

## What makes a site “Permaculture”?

By Steve Gabriel

Interest in the Permaculture concept has grown rapidly in the Northeastern US in the last ten years or so. I remember when I came back to New York from traveling in Scotland, where I first learned of the concept, to find the closest certification course in North Carolina. Now there are dozens of courses all over the east coast.

In a similar fashion we see a number of organizations, farms, and demonstration sites popping up. Some self-identify as Permaculture sites, and others use a mix of adjectives and current buzz words to describe the unique approach they may be taking to land use and culture design.

The question I often get asked as a teacher is, “What makes a site Permaculture?” I often respond that there is not a specific list of criteria handed down from on high; and that the wide range of iterations we see in sites as well as the wide range of interpretations of the word, and practice, are one of the strengths of this movement.

Yet, at the same time, I personally feel like there are some aspects of a site that should be clear and explicit if it wants to call itself a true “Permaculture Site.” This article shares my perspective alone, and is certainly up to debate and discussion. The great promise of the Permaculture movement is that many of the practitioners are willing and eager to have civil dialogue and constantly redefine the practice as a whole, and in its parts.

So, without further ado, here are the criteria I would argue would be necessary for a site to declare itself “Permaculture”:

### 1. Expressed ethics

At the heart of Permaculture, and its most unique aspect in comparison to other ecological movements is that all of our actions rest on ethics. The three ethics are:

***Earth Care:*** protect healthy ecosystems & regenerate degraded ones

***People Care:*** provide for individual and community needs for survival & “thrival”

***Fair Share:*** reduce consumption and yield a surplus that is distributed to the less fortunate.

My colleague and friend, Rafter Sass, comments on the idea of “giving teeth” to these ethics, an article which is linked at the end of this article. The idea of the ethics has always been that they be broad and universal – yet without a site being very explicit and detailed, there is hardly a reason to have the ethics in the first place. As Rafter writes:

*“But how well do the function when it comes to the heavy lifting that’s required of ethical principles – that is, guiding our behavior? If I don’t occasionally review the Ethics, and **change** some current or planned behavior as a result, then they **by definition make no difference**. The trick is, the abstraction that makes them such a good conversation-starter is also part of their weakness.*

*I have often found that the Ethics are taught in a watered-down and feel-good style, that does more to create good vibes and excitement than it does to challenge students, or help designers navigate the sometimes-murky waters of choosing clients, partners, and projects.”*

I couldn’t agree more, and want to pose the following questions, that a site or person wishing to label “Permaculture” could strive to answer as a starting point. Again, these are totally borrowed from Rafter’s piece, which is highly recommended:

***Earthcare:***

*What is our measure of ecosystem health? How do we know our actions and systems are improving the health of the environment?*

***Peoplecare:***

*How is this project helping this community USE AND CONTROL it’s own resources regeneratively? How is this project helping a community take control of its own destiny – to self-determine?*

***Fair Share:***

*How is my work helping to fill the chasm that separates the 80% world from the 20% world, that must be filled to regenerate our culture and our biosphere?*

Now, in my opinion, not all these questions have to be fully answered and completely aspired to before a site can be labeled “Permaculture.” The more important thing is that the site/persons are actively reflecting on these questions and striving to answer them better each time they ask.

## **2. Applied Principles**

The second biggest strength in Permaculture is its basis in principles, which are guidelines that are mostly derived from the observation of natural systems, and named and summarized to help Permaculture folks as they design and develop landscapes.

The question with principles is how they are, like ethics, used as a tool to continually develop and improve the site and systems. It’s easy to after the fact hunt for examples of a principle in a site, and say, “See, I’m doing Permaculture!”. This is

very different from using the principles all along the way, to inform and improve the systems on a site, and the site as a whole.

For example, the *Principle of Multiple Functions* expresses that “each element serve at least three functions.” One could easily visit a number of sites and find elements that do more than one beneficial thing to the site – that’s easy. The hard part is to really stretch the principle as far as possible.

To get more specific, let’s look at ducks as a member of a possible Permaculture site. On their own, ducks in a confined pen are performing multiple functions. They are likely providing meat or eggs to the owner, they are fertilizing as they eat, and they are probably eating a bunch of pesky insects. Ok, so I’ve covered that principle?

I would argue not. Where the principles really shine is when they are really pushed, really expressed as an intention by the designer. So, if I sow a cover crop of buckwheat and tillage radish and red clover, with the plan to rotate the ducks in after three weeks to eat the first two and leave the young clover shoots alone, all while fertilizing and producing eggs, I am beginning to engage in a system that has both an element of complexity in the relationship between species and in the timing of how that interaction plays out.

