

Lessons of War, Prospects for Peace: The Ginkgo Tree Project

Recommended Text for Ginkgo Tree Signs and Associated Website

Members of The Ginkgo Tree Working Group (Keya Zhou '25, Luna Noguchi '25, Flo Moser '26, Casey Scheiner '28, Lily Ogawa '28, and Dr. Graham Bullock) collated and analyzed the input from the March 2025 Deliberative Forum on the Legacies of WWII in the Asia Pacific, and they identified eight general themes from this input to include on the signage for the trees planted between Chambers, Wall, and the Library. These themes could be shared via a single sign near the planted trees, four signs with two themes expressed on each sign, or eight individual signs (or some other format). These signs could be relatively small and unobtrusive (e.g., 6 inches high by 12 inches wide), sticking a foot or so out of the ground. Alternatively, a single sign that shares all eight themes could be somewhat larger (e.g., approximately one foot high and two feet wide at waist level).

Smaller signs could include a short title and sentence summarizing its correspondent theme. They could also include a QR code that would link to a webpage that would provide more background related to that theme. The webpage could include additional text, relevant links, and documents as well as the theme title and sentence that are on the corresponding physical sign.

Recommended versions of the theme's titles, sentences, background text, and some examples of relevant documents are provided below.

THEMES, SIGNS, AND WEBSITE TEXT

SIGN 1: A Living Memorial

Descended from trees that survived the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, these ginkgoes were gifted by Green Legacy Hiroshima to share a message of remembrance, resilience, and peace.

This sign could be placed in front of the tree closest to Wall and could be larger than the other seven signs to include the more extended text below. It could also include more information about the project and the other signs – for example, an introduction to a walking tour and more background about the trees themselves. Alternatively, if a larger sign is not feasible or desirable, the text below could be included on a corresponding webpage.

Background Text for Webpage or Larger Sign:

In Spring 2024, eight ginkgo trees—descendants of those that survived the Hiroshima atomic bombing by the US military—were planted on Davidson College’s campus. Donated by Green Legacy Hiroshima, these trees symbolize both the dangers of nuclear weapons and the resilience of humanity and nature. The project, initiated by Professor Kristi Multhaup, supported by the College’s leadership, and aided by Professor Susana Wadgyamar and Director of Grounds Jamie Moore, aimed to spark reflection on the legacies of World War II in the Asia-Pacific region.

Given that the Ginkgo trees are directly related to the tragedy of Hiroshima, some students and alumni of Chinese and Korean backgrounds expressed concern that their planting did not sufficiently represent the broader historical context, particularly the suffering caused by Imperial Japan’s invasions across Asia. In response, Dean Shelley Rigger invited the Deliberative Citizenship Initiative (DCI) to help facilitate a community-wide deliberation on how to contextualize the trees through thoughtful signage and interpretive materials.

A student-faculty team organized a Deliberative Forum in Spring 2025 that included faculty presentations, survivor testimonials, and facilitated small-group discussions. Participants deliberated about the complex legacies of war in the region and submitted written reflections on what should be included on signs and interpretative materials introducing the trees.

From these reflections, the team identified eight core themes and drafted content for physical signs and related online resources. The project sought to create a reflective, inclusive memorial that acknowledges the universal human cost of war and promotes dialogue across perspectives. Through QR codes on each sign, visitors can access additional materials, and the website will grow over time as the Davidson community continues to reflect on war’s legacy and the enduring pursuit of peace.

Relevant Resources:

1. Link to [article](#) about Ginkgo tree planting
2. Link to Dr. Multhaup’s Slides from the Deliberative Forum
3. Link to Ginkgo Tree Project Description
4. Links to More Information about the Ginkgo Trees and their Biology
5. Link to [Green Legacy Hiroshima](#)
6. Link to Green Legacy Hiroshima’s page about [Davidson’s Trees](#)
7. Link to Green Legacy Hiroshima’s brochure with map (from College Archives)
8. Links to other relevant resources

SIGN 2: The Brutality of War

These trees bear witness to the horrors of war—from forced labor to mass slaughter to atomic devastation—and remind us of the dangers posed by militarism in all its forms.

Background Text for Webpage:

These trees bear witness to the horrors of war—from forced labor to mass slaughter to atomic devastation—and remind us of the dangers posed by militarism in all its forms. The destruction wrought by World War II in the Asia-Pacific was not confined to battlefields; it was deeply felt by civilians, from those who endured occupation and enslavement to those who perished in bombings and famine. The scars of war endure, shaping the memories and identities of nations and individuals alike. By confronting this brutality, we reaffirm our commitment to preventing future conflicts.

