

Building a Toolbox for Social Permaculture

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Introduction

Many permaculturists have observed that the social dimensions of design can be far more challenging than the ecological ones. The most robustly interconnected land management system will fail to achieve its goals if the human relationships surrounding that system suffer. Permaculture ethics insist that people care (i.e., social health) and fair share / returning the surplus (i.e., economic justice) are just as important as ecological regeneration. Permaculture design, then, can become more holistically effective by integrating understandings of social and economic systems.

Both authors of this article worked as nature-based educators before we were permaculture teachers and designers. Years spent facilitating people's connection to the natural world created similar realizations for us. Since we *are* nature, working,¹ ecosystem mimicry can inform the design of our social and economic systems as well as our physical habitat. But the design principles and strategies of permaculture did not, by themselves, seem to tell us *how* to approach economic and social design. We had to look elsewhere, to tools and frameworks developed by others outside of the permaculture network that resonate with the ethos behind permaculture theory.

In July 2012, we integrated these tools and frameworks into an experimental four-day workshop in Social Permaculture² in the southern Green Mountains of Vermont. This article shares some of the territory we explored during those four days, and offers proposed components of a social permaculture toolbox.

In applying the term “social permaculture” to a collection of already-existing traditions and knowledge, even lightly, it is important to recognize the shoulders we stand on. A subtle but very harmful form of oppression occurs when members of dominant groups claim, appropriate, and rename knowledge that others have developed. Independent of the permaculture network, many people, organizations, and communities have created and refined these tools we offer here. Furthermore, many other permaculture teachers have integrated social, cultural, and economic considerations into their courses.³

¹ This phrase is from Penny Livingston of the Regenerative Design Institute – <http://www.regenerativedesign.org>

² <http://www.southernvermontpermaculture.com>

³ For example, the Permaculture f.e.a.s.t. course in Holyoke, MA, with Lisa DePiano – <http://www.permaculturefeast.org/> – and Starhawk's Earth Activist Training – <http://www.earthactivisttraining.org/>.

As a result, we present this article not as any codification of “the” boundaries or essential ingredients of social permaculture. Instead, we offer a collection of tools that permaculturists can explore and expand. Where possible and appropriate, we’ve referenced our sources in the text or in footnotes, and we encourage readers to explore the work of these people and organizations more fully.

1. Apply a Personal Design Process

The empowering message at the heart of permaculture – we are nature, working, with the inherent ability to improve and transform our world – can apply equally to all aspects of our lives as it does to the natural and built environments. A commonly employed process in permaculture design includes: 1) articulating goals, 2) assessing existing conditions, and 3) developing designs that elegantly marry those goals with the existing conditions. Translating these steps to a personal process, we might ask: What are our personal goals? What are the existing conditions of our lives related to those goals? Where are our greatest constraints and opportunities? What new potential directions could we consider taking that could move us towards reaching our goals? An ongoing conversation of personal design can create a setting for creativity, collaboration, and powerful new possibilities.

2. Work Towards Personal Healing and Re-emergence

Fractals in nature, such as the spiral of an unfolding fern frond or the dendritic branching of a stream system, mirror the layered complexity of the inner human landscape. Both modern Western psychology and wisdom traditions from around the world point out that our internal state becomes expressed in our external actions. “As within, so without.”

Imagine an iceberg towering above the surface of the ocean. It appears, enormous, mountain-like – and yet the vast majority of its mass is underwater. The above visible portion is only a tiny percentage of the whole. In a similar way, our surface-level beliefs and actions may only represent a small fraction of our whole selves. Deeper components such as worldviews, belief systems, unexpressed gifts, unhealed trauma, and neuromuscular patterning all lie below the surface. These less-conscious aspects of our selves can create unintended impacts in our work when they remain occluded.

There are countless tools that people have used to undo old patterns and overcome self-imposed limitations. A few that we have found especially helpful include the theory and practice of Re-evaluation Counseling,⁴ communication frameworks such as Non-Violent Communication,⁵ and peacemaking principles

⁴ Re-evaluation Counseling International: <http://www.rc.org>

⁵ Center for Non-violent Communication: <http://www.cnvc.org>

from the Peacemaker's Journey story of the Haudenosaunee confederacy.⁶ One question we often ask our students and ourselves as a starting point is, "Are my goals motivated from a place of grief [i.e. trauma, wounds, unconscious patterns] or a place of creativity [i.e., gifts, positive vision, our best thinking]?"⁷ Questions such as this one ask for brave self-awareness and turning our minds towards what's possible rather than what impedes us.

