

# Introduction to Social Permaculture

Adapted from *Change Here Now* by Adam Brock

## Our Vision Deficit

What does your perfect world look like? I'm not talking about a less-bad world sketched out in policy prescriptions or optimistic statistics. Nor am I referring to a technological wonderland envisioned by some twentieth-century sci-fi author or twenty-first-century tech entrepreneur. No, I mean the world that you, and only you, can envision—the world that you know to be the fulfillment of humankind's highest potential as a species.

For me, that world is one in which every person performs meaningful labor. Where every family has the ability to prosper if they work hard. Where one person's success doesn't mean another's oppression. A world where elders are revered and women are empowered, and where a multiplicity of skin tones, ethnic traditions, and gender identities are able to thrive. It's a world where local communities have control over their own affairs and manage them responsibly, with their grandchildren's grandchildren in mind. Where communities are seamlessly embedded within the ecosystems around them. It's a world that understands and respects natural limits on local and global scales, a world that's learned how to balance individual agency with collective responsibility for each other and our shared home.

Perhaps your perfect world looks different. Each one of us, after all, has our own priorities of growth and change. Our imaginative impulses send us in all kinds of different directions, and our life experiences give us vastly different perspectives on society's problems and opportunities. Regardless of the specific substance of your perfect world, however, it probably seems pretty distant right now. From the ballot box to the global climate, we live in a time of unparalleled turmoil. Every day seems to bring news of another act of unprecedented violence, another natural disaster, a worsening of one ongoing crisis or another. Under these circumstances, visions of a perfect world might seem not only far-fetched, but embarrassing to even contemplate.

Yet it's now, more than ever, when we need these visions to guide us. It's true that things are likely to get worse before they get better. Much of our vision will remain unrealized during our lifetimes, and perhaps for several generations to come. But whether or not we even "get there" at all is only part of the point. Because back in the here and now, we need goals to guide our actions, targets to rally around. And if all we're striving for is "less bad," then that's all we can ever hope to achieve. This course makes the case that no progress—incremental or revolutionary—can occur without a long-term vision of what we're after.

# Three Premises of Social Permaculture

Our work in developing this Pod has been guided by a few core premises:

Premise number one is that **humans are part of nature, and nature creates abundance**. As much as we like to tout our own exceptionalism, it's hard to deny that Homo sapiens is just one species of millions, all of us sharing the thin crust of a planet hurtling through cold space. Without collaboration and stewardship of that thin film of life, we're toast. Fortunately, we're surrounded by ecosystems that, despite challenging conditions, have managed to thrive for billions of years. Abundance is what nature does best, and it's used that abundance to weather untold challenges over the eons.

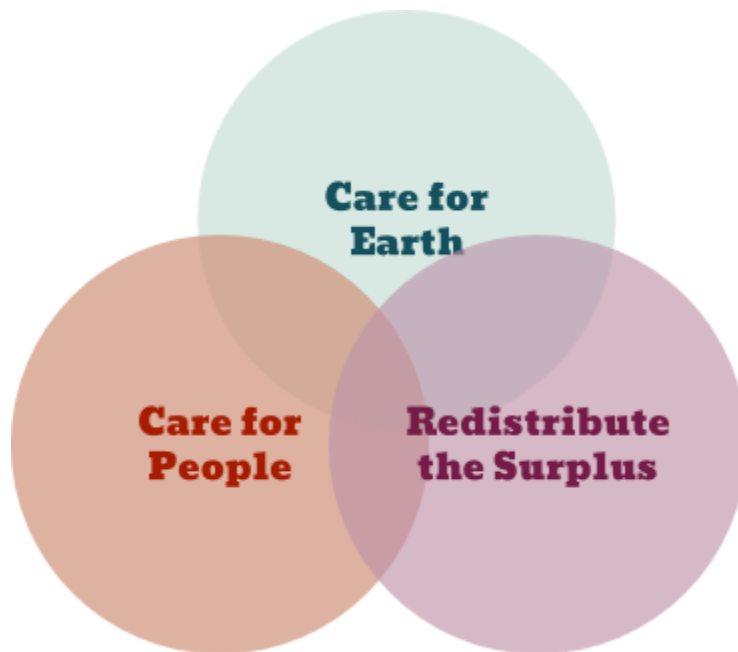
Humans are part of nature—and always have been. But despite having nature's abundance on our side, our operating system has been infected with code that erodes this abundance. That brings us to the second premise, that **our current political-economic system is unsustainable and headed toward collapse**. Like a parasitic virus destroying its host, our elite-controlled global economy is consuming the very foundations of life we need to survive: natural resources like fossil fuels and fresh water, to be sure, but also local economies, networks of mutual aid, and shared narratives of meaning. These dynamics have been operating for decades—in some cases, centuries—but in the last several years they've become increasingly impossible to ignore. Our addictions to control and growth are still largely absent from civil discourse, but they're lurking in the subtext of just about every headline. Across the globe, example after example of civil unrest, repressive regimes, and economic instability can be tied to the social and environmental stress caused by attempting infinite growth on a finite world.

