

Radical Redesign

Charlie Brennan and **Bridget O'Brien** take an inspired, realistic and critical look at permaculture and offer tips that invite big shifts in perspective



Bicycle sculpture at Cloughjordan Ecovillage in Ireland

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It's more than 40 years since the first permaculture books, films and presentations came out. We fondly remember seeing those images in *Permaculture One*, particularly the fish pond with planted edges, insects hovering, and seed-laden trees overhanging the water. Permaculture, as initially conceived by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren in Tasmania in the late '70s, was radical redesign. It drew together a story of systems thinking, agricultural science, Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis and inspirations from Fukuoka's natural farming methods, Yeomans' keyline, soil, weeds, water and landscapes, Hart's English food forests and traditional ecological knowledge and skills and more.

Permaculture is a worldwide movement that has endured, inspired and galvanised the actions of many, many people, but fundamental and unpredictable change is shaking our world and it's accelerating continuously. As Sir Ken Robinson,

famous British educator showed (see his Ted Talk for more),¹ we actually have little idea of what life will be like for most people in 10, 20, or 50 years' time, so it's very hard to know what to educate people for – other than creativity, adaptability and practicality. These times are ripe for permaculture and radical redesign.

Our world's biggest issues seem well beyond most current governments. We won't list these issues here – a simple scroll of media reveals the precarity, danger and uncertainty that is the reality for much of the world's human population and definitely for the vast majority of more-than-human beings. The good news is that people and communities have been carrying out living experiments as they dedicate their lives to putting into practice the ideas and ideals that emerged during the '60s and '70s counterculture movement. These range from alternative land use, to conservation, holistic health, community development, alternative economies,

to ecopsychology and spirituality and acknowledgement of Indigenous ways.

What have we learned about permaculture over these last 40 years?

In our own designs and projects we use permaculture as our overarching design framework and as a set of tools, but we also weave in other approaches too. To be effective, permaculture is best used as a set of lived practices and definitely not treated as a doctrine. At its core, permaculture is deeply successful radical redesign because

- it's action-orientated,
- it really engages with the organic and more-than-human realm,
- it highlights the power and possibility of design,
- it's an outlet for political (small p) engagement with the embodied world, and
- it's a way of being, and showing up in the world that supports life, unlike much of the current life-destroying habituated culture we're all exposed to.

Permaculture as Radical Redesign

For permaculture to continue being relevant and adaptive we must keep alive this radical spirit and intention. After visiting projects and listening to permies, it's clear many people have ideas and insights that are keeping permaculture alive as an active set of practices and discussions. These revolve around:

- Inviting in a posthumanist perspective with humans not at the centre of this vision;
- Busting 'Edenic Narratives' that perpetuate unhelpful and unrealistic expectations, that we will be unconsciously delivered to some kind of promised idealised past/future ...
- 'Situating' permaculture in the times we're in with an honest engagement of the ideas, values, assumptions, power arrangements that underpin what we're doing, especially the colonising practices that run through our lives;
- Applying permaculture to everything – beyond gardens and homesteads;
- Remembering to keep supporting and energising life-generating systems and hacking life-depleting habitation.

We need to be comfortable with permaculture being reviewed, critiqued and redesigned itself. Great examples of this are the work of Liberation Permaculture and Dan Palmer's contribution through 'Making Permaculture Stronger'. Permaculture helps us shape community gardens, build sustainable homesteads and retrofit declining farms; but it's so much more than that.

It's so vitally important in these times of climate and biodiversity disaster, as so unequivocally stated in the recent IPCC report, that we hear about and acknowledge projects that are shining examples of rehabilitation and innovation. The despair that we feel can be tempered by the hope generated by projects such as Growing Power which is an urban agriculture project headquartered in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, US founded by ex-professional basketball player

Will Allen in 1993. For nearly 25 years Growing Power has taught kids and adults to grow and consume local food. Growing Power aims for sustainable food production, as well as the growth of communities through the creation of local gardens and community food systems. Its facilities include seven large greenhouses, a kitchen, indoor and outdoor training gardens, an aquaculture system and a food distribution facility.

Another, and one of thousands of food sovereignty projects worldwide, is SUSTAIN 'The Australian Food Network' which is a 'think and do' network, specialising in designing and building sustainable and healthy food systems. As an organisation it supports the transition towards food systems that support flourishing communities, individuals and ecosystems. Based in Melbourne, Sustain gives people, councils, and organisations the tools they need to help them become empowered food citizens, supporting healthy communities, people and ecosystems.

These projects depend upon determined individuals and organisations to put into place our ideal sustainable practices and to do so requires experimenting with new methods and approaches 'to make it work'. From damaged landscapes, local economies and communities in crisis, the work moves from systems of exploitation to those of cultivation, regeneration and healing.

