Transcript
Mount Pleasant Cemetery
A conversation with arborist Daniel Chevalier

Note: Daniel Chevalier's answers have been slightly altered for a better flow to the transcript and may not be entirely accurate to the actual recording of the interview. It should also be mentioned that Chevalier's answers may not be given exactly as they appear in the transcript, when compared to the podcast as his answers needed to be edited down to suit the format and length of the podcast.

Jacob (NARRATOR)
Okay, so I'm gonna go into one of our next topics. So as history majors, we look at change over time. This is essentially an idea about how certain places experience change over time. Essentially, in the context of cemeteries, it is common for informal sections to emerge, individuals will choose to bury relatives near each other, or near those from a similar cultural background, and for children to have their own dedicated area.

One of the areas we're interested in looking at was the Children's Memorial Garden on plot 42 along Moore Avenue. I wanted to know what you could tell us about the trees, shrubbery, and flowers used to decorate that memorial?

Daniel (ARBORIST)
Yeah sure! So that was before my time, but I can certainly comment on what I think they were aiming for!

There's a really big beech tree right beside it. That tree would have been there for, you know, a number of decades. That tree is probably about 70 years old— 75 to 80 years old. But just around that little garden area where you have the statue and everything, there's smaller ornamental species. So that would be dogwood, serviceberry. There's an apple tree back there, and so those are what's planted directly around it. And I think their thinking was probably, "we want trees that are not going to get big, so those are low growing species, because they would eventually have to compete with the beach that's there. That Beach is going to win because it's bigger, it's going to get the light first." So they planted smaller ones, so they know, moving forward in the future, that they're not going to have trouble competing with the other trees around them. Because generally, you don't want trees that close together. They compete with each other for the light. But there are also species that have really nice flowers, all three of those, yeah.

So I think that a combination of having species that they know that will last there for a long time, otherwise, you know, families would be understandably upset. You have your child buried and then the tree dies. So we wanted to make sure we have something that people are consistently seeing for years, and then also something that looks nice.

And those are all those apples, which can be a challenging species. They don't always have the best longevity, but they do have nice flowers. So I think the flower: the fact that they're all nice flowering species and small ones, probably what guided their decisions when it was made, and when it came to planting at the time. I would use similar logic if I was to do it now.

Jacob (NARRATOR)
Okay, that makes sense, because I have seen the memorial itself, and it did look very beautiful!

The next monument we're looking at, or rather, section of the cemetery: is the design of the force of remembrance. So can you tell us about the natural design of it?

Daniel (ARBORIST)
Yeah. So again, before my time, but I can comment on, you know, what I believe they were thinking at the time.

We don't really have any records of exactly what they were thinking when they designed it; but they did a nice job of leaving a lot of old growth trees, so some really big oaks in there that would have existed long before anything was ever started to be buried around there. And in the scattering area, there's less damage to roots because they're just burying an urn. You only go down a few feet— compare that to when you're digging a grave with a backhoe: like how much damage that does to roots and everything like that. So they were smart in choosing an area that was gonna hurt the trees less by the work that's being done, and choosing a little bit more room otherwise so all the roots didn't get destroyed by the barrels.

I think they chose an area that had old growth species that were doing well, that was also close to the entrance. I think they wanted it to be a focal area that people could find easily. It's along the path that connects you down into the trail that goes all the way down to Evergreen Brickworks and everything like that. So I think that was intentional. I think that they chose that spot for a reason, and the species' that they did add: they planted shade tolerant species. Obviously, we have all those big trees. Nothing's gonna be able to grow underneath them unless they're very shade tolerant species. And there's only a handful that can actually do that. So they were smart, and, you know, thinking of which species they needed to do that.

Jacob (NARRATOR)
I do have a follow up question with that. I was actually in there earlier today, just looking around, and I noticed there are markers for people's graves that just have sticks going up out of the ground, and they're always near trees. I just want to know if the marker was placed for a tree that grew over a grave, and then the original marker had to be removed.

Daniel (ARBORIST)
Trees do grow when they're not sometimes supposed to. But that actually is a memorialized tree, if you look at the plaque that I believe. We have designated: we call them tree lots. We have a whole surveying mapping system. Every grave in the cemetery is mapped out, and you can find it online. We have a whole internal process. Of course, I can't plant trees on a grave: understandably. We have designated tree lots, so when I'm planting, I can only plant in these areas, and I have to make sure they're big enough so that when the tree grows, in 30 years from now, if a barrel happens to be placed next to it, it's not going to kill it and take away half of its root system. So I have to be mindful of that.