3. Apply an Analysis of Difference, Privilege, and Power

Pattern observation and interpretation is a core skill in permaculture design. One significant pattern that can be observed in human relationships and social structures is diversity, as real and complex in human communities as it is in the natural world.

People are different in a thousand ways. Some of those differences have become preferenced over time, and people with those preferenced identities have gained privilege over people with other identities. Those privileged identity groups have gone on to build systems of power to reinforce their privilege, and used those systems of power to actively oppress and disempower people with non-preferenced identities.⁸ Racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, and other systemic forms of discrimination can be understood through this analysis of difference, privilege, and power.

If our goal is "permanent culture" and whole-systems design, we cannot ignore these patterns of privilege and systems of power and oppression that have served to separate and divide people. And since systems of power have been internalized and normalized throughout society, self-awareness and personal healing go hand in hand with building our capacity to undo oppressive systems.

4. Map Personal Identities and Histories

Exploring our own personal identities can be a useful starting point in understanding dynamics of power and privilege.⁹ Each person's race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, religious background, and other forms

⁶ This tradition of peacemaking has been mostly transmitted through oral history, passed on by the late Tekaronieneken Jake Swamp and his wife Judy Swamp, both of the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation. Jake was a sub-chief of the Wolf Clan of the Haudenosaunee confederacy, and passed away in 2010 after decades of international diplomacy and activism through the Tree of Peace Society.

⁷ This question comes from James Stark of the Regenerative Design Institute – <http://www.regenerativedesign.org>

⁸ Privilege as Practice framework from Kalynn Sullivan Twotrees and Matt Kolan. Full article here: http://www.trackingpatterns.org/articles-essays/Privilege_as_Practice.pdf

⁹ One example of an identity mapping process is here, from the Mississippi Coalition for Racial Justice: <http://www.welcometable.net/archivedsite/documents/cultural-map.pdf>

of difference, have strongly shaped his/her experience in the world. Nuances of these identities go beyond simple categories; they can contain complex personal, family, and social histories that help to tell the story of where we come from and how we have become who we are.

This exploration of identity helps to highlight how our identities have given us greater or lesser degrees of power and privilege in the world. For example, the authors of this article, as European-heritage people, have benefited from the color of our skin in countless ways. Neither of us chose to be white, yet whiteness has allowed us to avoid forms of race oppression that many people of color—people of the global majority—experience on a daily basis. Especially for members of privileged groups, lacking awareness of our identities and how we benefit from them makes it very difficult to share power across lines of difference.

5. Become an Ally to Members of Targeted Groups

In order to have a positive impact in the world, anti-oppression work needs to go beyond self-awareness into action. One place to start can be in choosing to act as an ally to people targeted by oppression. Being an ally requires self-awareness. For example, a common phenomenon in groups is for men to speak more than women, and yet believe that they are sharing airtime equally. Men becoming allies to women and female-identified people might look like stepping back and creating space for women's voices to be heard.¹⁰

Practicing being an ally means thinking about others' life experiences and how historical forms of injustice still play out today. It also means a willingness to take risks, make mistakes, and communicate. Furthermore, it means recognizing that personal cultural competency does not, by itself, address systems of power that perpetuate oppression. The redesign of social-political systems is necessary for larger scale change – a vision which permaculturists are in a strong position to contribute to when we apply our toolbox for systems thinking and design.

Some anti-oppression organizations we recommend as resources include Power of Hope in Seattle, WA (<http://www.powerofhope.org/>), Training for Change in Philadelphia, PA (<http://www.trainingforchange.org/>), and Re-evaluation Counseling International (<http://www.rc.org/>). There are thousands more organizations worldwide actively engaged in opposing and undoing systems of oppression. We encourage permaculturists to build relationships and develop alliances with those organizations.

6. Apply Cultural Elements that Create Connection

¹⁰ Many other examples of ally actions can be found in the article, "Tools for White Guys", by Chris Crass. The principles and practices described in the article aren't limited to use by white men... <http://www.starhawk.org/activism/trainer-resources/tools-whiteguys.html>

Cultural elements repeat through out every continent and express themselves uniquely in each place. Some of these repeating cultural elements evolved to create strong connections between people as a means of survival. Practices such as greeting customs, song, storytelling, ritualistic rites, and intergenerational mentoring have persisted around the world for a reason – they create connection, draw out peoples’ gifts, and speak to our common humanity. Connection-building cultural elements help to “push back” harmful, divisive messages of the modern consumer society, and instead, invite expressions of social cohesion and resilience.¹¹

In organizational meetings, educational settings, and community gatherings, consider orienting the culture towards building connection (both among people and between people and nature) first, before covering content or making decisions. Then see what happens.