Recognizing the dire situation we're in, tens of millions of people across the world have dedicated their time and money to addressing issues of violence, poverty, climate change, and resource depletion. Yet many contemporary efforts at social change are atomistic—they try to change individual issues, one by one. Many of these solutions have become vital stopgaps, slowing the spread of our planetary virus. Many others, by focusing so narrowly on one challenge, have created side effects that actually make other problems worse. But even if they all worked exactly as intended, these solutions just don't add up to the deep change that we need. That's where the third premise comes in: **permaculture and other tools of regenerative design give us the conceptual tools for transcending the challenges we face as a society**. By drawing on ecosystems for inspiration and applying a rigorous and methodical problem-solving process, permaculture design shows that it's indeed possible to create twenty-first-century communities that work in concert with nature's abundance. The regenerative design paradigm invites us to approach our civilizational crisis from the "top of the watershed," where it's clear that our myriad challenges are all symptoms of the same fundamental disconnection.

# Permaculture 101

For a worldwide movement that's grown exponentially over the past few decades, Permaculture is notoriously hard to pin down. Less a body of knowledge than a process for *using* knowledge, permaculture attempts to weave together fields as diverse as indigenous practices, ecology, geology, and history into a comprehensive framework for figuring out how humans can live indefinitely on this planet. As my colleague Rafter Sass Ferguson puts it, permaculture is at its core about meeting human needs while restoring ecosystem health – a radical proposition indeed in our hyper-destructive society.

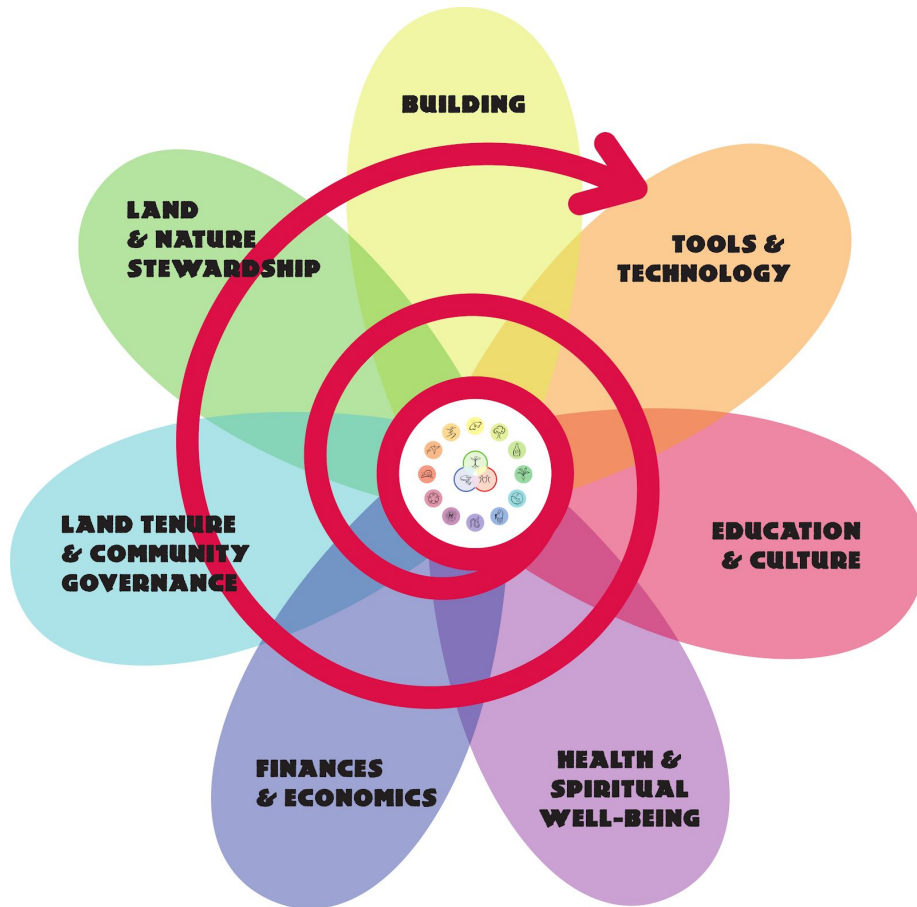
At the heart of permaculture are a set of three ethics, a handful of principles, and a design process for applying those ethics and principles to just about any challenge you can think of. David Holmgren, one of permaculture's co-origins, developed an image of a flower to represent these key elements of the permaculture framework. At the center of the flower are the three **ethics** of permaculture:



