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A PacificEdge paper

# REMAKING OUR ORGANISATIONS

## Alternative structures for permaculture

### Permaculture's journey...

...towards Permaculture version 3.0

PERMACULTURE is a synthesis of ideas... a simultaneous existence of ideas old and new... traditional and contemporary that sometimes steps boldly onto new ground and at other times seeks the safety of the tried and proven.

Smaller scale organisations in permaculture have for the most part taken the latter path, yet, seen as a social movement, permaculture has taken on a different structure that we will explore in this paper. Doing this has not been due to any deliberate decision. It is an outcome of permaculture's evolution.

It is this evolution that may yet see the emergence of larger scale organisations within permaculture, organisations at the regional, state or national scale. What sort of organisation would these be? And, true to its traditions, should they be a new type of organisation in permaculture?



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“THAT’S WHAT WE’RE DOING in history; call it the invention of permaculture.

“By permaculture I mean a culture that can be sustained permanently. Not unchanging, that’s impossible, we have to stay dynamic, because conditions will change, and we will have to adapt to those new conditions, and continue to try to make things even better — so that I like to think the word permaculture implies also permutation.

“We will make adaptations, so change is inevitable.”

(Sixty Days And Counting)

**Kim Stanley Robinson,**  
science fiction author,  
Village Homes, Davis, California.

# Forward: Towards Permaculture version 3.0

## The search for the new and better

**THIS PUBLICATION** outlines ideas for the structuring of larger-scale organisations within permaculture. They would form part of a new iteration of the permaculture design system, Permaculture Version 3.0.

Permaculture usually self-organises at the level of the community association. Although it is larger scale organisations that is the focus of this paper, perhaps the gist of these newer organisational ideas could also be applied at the association level.

I acknowledge that there are people who are happy to make use of conventional

organisational structures and that these structures can work. They can also be something of a turn-off. I've been a member of advocacy and community-based organisations full of smart people who have unquestioningly adopted what they are familiar with, and that has been formal and tried organisational and meeting structures. Sometimes, I've seen those structures turn away potential members because they found them stultifying and boring. The organisation and its important goals was the loser.

My experience in the voluntary community sector, in non-government organisations designing and implementing projects, in



social enterprise and in small business and local government leads me to believe that those conventional structures sometimes leave much to be desired when it comes to effective decision making and to organisational governance. There has been a disconnect between how those entities worked and what participants with a more innovative and informal mindset would have preferred.

Whatever the organisational structure adopted, it has become clear to me that it is often poor communication, the making of assumptions and a general lack of people skills and process among the leadership that alienates people. This leads to feelings of unease that, at some point, can lead to valuable people leaving an organisation.

Today, business, some voluntary community associations and even large corporations are searching for and experimenting with different organisational and decision-making structures to find something that gives them the agility to deal with rapid change.

Businesses face competitive pressures that drive change but — like government — community-based organisations do not unless another community association sets up to do the same thing. It is this competitive pressure that can make innovative business more experimental than community groups. It is ironic that groups pressing for social change can be bastions of old, conservative organisational structures that are not only tired, but that are really expired.

I believe that permaculture can do no better than to join those organisationally-innovative entities that are seeking better ways to do their work.

## PERMACULTURE evolves

That evolution started in the late-1970s when Bill Mollison and David Holmgren published *Permaculture One*<sup>1</sup> after which Bill gathered a small band of early adopters around him by offering the first permaculture design courses in Tasmania. That, the period between 1978 and the early 1980s, we might call Permaculture Version 1.0. It was the time of the innovators.

The 1980s brought a slow diffusion of the permaculture idea through society's innovative fringe, then in the 1990s the design system went through a boom. Let's call this period Permaculture Version 2.0.

We are now riding the long tail<sup>2</sup> of Permaculture 2.0, working with ideas and developments within the design system that emerged from the mid-1990s and on into the first decade of the new century.

Some now argue that global and local circumstances have changed so much, are so different to those of permaculture's earlier times, it is time to move onto a new iteration of the permaculture design system that we could call Permaculture Version 3.0. This new version would seek to scale-up the application of permaculture, to broaden the areas where it is applied and to influence and gain the participation of social institutions. To do this it would be necessary to introduce new ideas to the design system, to update its content and courses and to step into new territory.

1 Tagari Publishers, Tasmania.

2 An idea about the structure of markets developed by Chris Anderson, past editor of *Wired* magazine, in which value is derived over the longer period by continued sales of existing rather than new products



## Summary

**THIS IS** an ideas paper about the structure of larger scale representative and other forms of organisations in permaculture, however the ideas may be applicable to other organisations.

The paper should be read as a broad concept document. It does not provide detail as to how any proposed model would be achieved or how existing legal structures would be integrated with any proposed model. Those are subsidiary things.

### Motivation

My motivation in writing is to see the permaculture design system positioned to:

- become more widely accepted as a valid approach to landuse and community development by local and state government
- to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of permaculture and other sustainability-oriented agencies
- assist the move towards creating livelihoods based on the permaculture design system for those graduating from Accredited Permaculture Training
- assist organisations be perceived as adopting new ideas that offer real

alternatives to organisational structure as befitting those that would reform the business-as-usual approach.

I've been influenced by a number of ideas in producing this paper including those from conversations with people experienced in establishing and managing community-based organisations, employment with non-government organisations, in local government and in the voluntary community sector. As well, I've been exposed to the ideas of recognised organisational thinkers such as Charles Handy, Peter Senge and those of social entrepreneur, Ernesto Sirolli.

This is an exploratory paper that proposes larger scale organisations emerging within the permaculture/sustainability milieu might do well to reflect the characteristics of the design system — decentralisation, local structures, reliance on small group action, operational agility.

I start by looking at permaculture as it presently exists, compare it to another entity that emerged around the same time but that followed a different trajectory then go on to outline the characteristics of an alternative structure.



## Basis of a proposed new model

The model I discuss is influenced by:

- permaculture's existence as an **array of geographically decentralised nodes** consisting of organisations, small businesses/ social enterprise and individuals across Australia that are linked by flows of information; this could be a model for larger organisations that would enable them to closely accord with and reflect permaculture's de facto organisation at the national scale
- the structure of **systems and networks** as revealed through science
- organisational thinker and educator, Peter Senge, and his ideas on **systems thinking in organisations** and of the learning organisation
- organisational thinker and educator, Charles Handy, and his idea of the **federal organisation**
- the idea of social entrepreneur, Ernesto Sirolli of the Sirolli Institute (author of *Ripples in the Zambezi*), who, while I was working at the City of Sydney, validated the role of the organisational worker (local government staff in the case in mention) as civic entrepreneurs who enable and assist citizen projects to happen; translocated, this **social entrepreneurial model** might be adopted by individuals within larger scale permaculture organisations
- the model of the **virtual organisation** in which project teams come into existence as needed, do their work then dissolve until their members reconstitute as new project teams for new projects, coordinated but not directly managed by an ongoing core team (much like TerraCircle Inc with which I am affiliated)
- the management model of the **flat organisation** in which chains of command and control are minimised
- the model of the **temporary, self-organising team**
- the **Mondragon cooperatives** of Spain's Basque region and the idea of the Mondragon Accord of Kim Stanley Robinson (Kim Stanley Robinson is a thinker and science fiction writer living in Village Homes, Davis, California, who is a supporter of permaculture); the Mondragon model consists of cooperatives owned by the people who work in them, that operate semi-autonomously and that support each other through trade and other arrangements as a structure of nested businesses.



# 1. Permaculture: a localised practice

**LET ME RECALL** a recent conversation with a couple people — one long-established in permaculture, the other relatively new. The discussion was stimulated by the observation, the proposition, that it is mainly a dedicated core that make things happen in permaculture.

The unstated notion was that permaculture was changing. Once, said one of the protagonists, greater numbers of members would have been involved in planning and organising the permaculture association's activities, but now most were content to let a small group organise things and then to attend them. His questions: Are we seeing a consumer culture evolving within permaculture? Is participation in making things happen devolving into the managerialism of an active few organising for the passive many?

This is not a recent phenomenon. Essentially, it's how the third iteration of Permaculture Sydney<sup>1</sup> operated in the late 1990s and its weakness is demonstrated by the protracted collapse of that organisation as the few doing all of the work burned out. Burnout is a common phenomenon in voluntary community organisations and one that must be guarded against if organisations are to remain viable. It happens when an organisation takes on projects that are too ambitious and that are beyond the capacity (the time, energy and resources) of those doing them. It happens when too few people are left with too much to do to keep the organisation and its activities running.

I don't know if those questions coming from that conversation reported above signify a real trend. I do know that the law of the few<sup>2</sup> applies in permaculture, however — that it's the motivated few who make things happen for the many. The questions were less about the reality that it's the comparative few who organise things and more about the number of that few.

I think the conversation signified that people were becoming aware that permaculture was changing but that there were few forums within permaculture in which internal questions like this can be addressed. The lack of such a forum has been noted over the years and comparison drawn with other organisations and professions. None of the permaculture email discussion lists of social media have featured any substantial attempt to reflect on practice.

Whatever the truth might be, the conversation was a reflection on the state of permaculture today.

## That which exists

In proposing change, a good place to start is to look at what already exists as this could give us ideas on what could be.

Permaculture in Australia has evolved an informal networked structure for a number of reasons:

- because of the wide geographic distribution of its adherents and their need to communicate ideas and news

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<sup>1</sup> There have been four iterations of Permaculture Sydney since the 1980s.

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of Malcolm Gladwell in his book, *The Tipping Point*, describing how ideas spread through the work of connectors and knowledgeable enthusiasts.



- because permaculture people display homophily — the tendency to associate with the like-minded; traditionally in permaculture this has led to the formation of community associations which, in terms of network studies, become nodes and hubs
- because of the notion of acting locally with whatever resources are at hand.

This structure is an outcome of permaculture's evolution — that is, it was unplanned and emerged from the mashup of local organisational capacity, local focus, reaction to local, national and global trends, the churn of ideas within the national permaculture milieu and other factors.