The same could be said for the principle *Waste = Food*. If you compost on site, does that mean you have it covered? Or is it more like if you are viewing waste in a more multi-dimensional form, like wasting time, wasting energy, or wasting the potential of a person? It’s in our ability to stretch, expand, and constantly revisit and redefine our use of principles that occurs at a “real” Permaculture site.

### **3. Layered and Integrated systems**

A good sign when visiting a potential Permaculture site is when the tour guide tries to explain a system and goes on and on in a rambling fashion and can’t really seem to describe what is going on in a linear fashion. This is how ecosystems work; in a web and a network of relationships. Any Permaculture system, like natural systems, should be in constant flux and change, and a good designer should always be looking for ways to improve and build more connections and more continuity in the system.

Bill Mollison, one of the co-founders of Permaculture, was known for saying, “*It isn’t the number of parts in a system, but the connections between them that counts.*” A site could have all the glitz and glam of sustainable living; solar panels, rainwater catchment, food forests, free ranging animals, etc – but if these parts aren’t stitched together in an intention way, all you have is a bunch of cool stuff.

Another way to consider the amount of integration present on a site is to note the presence of what I've called win-win-win situations. This idea flies directly in the face of modern environmental vs. social arguments, where the decision has to be either "save the trees" or "create more jobs." In Permaculture, solutions are offered which can meet both human needs AND regenerate ecosystems.

A good example is shiitake logs, grown outdoors on hardwood logs. Thinning the forest appropriately can improve its health on the long term, and the byproduct of this activity can be inoculated with mushrooms which provide a healthy, edible food source that has as many medicinal qualities as it does culinary. The sale of mushrooms is an economical option for farmers. The logs are spent after about four years, and can be placed in the woods to further decompose and build soil.

In this scenario, the forest wins, and the people win. There are plenty more examples of these, and the more one witnesses at a site, the more they might be able to justify it as a "Permaculture" site.

#### **4. A consciously designed "whole"**

The last key element of a Permaculture site is the presence of not just a number of cool, integrated systems that have made use of principles and express a sense of ethics, but that also are clearly constructed as a whole system. In other words, does the site as a whole have a coherent structure of systems that stand on their own and also interrelate? Are flows of energy and materials cycled through and between different systems? Does the site as a whole convey an overall concept or theme?

In addition, there are a number of sites that don't have well documented design and implementation processes; places where the next idea is in the head of those running the site, but not on paper anywhere. This is a serious disservice to the larger Permaculture movement; we need sites that are designed on paper, and that are documented with photos, data, and other means as a way to track the changes and progress over the years.

#### **Being Kind to Ourselves**

Admittedly, as I write this article, I reflect on our own farm, Wellspring Forest Farm, with a bit of sheepishness because, while I preach these as parts of a demonstration site, my fiancée Liz and I are not doing all of these, at least not to the fullest extent possible. At the same time, I would agree that we aren't yet a demonstration site, at least not yet. We are in our first full season, and there is a long way to go. Aspects of our Permaculture aspiration have been realized, but not fully achieved.

This is reality; that our visioning minds and dreaming selves will always be ahead of what actually happens; that while we planned to make more maps, and design more things, we sometimes had to make decisions and just go for it. This is where the last tenant of a Permaculture site comes in; that those who are developing the site are both honest about where they are at, transparent about their shortcomings, and always, always trying to get just a little bit better at it. After all, we are mortal beings, and especially in the Permaculture movement we are going to stumble a lot along the way as we try and figure things out.

As a teacher it's always challenging to teach the theory of Permaculture and not beat myself up a little bit about how I haven't exactly practiced what I've preached. Yet I am always reminded that to point of it all *is* the process, and not the product. We have to recognize that we actually can't achieve full earth-repair, and full self-sufficiency and equality for all people in a lifetime. It will take multiple generations of conscious and committed individuals to get there, with each of us being a mere stepping-stone along the path.

So what makes a site "Permaculture?" I would argue that it's a place where the people are actively doing the things mentioned in this article, getting a bit closer to full actualizing of them each day. The site would be a clear expression of ethics and principles, and its developers would be constantly revisiting them as a way to further inspire their work. The site would have well connected and integrated (win-win-win) systems, stitched together as a coherent whole system. And the individuals would be open, honest, and transparent to the outside world about how they are doing along the way.

How about you? What makes a site "Permaculture" in your eyes?