

5.8 O'Connell St., Dublin

Mature tree felling in breach of Local Agenda 21

This part of the report was written by Mr. Andrew St. Ledger of the Woodland League. Andrew is also a wood sculptor and artist, as well as being a native to Dublin.

In 1998 the council produced an integrated area plan for the redesign of the main thoroughfare in Dublin, i.e. O'Connell Street. This plan did not state clearly in words accessible to the layperson, that the council were intending the removal of approximately 40 mature plane trees nor was this highlighted, which is typical when development encroaches on trees to avoid what developers call emotive responses from the public in Ireland.

In 2000 an EIS was produced by the council specifically for one aspect of the integrated plan - the proposed stainless steel spire which would rise higher than any building in the city and create the precedent that developers and speculators were looking for to allow more high rise developments in Dublin City. This spire was supposedly selected by a council committee from submissions sent to them after a public competition.

The public reaction to this strange choice was on the whole quite negative and led to one of the rejected artists taking a court challenge against the council decision. This artist lost and the council carried on amidst the controversy. Page 81 of this EIS stated the intention to remove all mature trees within a large area to the left and right of the spire to facilitate the construction of this unpopular monument. Once again the language used was not layman.

On the basis of the EIS, the council proceeded to fell approx thirty mature plane trees. Some of these trees were over one hundred years old provided habitats for wildlife, oxygen, beauty throughout the seasons, familiarity to all particularly the elderly city people and shelter from sun, wind and rain for all (particularly the homeless as there were benches beneath the trees) in a city situation that is often devoid of the above.

There was a public outcry and a campaign to save the remainder of these trees was initiated. A public consultation process started belatedly by the council. The council responded to reassure the public all was well by emphasising how many new Lime saplings would be planted in their place, without explaining the ability of the older established trees to absorb CO₂ is far greater than the saplings. At 100 years these broadleaf trees were just getting into their prime in terms of tree lifespans.

These trees were part of the people's story and their removal interferes with the integrity of cultural heritage belonging to the people of the City. These trees were living national monuments and should have been incorporated into the scheme. It would appear these trees were not diseased or dangerous and were culled to facilitate the whimsical nature of a designer led scheme which required their removal on aesthetic grounds as the new design envisaged small squared off unnatural shaped exotic lime trees which are out of place in a city.

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It should be mentioned that the plane trees were not native. However, they had become naturalised and they were planted at a time when the importance of native trees and plants to local areas was not recognised. However, the council have no such excuse as the convention on biological diversity 1993, signed up to by Ireland, makes this point very clearly. Every county council in the country should have put in place a biodiversity plan to reflect this new thinking. The reality in Ireland is that we are still waiting.

The by now very public consultation process was abruptly brought to an end by the secretive dictatorial decision of the city manager John Fitzgerald to use Coillte, a public entity, to fell the last ten trees in July 2005. Coillte claim to carry out forestry on a sustainable basis and boast of their FSC certification (which is based on the principles of Agenda 21 - the basis of which is public consultation). The trees were disposed of on site by chipping so that, for example, local artists could not avail of the wood to make a positive statement from negative - once again unsustainable practices by public bodies that should be leading by example. The felling occurred with heavy traffic at rush hour and it was reported some of the tree limbs fell out on to the road putting the public at risk.

The council and all state bodies are obliged to abide by Agenda 21. These actions are in clear breach of Agenda 21. Furthermore, it sends out the wrong message to the general public and other state bodies that this behaviour is acceptable, and that its viable to destroy 100 year old veteran broadleaf trees to accommodate the aesthetics of an unnecessary redevelopment plan. This would be a dangerous precedent should it go unchecked by the EU as the behaviour of other council managers will be influenced by the consequences or lack of regarding this serious breach of Agenda 21.

We propose the planting/replanting of the exotic Lime trees elsewhere. The replanting on O'Connell Street should occur with semi-mature native trees more suited to the place (for example, native sessile oaks would make a bold statement) after consultation with the locals and other stakeholders in line with Agenda 21, as the most sustainable use of planting to restore a degraded site which is an option under the EU rules for sustainable development.

Finally, this development appears to have all the hallmarks of project splitting which we understand is illegal under EU environment law.

Appendices:

Letter from Lisa Cooney to Dublin City Manager, 6th November 2002 (See DVD Appendices).

Letters from children to Ciarán Cuffe TD about the felling of the O'Connell Street Trees (See DVD Appendices).

Article in the Irish Time, November 11 2005, "Lyden's projects aim to beat the gridlock", (Section Available in DVD Appendices). This article demonstrates the construction industries disregard for natural and social rights in Ireland.