



Creating a perma-culture

a design approach to creative living

PERMACULTURE—THE DESIGN SYSTEM

The coronavirus shutdown of 2020 showed us how important personal and community self-reliance in basic human needs can be. The demand for non-hybrid vegetable seed led to a shortfall in supply. People who didn't have the time or interest before the shutdown started to make food gardens in their backyards. Communities organised to support the most vulnerable people in their areas. Demand for how-to information on a range of topics grew rapidly. The real value of the internet for staying in touch, for learning and for work became glaringly apparent.

Food, water, shelter, health care, community support, communication. The coronavirus shutdown highlighted how these basic human needs are the core of both personal and community resilience. We can think of resilience as the ability to recover quickly during or after a crisis.

Increasing personal and community resilience are core aims of the permaculture design system. One of the inventors of permaculture, Bill Mollison, put it this way:

We're only truly secure when we can look out our kitchen window and see our food growing and our friends working nearby.

The coronavirus shutdown demonstrates the truth of Bill's statement.



The core of permaculture—the design system's three ethics.

A design system

Permaculture is a blended word meaning 'permanent culture'.

Design is the process of planning to meet a need and building whatever it is to meet that need. The permaculture design system is a means or making our homes, our neighbourhoods and our lives more resilient. We can apply its ideas and design principles as individuals, as organisations, as communities.

Because permaculture principles can be applied in a wide range of areas such as food production, home energy and water efficiency, community development and cooperation, farming, land management and more, another way to think of permaculture is as a platform of ethics and principles on which its practitioners develop useful applications.

Permaculture's principles and ideas are applied in city and country. The applications that people have developed span farming and urban food production, community trading systems, international development assistance, community education, small business and social enterprise, village development and building design, among others.

GUIDED BY ETHICS, APPLIED THROUGH PRINCIPLES

Guided by a set of three ethics and enacted through a set of design principles, permaculture aims to create a modest prosperity for all, a way of living that avoids both deprivation and excess at the same time it regenerates the farming, natural and social systems on which we rely.

Permaculture's ethics are about caring for people and the natural and human systems which support them. Mutual assistance is a third permaculture ethic through which we distribute knowledge, skills, materials and funds that are excess to our own needs.

However we choose to apply permaculture we make a start where we are and with the tools we have at hand. Bill Mollison puts it this way:

Sitting at our back doorsteps, all we need to live a good life lies about us. Sun, wind, people, buildings, stones, sea, birds and plants surround us. Cooperation with all these things brings harmony, opposition to them brings disaster and chaos.

We are surrounded by insurmountable opportunities.



Permaculture is about the conviviality of co-operation and good design.

Photo: From left: Hannah Maloney and Anton Vikstrom ([Good Life Permaculture](#)); Fiona Campbell (permaculture educator and civic entrepreneur).

IDEAS FOR SUSTAINABLE LIVING IN THE CITY... publication produced by Community Gardens Australia

PERMACULTURE PRINCIPLES OF BILL MOLLISON

Relative location—in design, place related elements close together.

Apply multifunctional design—each element in design performs several functions and designs can serve a number of purposes.

Each important function in a design is supported by many elements—built-in redundancy increases resilience.

Design for energy efficiency—to make best use of resources and reduce operating costs.

Use biological resources—use natural systems and energies.

Cycle energy, resources, nutrients—reuse and recycle resources. Maximise the yield from resources.

Make small-scale, intensive systems—use limited areas of land to stay manageable and reduce resource consumption.

Accelerate succession and evolution—interplant ground covers, shrubs and trees to mimic the development of the natural forest.

Make use of diversity—diversity provides a range of services and builds system resilience.

Use edge effects—utilise and manage the increased productivity found where ecosystems or other systems interface.

ATTITUDINAL PRINCIPLES FROM BILL MOLLISON...

Everything works both ways—permaculture is information and imagination intensive. Elements in design affect each other. Intervention in a system may produce effects elsewhere in the system at other times.

See solutions, not problems—Reframing how we see problems can make solutions apparent and may suggest solutions to associated problems.

Make the least change for the greatest possible effect—it may be more economical to repurpose existing systems rather than invent new.

The yield of a system is limited only by the imagination and the information available to the designer.

Everything gardens—all organisms and cultures modify their environment to create conditions suitable to their continuity.

