

TREE SHAPING IN THE USA

Joe Clements

On the 7th of May 2016, my colleague Rupert Harbinson and I set off from London to the USA or, more specifically, Boston, Massachusetts. Our aim? To study the ways of the Tree Shapers, a handful of isolated artists dedicated to experimenting with bending, pleaching, training and grafting woody plants into fantastical living sculptures, and useable structures. The training of fruit trees - apples, plums, pears and the like - is well established and understood, but the response of other tree species to being trained away from a natural course of growth is largely unknown territory. In particular, the training of relatively fast-growing pioneer species, such as willow and poplar, yields very different results to that of slower-growing fruit trees, such as apples.

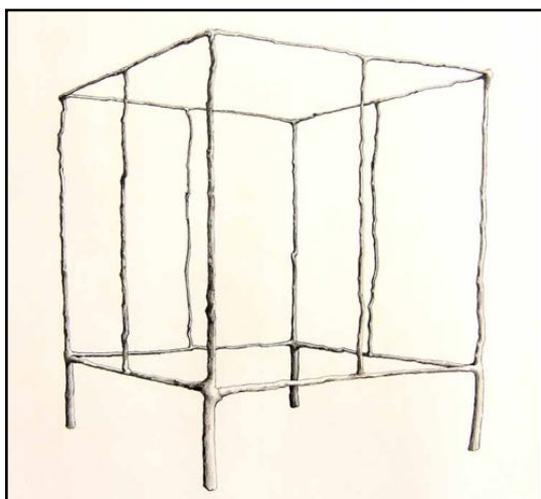


'Lattice' by Daniel Ladd

The first stop on our quest was to the small country town of Northampton in western Massachusetts. Here we stayed with tree shaping artist Daniel Ladd. Dan has been a practising bender of branches since 1979, although only sporadically, as an accompaniment to his other living sculpture work. We began our time with Dan by visiting nearby Smith College, a prestigious women's liberal arts college, where Dan is the artist in residence. We had a chance to look around their modest

botanic garden and glasshouse range before heading off to their field station, where Dan's most recent living projects can be found. Once we arrived we set to work photographing and making extensive notes on each of his specimens. We had plenty of opportunity to ask probing questions, and try to get to grips with how horticulturally-minded his approach to living sculpture is.

The next day we drove a short distance from Northampton up to a small village called Putney, just over the northern border in the state of Vermont. Here we saw Dan's older tree sculptures, and they proved to be very interesting specimens. Dan's trees had developed several anatomical quirks as a result of being trained into unnatural forms; most unusually, and uniquely of all, they were repeatedly grafted onto themselves. A good example is the Sycamore Box Frame.



Daniel Ladd's concept for the Sycamore Box Frame



The real life Sycamore Box Frame

All photographs © Joe Clements

The next chapter of our journey saw us fly across the United States to sunny California, where we headed for the town of Gilroy, near Santa Cruz. We were here to record the remains of Axel Erlandson's famous Tree Circus. Erlandson, the son of Swedish immigrants to the USA, was born in Minnesota in 1884. He is the earliest known Tree Shaper and, arguably, the most accomplished to date. Beginning his working life as a farmer and land surveyor, he went on to practice the art of tree-trunk topiary from 1928 until he died in 1964.

Mark Primack, a famous architect and our host in Santa Cruz, was the man responsible for stepping in and caring for the Tree Circus after Erlandson passed away. He organised groups of guerrilla gardeners to break into the abandoned site, to weed and water the trees. He also found a buyer for the trees, which has enabled many of them to survive to the present day.