## That which could have been

Could permaculture have created a different structure? Yes, it could have. The sparse records left by the first batch of permaculture early adopters who did Bill Mollison's first courses at Stanley in northern Tasmania — as the decade of the 1980s opened — record the idea that permaculture could have replicated itself using a structure quite like franchising.

This alternative but unrealised future was reported in a newsletter, one of the first to appear during those dawn years of permaculture, the SE Queensland *Permaculture: A newsletter of the subtropics*. The newsletter's reporting on one of those early courses highlights what could have become a different structure for permaculture: "The agents trained in the course will be fully franchised when they submit ten designs for Tagari's approval"<sup>3</sup>.

That would have created a very different permaculture to the one we find today.

There is another unrealised course that permaculture might have taken, a course similar to that taken by another enviro-social movement that I discuss below.

## Proposal for a different future

The loose, diverse, ideologically varied, distributed network structure that emerged from the permaculture milieu has been a strength in that it values grassroots initiative. But it has been a weakness in positioning permaculture as an advocate in society because of the lack of any unified and representative voice. Permaculture has been good at doing things locally, but not at a larger scale and less so when it comes to exerting influence on decision makers.

The idea of creating a representative body for permaculture has been around for a couple decades but until recently it has been resisted as 'centralist' and its mention would garner resistance. This I recall from discussions at permaculture convergences<sup>4</sup> during the 1990s and on the first permaculture email discussion group.

That attitude appears to have changed rather suddenly as became clear at Australasian Permaculture Convergence (APC10) at Kuranda in Far North Queensland in 2010. In what must have been the most fractious convergence to date a proposal for a new, national, representative organisation was

<sup>4</sup> A convergence is a gathering or conference of permaculture practitioners. Australasian Permaculture Convergences are traditionally organised every two years in different places, although there have been longer gaps between them. There are also International Permaculture Convergences held less frequently.

<sup>3</sup> *The Permaculture Papers 3—Childhood*; [www.pacific-edge.info](http://www.pacific-edge.info)

floated and those at the convergence voted for it to happen.

Unfortunately, as if to demonstrate that it falls to the few to make things happen at scale in permaculture, most of those who voted for change have not been around to help make it happen.

## Community origin, different evolutions

Organisations and practices that start around the same time within a similar social milieu can follow different evolutionary paths. This is due to how they are conceived and brought into existence — to their starting conditions. Starting conditions for any new organisation are quite important to its future; they set an initial direction that can be hard to change..

Permaculture's evolution is markedly different to that of another practice whose development it paralleled. It may be instructive to briefly look at this other practice now that some in permaculture are seeking greater social and organisational influence.

## Bush regenerators positioned themselves in the public imagination as working in the public interest...

Unlike permaculture's uncoordinated move towards a decentralised national network of groups, individuals and small commercial entities, the practice of ecological restoration (also known as bushland regeneration<sup>5</sup>) started,

5 The credit for starting bush regeneration is ascribed to Joan and Eileen Bradley who developed weed management and native vegetation restoration techniques in Sydney during the 1960s.

like permaculture, as a grassroots movement but went on to rapidly develop pathways to practice and legitimacy through TAFE courses. These set minimum competency standards and validated the practice, providing the basis for its recognition as an industry.

This was boosted by the promotion of an Australian-first plant nationalist message by membership organisations such as the Society for Growing Australian Plants, and this further increased environmental restoration's prominence among the public as well as with state and local governments. Building links with the then-emerging national Landcare movement and organisations like Greening Australia further legitimised environmental restoration. Creating links with other networks and organisations raised the profile and credibility of bushland regeneration with local, state and federal government.

Bush regenerators positioned themselves in the public imagination as working in the public interest, differentiating themselves from that part of the environment movement<sup>6</sup> that was based on campaigning to save natural areas. Their plant nationalist message found resonance with Australian nationalism and with a personal sense of place and this further embedded bushland regeneration in popular culture.

This legitimisation and normalisation of the practice and the development of a grand narrative<sup>7</sup> around the idea of growing Australian plants and of restoring degraded

6 Permaculture, too, distanced itself from campaigning environmentalism. Bill Mollison criticised the environment movement for simply campaigning against what it did not like rather than creating what it wanted to see.

7 A grand narrative or metanarrative is a statement in story form. It is a comprehensive explanation of a social movement or other entity in terms of its goals and including a critique of what it seeks to change.

urban, farm and bush land made it possible to attract funding and to create salaried local government positions. Small bush regeneration businesses set up to contract their services to councils and to offer employment to the qualified.

## Permaculture's different path

This was the path not taken by permaculture.

While permaculture and ecological restoration can be seen as emerging from the broad environmental sensibility that started to become apparent in the late 1960s and that developed further in the 1970s, today we see ecological restoration mainstreamed as both a community-based practice and as a small industry enjoying legitimacy with government. In contrast, permaculture remains a grassroots practice largely with no economic or political influence and with only limited legitimacy among landuse and design professionals.

A comparison of ecological restoration and permaculture discloses the tight structure of ecological restoration and a loose and quite variable structure of permaculture. One set a course for legitimacy with community and government by establishing formal structures while the other evolved a decentralised body of practice anchored in the local and informally bound by group agreement that the ethics<sup>8</sup> and principles<sup>9</sup> of permaculture form the basis of the design system. One succeeded in setting up a structure of employment while the other has done this only minimally, thus one could be built into people's livelihoods while the other, for most of its practitioners, could not.

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8 The three ethics of permaculture: 1. Care of the Earth. 2. Care of people. 3. Fairshare.

9 Sets of permaculture principles have been devised by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, and added to by permaculture practitioners.

## With its formal structure, bushland regeneration set standards for the work of its practitioners. The adoption of standards has barely been talked about in permaculture

It is this latter point that has contributed to permaculture becoming largely an application for use in the household, something that was recognised by David Holmgren, one of permaculture's inventors. Permaculture as a set of ideas for individual or home life, to increase opportunities for sustainable living, has been accompanied by sometimes successful attempts to apply it at the community level that date back to its first decade. Perhaps the first significant indication of this was the book *Sustainable Urban Renewal: Urban permaculture in Bowden, Brompton and Riddleton*, a publication of innovative South Australian permaculture practitioners<sup>10</sup>.

With its formal structure, bushland regeneration set standards for the work of its practitioners. The adoption of standards has barely been talked about in permaculture and too much of its work has been poorly executed, especially in public places where it is most visible. This is a perception I have come across in my work. There is no guarantee to anyone hiring someone to do permaculture work that they will meet a set of minimum standards of functionality and completion. Instances where permaculture people have created the impression that they do professional quality work and have been consulted have revealed

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10 1985; Social Impacts Publications, Armidale NSW.

their lack of knowledge and capacity in some cases. This has not helped the reputation of the design system.

Establishing a set of standards<sup>11</sup> for permaculture work will be necessary for graduates of the Accredited Permaculture Training, as they are for any profession. Doing the same for permaculture practice in public places in general is more problematic, in part due to the lack of consideration of standards by many teaching permaculture design courses, especially those using the third person

teaching approach of people new to the design system doing a design course then going out to offer their own without gaining complementary experience. Often, it is only what those teachers have learned from their own teachers that is passed on.

I recognise that ecological restoration and permaculture emerged from ideas around ecological sustainability and can be complementary. I also know that the two have clashed at times and there continues to be occasional friction. This, I suspect, has a lot to do with permaculture's more anthropocentric focus on sustainability as well as its broader focus that incorporates the continuity of natural systems and the environmental services they provide us.

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<sup>11</sup> Standards for work in public places would have to account for the use of Australian Standards and the use on sites of Worksafe practices, a legal requirement. To my knowledge, neither of these get much coverage in permaculture design courses. They would have a place in Accredited Permaculture Training.

Despite this, permaculture projects are carried out in public places without considerations of liability apart from some organisations carrying public liability insurance. There appears to be little knowledge that permaculture practitioners are legally liable for the consequences of their work, or that in NSW volunteers are recognised as workers in Worksafe legislation.

Permaculture designers, I suspect many fail to realise, remain liable for the effects and impacts of their works.





## Comparing the evolution: bush regeneration & permaculture

PROPERTY	BUSH REGENERATION	PERMACULTURE
INTELLIGENCE/ STARTING CONDITIONS	A clear philosophical attitude based on plant nationalism and the value of indigenous ecologies.	A somewhat variable philosophy around sustainability.
CLEAR INTENT	To popularise and legitimise ecological restoration via formal training, standards of practice, formal structure, grant funded projects, employment opportunity and support from government.	A generally clear intent, though lacking in detail and variable in implementation, of providing a design approach to sustainable living mainly through community-based initiative.
APPROPRIATE MEANS	<p>TAFE training, supervised community activity, standards for professional and volunteer work, links with and funding through government, salaried local government positions.</p> <p>A structure for community action/ participation often mediated by local government.</p> <p>A sense of belonging passed on through formal training.</p>	<p>Mainly a community-based approach informed by the Permaculture Design Course and articulated in books and online permaculture media.</p> <p>No formal standards of practice; a sense of belonging passed on via a range of permaculture design courses of variable content and quality. A recent move towards formal qualifications and educational standards via Accredited Permaculture Training.</p>
CLEAR PLAN OF ACTION	Legitimacy, validation and continuity via a TAFE course, industry structure, advocacy, recognition, maintenance of credibility.	Decentralised network structure has evolved no clear plan of action at the state, regional or national scale though some exist at the local level.



## 2. The structure of permaculture: a mesh of networks

**Fuzziness around defining permaculture design is a strength when it allows a broad range of things to fall into the permaculture basket and take root there...**

**IF WE LOOK** at the national permaculture milieu in systems thinking terms, we see a matrix of entities — groups, individuals, households, small businesses some with their own online communities, educators, consultancies, online virtual entities — a national network within a boundary defined by a rather loose, informal and sometimes poorly articulated notion of what are and are not the foci of the permaculture design system.

This looseness — this fuzziness — of what is and is not permaculture can be a strength when it allows a broad range of things to fall into the permaculture basket and take root there.

It is a weakness when practitioners are asked to describe the design system. Their explanations can be quite varied and often reflect two main influences: their own involvement in the design system and the passed-on understanding of what their permaculture teachers said it is.