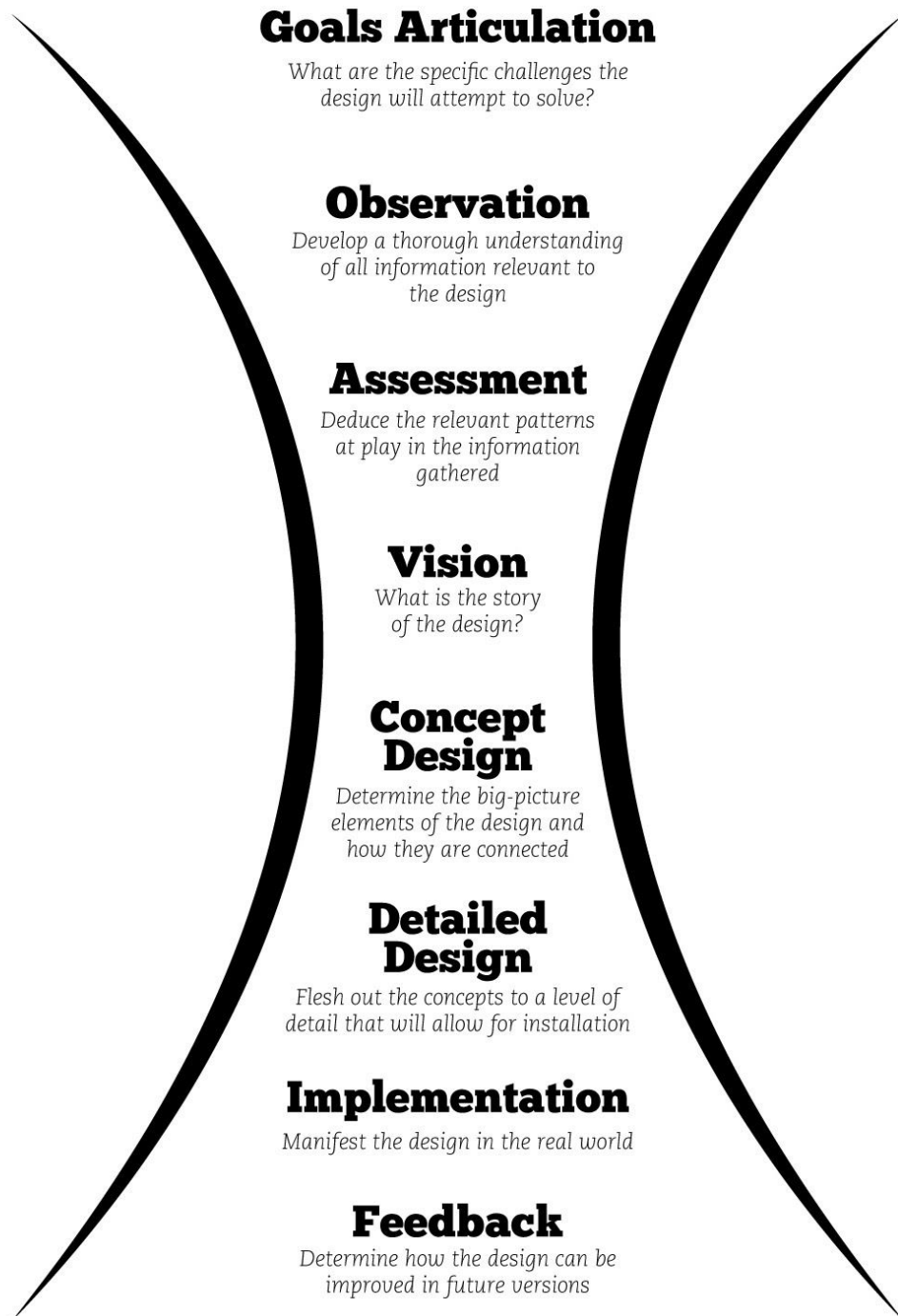
Surrounding the ethics, although still in the core of the flower structure, are the **principles** of permaculture. There are several sets of principles out there; the set that's most commonly referred to these days is Holmgren's list of twelve, first explained in his 2002 book *Permaculture: Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability*.

- |   |   |   |  |
|---|---|---|--|
|  | 1. Observe & interact                         |  | 7. Design from patterns to details     |
|  | 2. Catch & store energy                       |  | 8. Integrate rather than segregate     |
|  | 3. Obtain a yield                             |  | 9. Use small & slow solutions          |
|  | 4. Apply self-regulation & accept feedback    |  | 10. Use & value diversity              |
|  | 5. Use & value renewable resources & services |  | 11. Use edges & value the marginal     |
|  | 6. Produce no waste                           |  | 12. Creatively use & respond to change |

Finally, the **petals** of the flower represent all the different areas that permaculture can be applied: agriculture, natural building, economics, et cetera. Holmgren's flower happened to have eight petals – but like real flowers, the number of petals can be divided into any number and the pattern still holds.



