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Saving the City's Shade: Good Reasons to Seek UNESCO World Heritage Status for Winnipeg's Elm Trees

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The City of Winnipeg in Manitoba is blessed with the largest urban population of elm trees in North America. Planted almost a century ago, the elm sensationally structures 40% of Winnipeg's unique streets and boulevards. Bearing witness to the near elimination in other cities, Winnipeg has still the chance to proactively engage in safe guarding its unique population of 160,000 elm trees. The city's impressive forest of 8 million trees gives shape on the otherwise treeless plain, provides shelter from an extreme climate, raises property values, and most of all forms the city's identity. The purpose of this presentation is to demonstrate why Winnipeg's outstanding green legacy is deserving of the most ambitious heritage protection and how the elm tree could play a key role in this.

A recent survey undertaken by the City's Forestry has shown that the unique population of elm trees requires further consideration than just addressing Dutch elm disease and the replacement of trees in boulevards. Thousands of American elm trees are lost due to Dutch elm disease each year, but the majority of these losses occur on private property. Considering this fact, it is quite surprising that there are no regulations to avoid the destruction or injury of significant and healthy trees on private properties. Furthermore, any tree replanting initiative is following the trend towards greater biodiversity in species, which will ultimately result in the loss of the characteristic homogenous canopy as elm numbers decline.

Emphasizing the importance of Winnipeg's tree canopy for the city's identity and citizens' wellbeing, and drawing public attention to this silent topic, the author has been pushing the tree preservation discussions for several years. By applying a simple but effective trick, this presentation shows how the strict application of the selection criteria would result in only one conclusion: that the distinctive, declining resource gives enough reason to include Winnipeg in UNESCO's World Heritage List. Such a status would provide Winnipeg's elm tree population with the reputation and recognition necessary to guarantee the sustainable conservation to safeguard them for future generations—regardless of growing on public or private ground. Additionally, it would stimulate an important public discussion on the species of choice replacing diseased trees. Since a proposal like that stands in strong contrast to the city's reality, the author expects a lively discussion about the perhaps naive speculation.

Learning Outcomes:

- Recognize the ecological, social, land aesthetic importance of trees in large cities.
- Identify advanced standards for tree protection, tree planting, and tree care.
- Acquire knowledge about the selection criteria of UNESCO's World Heritage list.
- Acquire knowledge of the pros and cons of inclusion on UNESCO's World Heritage list.
- Learn strategies and conceptions for care and maintenance of tree heritage reflecting socio-economic circumstances and new political and/or administrative requirements.