

Melbourne's Digital Revolution: Talking Trees

Text by Yvonne Lynch
Images by City of Melbourne

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My dearest Ulmus,
As I was leaving
St. Mary's College today
I was struck, not by
a branch, but by your
radiant beauty. You must
get these messages
all the time. You're such
an attractive tree.



In a busy and bustling cosmopolitan city, it may appear that there is neither the time nor the space to pause and ponder one's innate spiritual or emotional connection with nature. And yet, it is possible that the urban environment remains saturated with a latent sentiment that awaits the opportune vehicle to transport it to full expression. That is such the case in the City of Melbourne*, as we begin to unpick the threads of the community's deep love affair with the city's trees.

While sipping some of the world's finest coffee in avant-garde cafes or hipster laneways throughout Melbourne, you can now conveniently email a tree nearby. Each of the city's 70,000 trees has been assigned an individual email contact via the Melbourne Urban Forest Visual, a website designed to share the city's tree data with the general public.

This sounds like a novel idea to many, or even a trivial one for some, but the function of emailing a city tree was one borne out of necessity rather than novelty. Following 13 years of harsh drought, the City of Melbourne's urban forest was left in a fragile state. In 2011, the city commissioned David Callow, now the City's Senior Urban Forester, to undertake a health assessment of each of the city's trees. David worked assiduously for several months applying a useful life expectancy (ULE) criteria to assess the health of the tree population. The results were shocking: by 2021, 23% of the tree population is predicted to reach the end of its useful lifespan, and 39% of trees will be at the end of their lifespan within 20 years. For heritage landscapes, the findings were even more dramatic: the ULE assessments indicated a possible 35% loss in 10 years and a 58% loss in 20 years.

*referring to the City of Melbourne municipality, not metropolitan Melbourne

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Dear Tree 1024529, You don't know me but you are an amazing tree and I have always thought of you as amazing ever since I heard of you. I would like to comfort you in your last year or few months of living.

This assessment prompted the development of the City of Melbourne's Urban Forest Strategy, now broadly regarded as Australia's most influential urban greening policy. As part of its development, the stories of the trees were communicated to the Melbourne community, serving to engage the public in creating a robust legacy for the future of the urban forest. A four-year citizen participation program came together to support the design of the strategy and the development a set of 10-year implementation plans for each precinct in the city in collaboration with the City of Melbourne community. It became immediately apparent that the community had a deep thirst for more information about the challenges facing the urban forest, in particular, they repeatedly vocalised a clear desire to access a detailed map of the ULE assessment.

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Dear 1037148, You deserve to be known by more than a number. I love you. Always and forever.

To respond to this demand, data visualisation expert, Greg More, was invited to work with the Urban Forest & Ecology Team. Together, the team spent several weeks exploring how to best communicate the data, while still honouring the community's request. The team wished to communicate as much information as feasibly possible in order to remain transparent, but there was also a need to distil the complexity of the data into a manner that was easy to understand.

Every tree is mapped and can be geo-located individually on the Urban Forest Visual. A simple colour palette indicates the life expectancy of the tree, while a set of distinctive symbols identifies the tree genus. At a glance, the user is able to quickly identify trees that are most at risk. The system included a facility to email trees using the tree asset identification numbers in our database, with the anticipation that trees with a low ULE would attract the attention and concern of community members. With the click of a button, anybody can select a tree of interest and pursue a line of questioning, or to report an issue directly to the City of Melbourne. The unexpected, but delightful, side effect of the email function was that within months of launching the site, trees began to receive hundreds, and then thousands of love letters, alongside fan mail extolling the benefits and virtues of trees.

