

TREE ALIGNMENTS, URBAN AIRWAYS

Looking for shade

We depend on trees for our existence, something we have never been fully aware of. Given the current situation, perhaps we should admit that our survival depends on trees. Their presence is critical to city life for they capture carbon dioxide and give off oxygen, improve air quality by trapping polluting particles, cool the space to prevent heat islands and build natural barriers to regulate noise pollution. They are the habitat of multiple species, which promotes biodiversity, and they create an emotionally healthy physical environment for people.

The benefits of trees in cities are many, but the conditions under which a tree exists in an urban alignment is something that should also be considered. Generally speaking, a tree in the public space has to thrive on a few square metres of pavement-covered ground. Soil compacted by constant traffic, which hinders the circulation of water and nutrients, slows the tree's growth. The development of the root system is limited and must negotiate the city's numerous underground pipes and infrastructures, not to mention the heat stress due to the high temperatures caused by asphalt and concrete. Because they function as natural filters, they are constantly exposed to the toxic particles in fumes and gases. The lifespan of a tree in an urban environment is significantly shorter than it would be in its natural habitat.

The way trees are currently arranged in urban environments is the result of a long, historical process. In the past, trees were actually what favoured the appearance of the first human settlements. The development of agriculture in the Fertile Crescent led to the cultivation and propagation of trees, which meant the transition from seasonal to permanent settlements. The Egyptians transplanted trees and transported them by boat over long distances. The Romans sometimes used them as markers to make the roads visible from great distances. Several centuries later, during the Modern Age, rows of trees as we know them today began to appear in the public space. The phenomenon originated in different geographical locations in Europe, sometimes as an extension or evolution of the gardens and green spaces belonging to the aristocracy. Trees were a key tool for the staging of power and their presence was generally a consequence of economic splendour.

The prosperous Netherlands of the Baroque period created a city model that outsiders described as "a forest in the city or a city in the forest", an image that would cause a sensation and become the benchmark for other European cities. In this case, the technical resource used to recover territory from the sea ended up creating a concept of urban development. Trees played a fundamental role in this process. As the windmills drained the water, the canals were stabilised by planting lime, elm and alder trees which helped to compact the soil. The network of canals in cities like Amsterdam were the primary arteries of communication and transport, and trees were usually planted on both sides of the canals.

In Paris, Queen Marie de Medici introduced the Italian custom of carriage rides. The "*Cours de la Reine*", four rows of trees measuring one kilometre long, was designed for this idle pastime. What was initially intended for the elite classes eventually became mainstream. This space became a place to be seen and to socialise, a place for love. It is also the first example of the connection between tree-lined roads and vehicular traffic. Today's tree alignments along roads can be seen as an offshoot of this pastime.

With the industrial revolution came a new scenario in which trees were indispensable to the habitability of cities. In London, the distinctive "plane trees" became a model of resilience thanks to their ability to purify the air in a city choked by the smog caused by the coal burned in factories and homes.

The problem was later exacerbated by roads overcrowded with combustion-engine vehicles that emitted gases and fumes. Paradoxically, the old practice of planting trees along roads was already a solution to this new problem.

Interestingly, at an earlier time in history the plane tree played a different role, which was to provide shelter and bear witness to the intellectual discussions and exchange of ideas by Greek philosophers. I would like to evoke the shade trees of Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum in search of that space for reflection in order to resolve the practical matters that concern our cities, a reality that poses challenges on a global scale.

El ladrón de miel (The Honey Thief)

"*El ladrón de miel*" (2023) is part of the *Arbolado para calles, imperios y paraísos (Trees for Streets, Empires and Paradises)* project, a series of prototypes and models of tree alignments for public spaces in narratives constructed around the dialogue between the trees and the urban context.

Throughout history, the presence of trees in the public space has been motivated by political, religious, social or practical interests, to the point where they are essential in today's urban ecosystem.

"*El ladrón de miel*" questions the underlying relationship between the development of civilisations and trees. It takes us on a journey from the species that gave rise to the settlements of the earliest civilisations, to the tree-planting models found in contemporary cities.

