

Zone zero is obviously very important in a permaculture design. It is the hub of the site and the system, and from which all other zones are activated and utilized. Furthermore, zone zero is occupied by us humans; ideally we ourselves create the design to which it is central. Our skills, knowledge, commitment and time become on-site energies available in the zone zero assessment.

But we also bring to the site design process ideas, attitudes and cultural priorities that will have a definitive impact on the future of our permacultural system, not only on site, but around us. For this reason, we must also assess zone zero as a sector, a natural force which impacts and passes through the site, as do water, wind and sun. Zone zero represents the human sector, us and our technology, the most dynamic and influential sector in the system.

ZONE ZERO IN AMERICA

We have turned to permaculture in hopes of learning how to redesign our patterns. But how do we avoid simply moving to a more ecologically correct deck chair on the Titanic? No matter how committed we are to leaving the earth healthier than we found it, or how much information we gather about permaculture techniques that can be applied to our site, the fact remains that we bring to our projects the conditioning and expectations of the consumer-oriented capitalist culture in which we were raised. Before we start imagining our energy-efficient, natural, healthy zone zero, it is incumbent upon us to assess the human sector: what we bring with us to the design process, and in particular, the expectations we derive from our American culture.

Zone zero in American society is not the home. For most of us, our homes are where we sleep and where we seek some peace from our real center of activity, called here "the grid." This term usually means the electrical grid, but we will use it to symbolize the centralized, homogenized, corporate pattern of control that has become life in America. And while the grid would seem to connect us together in the name of progress and growth, at a personal and communal level we are diffused and exhausted.

We work one place, buy our food another, go to the post office, day care center, discount store, movie theater. Eighty percent of Americans are now directly dependent on an urban center for survival, and those who are not, if they own a TV or radio, are heavily influenced by urban-based values and expectations. Our vehicle becomes a vital element in zone zero. No wonder there is so much emphasis on comfort in American automobiles — they are truly a center of activity.

Anyone who grew up in America imbibed certain cultural and nationalist ideals. America is endless abundance, freedom of expression, and it is the mover and shaker of the world. We all learned "it's a free country," and were taught that we each had an equal shake at the good life this freedom provides as long as we worked hard and obeyed the rules.

But the virtue of a free society can be subverted by its own inherent generosity. The Constitution of the United States, though a remarkable and transcendent document, could not prevent subsequent generations of Americans from

focusing on the acquisition of material wealth rather than on acceptance of individuality as the ultimate goal of a free society. This narrow distortion of national goals has reduced independence to autonomy, individual rights to competition, and "the pursuit of happiness" to immediate gratification. These thought patterns, which support and feed our acquisitive culture and now define much of America, we will call "gridthink."

THE TENETS OF "GRIDTHINK"

Autonomy is the strong and silent cowboy on the open range. He has his horse, his saddlebag of food, his bedroll. He needs no one else to live life as he wants. His autonomy means that his responsibility to others extends only to doing his job and he need be part of no other human circle.

In gridthink, the autonomy of others is sacrosanct. Private property rights, and related rights to protect that property such as owning a gun or taking someone to court are unquestioned. Communal concerns are external to gridthink autonomy. Most of the responsibility for knitting community is dumped into the lap of government which is given only enough resources to react to emergencies and is never given the power to create long term solutions. Non-profit organizations whose purpose is aberrantly communal rather than acquisitive are allowed to function to keep community grumblings at an acceptable level.

Competition is the head coach of a professional sports team. He mobilizes his resources solely for the purpose of winning, not only the day's game but the national championship. Every decision he makes is based on this projected outcome: to be Number One. He lives in a world where every decision made is either absolutely right or irretrievably wrong, and other people are either winners or losers. A winning coach is encouraged to feel superiority and self-justification for pushing the envelope of good sportsmanship.

With winning being the culturally dictated criterion of a successful life, societal choices become narrow and homogeneous, and thought is polarized into black or white, right or wrong. A diversity of priorities or opinions is discouraged.

By Peter Cooke & Ingrid Kelley

Immediate gratification is personified in the corporate CEO on the fast track who must have the latest, most accurate information about everything from international monetary exchange rates to weather conditions in the grain belt in order to make quick business decisions. The CEO also expects to know instantly the results of any action taken. "Time is money," which means that maximizing short-term gains takes precedence over long-range planning, and the primary criterion of efficiency becomes how long something will take. Results that are difficult to quantify quickly are ignored.

The latest high level technology is considered essential to fulfilling the need to be fastest, and its ongoing development has institutionalized the expectation of speediness throughout the society. Companies that provide the most immediate gratification to their customers, whether through image or actuality, are most likely to stay autonomous and competitive. Also, the success of technology so far to provide fast, short-term solutions has blinded the culture to the concerns of the future. Gridthink assumes the future will take care of itself with similar technical marvels.

GRIDTHINK IN PERMACULTURE

Gridthink is everywhere. The daily newspaper prints headlines like "Environmentalists Score Victory in Grazing Issue," and, like sports fans, we celebrate or despair, depending on our point of view, but seldom reflect on the divisiveness of the attitude in the headline, or whether productive environmental planning belongs in the winner/loser context.