### **An artifact of education**

This passed-on understanding often comes from the third-person teaching I mentioned earlier. It occurs when people do a design course then soon after go on to offer their own

course without testing and expanding what they learned through adequate personal experience. Doing this should be a process spanning years, not months.

Third person teaching might be good for the teacher but it usually contributes little by way of new insights and material and becomes the passing-on of knowledge rather than the development of new knowledge. The design system thus does not grow a great deal with third-person teaching. It in part accounts for the wide variability in the quality of permaculture design courses.

It is, however, an artifact of permaculture's early development... of its starting conditions. It probably has much to do with Bill Mollison's early idea of an itinerant army of permaculture educators doing their training then going out across the country to educate others. That this didn't happen to any significant degree may signify the value of place-based educators to which students come. Looked at over the long term, travelling to teach has proven viable for a number of early-established educators and to a few who started later, however even these travelling teachers have a home base.

Quality has long been a talking point about the permaculture design course. Student responses to the courses they pay for span enthusiasm to disappointment. Sometimes, it's the lack of knowledge, more a superficial knowledge of components that might be used in design that leads to criticism. Sometimes it's the teaching methods. Many students today are tertiary educated in the ideas contained in the permaculture design course and expect teachers to be equally if not

more knowledgeable. When they are not the credibility of the course, and of permaculture, is called into question.

Permaculture is — or should be — an open system. That is, it is supposedly open to new ideas coming in from outside, from beyond its porous boundary. This allows a certain adaptability and shift of focus, an updating of what permaculture is and should do, and a responsiveness to events and trends in the wider world. This is a good argument for creating loose links with compatible organisations that can be the source of new ideas.

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### **Permaculture as an array of networks**

It might be a reasonable idea that any group of permaculture practitioners planning any ambitious, larger scale, perhaps national organisation within permaculture might do well to reflect the present structure of permaculture in Australia.

As explained earlier, we can envision permaculture in Australia as consisting of a geographically distributed, loosely connected and decentralised array of organisations,

communities of practice, small business/social enterprise, households and individuals.

This is the result of an evolution that started over 35 years ago when the design system was first articulated (in the book *Permaculture One*) and reflects the starting conditions set by its inventors, Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, and those of its first early adopter cohort. These conditions set the stage for the evolution of the permaculture idea and of how it would be implemented.

Influenced by cultures, economic conditions, trends, political change and ideas outside its boundary, permaculture adapted and evolved into a practice of groups, households and individuals acting autonomously where they live but within the ambit of permaculture's ethics.

Sooner rather than later, a loose, uncoordinated national network of practitioners emerged.

### **The networks of permaculture**

Networks are structured as:

- nodes — these are individuals or groups
- hubs — major nodes the location of activity with many connections to other nodes and forming a cluster
- connections — these are flows through which information or goods move from node to node.

This structure can be thought of in terms of stocks and flows. The nodes and hubs form the stocks in permaculture made up of accumulations of knowledge, ideas and tools. The flows are the connections in the network along which that knowledge moves from node to node, hub to hub. Flows distribute the permaculture body of knowledge.

**...permaculture has no head office—there is no location or entity that fills the function of overall coordination, organisation or representation of the practice of permaculture...**

The present model of permaculture in Australia is of a decentralised array of nodes and hubs connected digitally for the most part — though physically when people come together for events and convergences — within a loose national network that is conceptual rather than organisational. At present, most of the national permaculture conversation takes place on social media, primarily Facebook, indicating the critical importance of this medium for keeping people in touch. The quantity of information flowing today is far in excess of that which passed through the Permaculture Oceania email list only a few years ago. Social media has opened the national (and international, if you consider links to New Zealand permaculture people) conversation to a flood of ideas.

### **An array of entities**

Let's imagine the permaculture milieu in this country as the array of organisations and other entities that I described above. What would it look like?

**...where are all those supposedly-thousands who have done the Permaculture Design Course?**

First, we notice this: permaculture has no head office — there is no location or entity that fills the function of overall coordination, organisation or representation of the practice of permaculture. That is, permaculture has not formed a formal hierarchy with a centralised leadership delegating tasks and decisions to subsidiary units and individuals such as government or corporations do. What we end up with are implementations of permaculture ideas as permaculture is understood by those setting them up.

This creates a significant point of difference that decentralises initiative but that precludes any broad political influence.

### **Graduate numbers—no correlation to active participation in networks**

There are a large number of individual nodes in the permaculture milieu, people with no formal connection to permaculture associations or other structures but who are nonetheless connected online and who identify as permaculture practitioners. Their degree of connectedness varies and thinking about it brings to mind the question that is sometimes voiced: where are all those supposedly-thousands who have done the Permaculture Design Course?

I've heard this question numerous times and it arises when permaculture educators disclose the approximate numbers who have gone



through their courses, and it arises when members of local permaculture groups find participation in group activities lacking. It's an important question because post-course participation may reflect course content, teaching and relevancy to contemporary life. Questions arise:

- Is there something lacking in design courses that would encourage greater community participation in projects and events?
- Is there too much focus on individual and household initiatives and too few on community enterprise?
- do course providers put too little effort into developing a sense of belonging in permaculture and generating an esprit-de-corps?
- do course providers have too little experience in community development?

The assumption seems to be that people graduating from design courses go on to practice what they learn at home or in their own lives if not in the community, assuming that they start to practice permaculture at all. But while this happens to some degree — that is revealed through participant or teacher observation — there is no objective evaluation data to validate the assumption. This — objective data — is something missing in the practice of permaculture because there has been little emphasis on evaluating the work of the design system. That sets it apart from NGOs, say, working in international development where even small organisations evaluate their work as a condition of receiving grants. The availability of time to evaluate would likely be a limiting factor when it comes to voluntary community-based permaculture associations as would the cost of hiring an outside evaluator.

## **Citing large numbers of course graduates as a sign of success misses the insight that comes through an understanding of how education works...**

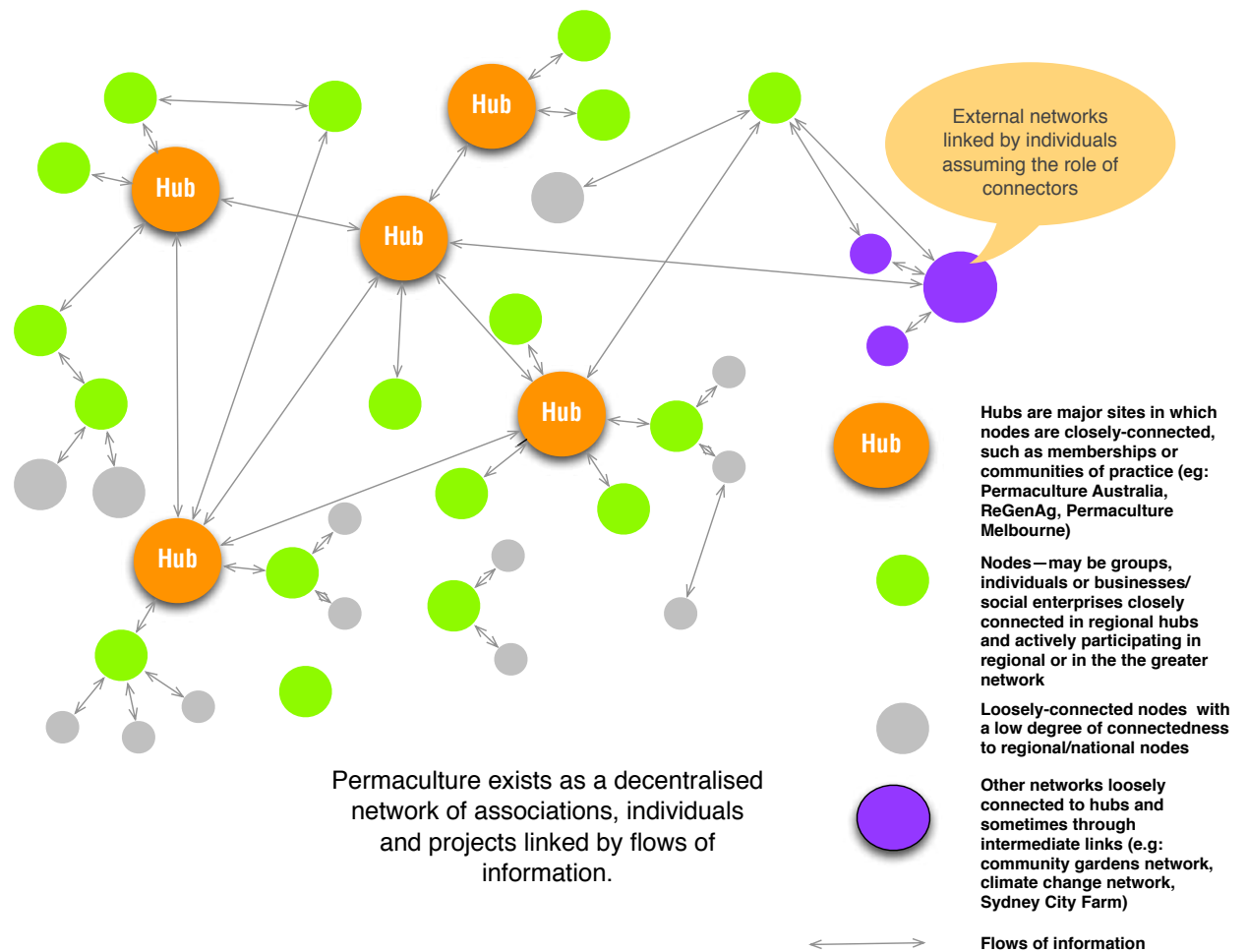
Highlighting the number of graduates coming through design courses mistakes quantity for quality, for the design system is not advanced by the numbers passing through courses but by the influence they have — what is called the 'ripple effect'. It would be better to have a small number of active graduates who go on to practice permaculture in a public way and so exemplify it rather than a large number of more or less inactive graduates or those whose practice remains in the relative invisibility of the household. This would influence their degree of participation in the permaculture network and their contribution to it — whether they form active or inactive nodes or are missing from the network altogether.