"*El ladrón de miel*" transfers the conceptual programme of a classical garden to an urban alignment. The mythological stories often portrayed by Renaissance and Baroque gardens, the playful nature of these structures and the romantic imagery of these spaces for love are the central themes of this row of trees.

The title "*El ladrón de miel*" refers to the bucolic verses of the classical poet Theocritus, in which Eros, the god of love, is attacked by bees while stealing honey from a honeycomb. Crying out in pain, he complains to his mother Aphrodite, asking how such tiny things can cause so much pain. Aphrodite reproaches him, saying that that is exactly what he does with his amorous games.

This story has been widely depicted throughout the history of art, as seen in Dürer's drawings and Lucas Cranach's numerous versions of this work.

The row of trees includes ash (*Fraxinus ornus*), lime (*Tilia cordata*), cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens*), fig (*Ficus carica*), orange (*Citrus x sinensis*) and apple (*Malus domestica*) trees. Most of them produce honey in symbiosis with bees. The alignment is based on a mythological forest from a story attributed to Simonides of Ceos. As a child, Eros built his weapons of love from the wood of two trees: the bow from the flexible wood of the ash tree and the arrows from the wood of the cypress. This was the starting point for the multiple vectors that would form the mythological stories where love, passion, seduction, betrayal, revenge and tragedy were the protagonists. Because many of these stories were meant to explain natural phenomena, the characters would often end up transforming into mist, rain, animals, flowering trees, etc., creating the mythological landscape for Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

I believe that an interesting analogy can be drawn between the mythological imagery and natural ecosystems. The symbiotic, mutualistic, predatory and parasitic relationships that occur in nature are also the games and strategies of seduction that lead to pollination, seed dispersion and germination. One such a strategy is the metamorphosis of the *Ophrys apifera* flower, the orchid that has transformed its appearance to attract the male bee and induce pollination.

The alignment of trees in *El ladrón de miel* captures all these attraction strategies. Similarly, the blossoming trees emit an aroma that appeals to the urban ecosystem, acting as a seductive artifact that aims to provoke a metamorphosis, an evolution of the public space. Trees are fundamental in metropolitan areas because of their importance in CO₂ fixation and air cooling.

They are the habitat of multiple species, which facilitates biodiversity. But cities and city streets are hostile spaces for trees, which are subjected to continuous stress throughout their existence.

This work questions the way in which we continue to manage green spaces, always from an anthropocentric and utilitarian point of view. It questions our predatory and parasitic attitude and considers a scenario of symbiosis between all living beings in the urban ecosystem.

“El ladrón de miel” proposes the superimposition of the mythological plane on the plane of everyday life. All the living creatures that are part of the urban ecosystem begin to participate in the mythological stories generated by the trees. Dogs, cats, pigeons, rats, insects and their mythological similes begin to interact with centaurs, dragons and nymphs. The playful and performative part begins to take on a life of its own from the “mythological scripts” created by the trees. Hades, Demeter, Phytalus, the Garden of the Hesperides, the dragon Ladon, Zeus, the Meliae, Cronus, Philyra, and Chiron are some of the deities we will encounter while exploring *El ladrón de miel*.

In a prototype of *“El ladrón de miel”* installed at the Artium Museum in Vitoria Gasteiz, the trees intersect the museum’s architecture in a game that pursues the performative complicity of the spectator whilst tracing a historical journey through several of the tree species that have accompanied civilisations over time.

References:

City Trees. A Historical Geography from the Renaissance through the Nineteenth Century.
Henry W. Lawrence.
University of Virginia Press. 2006



"El ladrón de miel" Installation (2023) at Artium Museum. Exterior view of Artium. Image: Artium



"El ladrón de miel" Installation (2023) at Artium Museum. Fig tree.



"El ladrón de miel" Installation (2023) at Artium Museum. Interior view of the Artium.

José Ramón Ais



José Ramón Ais is a visual artist. His work explores emotional links and the ways in which stories, ideologies, desires and utopias are projected onto nature, reflecting and experimenting with concepts related to landscape as construction and representation. His processes are based on the cultivation, observation and documentation of plants in a territory where garden, studio and set are hybridised, a practice that blends photography and image post-production techniques, fieldwork and historical research.