
Radical Redesign

Dr. Charlie Brennan and Bridget O'Brien

WE OFTEN HEAR that something is “normal,” or “natural,” or “the way it’s always been.” And then there are aspects of our lives, storylines we live, that it doesn’t even occur to us to question—they are so woven into our beings they’ve become all but impossible to see. Expanding upon this, existential philosopher Martin Heidegger tells us that “fracture renders the familiar explicit,” in everyday speak—we don’t know what we’ve got ‘til it’s gone or broken. People will often experience some kind of revelation through travel, or life-stage changes, or the loss of loved ones that fracture the familiar in one way or another. We’re in a time of perhaps unprecedented change, dislocation, and loss. When the dust settles on the remains of what was, we are left with the opportunity, and need, to Radically Redesign—to write a new story.

Design as an activity is easy enough to understand as something that we all do daily in one form or another. Redesign is taking this a bit further through understanding that often we are changing, adjusting, or tweaking something that has been created previously. But what makes redesign radical? When we realize that almost everything in life has, to some extent, been constructed—made, shaped, or framed—through social processes, and therefore the redesignability is as far reaching as we can possibly comprehend. This includes gardens, houses, clothes, livelihood, lifestyles, relationships, communities, ideas about nature, belonging, identity, and more. When this is taken into account, it becomes apparent that all these facets of our lives are radically redesignable and that we have the ability to play with the power and possibility that proactive wholistic design processes provide. Going back to Heidegger, we can wait for things to break, fall apart, or be lost or destroyed, or we can proactively Radically Redesign our futures.

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A previous era of social change and upheaval led to profound changes in many aspects of (Western) life. Malcolm Gladwell says that permaculture was born in response to the 60s and 70s counterculture of protest, back to the land, self-sufficiency, and intentional communities, and the general experimental sentiment of that time. Those ‘going back to the land’ were often from urban backgrounds, often bought old farms, and often suddenly were asking themselves ‘OK...., now what?’ Permaculture gave guidance—a kind of to-do list and was the case of a new story emerging at the right time and place. Australia at that time saw rapid political and social change, Aquarius events, and forest blockades and protests that eventually led to the conservation of the last of Australia’s rainforests.



Redesigning a gravel quarry, the Eden Project, Britain. Photo by Bridget O'Brien.

Many of us fondly remember encountering the iconic images in *Permaculture One*, particularly the fish pond with planted edges, insects hovering, and seed-laden trees overhanging the water. It engaged our imaginations because it showed how differently we could relate to gardens, farms, food, ecology, and shaping the land; it showed dynamic Gaian, self-making, organic, life systems. We better understood the beneficial roles of weeds. What the book most clearly signified was the importance of design. The methods of agriculture imported to Australia from northern Europe were not traditional to those places and were generally not suited to the old fragile soils of that newly “settled” place. The models of economy, community, housing, food production, and transport were also being fundamentally questioned during this time of cultural transformation. The point here is that permaculture, as initially conceived by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren in Tasmania, was and is Radical Redesign.

Permaculture drew together a story of systems thinking, agricultural science, urban geography, technological advances, and inspirations from diverse people: Fukuoka’s natural farming methods, Yeomans’ keyline, soil, weeds, water, and landscapes and Lovelock’s Gaia Hypothesis. It became a worldwide movement. Despite a range of potential criticisms, the movement endures, and inspires and galvanizes the actions of many people. In the more than 40 years since the first permaculture books, films, and presentations, a great deal has changed. Further, the rate of change is accelerating continuously. Sir Ken Robinson shows that we actually have no idea 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, what to design for (see his Ted Talk for more). In that presentation, he argues that creativity is of the highest importance so that people can shape, and adapt to, this rapidly unfolding but unknowable future story.