It had been my dream to visit this Mecca for Tree Shapers since I was in my mid-teens, but when Rupert, Mark and I finally pulled up at the site I was quite horrified by what I saw. The current owner of the Tree Circus is the town of Gilroy, and the Tree Circus has been subsumed into a much larger entity known as 'Gilroy Gardens Family Theme Park'. It would be a gross understatement to call Gilroy Gardens 'cheesy'. A different cheery fairground song greeted us every ten paces. Teacup rides, rollercoasters and puppet shows of singing and dancing vegetables stood side by side with the great horticultural legacy of Axel Erlandson. All this would have been forgivable had it enabled the Tree Circus to survive into the twenty-first century. But, unfortunately, many of the trees were dead or dying, and those that remain in good health will not survive many more Californian droughts without adequate irrigation. Nevertheless, we set about taking photographs, recording observations, and questioning Mark. We obtained a wealth of invaluable data on the Tree Circus - and the trees themselves were, of course, awesome.



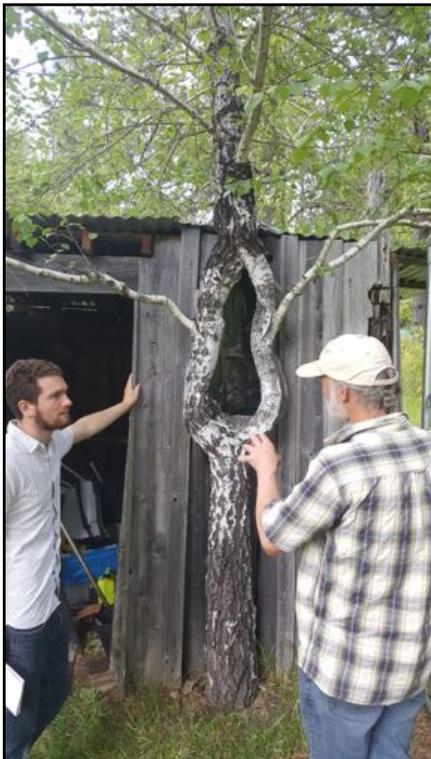
This neglected tree was once Axel Erlandson's 'Birdcage'. The crown has died back almost entirely, causing epicormic growth to sprout at the base. It has been in this wooden planter since 1975.



The Archway was one specimen still in good condition



**Axel Erlandson's
'Basket Tree'**



**Richard Reames and I discuss
his birch picture frame**

The final stop on our Tree Sculpture trail took us just over the state border into Oregon. We meandered our way through the rolling hills of pine forest common to both northern California and southern Oregon. Nestled down between two of these hills was a charming little stone and round-wood cottage, hand-built by the man we were here to see: Richard Reames. Richard has been practising living tree sculpture since the early 1990s, when he found he was about to have a family and needed to find a means of supporting it. He had some success in the release of his self-published book *How to Grow a Chair*, and for a time made his livelihood from forming living chairs for paying customers.

In the few acres of land that surround Richard's cottage he has a menagerie of larger, more abstract tree sculptures. He has created a number of functional structures: an arbour, tree-house, chair, bridge, window frame and archway, to name but a handful. He has also shaped abstract living sculptures, one of which is reminiscent of the double helix of DNA. It would be fair to say that Richard is a bit of a hippy, and these days he is more focused on his cultivation and breeding of marijuana (fully legalised in Oregon), in order to provide for his family, so his living tree sculpture work has taken more of a backseat. But he was very open and willing to share his experiences with us, both successes and failures. I am now coming to realise, thanks to the Tree Shapers I have met, that they are, of course, not failures but lessons.

I certainly gained a great deal from this trip, although not necessarily what I had anticipated. I was fully expecting to learn a great deal about Tree Shaping techniques, the problems encountered, etc. But I also gained a greater perspective on Tree Shaping as a whole; the human problems that come with it (such as having to wait decades to see a result); the attitude you need in order to stick it out, and a much better understanding of why Tree Shaping is not commonplace around the world. Personally, I think perhaps the art of tree shaping would be much more at home in a garden setting than as part of a private sculpture collection or as a commercial product.

Joe Clements is currently studying for a Diploma in Horticulture at Kew. This article is an abridged and edited version of his Travel Scholarship report.