With a memorialized tree, a marker would have been placed intentionally after the placement and maturation of a tree. Someone would have paid to be associated with this tree. It's a program that we actually don't offer anymore. We don't offer memorializing trees anymore, and that stopped again before my time. But I could speak to why that is. I think it's very difficult. Trees are organic structures, right? They can die, just like humans, unexpectedly. You know, we do our best, but each tree is an individual, and there are things that happen sometimes—insects, pests, diseases, bad seasons— that impact tree health. And we can't always control that. We do our best, but we really can't control that. And you have a family that has a loved one that they've attached to this tree? They become very invested in just this tree, and there's things that we cannot do to stop that tree from declining. And if somebody has a loved one associated with a tree: an element of grief I've definitely observed is that they've attached to that tree, and it just impacts the way they feel about it. And because they're organic structures, we can't make sure it's going to be there 100 years from now. With a tree, we can't do that. We don't know how a tree is going to be. We're going to do our best, of course, but, yes, that's a memorial marker, so you'll see those around. But nowadays, if a tree does die, we replace it, of course. We bring in a new one, but the family might have been attached to that specific one, right? So that's definitely a challenge that I've encountered: sort of managing people's expectations of tree health.

Jacob (NARRATOR)
I think that goes on to our next question pretty well. Has there ever been a conflict between the preservation of nature and the establishment of monuments or burials? I know that Mount Pleasant is an Arboretum, but at the end of the day, this is a cemetery? Like you have to bury people. Has there ever been a case where you have to choose between the preservation of nature, or have you been made to remove a tree?

Daniel (ARBORIST)
It's a relevant question, because Mount Pleasant is a cemetery. You're right. We are a cemetery, but we are an Arboretum too. The Cemetery came first, that was always the point. But managing property for a cemetery and an arboretum are two, like, completely different things: almost opposing.

Every tree in our property has had some degree of root damage, because roots extend twice as wide as trees can underground, so they're experiencing root damage, but they're still okay. Trees can handle damage. But to your question, do conflicts come up? I mean, yes, absolutely all the time. It's only in recent decades that we've gotten a better understanding of what trees can tolerate, and in the world of trees and construction, and so we have trees that are really close to a lot that somebody bought 50 to 60 years ago, right? They own that lot, and there's this big tree beside them. Now time has gone by, and somebody has passed away, and the time comes for them to be buried in the lot. And in the meantime, that tree's gotten nice and big, and we still have to accommodate that burial, because they've paid for it, and they own it. Obviously their loved one has died; and it doesn't happen very often, but there are times where back then, that planning wasn't in place the way that it is now. And so trees sometimes do take some very extreme root damage, with the burials that happen. I don't want it, of course, it's not what I want, but it happens. It's just kind of the nature of having trees in an urban environment.

What we do now moving forward: Mount Pleasant was surveyed years ago. Yeah, 1876 I think it was. But we have other cemeteries and other sections that are expanding. So when we're surveying it, that means

they're designating where all the graves will go. I then go before they sell any graves, and mark out which ones have to be saved for trees. So you cannot sell these seven or eight— however many graves, because we know eventually they're gonna get big, and we can't risk them dying. So you're sort of learning from mistakes that made: the mistakes they didn't really know any better back in the time.

In Mount Pleasant, we're in such a unique context, there's not a lot of cemetery-arboretums in the world. There's a big one in Montreal on Mont Royal. But we have a really unique context here. So, we're sort of blazing a trail when it comes to it. It's in our strategic plan. It's in our goals to make sure we're being stewards of this land. And, you know, we do our best to accommodate anything.

But yeah, there's all kinds of things I encounter this all the time. A family might not like a tree that's beside their grave: they might not like the fruit it drops. They might not like the leaves it drops. There might be pressure from them to remove that tree, because they don't like it. They like trees, but they don't like that one tree. It's a very common thing I experienced, you know, people love trees, but they don't love that one tree that they have to rake, and then you're always in conflict with the "do I remove the tree?" In those scenarios, we cannot remove the tree. There's tree protection bylaws in the city that protect the trees. So we do our best to manage clients expectations. And if fruit is an issue, or leaves is our issue, then a better solution is to just make sure that we're cleaning up a little bit more frequently, rather than removing the entire tree that has been there for decades. I'm pretty biased. I think there has to be a tree hugger in the room when we have these conversations.