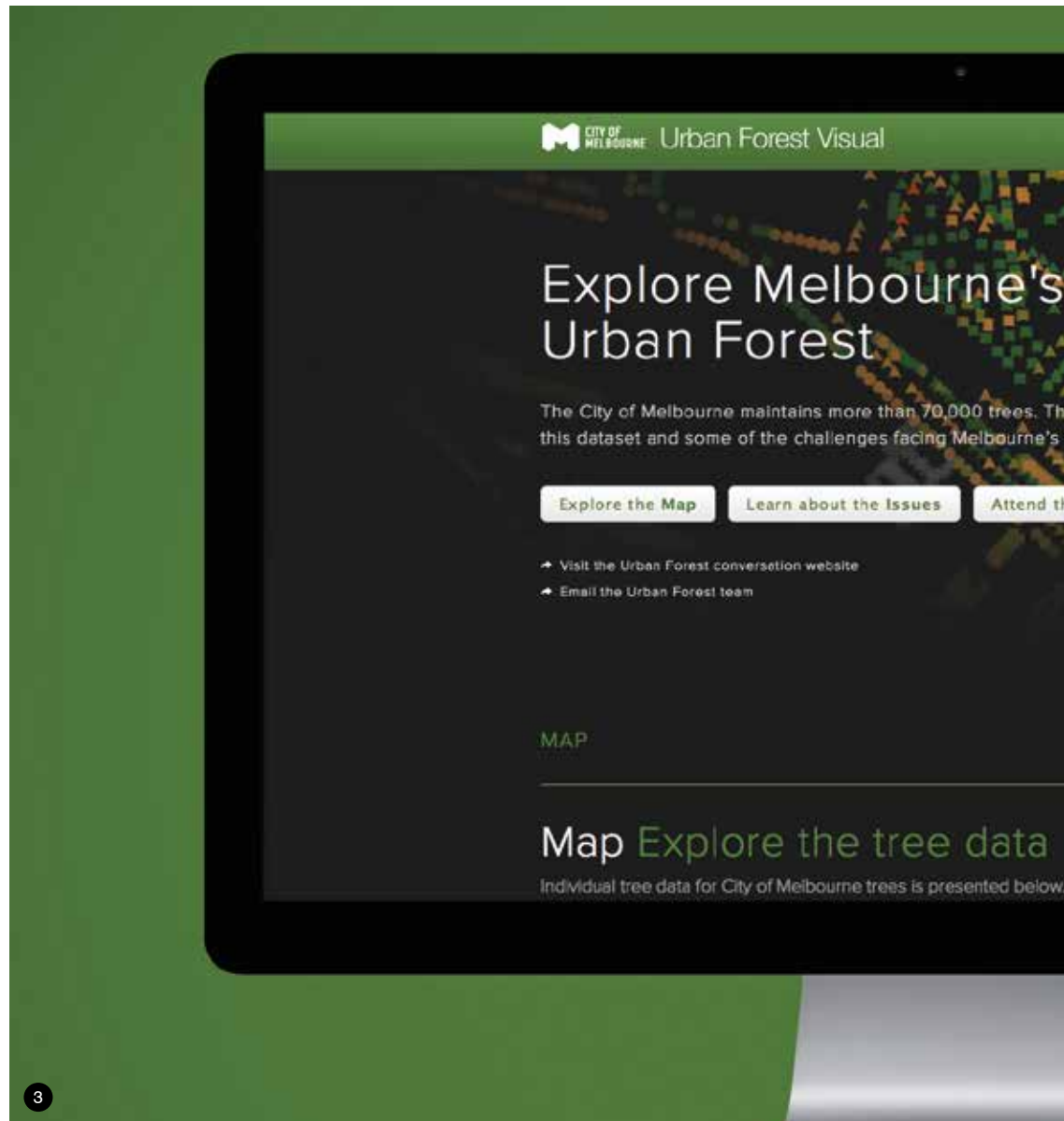
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Dear tree, Thank you for being there. A few years ago I was a student... You then provided a place to sleep three nights a week as I lived in a little country town and it was a four-hour coach trip each way to and from college... You provided me with shelter from the sun, the wind and the rain. You rocked me to sleep at night...