We argue that many people don’t have a handle on the current moment, let alone the future. We do know that this is a time

of enormous upheaval, dislocation, loss, and personal, social, economic, and ecological change. In the Western world, life expectations are declining, and the principal factors for ill health are now social isolation (loneliness), poor nutrition, insufficient exercise, stress, and socio-economic status. Jobs are being streamlined and automated. Wealth is concentrated. Housing has become unaffordable. Farms and landscapes are being either mechanized or abandoned—both leading to rapid depopulation. Unfortunately, there's more—much more. The biggest global issues are beyond governments—climate change, biodiversity loss, resource depletion, pollution, military expansions, declining corporate tax contributions, and the desperate plight of hundreds of millions of displaced refugees. In this context, we really need Radical Redesign!

The good news is that there are literally tens of millions of people and communities around the world doing just this. Ever since the 60s-70s, people and communities have been carrying out living experiments as they dedicate their lives to putting into practice the ideas and ideals that emerged from counterculture and a revitalization of indigenous ways. This is no easy task. It takes 10,000 hours to become good at something—from alternative land use, to conservation, to holistic health, to community development, to alternative economies, to psychology and spirituality. We need to acknowledge, evaluate, and learn from these practices and practitioners that have been on the edge writing that story for so long.

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Permaculture itself must accept being reviewed, critiqued, and redesigned. [editor's note: see Dan Palmer's contribution, *this issue*] Permaculture helps us shape community gardens, build sustainable homesteads, and retrofit declining farms; but it's so much more than that. Permaculture needs to ensure that its not enclosed in its own bubble and that it is relevant and accessible to all. We need to be prepared for redesign, allowing permaculture to more readily acknowledge indigenous cultures, social, and ethnic diversity, and be open to input from other disciplines of science and technology, social sciences, psychology, and spiritual practices. Lastly, the movement needs to openly and critically review the initial 70s teachings, some of which work and others that clearly don't.

Redesign is happening by itself. In this time of profound uncertainty, people are consciously and unconsciously heading back to some sense of "the core"—a place to retreat to, and a place to be strong from. This is not another iteration of modern day narcissism, but it is about pro-actively practicing care for, and healing of, our selves and landscapes. Learning practical skills is as relevant as ever. So is understanding ideas, values, and ecopsychological relationships that underpin both environmental issues and solutions. It has been long understood that practice and ideas are best arranged so they form a synergy;

each supporting while challenging the other. For many, this movement to some kind of core place is a spiritual celebration and resilience; others find themselves forced there by bureaucracy, finances, and/or other life difficulties. This movement is nothing but essential in our storyline.

These times call for a resounding mass rejection of mainstream lifestyles that can no longer be endured and probably will not offer much in the days ahead. These times are asking us to reflect deeply upon our dreams, ideas, inspirations, and basic life-sustaining needs—clarifying what is important and what's not. We are being asked to respond, design, and redesign, focused on an ethical foundation of caring more about the choices we make and how they affect whole systems. As the world we know crumbles away, we can creatively and playfully engage in more connective experiences. Maybe it's time to head out and inhabit our semi-abandoned landscapes; or to go sit resting deeply in a tree or on a hilltop; or to say "that's enough" and go on a pilgrimage through sacred landscapes, expansively exploring the root of cultural redesign and radical connectivity with all that gives us life.

Do we go forth by current story default or by proactive wholistic design? The current system is largely depleting and exploitative, but redesign offers infinite possibilities. Shining examples of rehabilitation and innovation worldwide include the Eden Project, Enchanted Makeovers, Greening the Desert, and Growing Power. These prove we can radically redesign our spaces. The Earth Activist Training, Looby Macnamara's book *People & Permaculture*, Mondragon Corporation, and the international cooperative movement prove that we can redesign social and business systems. Coats that turn into shelters, paper cups that plant trees, and home biogas digesters demonstrate that we can interweave old tools and skills with appropriate technologies to redesign better ways of being in our day to day lives. We can go further. We can challenge status quo. We can radically redesign the future, writing a new story about a place where we can thrive in the world we want to live in. Δ

Dr. Charlie Brennan and Bridget O'Brien are explorers, designers, and educators offering consultations and workshops worldwide through Sacred Places Designs: charliebrennan.info. Bridget is the creative developer of 'Adapt,' a design game & toolkit (PlayAdapt.com).

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