

ABOUT NEW YORK

A Museum of Trees That Speak of History



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

ART PROJECT Katie Holten, near a white pine on the grounds of the Andrew Freedman Home that will be Tree No. 34.

By JIM DWYER

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The notion that the Grand Concourse could be turned into a long boulevard of talking trees — a tree museum, with trees connecting to oral guides of Bronx history — came to Katie Holten one day when she was traipsing along the boulevard near the Cross Bronx Expressway.

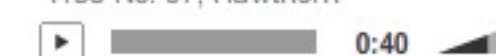
Multimedia

Telephone Tree Tour



Samples of what visitors to the Tree Museum will hear when they call numbers posted on trees along the Grand Concourse.

CLICK TO PLAY AUDIO
Daniel Libeskind, architect
Tree No. 97, Hawthorn



Coquis, Puerto Rican tree frog

Dart Westphal, preservationist

Lurry Boyd, community gardener

Brochure: [Tree Museum \(pdf\)](#)

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Near Van Cortlandt Avenue at the northern end of the Concourse, the architect [Daniel Libeskind](#) will speak for No. 97, a hawthorn. When he was an immigrant teenager from Poland, the Concourse became the center of his life.

“A street of extraordinary trees — a kind of boulevard that I only dreamt of because it reminded me of Europe,” Mr. Libeskind says on the recording. “Because we didn’t go to Manhattan or anywhere else, we used to spend all of our time in the Bronx. Our preferred mode of leisure was to walk up and down the Grand Concourse, looking at the beautiful architecture, the very beautiful brick buildings. Enjoying the open sky above the Bronx.”

One recording — by Carlos Lazarte, No. 73 — simply is a minute of soothing chirps of coquis, Puerto Rican tree frogs. D. J. Jazzy Jay, a hip-hop pioneer, is going to make a recording, Ms. Holten said, but the designer Calvin Klein said no.

Ms. Holten, who was born in Ireland and came to New York in 2004, won the commission from the [Bronx Museum of the Arts](#), Wave Hill, the city’s parks department and the Greenwall Foundation.

SHE does not live in the Bronx, but has immersed herself in the life of the Concourse — even snagging office space in one of its greatest and oddest buildings, the [Andrew Freedman Home](#) near McClellan Street. The Freedman house — an enormous palazzo — was built in 1924 at the bequest of Mr. Freedman, a Tammany Hall insider who invested in the first subway and was an owner of the New York Giants baseball team.

The mansion was a home for wealthy people who had run out of money, or luck. The house served as a residence until the 1980s. Now owned by the Mid-Bronx Senior Citizens Council, it has a grand ballroom, dining rooms, dozens of private bedrooms and a handsome library whose ceiling is now falling down.

“No one can believe it until they see it,” Ms. Holten said. “It’s like a ghost ship.”

It is squarely at home on the Concourse, which was designed in the late 19th century to be a speedway for people coming from Manhattan to the parks of the north Bronx. The road opened in 1909 with separate paths for horse-drawn carriages, cyclists and people on foot. The arrival of the IRT elevated line along Jerome Avenue, a few blocks to the west, spurred development along the Concourse of mighty apartment buildings built in Art Deco styles; Loew’s Paradise Theater, which seated 4,000; and the Concourse Plaza Hotel.

The tree museum is running haiku hikes for school kids, birdhouse-building programs and a party for its opening at the Freedman Home.

“You tell a lot of people about a tree museum, and they say, ‘What trees? There are none,’” Ms. Holten said. “They think they’re just these sticks coming out of the ground.”

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At the time, about two years ago, Ms. Holten was competing for an art commission to commemorate the centennial of the Concourse this year and racking her brain for a way to tell the story of the place and its people.

“The light bulb came on: If this is about the whole street, well, then the trees have to be part of it,” said Ms. Holten, 33. “The Concourse has always been tree-lined, even before it was paved.”

She has [marked out 100 trees](#) along the Concourse, which is about four and a half miles long. Each one will have a sign that gives a phone number and a code to listen to short recordings of people speaking about the Bronx, their lives and their work. The [tree museum](#) will open on June 21.

Tree No. 39, a honey locust at Marcy Place, will feature Jose Ortiz of the percussion group BombaYo. At another honey locust, No. 52, at 175th Street, Lurry Boyd, who grows peaches and strawberries in a community garden, will narrate. In Poe Park, a London plane tree (No. 75) will connect listeners to the story of the park, a former apple orchard that is now home to a cottage where [Edgar Allan Poe](#) lived. People often danced around the park’s bandstand at night, as Lloyd Ultan, the Bronx borough historian, tells it, including two sisters named Clooney. One of them was the singer [Rosemary Clooney](#), aunt of the actor [George Clooney](#).