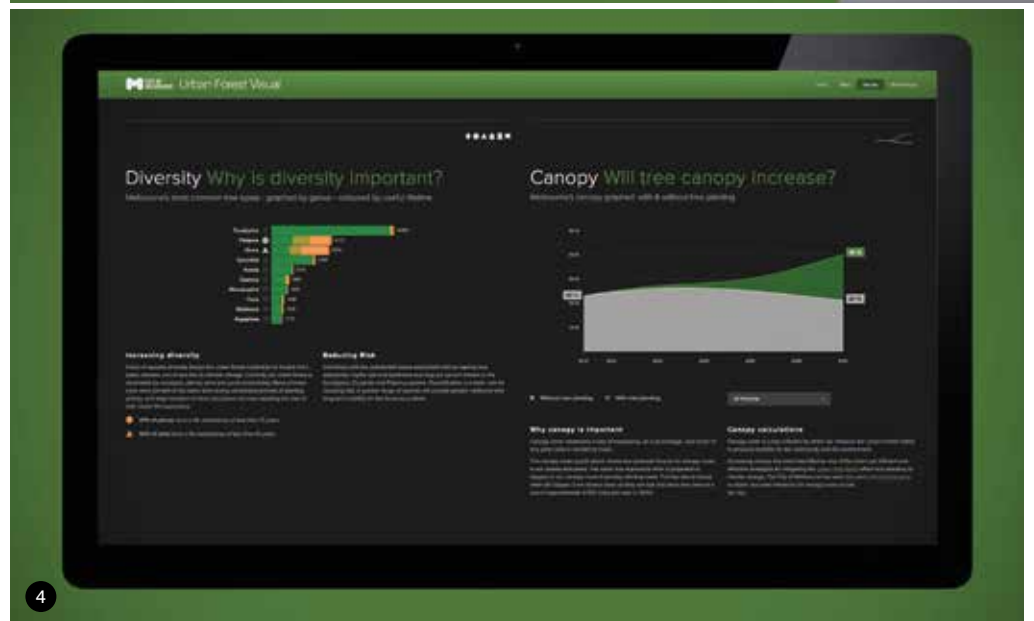


1. London Plane Trees on busy Bourke St, Melbourne.

2. Community workshop on the future plans for Melbourne's urban forest.

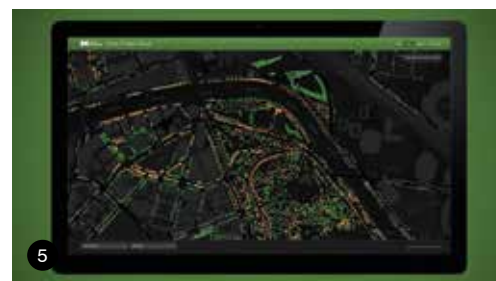
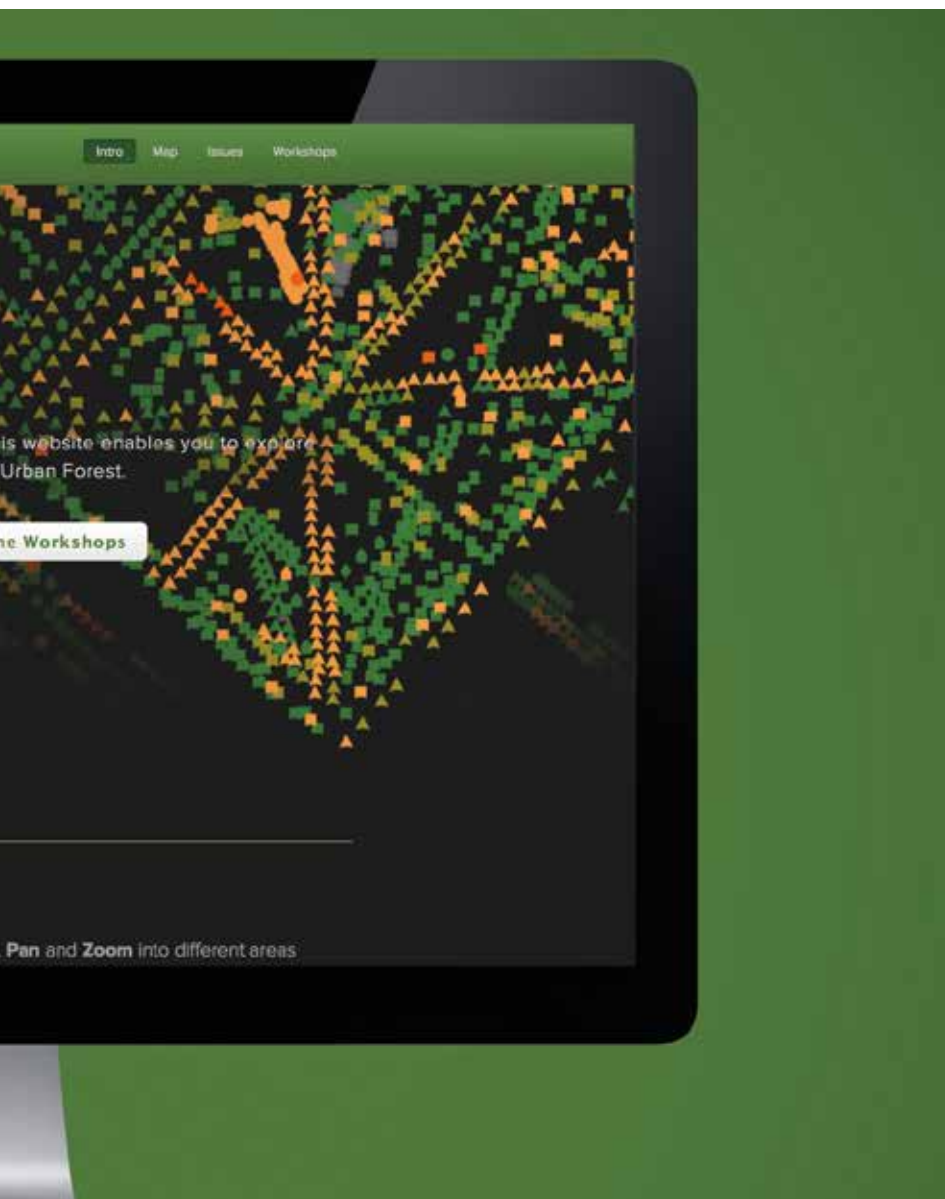


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3, 4, 5. Screenshots of the City of Melbourne's Urban Forest Visual.



It is often astounding to discover the deep emotion revealed within these emails. There definitely is an abundance of research literature citing the many benefits that trees provide for human wellbeing; but it is one thing to intellectually understand the research and another to actually comprehend this deep community affection for trees, or even to discover that many members of the community can clearly articulate these benefits and express gratitude for them. The content of these emails demonstrates a true understanding of the restorative, healing properties of trees and the general impact of trees have on human wellbeing.

There are many who believe that technology removes us from nature, but the opposite can also be true—technology can bring us closer to nature if it is utilised in a thoughtful manner. As our cities rapidly expand, our resources will become increasingly strained: communication with a growing community will soon pose challenges. City managers will need to identify new and effective ways to connect with community members to not just seek social license for new policies and plans, but also to engage the support of the wider community in creating and sustaining the urban forests providing the fabric for the city of the future. This does not suggest that tree email programs need to be commonplace, but that there is a need to further explore how digital technology can advance our ability to collaborate with our communities and to develop a unique understanding of our cities. 

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Hi there, My housemates and I, who live in your vicinity, would just like you to know that you are a fantastic natural specimen. You selflessly provide shade for my car and add a touch of beauty to the street. Keep up the good work.

There are a multitude of reasons why people choose to connect with particular trees; some select their tree of choice randomly, while others are influenced by their proximity or familiarity with a tree they regularly encounter during their commute; many write to a tree that represents fond memories or important lifetime milestones to them.