Cooperate rather than compete—a constructive approach that makes best use of resources and produces mutual benefit.

Obtain a yield—design elements to produce something useful so they become self-sustaining.

Work where it counts—Where would your voluntary or remunerated work be most beneficial? Where is the opportunity and need? Applies the Pareto Principle or 80/20 rule that says around 20% of your work produces something around 80% of the results.

Use everything to its highest capacity—minimise waste and maximise return on energy and resources invested. Make full use of resources.

Bring food production back to the cities—to increase urban food security and food sovereignty and to support regional food economies.

Help make people self-reliant—reduce dependency on outside resources and services by increasing skills, knowledge and opportunity.

Minimise maintenance and energy inputs to achieve maximum yield—low-maintenance systems reduce energy and other inputs and are more economical.

PERMACULTURE PRINCIPLE OF DAVID HOLMGREN

Observe and interact—look, think, then act.

Catch and store energy—harvest and store energy and materials (such as water) where they occur for later use. Brngs economy and maximises use of resources.

Obtain a yield—A yield is a return on energy, time, knowledge and resources invested to make something happen. It increases the viability of a practice.

Apply self-regulation and accept feedback—monitor what you do by designing in feedback loops that provide timely correction.

Use and value renewable resources and services.

Produce no waste—reuse, recycle, repurpose, redesign, rethink.

Design from pattern to detail—such as from climate to the design elements that work best in it.

Integrate rather than segregate—link elements of design that relate constructively to each other.

Use small and slow solutions—to keep things manageable.

Use and value diversity—multiple elements increase the resiliency of a system.

Use edge and value the marginal—make creative use of things that are not core parts of a system, including ideas.

Creatively use and respond to change—adaptability is necessary to enable organisations, individuals and design maintain fitness for their purpose.

AUTHOR'S ADDITIONAL PRINCIPLES...

Apply systems thinking—consider your inputs/processes/outputs; create starting conditions likely to benefit your preferred outcome.

Re-examine assumptions and beliefs—to avoid repeating errors and to obtain a clear image of what you want to do.

Create and strengthen networks—distributed networks are more resilient than hierarchies and facilitate open information flows.

Adopt a federal organisational structure—set up decentralised, semi-autonomous, self-managing hubs to do an organisation's tasks.

Monitor, evaluate and document your work—and make it available to others so they can learn from you and start where you finish.

Make your projects and designs replicable, adaptable and scaleable where possible—so that others can use them as templates and adapt them; scaling-up extends the usefulness and availability of design.

Communicate clearly, concisely and effectively so that all understand. Clear communication is key to effectiveness. Effectiveness is setting out to do something and then doing it.

Adopt a philosophy of continual improvement—tinker, tweak, explore how to increase the effectiveness of your design and your work.

Put first things first (from Stephen Covey)—identify, prioritise, act on the most important things.

Apply protracted and careful observation rather than protract and thoughtless action (from Bill Mollison)—adopt an evidence-based approach of looking, thinking, then acting. Look before you act—don't rush into action without understanding.