Jacob (NARRATOR)
Okay, our next topic, you'll love it! Trees have been very important to the scenery of Mount Pleasant Cemetery. What can you tell us about the importance of having a diverse collection of trees in the cemetery?

Daniel (ARBORIST)
Yeah, yeah. Well, there's many benefits, yeah. So the big one that we're all learning, collectively, in my industry– the tree industry– is that you cannot put all your eggs in one basket when it comes to tree species, because we don't know what future invasive pests and diseases are going to come in. So we've seen this early in the 19th century with Dutch elm disease. Elms were a species that could tolerate urban environments. They're great. And then this fungal disease came, and it's still around. It's very devastating. We lost a lot of elms, and then in the 70s, we started planting a lot of ash trees. These are a species that can handle salt and compaction, which are the two major issues for trees in an urban environment. So they're great. We planted them everywhere, not me, but you know, my predecessors in this industry. Then in the early 2000s we had the emerald ash borer, which is this really aggressive, invasive beetle that has completely wiped out all of our ash trees. We have very, very few ash trees left on our property, and we inject them with insecticide for them to even be still around. So all those people in municipalities that plant some ash trees, those ash trees are gone, and all the benefits that we get from trees: psychological, environmental, the list is long. We no longer get those because we only planted ash. So now we know you plant a variety of species, because we don't know what the future holds. So we have to plant a lot so it makes us resilient. That's the number one thing: Planting a variety of species means our property is resilient to whatever the future holds. Yeah, that's the big one.

Jacob (NARRATOR)
I never thought of it like that. Honestly, I did take a class on urban environmental history, and we learned about, like, how tree species can be wiped out by disease. We learned about a famous park in Victoria for its forest that had almost entire tree species wiped out.

Daniel (ARBORIST)
Well there's a new disease called oak wilt that they've discovered in Canada for the first time last year, and we don't know how that's going to impact Canada. Like, I just don't know how it's going to impact so I have to consider that when I'm thinking whether or not I'm going to plant an oak right now. Because I don't know how this disease is going to go in the next 20 years. You don't know if that tree will survive. Yeah. So there's not a really good investment. If they spent $500 to plant this tree: the labor, the cost, and everything just for it to not actually make it to maturity, it's a poor investment. So okay, you have to consider these things.

Jacob (NARRATOR)
To move onto our next question. Can you tell us about some of the trees that were brought to the cemetery? In terms of where trees were sourced from? Or if you know of any interesting stories about trees that arrived in Mount Pleasant.

Daniel (ARBORIST)
I know, historically, we tried, from the get go, to be this urban green space for the community, which we do a great job of doing, and they wanted to have that diversity that was always there from day one. We have really weird, rare species here that I cannot source anymore, because now you can‘t even take a banana over the border. Before they would just take a tree from Europe, bring it here and plant it. But now we understand that's how you spread invasive diseases. You know, for a while there, we were easily able to get very rare species that we have and that have been here for decades. It's harder to do that now.

So I'll be honest with you, it's something that when I'm planting trees, I have to plant what I know is going to grow in the context of climate change. I know that species native to the south of here can tolerate warmer climates. So I know 100 years from now, when we have a warmer climate here, you know, that's a species that will thrive. I don't know if that's quite what you're asking. We do try to source from like these exotic nurseries. The trouble we find is with trees that are grown not in Toronto. There's a really great nursery based out of Oregon that has a lot of really cool species, and we've tried planting them here in the past. We went through the whole process, which is very expensive to do so, and we got great species, but they can't survive winters in Canada. Canadian winters are just too harsh for them, so we're really forced to just grow what goes around here.

We do have a number of cool trees in terms of donations we had. We have an oak here that was grown from an acorn taken from Vimy Ridge, from the war. So little things like that. I can definitely say it's tricky taking donations, right? Because people donate something and they sort of feel like they have ownership over it. And we can't control how that tree is going to go in 100 years, especially if it's been

living on a balcony for, you know, 30 years now. Generally speaking, at least in my experience, we try to just order from local nurseries.