Citing large numbers of course graduates as a sign of success misses the insight that comes through an understanding of how education works. There is much to learn from thinkers like James Prochaska and his ideas on individual readiness to act on a new behaviour, and the similar, more recent work of sustainability educator, Bob Doppelt.

## **Hierarchies in permaculture's network**

Nodes form a type of hierarchy based upon the role adopted and the starting conditions affecting the development of the node.

# Conceptual network model of permaculture in Australia



Hubs are major influential nodes in the network which have a larger number of close connections to constituent nodes such that they form a discernible cluster. These might be made up of organisational members, past students of permaculture educators or communities of practice or interest. They are in turn connected to other hubs and nodes through channels of information flow.

Examples of hubs include:

- regional permaculture associations — Permaculture Melbourne, Permaculture Sydney North, Permaculture Association South Australia

- the Permaculture Research institute
- Northey Street City Farm
- Randwick Sustainability Hub.

Nodes consist of individuals connected in a network and form its basic component structure. Nodes can also be smaller, less populated groups that have fewer connections than better-populated hubs but that may be connected to larger regional hubs.

Nodes include:

- commercial entities such as social enterprise/ small business, permaculture educators

- special interest groups with fewer participants than the larger groups making up the dominant hubs, such as ReGenAg, Transition groups (these can also be seen as minor hubs because they have more connections than individuals)
- individuals who are thought leaders in permaculture, such as Holmgren Design Services.

Channels of open, two-way communication link hubs, nodes and individuals and join them to other networks through what are known as 'weak links', the opposite of the 'strong links' of closely-connected hubs.

The idea that weak links are important came from a 1973 paper published by US researcher, Mark Granovetter. He researched how people found managerial positions and discovered that it was not through friends, as might have been anticipated, but through acquaintances who were only indirectly connected to them.

Granovetter found that social networks (not only those online) consist largely of friends or members of groups and that they are closely-connected. That is, your friends and association members are likely to know each other and form a close circle with strong links between members. They are likely to be familiar with how each other think and are likely to share a similarity of outlook, to be exposed to much the same information and thus form a more generic group. In effect, they form a closely-coupled cluster.

### **Closely connected and insulated**

A property of this type of closely-connected network is that, sometimes, it exhibits resistance to new knowledge or information coming in from outside, especially if it challenges existing beliefs, practices and attitudes.

This I witnessed as a reaction to the posting on a social network page of a Transition Town group of an article, written by a scientist unconnected to the group, that supported the development of nuclear energy as a means of moving from oil based fuels in a context of climate change. One response to the posting was quite hostile and the respondent ended up questioning why anyone would read such articles, and saying that they had no place on the group's social media.

### **...closely-connected groups can resist new ideas...**

Yet, it was a topic that those involved in proposing changes to society's sources of energy should be familiar with even though it might not be their preferred technology. The attempt to shut it out of the group's discussion indicated a closely-coupled organisation closed to challenging ideas.

The respondent was not alone in reacting that way. Another respondent from a similar organisation said that people holding such views as the writer of that pro-nuclear article really weren't sustainability-oriented. This was a case of black versus white — a statement of instant polarisation by the group saying it was right and that those with differing ideas were wrong. The author of the article considered himself as someone acting in the interests of sustainability.

Both instances demonstrated how closely-connected groups can resist new ideas, especially when they are uneasy with their content. This case demonstrates organisations closed to challenging information and which seek to insulate themselves from it. A more

enlightened response would have been to engage with the author of the article to explore and properly assess his ideas before deciding to oppose them or otherwise.

## The importance of connectors

Groups form closely-coupled clusters but they are not shut off from the world.

They are linked through individuals who form weak, looser ties with other hubs and nodes in the larger network. These are the 'connectors' identified by Malcolm Gladwell in his influential book, *The Tipping Point*<sup>1</sup>, in which he described their importance to the transmission of ideas. It is through the connectors that new information flows between clusters or hubs in networks.

Connectors may be the familiar names that pop up frequently in social media or the Worldwide Web. They are easily mistaken by those unfamiliar with how networks structure and work as 'dominating' presences.

Connectors may also be thought leaders who post ideas-rich messages or who repost such content. They may be curators of topics, reposting information to their own networks. They seek to cultivate the intellectual garden as well as the soil-based garden of 3D-space. This

is an area partially evacuated in permaculture according to some. There's plenty of focus on going out and doing things but too little on reflecting on them and on big picture, on philosophical or intellectual content of the design system. This has been said by a significant number of people over a significant period of time.

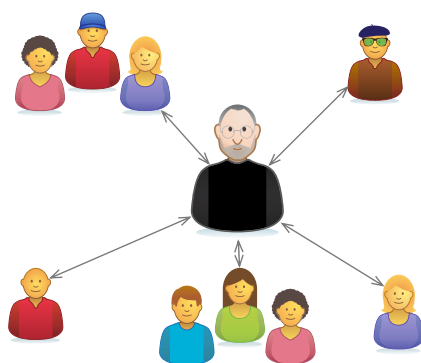
We can view the permaculture milieu as a fragmented web of closely-connected clusters or hubs communicating through the weak links of communicators. This is how new ideas and information flows between nodes and is key to hubs and nodes changing what they think and do and how they do it. Connectors are important to organisational evolution, to adaptability to changing conditions and to fitness for chosen purpose.

But connectors are not alone. Gladwell says that two other types also create links with individuals and groups or nodes:

- **mavens** are people with specialist knowledge who share that knowledge to help others
- **salesmen** are people who publicly convince others of the value of an idea.

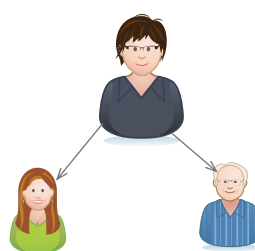
You can see that individuals might fill more than one of these roles in different circumstances, however it is the connector who is critical to the two-way flow of information in networks.

<sup>1</sup> Gladwell M, 2000; *The Tipping Point*; Little Brown, USA. ISBN 0316346624, ISBN 0-316-31696-2

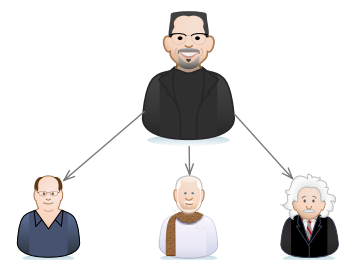


**Connectors** facilitate links with other nodes and hubs

## Malcolm Gladwell's typology of roles in a network



**Mavens** share knowledge to assist others



**Salesmen** convince others



## Participation = viability

Now, here's an important thing to remember about networks:

**the value of a network  
is proportional to the  
number of active nodes  
within it.**

The greater the number of active nodes, the more exchange and the more comprehensive the conversation. Note that these are 'active' nodes. Networks often have inactive nodes consisting of people who read and listen but do not contribute. They add little of value to a network and, in online networks, are known as 'lurkers'. Sometimes, people new to networks lurk awhile to gain an understanding of how a network operates before becoming active.

Once again, it comes down not to numbers alone, such as the number of Facebook Friends or Likes an organisation or individual might have, but to the activity of those numbers — the active nodes and what they contribute to online conversations — and to the wider effect they have. Once again, it's less about quantity and more about quality — the number of active nodes that contribute to conversations.

Any organisation with larger territorial ambitions in permaculture would do well to foster a national conversation because new ideas are built upon old ideas and the wider the conversation the more we have to draw upon in creating those new, innovative ideas that would take us far.

## How to relate?

Had permaculture developed along the franchise model mentioned earlier, we would have had a very different structure today, possibly more akin to a pyramidal hierarchy than a network.

The nearest permaculture has experienced to a hierarchy was the natural domination of the early hub, the Permaculture Institute. Its time was the formative decades of the design system. The Institute, first based in Tasmania then moving to northern NSW before returning to Tasmania, attained its leadership role as the pioneering organisation in the development of the design system. It set the starting conditions for permaculture — the Institute published its first permaculture educators' curriculum in the early 1980s and superseded this by adopting Bill Mollison's *Permaculture—A Designer's Manual*<sup>2</sup> after its publication in 1988. It published the first formative books on permaculture and was dominated by the presence and natural leadership of Bill Mollison as unofficial leader and spokesman of the movement.

**...it would have to adopt  
the permaculture adage  
of starting where you  
are and working with  
what you have and accept  
the networked structure  
as the initial starting  
condition...**

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2 Mollison B, 1988; *Permaculture — A Designer's Manual*; Tagari Publishers, Australia, ISBN-10: 0908228015 ISBN-13: 978-0908228010.  
<http://www.tagari.com>

The Institute lost its prominence with its return to Tasmania and by declining to participate first in permaculture email discussion groups then in the online social networks around permaculture — the location of the national permaculture conversation today. This has made the Institute less visible and influential. Contributing to its declining prominence were permaculture educators moving away from the Institute's curriculum on the grounds that it was not adaptive enough for different teaching circumstances and demographics. One size, they said, fits few.

How would an ambitious organisation seeking to establish a national structure relate to the decentralised network of permaculture in Australia? I think it would have to adopt the permaculture adage of starting where you are and working with what you have and accept the networked structure as the initial starting condition, seeking ways to engage constructively with it and adopting an internal structure that allowed this to happen.

That's what our next section looks at.



### 3. Looking for a model

...the hierarchical model...  
is now subject to the law  
of diminishing returns...

**PERMACULTURE IS A DESIGN SYSTEM** that purports to offer viable and effective alternatives to business as usual.

As was suggested by Bill Mollison, co-creator with David Holmgren of the permaculture design system, permaculture groups start with what they have to work with and follows the principle of maximum yield for minimum investment. What this means is that permaculture groups have adopted existing legal structures suited to their purpose, such as the incorporated association model and, in Permaculture Australia's case, the company limited by guarantee that gives it a national reach.

**Identity is self-  
concept and, projected,  
public image. It is not  
'branding'...**

Doing that can be seen as common sense, but we need look to the present for clues about alternative structures for larger permaculture organisations with ambitions beyond the local area.

#### What type of organisation?

Any organisation needs identity. What is it? Why does it exist? How will it structure itself and how will it work? Identity is self-concept and,

projected, public image. It is not 'branding', an essentially superficial public relations exercise more to do with form rather than substance and the property of businesses rather than community organisations or NGOs.