The 2025 Deliberative Forum on the Legacies of World War II in the Asia Pacific, particularly the video showcasing survivors' experiences, underscored the necessity of highlighting the multiplicity of suffering endured during the conflict in any discussion of war's devastation. While the ginkgo trees symbolize resilience in the face of nuclear destruction, forum participants pointed out that the war's brutality extended far beyond Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The Nanjing Massacre in China, the firebombing of Asian and Pacific cities, the struggles of prisoners of war, and the histories of sexual enslavement and forced labor across the region all highlight the profound human cost of militarism. Many emphasized the need for interpretative materials to reflect this broader history, ensuring that remembrance does not become selective or nationalistic. By engaging in these deliberations, participants helped shape a more inclusive narrative—one that acknowledges the suffering inflicted across borders and underscores the universal dangers of war.

Relevant Resources:

- Link to information about Deliberative Forum
- Link to Dr. Mortensen's slides from the Deliberative Forum
- Link to [video](#) created by Keya Zhou
- Link to information about sexual enslavement across Asia
- Links to other relevant resources, including more information about the examples of the brutality of war in the region listed above

SIGN 3: No One Story Tells It All

The legacies of war are complex, contested, and multi-sided; these trees make space for the many perspectives and experiences shaped by WWII in the Asia Pacific.

Background Text for Webpage:

The legacies of war are complex, contested, and multi-sided; these trees make space for the many perspectives and experiences shaped by World War II in the Asia-Pacific. For some, they recall the suffering inflicted by imperial expansion; for others, they are a reminder of the devastation of nuclear weapons. While national narratives often diverge, these trees stand as an invitation to listen, to engage, and to acknowledge the many truths that coexist in the memory of war.

During the Deliberative Forum, participants repeatedly underscored the difficulty of telling a single, definitive story of World War II. The presentations by Davidson faculty highlighted how the war shaped national identities in different ways. Varied perspectives made it clear that drawing a universal lesson from this conflict is challenging. Some participants expressed concern that focusing on the atomic bombings risks downplaying the broader regional context. Others pointed out that the suffering of ordinary Japanese civilians should not be dismissed either. The forum discussions helped clarify the need for interpretative materials that honor all these perspectives while resisting the temptation to flatten history into a singular narrative.

Relevant Resources:

- [Link to Dr. Zhu's Slides from the Deliberative Forum](#)
- [Link to Deliberation Guide sections on different countries' experience of WWII](#)
- [Links to other relevant resources](#)

SIGN 4: Memory Across Boundaries

These trees invite us to remember the pain and loss of World War II and of all wars—not just in one country, but across the Asia-Pacific region and the world.

Background Text for Webpage:

These trees invite us to remember the pain and loss of World War II and of all wars—not just in one country, but across the Asia-Pacific region and the world. Conflict does not recognize borders, nor does suffering belong to any single people. War uproots families, destroys communities, and leaves a lasting imprint on generations. In remembrance, we honor those who suffered as human beings, transcending national identities, and reaffirm our responsibility to prevent such devastation from recurring in the future.

Forum discussions repeatedly returned to the importance of collective remembrance—one that does not privilege a single nation's suffering over others. Some participants worried that the ginkgo trees might be seen as only commemorating Japan's pain, rather than the shared trauma of the entire region. Others noted that countries in the Asia-Pacific continue to struggle with unresolved tensions over historical memory, often shaping international relations to this day. The participants' discussion of collective memory illustrated how different nations construct their narratives of war, sometimes in conflict with one another. Through deliberation, participants explored how the trees could serve as a bridge for understanding rather than a symbol of division. This theme emerged from a desire to recognize that war's impact is never isolated to one people or place, and that true remembrance must cross national and historical boundaries.

Relevant Resources:

- Link to comments shared in the Deliberative Forums' roundtable discussions and via the online input survey shared after the forum
- Links to other relevant resources

SIGN 5: Resilience in the Face of Destruction

The ginkgo trees, descendants of survivors of unimaginable hardship, symbolize the enduring strength of life after war and trauma.

Background Text for Webpage:

The ginkgo trees, descendants of survivors of unimaginable hardship, symbolize the enduring strength of life after war and trauma. In Hiroshima, where entire neighborhoods were reduced to ashes, ginkgo trees remained standing amidst the ruins—an astonishing testament to nature’s ability to persist against all odds. Their presence here serves as a reminder that, even in the face of devastation, renewal is possible.