Permaculture is not immune to gridthink. The basic design course opens our minds to the interrelationships in the natural system, and spurs us to imagine harnessing natural and communal energies to create a sustainable and abundant way of life. But it cannot purge us totally of our culturally implanted desires to be free of all dependence on others, to have the winning best, and to possess these states as quickly as possible.

Gridthink has crept in with the permacultural fantasy of a site that is totally energy independent, miles from anyone, and needing nothing from the outside world. This is essentially the American Cowboy Dream taken to its ultimate autonomous point. There is gridthink in the desire to build the most amazing permaculture demonstration site with all the latest and best appropriate technology, designed by experts and better than anyone else's, that will be lauded by permaculturalists and school children alike. Also, starting a design business that sells permaculture as a product to those who can afford it is really just gridthink business as usual.

Gridthink is present in the idea of starting a non-profit in order to seek grant money to do independent permaculture projects. And for all of us, there exists a certain gridthink desperation to get a "successful" business or a site up and running before we start building our invisible communal structures.

DESIGNING A PERMACULTURAL THOUGHT PATTERN

Gridthink is antithetical to permacultural ethics, philosophy, and action. It is based on self-aggrandizement and personal indulgence at the expense of the community rather than on building a community system where everyone and everything can prosper. The intrusion of gridthink into our lives is phenomenal, so much so that we even find it natural to regard permaculture design as a technology rather than a way of life.

Becoming aware of the gridthink around us is the first step in our zone zero assessment. Finding gridthink inside of ourselves and recognizing how it will impact our site design, and then making a conscious change to a true permacultural viewpoint requires vigilance and discipline. This is the work involved in implementing our new zone zero thought pattern.

Intent Planting a tree is doing nothing if that act is done without regard to its guild, and its guild to the system. It is our intent, coupled with our resources, that together create the product of our action. We always have intent, but the quality of our intent is determined by our awareness of the whole. Saving the forest so we can fish in the stream may signal more conscious intent than clear cutting the timber, but the forest will be safe only as long as we intend to fish.

Permacultural intent is found in the ethics: care of the earth and its people, and sharing in the abundance of the system. Permacultural intent incorporates the whole of life, not merely personal or societal desires. It serves as the touchstone for our design decisions, helping us to discern the relentless incursion of gridthink priorities. The act of permaculture design is itself an ongoing cycle of intent — learning, doing, and sharing the resulting knowledge.

Creativity Awareness leads to creativity. The grid has reduced our capacity for acquiring awareness through its digital message of zero's or one's, winners or losers, good or bad. The convenience of TV has convinced us we need no other magic; our imaginations have become stultified. To be permacultural we must learn again how to be aware of our

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natural patterns in order to reawaken our creativity. Not only have we lost touch with patterns of the natural world around us, but also with our own rhythms of breath, sleep, activity, and intuition.

Native American wisdom is valuable to us not for the romantic image of simplicity that some ascribe to it, but for its reliance on patterns and its gratitude for the gift of their

continued on page 18

inherent creativity. The word religion itself means relinking. The first religion on Turtle Island was based on awareness of natural patterns. Learning this awareness leads us away from the gridthink principle of dominion over the earth and toward a genuine contribution to the cycle of creation of which we are part.

When we recognize and drop gridthink impulses toward autonomy and competition, we open to new possibilities of cooperation with all other beings in the system. We can proceed without expectations and be surprised by the abundant fruits of group creativity.

Time and Space Change is the manifestation of time, and is a most natural thing. Yet in gridthink, change is the enemy, and is something, God willing and with technology, we will overcome. In a permaculture system, it is a stepping stone, like a mother raising a child. Change is a self-empowering opportunity to open up and grow.

Native Americans speak of acting with seven generations in mind, a concept so foreign to the immediacy of gridthink it is difficult for the American mind to grasp. If we can rather think of ourselves as positioned in the middle, with three generations ahead and three behind, we can both benefit from our ancestry and contribute to the lives of our descendants.

Permaculture looks at time as part of the pattern in a system. Time and change are resources. It is best if one can observe a site over the course of four seasons before beginning to design the zones. In permaculture, it is possible to plant trees that will not mature for eighty years and know the value of this contribution to the system without a quarterly report.

Gridthink says land has monetary value only, unencumbered by intrinsic pattern or history. Priorities are dictated by legal private property rights rather than the reasonable concerns of neighbors or community. Site assessment stops at finding a building envelope with a view, or squeezing in enough parking spaces to get a permit. If land is sacred and cannot be owned, as the Native Americans say, then the land must be allowed to speak for itself.

We can listen to the land even if we are not private property owners. Rental property and public spaces deserve permacultural observation and insight, and involvement in such projects as community gardens or reforestation expand the scope of permacultural possibilities beyond zone zero.

Needs and Wants It is important to understand the difference between needs and wants. Needs are elements of basic sustenance and include the efficient design of the system. Wants, on the other hand, may be frivolous extensions of gridthink desire. For example, we need shelter, but if we want a particular kind of shelter regardless of site or energy considerations, we compromise the integrity of our zone zero design. Asking ourselves why we really need or want something is therefore an essential exercise.

There will always be some kind of "grid" in our lives. Too much technology surrounds us now to get away from it. Assessing its influence in zone zero is difficult because we are so close, but this self discipline is necessary if we really want to change the future.