Identity has much to do with an organisation's sense of direction and before setting up an organisation of any scale beyond that of the local group (though why not that too?) there are important questions for those creating the entity. Will the organisation be:

- a **campaigning organisation** indulging in political actions around some topic?; classically, this has taken the form of opposing the initiative of others characterised by statements and slogans around 'stop the ...', 'save the .....' etc; it is an essentially reactive mode expressing a position against something that others want to do and has become known as 'negative campaigning'; it was the model that big environmentalism<sup>1</sup> built themselves on and that then had utility but now is often perceived as tired and increasingly unattractive; there is potential, however, to campaign for something new and positive through what we might call 'positive campaigning' — this links to...

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<sup>1</sup> The large environmental organisations that emerged in Australia during the 1980s and 1990s and which became politically influential at the federal and state level. Most campaigned, often successfully, on saving examples of natural environment and although some sought to move on to more contemporary environmental themes this proved only moderately successful. Examples of big environmental organisations include the Australian Conservation Foundation, Wilderness Society, Total Environment Centre NSW.

- a **creative organisation** developing positive alternatives; it is this that permaculture people have adopted as their self-concept, especially after Bill Mollison offered his critique of negative campaigning and positioned permaculture as an alternative-builder; in 2012 the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance took a similar approach in response to the federal government's move to develop an agribusiness, neo-liberal food policy; the Alliance engaged the public regionally in creating the People's Food Plan<sup>2</sup> as an alternative rather than running a negative campaign around 'stop the government's food plan'; this creative and attractive model positioned the Alliance as a proactive, imaginative agency.

Creating positive alternatives involves making a creative critique — without exaggerating and using selectively harvested information (people are too smart to be taken in by this today) — of something and the positioning of a fair and achievable, well-thought-out alternative as the better way. It does not use the opponent's language, mental models or frame of reference and reframes the issue in terms of authentic public interest. It positions the creative alternative as one offering opportunity, long-term public/economic/security/national/cultural interest. It seeks to position it as 'normal', framing that which it is offering an alternative to as aberrant, potentially dysfunctional or of benefit to a small, select group.

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2 *People's Food Plan* working paper 2013: <http://www.australianfoodsovereigntyalliance.org/peoples-food-plan/revised-plan/>

## What structure?

That's the organisational mode. Within that there exists a range of options for the way an organisation might structure itself.

Will it focus on being:

- a **conventional advocacy or lobby group** with a structure similar to others of the type with an organisational hierarchy and a minimal, perhaps select membership rather than an open membership attracting larger numbers; the risk is being perceived as closed, aloof and elitist and structured similarly to those you seek to influence or who oppose you; there may be other, less formal structures for advocacy groups although their nature of their work calls for formal structure with defined roles such as spokesperson.
- a **social movement** with characteristics such as...
  - passion
  - a participant/membership base
  - inspirational leadership
  - a barrier to entry such as a declaration of agreement with the movement's agenda
  - empowering people with knowledge and stimulating action
  - shared ownership that allows the team to take the movement forward
  - a powerful identity that forms the organisation's point of difference to other entities, rather than a brand as is common among commercial entities
  - both an online and offline presence
  - making participant advocates feel important
  - trustful and trusting of others
  - achieving results
  - fighting an injustice or creating an alternative, or both.



- a mutual support organisation in which the focus is on the individual and their wellbeing/advancement.
- a service organisation, such as a representative industry body working on behalf of a specific milieu.
- a maker organisation whose activity is to create the models it advocates so as to set up, prototype and distribute functioning structures as real alternatives to business-as-usual, rather than/as well as advocating politically.

■ a **distributed network**...

- in which the nodes are the activity hubs that form as permanent or temporary structures to do some particular task
- a federal organisational structure in which nodes/hubs self-initiate and self-manage within the bounds of the organisation's mission
- a management team to look after legals, membership records, relationships etc.

The distributed network has no head office. The functions are carried out by the hubs that are connected by two-way paths of communication. This is an inherently democratic, self-managing structure.

- a **platform** with a core of organisational and legal structure and with hubs and nodes that develop applications of the organisation's mission according to regional needs; for example, there might be an advocacy hub,

an educational hub, an administrative hub, a hub in which participants do work of an applied type by creating something physical. Think of how smartphone manufacturers create a platform of technology and software then leave it to developers to create apps that add value to the basic platform.

- a **community of practice** that engages participants in making and learning, combining practical activity with workshops or study circles for self-education.

The platform and distributed network models could be combined.

There exists today, mainly in the business world and among the bodies that study organisations as well as within digital culture, a realisation that the hierarchical model — an artifact of the age of industrialism of the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries — is now subject to the law of diminishing returns.

The reduced effectiveness of established, hierarchical structures is being driven by the incapacity of many to respond with sufficient rapidity to changes in their market or constituency (terms that include organisational memberships and their expectations) and in their environment or to the initiatives of other groups. They are slow to comprehend and adapt to the churn (the rate of change) we find in markets and constituencies.



## The importance of culture

In his book *Understanding Voluntary Organisations-How To make Them Function Effectively*<sup>3</sup>, the organisational educator and author, Charles Handy, describes four organisational structures:

### 1. The Club

This revolves around the character of a leader and is most appropriate for closely-coupled organisations in which the leadership team shares the values of the leader. This is a culture built around a shared mindset that emerges under the dominant presence of a leader. Communication is mainly by talking and the organisation can respond quickly to changes in the environment.

### 2. The person culture

This is a minimal organisational structure that gathers around an individual who forms the most important component. Think of a well known singer and the team that manages their affairs.

In its early years the Permaculture Institute could be seen as a person culture due to the dominance of Bill Mollison. It moved towards the distributed network model as it evolved.

### 3. Role culture

This is the familiar structure of our bureaucracies in government and corporations. It deals with tasks that are repetitive and unchanging and is governed by the logical mindset of rules, procedures, standards, chains of communication and decision making, formal relationships and systems.

It is a culture resistant to change and that cannot handle change in its environment

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<sup>3</sup> Handy C, 1988, *Understanding Voluntary Organisations-How To make Them Function Effectively*; Penguin Books UK.

with speed or effectiveness. When it has some higher degree of effectiveness and a policy of doing so, it can be a fair structure in the way it treats its clients equally. It is a slow-moving culture.


Within this culture, individuals occupy roles and are replaceable within those roles, the roles having the continuity. It discounts initiative, entrepreneurship and independent action in part because there may be no procedure for dealing with the individuality and uncertainty of those things. It finds it very difficult to deal with exceptions to the rule, expedient and advantageous they might be.

Imagine the conventional hierarchical organisation chart and you have a mental picture of the role culture organisation.

### 4. Task culture

This organisational structure is one of small teams sharing knowledge, skills and responsibilities to accomplish something specific. It has minimum hierarchy and no managers, the backup work being performed by coordinators who are team members rather than people having some controlling role and which form a specialised team without any status different to other teams. The model has reviews of progress rather than of past performance. In decision making it consults the team rather than a formal or informal leader who makes decisions alone. The team culture is not bogged down waiting for decisions to flow through a role culture hierarchy.

Speed of response to changes in its environment is a characteristic, as is an informality of operation and changeability within its structure. It may be a temporary assembly. It can be virtual. It values innovation and entrepreneurship. With loose, adaptable plans allowing manoeuvrability in place of



procedures, it thrives in organisations focused on problem solving and has a culture of questioning.

A operational methodology for the team culture may be the **Agile Planning** approach. This is a project planning methodology based on the work of teams which proceed in 'sprints' of manageable work chunks completed within specific times to complete a project. Rather than produce a detailed plan then attempt to complete an entire project all at once, Agile Planning produces a series of iterations of the product, each adding something functional that improves it until the work is completed and operational.

Agile Planning enacts the philosophy of continual improvement. Its advantages are an ability to adapt its work to changing circumstances as it proceeds, to make changes and to produce a product that reflects conditions in its environment at the time of completion rather than what prevailed at the time of starting which, given the pace of change, may be obsolete by the time it is eventually completed.

## The hybrid culture

For some organisations, a blend of the 'role culture' for carrying out necessary administrative functions such as financial management, secretariat etc can be matched with the 'task culture', the task teams doing the actual work the organisation sets up to do. This may suit organisations that have some legal requirements around their structure, such as a company limited by guarantee, the structure adopted by some organisations that operate nationally.

The role culture component of a hybridised organisation would form a core functions team

carrying out the legally necessary responsibilities — an 'admin team' in effect — such as financial management, membership records, legals, reporting etc. This would see individuals occupying fixed roles. They may or may not be members of a board of management but would report directly to it. I'm not sure it makes any difference if they are board members unless there is some legal stipulation about that.

A board usually has people reporting to it on the state of the organisation but who might not be board members. It is concerned with strategic direction, finding solutions to problems that could affect the wellbeing of the organisation, compliance with ethics, the law, external relationships etc. The best boards do not micromanage their organisations.

The task culture component of a hybridised organisation would be based on work carried out by small groups applying their talents to specific tasks. They can come and go, reform for new tasks and can be changed in composition as circumstances suggest would be advantageous. They may also be virtual, geographically scattered and meet via digital media.

Handy writes of the importance of creating the right organisational culture. Many of us will have seen how a wrong choice can quickly alienate those with an innovative, creative mindset such as a small organisation adopting the controlling, hierarchical role culture model rather than something looser and more informal. Members will walk — they will simply disappear and find another organisation more conducive to the way they prefer to work.

I believe that within the permaculture milieu there's a predilection, a bias, towards the less structured, informal task culture of teams cooperating to produce something of value.

## Learnings

Over recent decades we've learned a number of things about organisations and how they behave, be they business or in the voluntary community sector.

### The virtue of simplicity

One of these is that, for those in the voluntary community sector, simplicity of structure, of operation and of decision making is a key to effectiveness and to organisational continuity, mainly because voluntary work is squeezed between working life and other life demands.

Volunteer capacity is defined by a mix of total time availability, availability at particular times such as those proposed for meetings or event organisation, the possession of skill sets and the expected and unexpected demands of work and family. Ask too much of volunteers and you get volunteer burnout and their loss to the organisation. Ask too much of a voluntary organisation and you get strategic overshoot — expectations and planning of actions that are beyond the capacities<sup>4</sup> of the organisation as a whole and of those within its teams.

