It is understandable that tree planting is difficult in certain urban areas in Hong Kong given the limited available space. Nevertheless, it is weird that in wide streets such as the Park Lane Shopper's Boulevard, a major portion of the street is paved left with only a small area for tree planting. It is not unusual to note that in many street tree planting operations in Hong Kong, trees are planted in very small and confined space without much regard to their future growth. The trees are not given a happy growing environment in any sense.

Very often, there are many reasons put up for such unsatisfactory arrangements. For examples, making allowance for pedestrian circulation, reserving space for underground utilities, keeping clear sightline for drivers are a few of reasons that are most common.

However, are there no better options for our streets?

The pursue of a quality public realm - the need for a quality streetscape planning and design

Streetscape is one of the key components in the public realm of our city. A quality streetscape design shall be beyond pedestrian flow and accommodation for underground utilities, maintenance cost and responsibility. It is also about the experience people learn and enjoy when they move from one place to the other. A pleasurable and memorable experience in the city always comes with comprehensive and innovative streetscape design that addresses the functional needs of the public and reflects the character of the urban setting and its surrounding buildings. A good design will hardly be achieved by rigidly applying typical and standard designs just for convenient maintenance and

management. Good examples of streetscape in other cities such as Barcelona, Copenhagen and Singapore tell us that we still have a lot to do and there are plenty rooms for improvements. However, we should recognize that it is impossible and impractical to simply copy the successful experiences from other cities, and should instead start to explore our own way.

One critical direction is to ensure the development of a quality streetscape planning and design that creates appropriate greening opportunities and right conditions especially for healthy tree growth and establishment.

The values of street trees in urban settings

The values and benefits of street trees to a city are myriad. From the perspective of urban environment, with their canopies, trees lower the average temperature of a city and thus the urban heat island effect. Trees provide shade and improve the comfort of walking in urban area. Trees soften the hard surface of the physical environment. Trees promote the image of a city. Trees create local identity and also refresh the history of a place. It has also been proved that trees can clean up the air in a city. Trees improve communications between people and the nature. And the list will go on.

In the contrary, improper planning and tree plantings in urban areas would inevitably create unnecessary risk cancelling out all the benefits.

Trees need space for their healthy growth. It is easy to see the large size of the canopy of a tree. In fact, the root system of the tree requires even more space than the canopy. In a favourable condition, the root system of a tree can grow up to 2-3 times more than the extent of its canopy spread. It is fairly difficult to provide such ideal root space in the urban realm. However, a reasonable lateral space without planting trees too deep or too close to each other would be essential. A continuous planting zone free from underground structure and utility lines is desirable. Unfortunately, for almost all the cases, underground utilities are planned and taken care first, then the trees and without timely input from landscape professionals.

Early involvement of landscape architects

Landscape architect provides essential professional inputs in master planning, layout design and implementation stages of a project and helps the successful completion of it. Trees are given very low priority in most construction projects in Hong Kong. Very often, advices from landscape architects are only called for at very late stages of a project when most of the infra-structure design and settings are fixed and barred from changes. The work of a landscape architect becomes very limited. He could only do his best to optimize tree planting and select the suitable tree species to the right place. Trees nevertheless cannot be accommodated in the most desirable site locations and conditions.

We advocate a holistic approach to develop a comprehensive landscape plan at the very early stage of a project in order to explore greening opportunities and identify the most suitable conditions for tree planting.

There are numerous constraints in every construction project. However, shall we keep on taking the easy way to push trees to accommodate to these constraints but not taking a proactive and win-win approach to accommodate trees to a reasonable environment they deserve?

The need of proper arboricultural practice – adoption of accredited arboricultural practitioners

In addition to good planning process, proper tree or arboricultural maintenance is also vital to the well establishment and long term growth of trees.

The arboricultural industry is relatively new to Hong Kong. Currently, there are no local recognizing systems and codes of practice for this trade. As a result, the quality of tree works practitioners, such as arborists, varies significantly. The Hong Kong Institute of Landscape Architects (HKILA) recognizes the need to regulate local arboricultural practitioners and promote an accreditation system.

The aim of this accreditation system is to ensure the standard of the arboricultural industry and continuously strengthen its professional practice. It is intended to develop a local list of quality arboricultural practitioners and regulate their practice under the

monitoring of HKILA and ultimately be adopted by both government departments and private entities for any tree related works in the future

Members in the list of accredited arboricultural practitioners are reviewed and renewed annually and they also need to have engaged in continuous professional development and keep themselves up with latest technical and management knowledge in the field.

Appropriate Tree Care Approach

It should be recognized that tree problems resulted from many different factors. It would be a sound tree management practice to prevent a tree hazard than curing a defect. A holistic and proactive tree care approach begins with early stage tree planning and design by adopting a landscape plan at the onset of a project, and followed by right planting location, right tree selection, and suitable soil conditions and volume. This cost-effectiveness practice, together with good monitoring system, will greatly reduce tree disorders and hence the use of pesticides and other therapeutic treatments and the risk to the public.

The balance of public concern and tree planting

It would rather be a great misfortune if the Park Lane Shopper's Boulevard tree toppling incident will lead to the thinking that "if there are no trees, there is no tree risk." While we agree public safety should be placed with the highest priority, we believe trees are our assets and we could live harmoniously with trees without worrying about the potential hazards given proper design and maintenance are all in place.

It is also our concern that trees will be unnecessarily felled in the name of potential tree hazard. It requires professional knowledge and judgment to determine whether a tree is truly posing a risk.

We are hoping that this mishap serves as an incentive for a better greening strategy instead of forming a hostile view towards the urban trees.

HKILA

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