

welcome

Urban Renewal

There's nothing like chutzpah. Most of us go into a dither at the thought of planting a couple of trees, much less a dozen: the expense, the selection, the shipping, the placement, the digging, the soil, the sun, the care and feeding. The headache. Trees are large and demanding creatures, even though they start small. Get involved with trees, and before you know it, you're in the woods. So I was properly impressed when landscape designer Topher Delaney announced her plan to begin planting 2,749 trees in New York City this spring.

There is to be one tree planted in memory of every person lost at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

While committees around town dismantle and reassemble kits for memorial plazas; while judges meet to pull the plug on a numbing series of pools and fountains; while architects wend their way through the circles of hell, looking for the back rooms of the political machine that is our building industry, one person has simply decided to do something. It helps that she is, herself, a force of nature.

Delaney describes her vision: trees, planted in groves, in all five boroughs of New York; trees on the Grand Concourse, trees in Prospect Park. You would think that everyone would welcome these trees. But sometimes a gift is seen as an imposition. That's one of the beauties of New York—you can count on it: nothing will be right for everyone. Take SoHo: trees were never part of that industrial neighborhood; why should they be brought in now? Take Chinatown. Some store owners may not want a tree planted on the sidewalk outside their shop; according to the ancient art of feng shui, trees near the door block wealth from coming into the building. This is exactly the sort of challenge that puts a gleam of excitement in Delaney's eye; it makes her start wondering about things, such as what, exactly, is a tree. Does bamboo count? With its strength and resilience, it is considered a token of luck. Chinatown immediately, and touchingly, presents the sort of challenge any gardener must face—a decision as to what is appropriate.

It is inspiring to be in on the ground floor (so to speak) of anything that will leave an imprint on a city. In Manhattan, it isn't easy to find such

an opportunity. This is a city whose cultural institutions are mature; many are reaching into their second century. I have often wondered what the city must have looked like to someone like me 150 years ago, when Central Park was created. How would I have responded to a call for service—help, money, counsel? Would I have been sensitive to the city's need for a refuge? Would I have cared about a new park?

What seeds are being planted today that will grow into the institutions of tomorrow? Another remarkable woman, Warrie Price, is focusing her considerable energy on resurrecting a derelict park at the tip of Manhattan—a place that millions of tourists pass through, making connections to the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, the Staten Island ferry. For shame, that we should greet our guests with such dishevelment, to put it kindly. As president of the Battery Conservancy, Price intends to turn the Battery into a horticultural masterpiece, a place that will honor visitors to the city, and provide succor to its residents. The development of ground zero, right next door, brings a new urgency to the need for a beautiful park. Right now the Conservancy is mostly PowerPoints—though some remarkable perennial beds, dedicated as the Gardens of Remembrance to those who perished on 9/11, have been designed and planted by Piet Oudolf, a designer from the Netherlands. The Battery is a proposal, some drawings, some blueprints, some fund-raising—and the dazzling vision and energy of another force of nature, a woman determined to make something important happen.

As I thought about both women and their gardens, it struck me that something miraculous is springing up in the city. The fires of 9/11 were a horror; no one will ever forget seeing the charred remains of what had been a living, breathing, vibrant place. But slowly, as after a fire devastates a forest, there are stirrings. You look at what appears to be dead, burned-out ground, and you notice a tiny green sprout; you look again months later, and that sprout has turned into a sapling, and it is not alone. Life returns. But we have to nurture it.



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