A factor that improves retention of active members is the opportunity for their participation in decision making. It's clear — and we see this in permaculture — that a portion of members are happy to remain followers of decisions made by an elected or de-facto leadership. This is fine and is unlikely to affect those who prefer a more involved role providing there is opportunity within the organisation for them to exercise their desire for more democratic involvement.

You sometimes hear low-key criticism of the lack of opportunity in shared decision making

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4 Capacities of time, knowledge, motivation, funding.

by people who would prefer the direct democracy of a participatory approach to leadership. Their argument is that voluntary associations are community initiatives and should thus reflect an appropriate democratic model of organisation. Out of this has come models of decision making such as sociocracy which, according to Wikipedia, is "consent-based decision making among equivalent individuals and an organizational structure based on cybernetic<sup>5</sup> principles (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sociocracy>)".

This raises the question of what leadership in permaculture should look like. Should it be more than another iteration of established, mainstream models or should it aspire to something new and innovative?

### Organisational churn

Another learning is that organisations that rely on an active membership for their work can have a limited lifetime. They characteristically start with great flourish, devolve to maintenance by a committed team, a period which characterises the majority of their existence, then decline. This is the evolution described by Roger's innovation diffusion curve<sup>6</sup>.


Over the past decade or so I believe we've seen greater churn in the appearance and disappearance of organisations, including local permaculture associations. This may partly be attributed to online media highlighting a larger number of issues that stimulate action by community-based organisations and which fracture what could have been unitary groupings, such as that of a national

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5 The theory developed by Norbert Wiener of control and communication within a system. Related to the study of systems dynamics.

6 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diffusion\\_of\\_innovations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diffusion_of_innovations)





permaculture milieu, into action groups defined by single issues or a small range of issues. For example, many people who might have been attracted to permaculture may have taken their activism to the numerous climate change groups into which they put the majority of their effort, or in some cases they may have been attracted to the apparent broader ambit of the Transition Town movement. They might still identify as permaculture practitioners but they put most of their effort into the other group rather than into a permaculture association.

**Permaculture has not evolved as a campaigning movement. It is a social movement that develops alternative models...**


A longer term example of this churn is the eclipsing of big environmentalism. Groups like the Australian Conservation Foundation, Total Environment Centre and the Wilderness Society have declined in their presence and impact since their peak during the 1990s. They continue to exist but their presence is surely less today than what it was and smaller, more agile groups with a stronger online presence now attract potential supporters. In many cases, big environmentalism took on the structure of the role culture organisation and, as some critics have said, became 'professionalised'. At worse, this managerial structure relegate members to the simple roles of petition signers or funding sources, the core work of the organisations being done by paid, specialised staff inhabiting fixed positions.

I found an early sign that they were well aware of this change when I was invited to attend a focus group to look at how people influential in the community NGO sector perceived those big organisations and their future. The notion that newer, internet-based organisations had a lot to do with the decline of big environmentalism came from that focus group. Add to this the changing themes around sustainability, such as climate change, resource depletion and food sovereignty and you see that big environmentalism has not been agile enough to move on to new concerns in time. Some have addressed these topics to some degree but the running has often gone to new entities that are not structured as role cultures.

How this presents opportunity for permaculture and for any larger scale entity emerging from the design system remains unexplored. Permaculture, while this was happening, remained largely locked into its own demimonde of home gardening and the like and therefore didn't grasp the moment to wield greater influence.

Influencing this was the critique of campaign-based environmental organisation made by Bill Mollison some years ago. This appears to have become more nuanced recently, a move away from the polarising attitude of 'permaculture good, campaigning bad'.

Permaculture has not evolved as a campaigning movement. It is a social movement that develops alternative models and in doing this it reaches back into that social milieu that it emerged from — the 'alternative'



movement of the 1970s<sup>7</sup>. A question for any new, representative and larger scale body in permaculture would be how alternative ideas for sustainable living would be reinterpreted for contemporary times.

### The inspiration of flatness

It is partly from the community sector but also from the newer industrial sectors that new models and new ideas on how to structure organisations are emerging, as well as from scientific studies into the dynamics of systems and networks.

**I saw how the slow moving culture of management made decisions without the input of staff with specialised knowledge acting as advisers...**

These new models are of 'flat' organisational structures in which levels of management are minimised and channels of communications prised open and made two-way. There

are others, such as federal structures with managerial-independent, regional operations linked into a national organisational structure, or of structures consisting of a geographically distributed network of specialists — units or individuals — linked by rapid and open flows of communications and called into cohesion as virtual project teams when necessary.

I operate within the latter structure for an agency working mainly in the Oceania region but I have worked for entities conventionally structured as the old hierarchies. In these, mainly in local government, I saw how the slow moving culture of management made decisions without the input of staff with specialised knowledge acting as advisers. The decisions they made were, shall we say, less than optimal. This is managerialism and it comes with built in defects.

At issue is not the responsibility of management to make decisions but of heeding the advice of those with knowledge and experience and allowing them to influence decisions. This has relevance to larger scale permaculture organisations. Just as in commercial organisations, delay in decision making in voluntary organisations can lead to lost opportunity. The moment can pass all too quickly.


Networks and the accompanying understanding of how systems work and of the application of that through systems thinking<sup>8</sup> are the organisational currency of the emerging century. Hierarchies and cumbersome management are tired. The new models are inspired and await their birth and deployment.

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7 'Alternative' is a collective name given to the diversity of ideas and groups that constituted a social movement, starting in the late 1960s and continuing as an identifiable movement to the end of the 1970s, that actively sought new ways of living and satisfying life needs. The movement, part of the social and intellectual ferment of that decade, questioned basic assumptions about societies and was influential in the emergence of permaculture. The alternative movement can be seen to have characteristics different to the 'hippy' movement of the late 1960s to 1970s although there was overlap. One of these differences was the alternative movement's focus on developing constructive solutions.

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8 A decisional or problem solving approach that views events and phenomena as interacting parts of a whole system. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Systems\\_thinking](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Systems_thinking)



Permaculture practitioners might effectively spend time in investigating these emerging structures and working out which are relevant to their mission, which are most compatible with the characteristics of permaculture and which are most useful in implementing the design system's three ethics.

## Openness and radical transparency

There is confidentiality and there is compulsive secrecy.

Confidentiality is the justifiable non-disclosure of information regarding activities and relationships the making public of which could negatively affect an organisation or an individual or disclose personal information.

There are two considerations when it comes to the question of disclosure: Is there a legal obligation to disclose, such as evidence of criminal behaviour? Is there public interest that would justify disclosure?

**...central control loses  
and openness wins in a  
networked era...**

Secrecy is the unnecessary withholding or the deliberate concealing of information about an organisation and its activities and relationships. It is a compulsion of government and corporations that is a misfit in voluntary community organisations as well as others working in the broader community sector.

**Radical transparency  
opens up organisational  
processes and  
information...**

Models of secrecy such as classifying information as 'commercial — in confidence' remain valid where disclosure really could put a business at an economic disadvantage in a competitive market, however its misuse by government and some corporations has devalued it. Today, it is often seen as a smokescreen.

'Radical transparency' is an idea proposed as far back as 1994 by Kevin Kelly<sup>9</sup> who wrote that central control loses and openness wins in a networked era. Articles in support of radical transparency have appeared in *Foreign Affairs* and *Wired* magazine in which Chris Anderson<sup>10</sup> proposed that the product development process be opened to customer input.

Radical transparency opens up organisational processes and information. The adoption of radical transparency can include structures for the input of information and proposals by the public or an organisation's membership. This could assist in planning and governance, activities and organisational direction as well as product development. Radical transparency opens the door to what has been called 'the wisdom of the crowd'<sup>11</sup>.

Compulsive and unnecessary secrecy indicates an organisation's lack of respect for and trust in its membership. It has no place in permaculture. Radical transparency is its antidote.

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<sup>9</sup> Kelly, Kevin, 1994; *Out of control: the rise of neo-biological civilization*.

<sup>10</sup> Past editor-in-chief, *Wired* magazine.

<sup>11</sup> Accessing the collective input of a group of individuals rather than a single expert. 'Crowdsourcing' input.

## Intellectual property — a persistent dilemma

Intellectual property has presented permaculture with a dilemma and it is something any national scale permaculture organisation might consider.

In the past, some permaculture practitioners have denied the reuse of their information while others have openly shared what they have produced.

### The Third Ethic is widely seen to imply open source...

The dilemma has been manifested in the publication of student notes — those made by students — during the permaculture design course. Are these really the intellectual property of the teacher who determines whether and how they can be redistributed by a student or have they been given as part of the business arrangement (such as fee for service, the service being permaculture education) in enrolling in a course and passed on to the student? That seems to have been the belief among many students and some have gone on to publish the notes they have taken during design courses.

It is not the ideas in a teacher's course notes that is the issue, for copyright law does not cover ideas, only particular expressions of them. Thus, permaculture educators and practitioners are free to use the ideas expressed in Bill Mollison's *Permaculture — A Designers' Manual*, however Bill Mollison, or Tagari Publications, controls the expression of those ideas as structured in the book in the form of chapters and graphics. It would be much the same

for a permaculture educator's course notes — the ideas are not the intellectual property (unless patented). What is, is the way they are expressed in the notes a teacher distributes to students, assuming those notes are the original work of the teacher.

In Australia, all original material is automatically copyright without the appendage of the © logo or registration, though this is not the case in some other countries. Copyright was intended as the temporary protection of material and comes with time limitations.

Copyright — the protection of intellectual material for the exclusive use by its creator or those appointed by the creator or to whom use is licenced — clashes with permaculture's Third Ethic of the sharing of resources. The clash comes in the de-facto attitude of what we would today call 'open source' in permaculture. The Third Ethic is widely seen to imply open source.

How does this relate to the structure and operation of larger scale organisations in permaculture? It becomes relevant when and if those organisations create material that could be seen as their own intellectual property. Whether and how they permit reuse is where they have potential conflict with those who view the Third Ethic as implying de-facto open source status.