Jacob (NARRATOR)
I have one more question. You did touch up it. For example, the trees can die because they're too close together. Or more, when it comes to the burials, they can destroy the root. I want to know about some of the threats to the survivability of trees in an urban environment, since we are in the middle of an urban, dense city.

Daniel (ARBORIST)
Well, the answer is, most of them don't. Salt and compaction: those are the two number one things in an urban environment along the streets. The ground is very salty, because we salt our roads. Yeah. It's too high, very high, different soil quality there, and that's a very limiting factor for trees. It alters the pH too much for many trees to even be able to survive. And then the compaction: you have cars, you've got construction, all kinds of stuff. It squeezes all the air, all oxygen, out of the soil. That makes it very difficult. There's only about 10, maybe 12, species in total that we could plant on the street in Toronto, and be confident that it wouldn't die.

It's a very limited palette, and so that's why Mount Pleasant is so important, because we have all these species that don't exist, and being in big urban green spaces is a place where people can come and get out of the concrete, get out of you know, the dense, and it's been studied extensively. We as humans are mentally better when we're in nature. You know, I gave a big tree walk to the public on Sunday, and there were 150 people there, and they're all excited about trees. Why are they excited about trees? Because it feels good to be walking around and looking at trees in nature. We're nature beings, you know, it's in our blood to feel better around trees. And so right now, in urban environments, the trees aren't winning. You know, we've lost a lot, and when you lose a big tree, it's not the same to just plant three small trees. The benefits that we take from the environmental side and the human side are all functions of leaf surface area. So bigger trees have more surface area, they have much more leaves, and they're the ones that are sequestering the most carbon. They're taking the more pollutant, sedira, things like that. And it's nicer to be around big trees and small trees, but then the small trees just aren't getting there in the city because of salt and compaction and and a lack of care and just the way that cities are. They are very difficult to care for, when they're mulched from their moderate water, as we try to do here, they can thrive more so. So that part of it is sort of after here. A lot of municipalities will plant trees and then just leave. You need to water them. You need to mulch them, you need to take care of them.

Jacob (NARRATOR)
You brought up the idea of people wanting to be closer to nature and trees. It's the reason we started this. We chose Mount Pleasant cemetery, because it was established during a movement called the rural cemetery movement, where they built the cemetery around the idea that you can put nature and the dead together. Essentially, you can allow people to walk around. Yeah, you can see the results if you use this entire cemetery.

So I'm gonna move on to just our last one of our last sections, the audience and visitors. I just want to know what you see around here? So, like, what do you believe draws people to the cemetery?

Daniel (ARBORIST)
It's not just the trees, but I think, I really think it is being a green space. I think the trees are a part of that, but that's what seems to draw in. My experience being around the property all the time. We have a lot of joggers, we have a lot of cyclists, a lot of walkers, dog walkers. How many of them actually have family that's buried here? Probably very, very few, so we function a lot more like Park in some sense. But there's trouble with that, because we are also a cemetery, and so people are grieving here. People want some quiet. They want some space. So it can be, from my perspective, difficult to manage both sides of it, but I do think it's a nice problem to have, in a way, because people are drawn here. They want to come here. We are a really nice sort of green beacon in the city. We're 200 acres in Toronto. Like, how common is that to find? So that's a really nice thing that we provide for our community. And I really think that's it. It's prestigious to be buried here, for sure. You know, we've got prime ministers and hockey players and we're right on Yonge Street, and that, you know, that attracts people too. But I think on the day to day, who comes in? Yeah, there's maybe some people that are interested in the monuments. For sure. I'm not usually one of those people, like I remember, I'm just looking up streets, but I recognized again, because it's my own little niche. But I really do. I would firmly believe that the green that includes the trees, but not just the trees, is really the reason that draws people here.

Jacob (NARRATOR)
Yeah, and I have another question. You already answered some of it. So the next question is how visitors to the cemetery interact with the natural environment. I want to know more because you've been here for about five years, five, six years. So you worked during the pandemic, and I wanted to know, how did the green space– how did people interact as the cemetery is like a park, for example, or as a green space during pandemic change?