7. Value Non-Financial Forms of Capital

Many thoughtful leaders have identified money as a significant driver of ecological devastation and economic injustice. The perceived need to earn money can set up a wide range of difficult choices for world changers, and can make it seem as if our eco-social missions are in conflict with our survival in a modern world. Transitioning away from a money-based economy can be a subversive, empowering, and new culture-building act.

One place to start is to invest in and conduct transactions in forms of wealth and value *other than* money. In particular, social capital (i.e., human relationships, mutual support, solidarity) and living capital (i.e. soil, plants, animals, productive landscapes, intact ecosystems) investments and transactions create a different form of economy with very different incentives.¹²

Recent thinking about complementary currencies emphasizes that not a single alternative currency is needed; rather, a basket or ecosystem of currencies that reflect different types of transactions and different forms of wealth is more robust. Valuing multiple forms of capital, at least as highly as we value money, has a significant role to play in building a more just, ethical, and ecological economy.

8. Create a Gift Economy

¹¹ Much of our learning about cultural elements and designing for connection has come through the Art of Mentoring network of nature-based mentoring organizations. You can learn more about this important work at the 8 Shields Institute - <http://8shields.org/> - Wilderness Awareness School - <http://wildernessawareness.org/> - and Vermont Wilderness School - <http://www.vermontwildernessschool.org/>.

¹² We’ve learned about multiple forms of capital and value from the Eight Forms of Capital framework, by Ethan Roland and Gregory Landua: <http://appleseedpermaculture.com/8-forms-of-capital/>

One powerful form of non-financial transaction is gifting. Societies around the world practice the tradition of a 'giveaway,' redistributing wealth, strengthening social capital, and helping the members of the community in the greatest need. Regular giveaways, large and small, can build a gift economy where people increasingly rely on social ties more than the money economy. Gifting seems to build a healthy economy best when the gifts given are useful, beautiful, and carry stories. Services (help, work, attention, support) can also be gifted in addition to physical items. Neighborly help in times of need is a form of gift economy that is still alive and well in many communities.

Our Social Permaculture workshop in July 2012 concluded with a giveaway by the workshop hosts, offering useful and beautiful things to the participants and staff to choose and take with them. Participants reflected that the giveaway embodied much of what the course had explored, and that they were excited to carry the cultural practice of gifting with them and pass it on in their home communities.

9. Apply Models of Shared Leadership

What would it look like to model leadership and decision-making modeled after nature? Although ecosystems contain some forms of hierarchy (such as the concentration of energy and biomass through trophic levels), they operate as interconnected webs of relationships rather than top-down systems of power. The permaculture design principle of "Functional Interconnection" suggests that through ecosystem mimicry, systems can be designed for mutual support relationships. To design social systems with these mutual support relationships in mind, conventional models of decision-making and leadership may need to be reconsidered. Applying models of shared leadership to a project or organization can express the design principle of "Redundancy" and help build a more regenerative culture and society.

One model of shared leadership is the Eight Shields cultural model embodied and taught by the Art of Mentoring network.¹³ Another model is Sociocracy, which creates circular rather than one-directional hierarchies.¹⁴ Consensus-based decision-making processes, such as the General Assemblies used by the Occupy movement, provide further examples of non-hierarchical systems of governance. There exist a myriad of shared leadership models, which can be matched to the goals and needs of a given situation. Like complementary currencies, drawing on a basket of decision-making processes (rather than defaulting to one single process) can offer greater agility and flexibility in social design.

¹³ In addition to the links in footnote #11, the book *Coyote's Guide to Connecting to Nature* by Young, Haas, and McGown is an excellent introduction to the Eight Shields model. <http://www.coyotesguide.com/>

¹⁴ Information on Sociocracy: <http://www.sociocracy.info/>

10. Evaluate Projects Using Whole-Systems Measures

If our goal is to truly achieve earth care, people care, and fair share, how might we evaluate our eco-social design work in a holistic way? How do we know if we are succeeding? One strategy is to use a holistic evaluation framework. The Center for Whole Communities has developed “Whole Measures”, an assessment tool that asks a series of ecological, economic, and social questions of an organization, project, or community.¹⁵ Many other such frameworks have been proposed.

Whichever framework or strategy is chosen, the authors believe that permaculture will have a greater positive impact on the world if it can more fully integrate social and economic considerations into ecological design. That integration work can begin with each of us as individuals. The more we can increase our self-awareness, cultural competence, and agility with systems of economics and governance, the more effectively we will be able to design integrated eco-social solutions for our planet and its inhabitants.

¹⁵ Whole Measures evaluation framework:
http://www.wholecommunities.org/whole_measures/