Perhaps the solution for large scale organisations as well as for those of smaller scale is to issue material under a Creative Commons licence that allows a range of reuse options.



## 4. Outline of a new model

**...adopting a structure flatter than that of the common hierarchical model would demonstrate compatibility with permaculture's claim of being at the forefront of developing constructive alternatives...**

**ORGANISATIONS** need an operating system that goes with their legal structure, such as an incorporated association or a company limited by guarantee with a membership and operations governed by a board of directors. What newer models raise is the possibility less the doing away with boards and memberships, the potential for which may be limited by legal constraints, but the role of such boards and memberships, how they relate to each other and how this might be modified to create more simply-structured and effective organisations.

For any larger permaculture organisation, adopting a structure flatter than that of the common hierarchical model would demonstrate compatibility with permaculture's claim of being at the forefront of developing constructive alternatives and lend those organisations credibility for trying.

### A thought experiment

Adopting a modern organisational structure implies abandoning the hierarchical model with

its command and control and predominately top-down, one-way flow of information. Some critics have described this as a parent > child relationship, of a organisation issuing edicts with the expectation that they will be obeyed and implemented by memberships or employees.

Let's make a thought experiment... let's imagine that one day the management and interested members of a large organisation with a regional, state or national focus sit down and decide to remake itself in a way that is compliant with its legal responsibilities but that change its operational methodology.

Here's what it might look like...

### Metastucture

The metastructure might be an adaptation of the federal model.

It might take the form of teams setting themselves up to perform specific roles, with these teams communicating with an admin/ coordinating team through people acting in a liaison role who may or may not be board members. The role of the board would be not to define how the teams structure and operate other than they contribute to the mission of the organisation and comply with permaculture's code of ethics.

Such a model would mimic the natural, evolved structure of permaculture in Australia, divest responsibility and initiative to motivated teams, distribute the work of the organisation nationally and place less work on the board.

### The board or management group

In contemplating a new organisational model for larger groups we can ask what the role

of an admin team, board of directors or a management team should be.

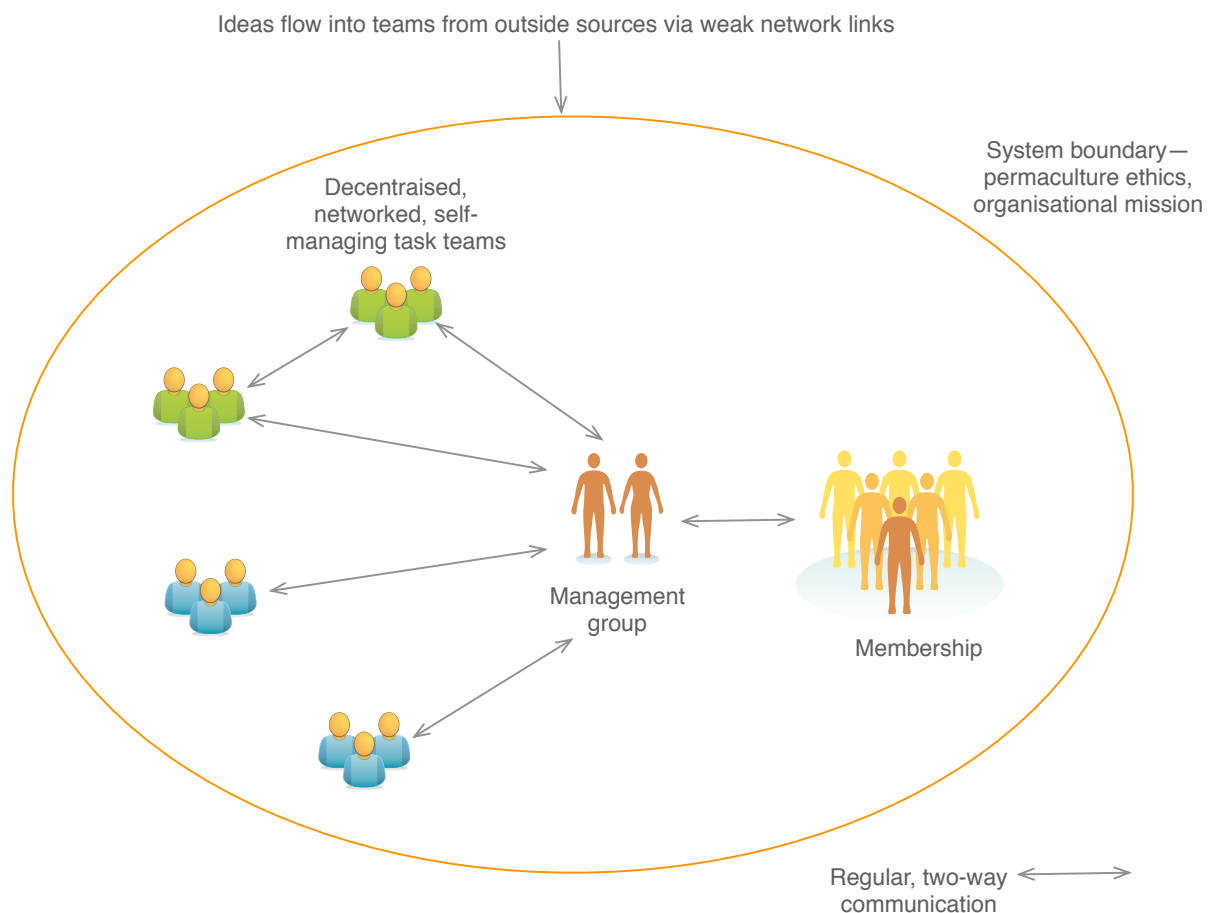
Should it adopt managerialism characterised by:

- a strategic oversight role of maintaining the organisation's course according to its stated mission
- management of the organisational infrastructure such as finances, membership, liaison with government and institutions, management of the legal requirements of the company
- a hierarchical structure in which decisions are made and handed down to the members and the teams; some may be happy with this but others would likely see it as effectively disempowering them and discouraging

initiative; it could risk the loss of participants where they are interested in a more democratic culture

- a predominantly trickle down effect of mainly a one-way flow of decisional information and authority from board to teams and members
- the micromanagement of teams including determination and alteration of their roles with little or no consultation and shared decision making
- validation or veto of initiatives and decisions coming from teams.

Alternatively, the board adopts the model of the flat, distributed organisation, avoids the old command and control structure inherent



Operational model for larger scale permaculture organisation

in hierarchies and adopts an oversight and coordinating role consisting of:

- strategic oversight, maintaining the organisation's course according to its stated mission
- managing the organisational infrastructure such as finances, membership, liaison with government and institutions, management of the legal requirements of the organisation
- facilitating the work of the teams
- ensuring the work of the teams remains within the ambit of the organisation's mission and roles
- ensuring teams comply in their operation and work with the ethics of permaculture.

### Teams or activity clusters

The work of the organisation is invested in teams or regional activity clusters that are:

- self-initiating — new teams would inform the board of their mission within the ambit of the organisation's role, and their intention; where compliant with the organisation's strategic direction, this would be ratified by the board/admin team
- self-organising
- self-managing
- semi-autonomous — capable of independent initiative, operation and decision making
- linked by multipath, open flows of information to improve coordination and cooperation
- have the capacity to communicate widely on their own behalf.

A potential outcome of self-initiation and self-management within agreed parameters could be the attracting of the most motivated people.

Teams would:

- be linked to the board or management group/admin team by a liaison who may or may not be a board member and by open, clear channels of communication; they would regularly communicate their state of activity so that the board has a clear image of what is happening in the teams at any time
- have an open membership and the capacity to recruit people themselves.

The larger organisation would function through the activity of its teams as active nodes in a distributed, networked structure. Through this structure, it would develop a greater capacity to self-organise.

The teams would be the main implementation clusters for the organisation's work.



## 5. Requirements of a new structure

...protracted and  
careful thought rather  
than protracted and  
thoughtless action...

**ANY NEW INITIATIVE** requires protracted and careful thought rather than protracted and thoughtless action before launching, to paraphrase Bill Mollison.

As well as time and board and member support and participation, among other requirements to achieve the type of organisation outlined in this document are:

- a **clear sense of identity** for the organisation... what is it?
- a **clear sense of purpose**... what does it want to do? why does it exist?
- a **clear point of difference** to similar organisations
- an **open, collegiate, collaborative and participatory** organisational culture
- clear, regular, open **multipath communications** between nodes and between nodes and board/admin team
- a **friendly welcoming mat** for new members and visitors
- a capacity to **solicit funding**
- **inducement to join** including a simple membership structure for organisations and individuals seeking membership
- **openness in decision making** including the polling of members on their preferences
- capacity for **external communications**
- a **mental model** of how the organisation is situated in relation to the national structure of permaculture that has evolved and how

it would relate to that structure in terms of information flow

- possession of a **grand narrative**, a story describing a realistic and achievable set of goals for the organisation
- a **communications strategy** developed by the communications specialists in the organisation and others who may join them
- the recognition that **the future belongs to small, agile organisations**.

A partial indicator of the state of permaculture participation would be membership numbers of permaculture organisations. That, though, doesn't capture numbers of permaculture people not participating in permaculture associations, and that number may be significant.

We can use the set of requirements formulated in the book, *Brains on Fire*, the collective work of a number of authors, to assess whether permaculture is well structured as a social movement. These are:

- does permaculture **reframe the conversation** around sustainability?
- do permaculture practitioners **get buy-in** from prospective participants at the first conversation — do they tell an attractive story, a narrative, about permaculture?
- does permaculture have an **inspirational leadership**? Passionate people who put in the hard work? A leadership that encourages participants to adopt its message?
- does permaculture have a **barrier to entry**? Crossing a barrier builds relationships.
- does permaculture **empower people** with knowledge?



- does permaculture have a **shared ownership**? This includes shared leadership that makes it possible for practitioners to move it forward. Do people feel free to comment publicly on permaculture or do they see that as the exclusive role of people prominent in it?
- does permaculture have a **powerful identity**? Or is its identity, its self-concept, dilute, fragmented and ambiguous?
- does permaculture **have a presence** both offline and online?
- does permaculture **make its participants feel important**? Does it engender trust between people in its organisations?
- does permaculture **get results**? Does it offer return of some kind on time, energy, knowledge, skills and funds invested? Does it make headway in addressing some injustice?