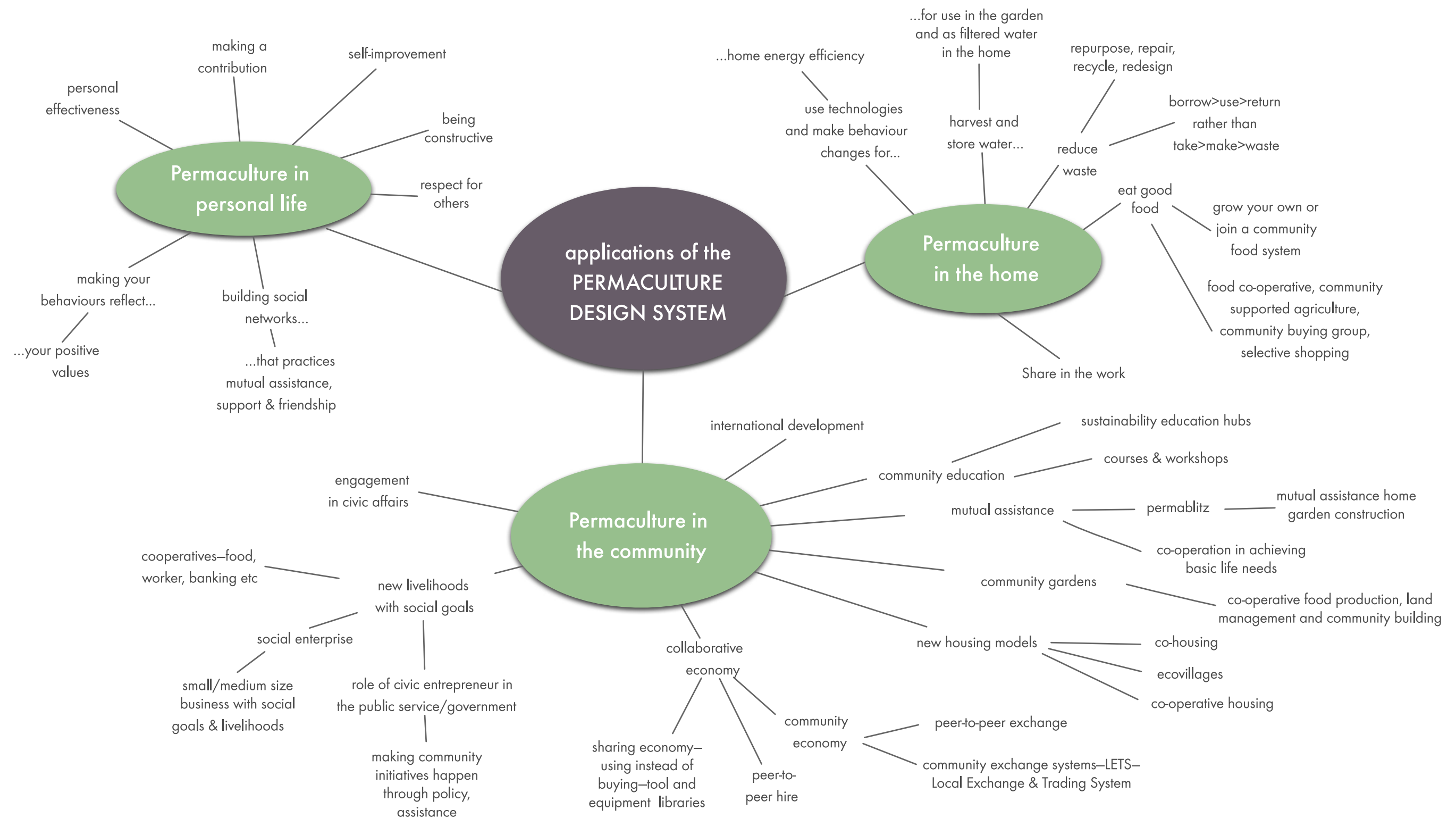
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Sustainable urbanism

Most of the world now lives in cities and this offers the opportunity to make them cities of opportunity. We have the motivation, knowledge and technologies to do this but to make it happen requires community self-help and political will.

Permaculture skills-up people in what we call tactical urbanism—those small, local initiatives that add up to something strategic... to a sustainable urbanism.

Personal life

It's in our personal life and that of our families and social networks that positive change begins.

Here, we discover those ideas that lead to changed behaviours that contribute to a fulfilling life of modest prosperity... of being effective, of self-improvement, respect for others, constructive action and making a contribution in any way within our means so that all may benefit.

Rural systems

There are a number of approaches to regenerative farming which improves agricultural soils and retains water in the landscape.

If we are to enjoy good food, then urban people need to support our farmers by choosing foods produced within Australia that sustain regional food economies.

Regenerative farming sustains the nation and its people.

Community systems

Stimulating a cooperative and convivial civil society is a core mission of the permaculture design system. We do this by educating people in effective organisation and decision making, by participating in the community-based collaborative economy, setting up our own enterprises with social goals and by developing open, responsible governance and civic life.

Production systems

However we produce our needs and wants, we follow the principle of borrow > use > return rather than the old and tired thinking of take > make > waste. It's clear now that the time for the latter is past.

We have the know-how and the technologies to adopt this approach to producing our needs whether we do that in our homes or together in business and industry.

Food systems

We have the opportunity to spend our money on foods that support the region's farmers, the types of enterprises that provide the food we prefer and that support regional food economies. Food system advocates call this 'food sovereignty'—the right to choose the food we want produced by means we approve of. Our food choices influence farm livelihoods, our water and energy consumption and carbon emissions.