

Elements of Tree Preservation: Step 1 - Getting a Seat at the Table

Keith Pitchford

The best means to ensure tree preservation success is involving arborists early in the design stage. This involves meetings with all stakeholders to discuss tree needs and all potential impacts. During my three decades of tree preservation planning, this has happened just twice. Both projects were highly successful. In most cases, I am handed a set of construction documents along with a strong desire from the owner to save trees. Unfortunately, in these situations the trees are usually highly compromised and cannot be saved.

Project size often determines the arborist role. Large projects, such as universities, government buildings, large developments and corporate campuses will often involve a project arborist (employed by the owner) and contract arborist (employed by the construction company). The project arborist works with the design team to plan for tree preservation. Preservation zones are established and based upon a thorough tree inventory. Ideally, quantitative analysis would be used to best determine a survival likelihood, although qualitative analysis is also an option. The project arborist will produce specifications detailing pre-construction, construction and post-construction requirements.

In all construction situations, the arborist must be adept at reading construction documents. They must interpret drawings to gain insight, and also to gain the respect from contractors.

For larger projects, the general contractor will hire an arborist (usually associated with a tree care company) to implement the specifications. The project arborist must vet the contract arborist to ensure that their experience is adequate. The project arborist is not paid to implement or supervise. They monitor the project, but do not supervise.

On smaller projects, such as home renovations, the project arborist is usually the only tree expert. In this case, their preservation credentials are essential to project success. Five years of preservation experience is a baseline. And, like large projects, arborists here must have input during the design phase. Trees often decline and die during a 3-5-year lag period after construction impacts. By this time, the builder is long gone, and the homeowner is left with a dead tree. As an example, there is a small development near where I live that was advertised as “wooded lots.” Ten homes were built around a small woodlot. No preservation was implemented. Almost all of the trees are now dead. I smell a lawsuit.

Designing around trees is the goal. However, because this rarely happens and trees are usually squeezed in amongst buildings, having an arborist at the design table is the next best option.