We can look to the book, *The Dragonfly Effect* to see what an organisation needs to achieve a degree of success. The characteristics include:

1. A **clear focus**. This might be thought of as the organisation's mission, its purpose. Having focus implies that the organisation has only a single or a limited number of foci so as to avoid ambiguity and spreading its energy too widely. A focus includes having a point of difference to other, similar organisations. The Pareto Principle, the 80/20 Rule, can be applied here by thinking about what would be most important to focus on... what are those limited number of foci that would yield the most important outcomes rather than that larger number that would yield smaller, less significant results? It's a question about return on the organisation's investment of skill, knowledge, funds and time.
2. The organisation has the means to **grab attention**. Working within the boundaries of

its focus, the organisation takes action of some sort that is appealing and attractive. The action and any proposals coming from it must be relevant, achievable, potentially effective and maintainable.

3. Having grabbed people's attention, the organisation then **engages** with those attracted. There would be many ways to do this, such as facilitating social connection, providing education, providing new tools that make a real difference in people's lives. Once again, we can use the Pareto principle to assess the potentially most beneficial.
- Having engaged with those attracted to the organisation's focus, it is time to **take action** on the foci chosen by members.

## ...the future belongs to small, agile organisations

"...we will hire the smartest people we can find and put them in small teams. They will go into the field with funding and communications infrastructure behind them, capitalized to find a place to live and work, and a job to do..."

Our company isn't a project that we pull together on, it's a network of like-minded, cooperating autonomous teams, all of which are empowered to do whatever they want, provided that it returns something to our coffers...

This company isn't a company anymore: this company is a network, an approach, a sensibility... it's risky doing anything. But riskiest of all is doing nothing...

That's what an ecosystem is all about, creating value for a lot of players."

...Excerpt from *Makers* by Cory Doctorow

## Conclusion

### ...we cling too much to the past rather than looking to a new future

**THIS** is a preliminary paper, an ideas paper. It is presented as the starting point of a discussion rather than presenting actionable proposals.

Sometimes, we cling too much to the past rather than looking to a new future. History is instructive but it doesn't deal directly with the present or the future, yet it's there that our organisations have to live and it's there that we make the decisions that affect our collective future as a body of practice, as permaculture design.

In offering this outline of ideas to structure organisations to inhabit that future, I am very much aware that it is the time availability of the people who do the work that is the limiting factor in getting anything done. Clearly, for some of these ideas to become reality we would have to stimulate member activity within an organisation.

It is an axiom of crime investigation that for something to happen three conditions are necessary: motivation, opportunity and means. For any larger scale permaculture organisation, seeing to the growth of these would be necessary but quite difficult. To engender motivation or to take advantage of that already existing there must be a compelling reason for people to join and become active in an organisation. In other words, incentive for membership. A friendly welcoming mat would provide the opportunity for membership and the means would consist of a simple method of gaining membership.

Yet, that conversation reported at the start of this publication, if true, suggests that permaculture is unconsciously moving away from a participatory structure in which a larger number worked together to make things happen. That would be a barrier to implementing some of the ideas presented here, but resorting to the managerial model would likely be equally ineffective, especially were it to be staffed by volunteers who could find themselves with a lot of work to do.

In discussing ideas about organisations, it's been suggested that voluntarism in Australia is in decline. I've seen no figures for or against this suggestion, however if true and were a national representative permaculture organisation to be born, then some new model might be needed to avoid volunteer burnout and organisational overshoot.

### For organisations, a key property today is agility...

Some organisations in other sectors have come to the point at which they have reached the limit of voluntary capacity, yet client or member expectation is that they continue to offer the services they provide. They then seek grant funding to employ staff full or part time, and while a great deal more can be accomplished by doing this, grants sooner or later cease to be offered and the organisation is then left staffless with, perhaps, a greater volume of work to be done by volunteers or by reducing their level of service.

A few have gone on to reorganise as a not-for-profit social enterprise. This is a viable model

but it can take the organisation far from what it previously was, often turning it into a service provider with a more businesslike relationship to members. It's difficult to see what a large scale permaculture organisation would offer by way of self-financing services that would sustain it.

That question — the question of return on investment in membership, what members get for their membership — has come up during discussions over the future of Permaculture Australia. To date, it has not been answered. That's because it's a difficult question, especially for an organisation with limited financial and volunteer resources. Ideally, those committed to a good future for permaculture would see their membership fees as an investment in the organisation and its work and not expect anything material in return. Experience has shown that this attitude is not universally prevalent in permaculture.

## An evolving practice

Behind the ideas presented here is the notion that permaculture is an evolving practice and body of knowledge. To be otherwise is to set off on the road to extinction.

Bodies of knowledge and practice and the organisations they spawn must evolve to adapt and survive in a somewhat saturated public marketplace for ideas and for people's attention and allegiance.

For organisations, a key property today is agility. To be agile is to remain within the capacities of the organisation, its leadership and its members. Strategic overshoot leads to extinction by attrition of the overworked and overwhelmed.

The ideas here might initially take some thinking about and, was there willingness to implement them, there would likely be a need

to spend time working out how to introduce, structure and tweak them. To allow for this it might be wise for all decisions and policies to be introduced in beta form, for a limited time before formal adoption, rejection or modification. I believe, however, that given a little time the workload of organisational governance might diminish.

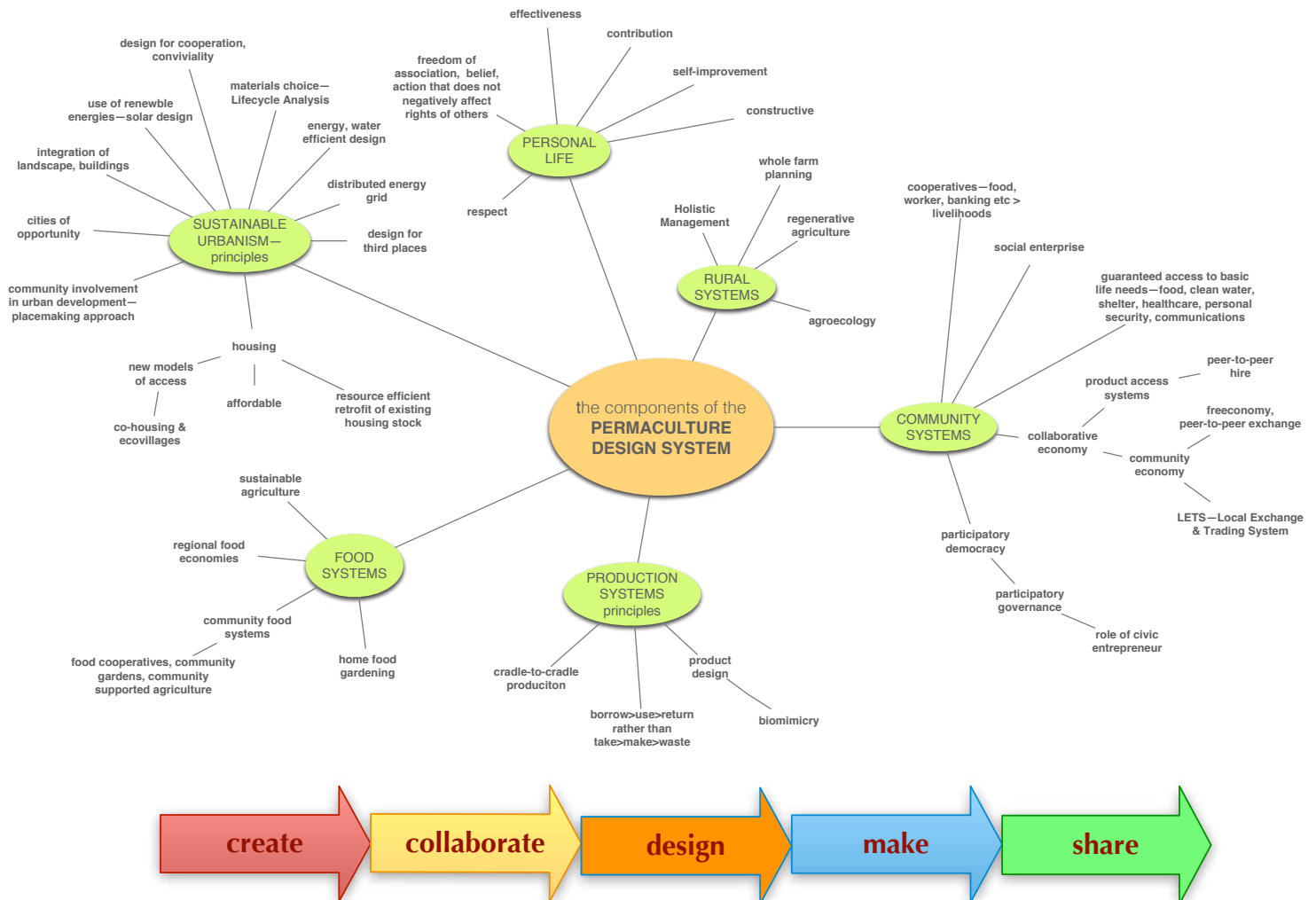
I think it remains a good idea that permaculture organisations demonstrate models of doing things that set a good example, that offer a true alternative and that reflect its ethos.

**"But if you think of yourself as terraforming Earth, and if you think about sustainability, then you can start thinking about permaculture and what permaculture really means. It's not just sustainable agriculture, but a name for a certain type of history... people tend to think of utopia as a perfect end-stage, which is, by definition, impossible and maybe even bad for us. And so maybe it's better to use a word like permaculture, which not only includes permanent but also permutation. Permaculture suggests a certain kind of obvious human goal, which is that future generations will have at least as good a place to live as what we have now" (in interview).**

**Kim Stanley Robinson,**  
science fiction author and thinker.  
Village Homes, Davis, California.

# Conceptual map of the permaculture design system

A set of interacting components producing combined outcomes greater than any of the components by themselves.



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Russ Grayson, Sydney, Autumn 2013