To continue the metaphor, a practitioner of permaculture navigates through these petals of knowledge like a curious bee on the flower, identifying and solving design challenges holistically and creating connections between each petal as they go. To do that, we use the **permaculture design process** as a guide, which provides a clear and concrete set of steps for solving problems in a regenerative way. Again, there are many ways to visualize the permaculture design process, but most practitioners agree on the overall steps and order. The following visualization comes from my mentor Peter Bane:



## Physical Structures, Invisible Structures

The ethics, principles and design process give permaculturalists a flexible and powerful set of problem-solving tools that can be applied to just about anything. Practically speaking, however, those tools have thus far been applied relatively narrowly. For most of permaculture's history up until now, its practitioners have tended to focus heavily on the petals of the flower that you might call "food production" and "land stewardship". The very word "permaculture" was invented as a portmanteau of "permanent agriculture" (it was later revised to "permanent culture"), and its co-creators were primarily concerned with how to derive a sustainable yield of calories from the land. And for good reason: the way a society gets its food determines nearly everything else about how it operates, and no culture can expect to last very long without a sustainable way of feeding itself.

From the beginning, the originators of permaculture recognized that creating a "permanent culture" necessitated a redesign of more than just the stuff we can grow and build. It also meant overhauling things like our economic and legal systems, governmental structures, educational attitudes, mass media, and modes of entertainment, as well. For these, Bill Mollison applied the broad term "invisible structures" to denote that they effected any design but weren't easy to see.

Despite this initial acknowledgement, permaculture as a whole had relatively little to say about invisible structures for the first few decades of its existence. Bill Mollison's *Designers' Manual* – still considered the ultimate text for die-hard designers more than 25 years later – spends a chapter discussing a few aspects of these invisible structures, and early design courses spent time discussing a smattering of social permaculture topics such as complementary currencies and ecovillages. Still, the intangible nature of invisible structures made them frustratingly hard to pin down and apply, and there was nothing like a systematic approach to teaching and designing with them. The bulk of theory and action within the permaculture community remained focused on obscure plant species, water-harvesting earthworks, passive solar design techniques, and the like.

Fortunately, the last ten years have seen a sea change in permaculture's approach towards invisible structures. Increasing mainstream interest in sustainability made permaculture seem less of a fringe topic than ever before, and brought it a new, more diverse set of adherents – a crowd that tended to be more urban, and thus keenly interested in person-to-person interactions. Meanwhile, the near-collapse of the global economy in 2008 and the recession that followed put economics front and center in the minds of many permaculture thinkers, as it did the rest of the population. Social movements like Black Lives Matter and Occupy brought a growing awareness and urgency of issues of inequality and systemic oppression in our society. With this lens, many permaculturalists began questioning the unintentionally oppressive nature of the movement itself. Why, for instance, were nearly all of the best-known permaculture practitioners middle-aged white males? And how could we expect to train a diverse cross-section of our society in permaculture, when the cost and time requirement of the PDC was unrealistic for all but the wealthier members of society? Even the term "invisible structures" came under critique as a nefarious-sounding and vague.

# Designing With Invisible Structures

Today, then, more and more in the permaculture community are turning their attention to social systems – and we're discovering that they might not be so slippery, after all. In fact, our past thirty years of lessons from the garden and landscape are surprisingly easy to apply to these design challenges, and in more than just superficial ways.

To start at the center of the flower, two of permaculture's three core ethics - "Care for People" and "Fair Share" - deal directly with how we interact with people. These ethics make it clear that we're obliged to consider ourselves responsible for the impact of our actions on our fellow humans. What's more, they offer the potent seeds of an entire approach for doing so, one that upends many of our current cultural norms.

The permaculture principles, meanwhile, offer nearly-unlimited relevance and insight into invisible structures. In 2007, David Holmgren co-authored an article with fellow permaculturalist Rob Hopkins sketching out some ideas on how each of Holmgren's twelve permaculture principles applied to running a business. In her book *People and Permaculture*, British permaculturalist Looby MacNamara has outlined a similar explanation of how each principle relates to self-care and working in small groups.

Whereas the ethics and principles offer general guidance in how to think about invisible structures, permaculture's design process provides much more specific tools. The "order of operations" suggested by the design process gives us a clear set of steps for going about our work, while many of the exercises used in the "analysis and assessment" phase of permaculture design help us ask the right questions and identify patterns that might otherwise be hidden.

Throughout this Pod, we'll be examining what permaculture - and its allied regenerative design frameworks - have to offer to the work of healing our social systems. This work is just beginning to be explored a comprehensive way, but already it has yielded profound insights for everything from self-actualization to effective movements for political change. As a member of this Pod, you're now part of a rapidly growing movement of practitioners across the globe approaching our most dire needs in a holistic way.

Welcome. What's your vision?