

New West welcomes Blue Trees

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Konstantin Dimopoulos visited New Westminster last week to help set up the new Blue Trees installation that's part of the Vancouver Biennale. Photograph By Chung Chow

Konstantin Dimopoulos is trying to change the world – one tree at a time.

The Australian artist visited New Westminster last week to help set up the new *Blue Trees* installation that's part of the Vancouver Biennale. "Blue doesn't exist in nature," Dimopoulos told the **Record**. "There are red trees, there are yellow trees – but blue doesn't. It's a surreal environment, where people aren't expecting to see blue. That's why we are creating it."

If you're looking for the *Blue Trees* around town, you'll find one on Columbia Street (across from Anvil Centre), 12 in Westminster Pier Park (near the concession and the urban beach) and 20 on the front lawn of city hall.

Dimopoulos said the *Blue Trees* really took off after

the *Economist* magazine published reports detailing the financial impacts of destroying the world's forests. He said he's not anti-forestry but believes forests have to be managed in a sustainable way.

"It's an art project," he said about *Blue Trees*. "I see myself as a social artist. I'd rather be remembered as a guy who left a forest behind than a guy that's left a sculpture behind. I think that's more important."

Dimopoulos, whose sculptures and installations appear around the world, first introduced the *Blue Trees* in Melbourne, Australia in 2005/06. Since then, *Blue Trees* have sprouted up in cities around the world.

"We did it in Melbourne first, very small, then we did it in Vancouver," he said of trees done in 2011 as part of the Vancouver Biennale. "We have done it in about 14 cities. We are doing Singapore. We are going from here directly to Singapore, then we are going to Stuttgart, Germany. And then we are going to Florida – Jacksonville and then Chattanooga, Tennessee. Part of it was I wanted to create a ripple. We want to take it all the way to the Brazilian rainforest."

Community members joined Dimopoulos at Westminster Pier Park on Friday and at city hall on Sunday to apply pigment to the trees. Using brushes and rollers donated by the local Army and Navy department store, Dimopoulos and volunteers applied an ultramarine blue pigment to the trunks of trees.

"It's pigment and water," he said. "It just comes off. In London, after three months they just washed it off because they didn't have a lot of rain."

In keeping with the environmental message of the *Blue Trees*, the shocking blue pigment is nontoxic.

"I've painted myself with it first before we ever did it," Dimopoulos smiled. "I said I wouldn't do anything to the tree that I wouldn't be prepared to do myself."

Applying an unexpected colour to an everyday object helps engage people and get them talking, Dimopoulos said.

"People slow down," he said "What public art does is gets people to slow down and ask, 'What are you doing?'"

Depending on the weather, the longevity of the blue trees remains to be seen. But long after the blue has faded away, Dimopoulos says the *Blue Trees* live on in the minds of those who've seen them and in photographs viewed around the world.

“Once a blue tree is here, it can never disappear,” he said. “It doesn’t have to be physically here. That’s what I like – this will disappear in a few weeks but it will still be on your camera, their cameras. Social media is incredibly powerful.”

The Vancouver Biennale commissioned Dimopoulos to create *Blue Trees* in tree cities as part of the 2014 to 2016 event. Community members are helping him apply blue pigment to more than 350 trees in West Vancouver, New Westminister and Squamish.

“Trees are the lungs of the universe,” he said.

The first Vancouver Biennale installation in New Westminister, *Public Furniture/Urban Trees* by Hugo Franca, was installed on the waterfront esplanade in June. The final installation as part of the 2014 to 2015 Biennale is *WOW New Westminister* by Jose Resende, which is set to be located at Westminister Pier Park.