

Carcassonne Declaration - 21 November, 2023

The beauty of tree avenues is essential to life - It must be made part of public policy

We, the participants in the international symposium 'The Essential Beauty of Tree Avenues' in Carcassonne, France, from 19 to 20 November, 2023, agree that:

1. Tree avenues of all kinds are cultural heritage assets, an architecture—a living architecture—in an historically codified form that combines a colonnade and, typically, a vault. The harmony of their volume and the perceived regularity of the colonnade are essential components of their aesthetic quality, which is as deliberate as it is loved. As a cultural-heritage asset, tree avenues connect people in time and in space, as well as symbolically. They are therefore an ideal agent for promoting values of cohesion.
2. Everywhere, tree avenues are a natural and landscape asset. They make special contributions to collective objectives for combating climate change and biodiversity loss. They contribute to all three dimensions of human health, which is defined by the World Health Organization as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being”. The fact that tree avenues are part of our everyday landscapes, where we live and move about, in both urban and rural areas, makes their contributions all the more significant.
3. Whereas public -safety policies are essential for ensuring people’s physical integrity, beauty—especially the beauty of tree avenues—plays a fundamental role in mental wellbeing, in living, in rebuilding oneself, and for rallying around technical or disquieting environmental issues and inducing the empathy necessary for social cohesion.

We, the participants in the international symposium 'The Essential Beauty of Tree Avenues' in Carcassonne, France, from 19 to 20 November, 2023, observe that:

1. Public road-safety policies of the ‘forgiving road’ type address the consequences of accidents not their causes. They require roadside space to be free of obstacles that could aggravate run-off-road accidents and they apply the same principles to the cultural, environmental, and scenic heritage of tree avenues as they do to roadside utility structures.
2. These policies consequently hinder the preservation and replanting of tree avenues: imposing excessive distances from the edge of the road poses major land-acquisition problems, alters proportions and one’s perception of the colonnade, and breaks up the vault over the road where one exists, all of which are fundamental to the aesthetic values of tree avenues. The loss of a vault is detrimental to crossing by wildlife, to general reduction of heat levels, and to the comfort of road users. The impossibility of ensuring the presence of ancient trees is also highly prejudicial to biodiversity.
3. Collisions with roadside obstacles can have dramatic human consequences that no one can wish for. However, collisions with roadside trees are not a matter of fate. Vehicle use will evolve and vehicle features, including lane-departure warning systems (LDWS), will continue to make progress. Besides, there is no correlation between road risk and density of avenues in a given area, even when the trees are close to the road. Avenue trees have a positive effect on the care exercised while driving, and their attractiveness and the colonnade tend to induce reductions in speed, making them a mechanism for acting on the causes of accidents. Conversely, distancing trees from the road induces a false sense of security which can result in inadvertence to risk and neglect of responsibility.
4. Some managers of roads outside urban areas have understood the implications outlined above: by not applying systematic distancing rules, they can replant avenues ... and this has not prevented them from maintaining better-than-average road-safety statistics.
5. When, in 1970, road safety peaked as a public-health issue, Georges Pompidou, at the highest level of French governance, bravely asserted that “Safeguarding the trees planted along our roads (...) is essential for the beauty of our country, to protect nature, and to safeguard a truly human environment” and that “whatever the scale of road-safety problems, they are no justification for disfiguring the country’s landscape”.

Therefore, we call on public authorities at all levels to:

1. **have public policies reflect their recognition that tree avenues of all kinds are in the public interest**, not only for the oxygen, habitats and ecological corridors they provide, for storing carbon, for reducing the temperatures on roads people travel on, and for their physical and mental-health benefits but also for their cultural significance and their positive contribution to road safety;
2. **take account of the need for beauty for mental and social wellbeing, with special consideration for the unique beauty of tree avenues** which will, in particular, imply not imposing restrictive distancing—neither on verges nor on adjacent properties—which effectively hinders the preservation and replanting of avenues in accordance with the conventional canons that guarantee their aesthetic appeal.