
Living Design

by Joel Glanzberg

For years we have been saying that permaculture is a design system. That may be true, but I'm not sure that we know what this means. We've all started with the assumption that any human creation is designed. It may be designed well or it may be designed poorly, but it is nonetheless designed. Natural systems, which we all admire extravagantly, are not designed. They are evolved. They evolve over time with the inputs and efforts of all of the inhabitants and participants. I believe that this is also true of all traditional agriculture, aquaculture, and architecture.

I would like to take a look at permaculture "design" and see what that means, or perhaps what it should mean.

All of us would agree that the mess we find ourselves in has been created largely by world views or approaches which are antithetical to the way living systems function. The problem is not that technology and mechanization don't work. They do work. They simply are antithetical to living systems. Machines and living systems are by nature incompatible. Almost all human designs have been made without an understanding of how the planet works, but with an understanding of how technology works. Since nearly everything we see, touch, and use is man-made, this leads us to believe that this planet must function very differently than it actually does. Therefore, the understanding of permaculture strikes us as a huge revelation. "Wow! We can't treat anything as isolated and we have to see how it affects everything else." Permaculture is really only a reintroduction to how the living world we are a part of works.

When we say that something made by humans is designed, this is true if we mean someone decided how to make it. It is not true if we mean that a "designer" sat down at a drafting table and created elevations and plans on sheets of velum. Most things which have been made by people, especially the most beautiful and sustainable, have been "designed" by their creators when their hands were dirty. They were made up as they went along. In addition, these designs have changed over time as needs and circumstances changed. They have been living designs, and the designing is an ongoing process over time involving the inputs and efforts of all of the inhabitants. In this way they are like natural systems. They are not so much designed as evolved.

In my experience as a "permaculture designer," this is the only type of design which works. Everything else falls on its face because it is antithetical to the way living systems work. Living systems are individual and continually chang-

ing. Similarly, permaculture systems cannot be static. They may take little or no outside inputs, but they must be managed if they are inhabited.

Most of the permaculture designs done for clients which I have seen neglect Zones I and II, or these zones were never implemented. This is probably because these zones are the most intensively managed. They are theoretically also the most productive. Without the involvement and desire of the inhabitants in the design of these areas, they will not be created or managed. Hence only the least productive zones are created and the inhabitants are still dependent on the outside world for most of their needs.

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Our first design objective is to provide for the needs of the inhabitants of the site on the site. Without the skillful management of Zones I and II, this is impossible. Without the dedicated involvement of the inhabitants, this is impossible. Without ongoing management and design, particularly of Zones I and II but also of all of the zones, "permaculture design" is simply a slightly less destructive form of the objective and remote landscape and architectural design which we already have. If the designer is not an inhabitant of the design, it must remain abstract and remote. Even if implemented it is still abstract if it is not lived in by people who interact with it, constantly adjusting to its changes, and it to

theirs. Since people are a part of these systems, they must live in them for the system to be truly alive.

At my own home, many of my initial design concepts have changed dramatically by living with the place. It is only by living with a place that you can get to know it. To me, permaculture is not a design system, but a reintroduction to the living world of which we are a part. Only if a designer is also a builder, gardener, lover, parent, or child can what is designed be a functioning living system. Only then is it able to evolve over time with the inputs and efforts of all its inhabitants.

In all things our aim is to take nature as our guide and that means taking our place as one of the inhabitants. It is our hubris which has gotten us into this mess. Only our humility can get us out.

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