Land Back is a campaign that seeks to re-establish indigenous people's political and economic control over land that historically belonged to them prior to colonisation. This includes land, language, ceremony, medicines and kinship. Land Back is supported by members of indigenous groups in the United States and Canada. It was introduced in 2018 by Arnell Tailfeathers, a member of the Blood Tribe (Blackfoot Confederacy). It then quickly became a hashtag, and now appears in artwork, on clothes and in beadwork. These creations are often used to raise funds to support water protectors and land defenders who protest against oil pipelines in North America.

Innovation and regeneration are also happening in the mainstream economy too. Certified 'B Corps'



Charlie in a tomato hoophouse in Michigan

Corporations are US businesses that meet sustainable standards of social and environmental outcomes and public transparency. B Corps is a movement that aims for culture shift in business towards more inclusive and sustainable economies and is based upon a system of private certification of for-profit companies.

These are all the kinds of radical redesign projects that, if sufficiently scaled up, would reverse the personal, community and planetary damages that have become so clear.

Other shining examples of rehabilitation and innovation worldwide include Designing Justice + Designing Space in California, the Eden Project in the UK, Enchanted Makeovers in Detroit, Greening the Desert Project in Jordan (see *PM102*), Keep Growing Detroit and SCOPE Malawi.² The Earth Activist Training (see *PM90*) and the Mondragon Corporation in the Basque region of Spain prove that we really can redesign social and business systems.

Radical Redesign Tips & Tricks

One way to apply permaculture as Radical Redesign is to ask challenging questions that invite big shifts in perspective. Over the last few years we have curated this list.

10 tricks & tools

RADICAL REDESIGN

For Creating the World of Your Dreams

1 Don't assume

What assumptions are you making? An assumption is 'something that you accept as true without question or proof'. What elements of your design are unproven? **Describe the unseen assumptions at play.**

2 Dream bigger

Take your ideas and actions further. How could you go bigger? What is the limit of possibility ... and beyond? **How can you know where the limits are if you don't test them out?**

3 Dream smaller

Why start so grand? What's the smaller, simpler version of your idea or action? **Why not start there?** Could you get to an easier aim now, then build up design over time?

4 Flip your design

What if you did the opposite? Or reversed what you planned? **Turn your ideas and actions upside down!** Great inspiration can come by starting from the end or turning your problem into a solution.

5 Drop your story

Leave the stories you have told yourself behind and start fresh. What is a new perspective, idea or action for the challenge you're facing?

6 Ask why

The child-like questioning – **why?** – can bring us to the core of our intention, aim, desire or need. Why do something? Why do it that way? Why does it exist? Why?

7 Be prepared

Are you ready for anything? Are you sure? **Take time to think through possible scenarios that could affect your system** as a disruption or a benefit. Check for holes in the 'safety net' and find ways to incorporate redundancy.

8 Back to core

When a system is challenged energy is focused on core needs to aid survival. So **when in doubt or stretched too thin, go back to the core of your design or system.** Are your / the core needs being met?

9 Hacking habituation

Habits can be supportive or destructive. Are destructive habits harming your design or system? If so, **what small, or big, thing could you change that could have a profound effect?**

10 Let nature guide you

What would Nature do in this situation? Would it grow or decompose? Would it produce or consume? **Think like Nature, work with Nature, be Nature.**

We love being a part of the global change network and are currently working with, amongst others, Abundant Earth Foundation and Ailuna Ailuna (an app which drives eco-habits with impact), writing this article with *PM*, facilitating community co-design for Oakhill Food Justice Farm in Melbourne with Sustain the Australian Food Network, training Graft Living volunteers at Cesar Chavez community garden

Bridget & Charlie planting out a food forest in NSW



in Detroit. We are also offering a Walkabout Permaculture course in the Driftless region of Wisconsin, and selling our permaculture-inspired 'Adapt' creative process game through PermaculturePrinciples.com and through our own outlet. One of our design and installation projects is Gateway Farm in Michigan in which we are guiding the transformation of an old golf driving range into a regenerative diversified farm, food forest and wildlife sanctuary. These are just some of our radical redesign projects.

We're only here because of Nature. We have for the most part forgotten about Nature and Nature's role in regulating, and making possible, everything on our planet and in all of our lives. We have lost the understanding that we are Nature also – nothing more. The greatest Radical Redesign is not even a Radical Redesign really – it's to revere, protect, encourage, enjoy and feel supported by/as Nature. Permaculture offers one of the few, perhaps the only, holistic, realistic, practical and politically-aware frameworks with this life-affirming vision at its centre.

What kind of radical story can you imagine for our futures? Now, dream bigger!

¹ <http://tiny.cc/KenRobinson>

² www.permaculture.co.uk/articles/transforming-schools-permaculture

Some parts of this article are adapted from Brennan, C., & O'Brien, B. *Permaculture Design magazine* #104, 2017.

Dr. Charlie Brennan and **Bridget O'Brien** are explorers, designers and educators offering consultations, design, project management and workshops worldwide through their design collaboration Garden Juju Collective, www.gardenjujucollective.com. Bridget and Charlie are the creative developers of 'Adapt,' a creative process game, www.PlayAdapt.com