Daniel (ARBORIST)
Well, during the pandemic, people didn't like it when we closed our gates to the public. I figure, yeah. And I mean, we're all flying blind. We've never been through a pandemic before in our lifetimes. So people didn't like that we closed. I know that, and I could understand that, you know; but at the time, we were just trying to do what was best, where, you know, they closed parks and everything, yeah, and it didn't last very long. It was only a couple of weeks that everything was fully, fully closed. And I think that it was definitely clear that people need these green spaces and not having access to them, especially in a difficult time in human existence. Yeah, it was a big thing that is not good.

I'm just gonna add on to that as well. But with the idea of, how did it affect nature? Because, there is something that happens here that I can't wrap my head around. And it's people feeding the squirrels, and it's a very common thing here. And I don't want to come down too hard, because these are just people that are being kind to animals. At the root of it, it's based on kindness. So I'm not like, I'm not gonna yell at anyone like this, but squirrels here eat the best in the entire city! They've got nut trees. Like, it's like, going to the bridal path and handing out free food, like, you know, they don't need it. They don't need it. And then we get our squirrels that are kind of domesticated. They run along the road. They're not scared of people, you know, we are more likely to run over them. So it's kind of like humans, in that sense, you know, it's humans doing it for themselves, not for nature. Like these squirrels will be fine without them, but they still do it.

And another thing that I did notice, and this is anecdotally, I certainly didn't do a research problem project or anything on this, but lichen on a tree. It kind of looks like moss. If you're familiar with lichen, it's not Moss, very similar, but it looks like moss.. It's like, it's like this, like, I want to say it looks like bronze, like oxidized or something. It can usually be like, kind of a light blue, yeah. So a very common complaint I get is, what's wrong with my tree? It's actually lichen, but lichen is not a problem. It's actually a symbiotic relationship between fungus and algae. Doesn't hurt at all. So if you see it, you're not supposed to scratch it off. People don't like it because they don't like the look of it, but it's actually an indicator of a healthy nitrogen cycle in the environment. And actually places that are more polluted have less lichen, and that's been a fact, and I noticed anecdotally, specifically trees along Yonge Street that there was a little bit more lichen because there was a little less, cars on the road, so less pollution happening in their direct surrounding environment. And remember when lockdown happened, a lot of people, less people were driving around Mount Pleasant. So, that's sort of my own little observation that I found was when we closed off Yonge Street for a bit there.

Jacob (NARRATOR)
I'm gonna move to just our final question. What can you tell us about the vision of the future? Like the future: your vision for the future of the cemetery? What do you want? What is your hope for the cemetery, and the cemetery's environment in the next 5 to 10 years?

Daniel (ARBORIST)
Yeah. It’s tough to know what the future holds, especially in this world, but I make all my decisions thinking 200 years in the future, because that's ideally how long the tree is going to live. So I have to always consider that, but looking at it like a macro scale, one of my visions for the entirety of the property is to make sure that we maintain the canopy coverage. We have much more canopy coverage here than the average of Toronto. We just have so many trees. And that's a really great thing we have. And it takes a minute to establish that in 1876 and we have, we have trees here that are older than that, trees here that were, you know, here before the cemetery even was, some that are oaks that are 225 to 275 years old. So that's a great thing. And so I have to be mindful with a tree like that, or if we lose trees due to storms, anything for whatever reason, if we lose our canopy coverage, that we're not losing that for good, that we are strategically planting new trees to be able to take over any gaps that that become open in the canopy.

That really guides my planting. What tree is going to go where, and if we lose a tree, and a family says, oh, but I'd really like my brother to be buried there. That's where I have to say, sorry, “In accordance with our arboretum vision, we have to make sure that a tree gets put back in.” Humans really struggle with this, just because, you know, living with a plan of 200 years is a hard thing. I'm not going to be here to see the young trees that I planted and get to their full age. So it's, you know, sometimes it does lead to challenges, but I think Mount Pleasant does a really good job. I mean, they have an arborist on staff. There's not any other cemeteries that do that. So that, I think that says a lot for them. So, yeah, that's my vision: we're going to maintain having old trees for now until forever, and we do that by establishing successive planting to ensure that when these big trees go away, we have smaller trees that will take their place.

Jacob (NARRATOR)
Okay, I guess the end of my questions. Thank you for joining us!