Discussions in the forum highlighted how resilience should not only be about endurance but also about actively seeking justice, healing, and reconciliation. While some participants saw the trees as symbols of Japan’s survival, others broadened the interpretation, emphasizing that resilience also belongs to all those who suffered as a result of the actions of Japan’s leaders and soldiers—whether they were, for example, Chinese civilians who rebuilt their bombed-out cities, Korean women who sought justice for wartime sexual slavery, or Pacific Islanders whose homelands were reshaped by military conflict.

Learning about the ginkgo trees’ journey to Davidson underscored their symbolic power, but participants emphasized the need to contextualize their meaning beyond Hiroshima. These conversations helped shape an understanding of the trees not just as relics of the past, but as living reminders of what can be rebuilt when peace and understanding take root.

Relevant Resources:

- Links to additional stories and videos of survivors of the war
- Links to other relevant resources

SIGN 6: Acknowledgments Matter

True healing begins with recognition – of suffering, of wrongs, and of the need for ongoing dialogue and understanding.

Background Text for Webpage:

True healing begins with recognition—of suffering, of wrongs, and of the need for ongoing dialogue and understanding. While history cannot be undone, acknowledgment allows wounds to be addressed rather than ignored. Reckoning with the past—whether through apology, education, or remembrance—creates the foundation for reconciliation. These trees ask us to consider: What does it mean to truly acknowledge history?

The forum revealed that acknowledgment remains a deeply contested issue in the Asia-Pacific. Participants discussed how Japan’s government has issued apologies for wartime actions but that disputes remain over their sincerity and whether they have been accompanied by meaningful restitution. Some attendees noted that acknowledgment is not just about governmental actions—it is also about how societies educate younger generations about history.

The question of what should be included on interpretative plaques sparked debate: Should they reference specific acts of acknowledgment and apology? Should they highlight where reconciliation remains incomplete? The forum’s deliberations underscored that remembrance must go hand in hand with accountability and that these trees offer an opportunity to engage in the difficult, but necessary, process of reflection about what constitutes sincere acknowledgement.

Relevant Resources:

- Links to acknowledgments and apologies made by different individuals, countries and organizations
- Links to other relevant resources

SIGN 7: Pathways to Peace

These trees invite us to imagine a future without war and to explore the many paths we might take to reach that vision.

Background Text for Webpage:

These trees invite us to imagine a future without war and to explore the many paths we might take to reach that vision. Diplomacy, reconciliation, disarmament, and justice are all ways in which societies can move beyond conflict. No single path guarantees peace, but through sustained effort and mutual understanding, we can work toward a world where war is no longer inevitable.

Forum participants grappled with the question of why war persists despite its horrors. The discussion about WWII's long-term effects highlighted how postwar settlements and unresolved grievances continue to shape international tensions. Participants debated various approaches to peacebuilding, examining the most effective paths to reconciliation.

Perspectives on conflict varied: pacifists emphasized disarmament and nonviolence, constitutionalists stressed the role of international cooperation and institutions, realists focused on power dynamics and national security interests, and constructivists underscored the influence of identities and historical narratives. While some argued that lasting peace depends on political will and public memory, others saw institutional reforms as essential. Ultimately, rather than treating these perspectives as mutually exclusive, participants recognized that each highlights different aspects of conflict and that, together, they offer a more comprehensive understanding of how to prevent future wars.

Relevant Resources:

- [Link to relevant text on pathways to peace from Deliberation Guide](#)
- [Links to other relevant resources](#)

SIGN 8: Hope Grows Here

Planted by the campus community and nurtured with ongoing reflection, these trees are a living reminder that growth, empathy, and reconciliation are always possible.

Background Text for Webpage:

Planted by the campus community and nurtured with ongoing reflection, these trees are a living reminder that growth, empathy, and reconciliation are always possible. Just as the ginkgo trees once withstood fire, atomic bomb radioactive fallout, and destruction, so too can humanity rebuild and forge new relationships. Their presence encourages us to believe in the possibility of healing, to commit to learning from history, and to cultivate a future where peace is not merely an aspiration, but a reality.

Forum Participants repeatedly returned to the idea that hope and remembrance must go hand in hand. The trees, planted by students and faculty, symbolize a commitment to learning from history rather than being bound by it. Many forum attendees emphasized the role of education in fostering peace, noting that institutions like Davidson College can be spaces for dialogue across differences.

The event itself embodied this aspiration—bringing together individuals with diverse perspectives to engage in difficult but meaningful conversations. These trees, then, are not just a commemoration of the past, but a statement of faith in a future shaped by understanding and mutual respect.

Relevant Resources:

- Links to organizations doing this work in different countries.
- Links to other relevant resources