

## Trojan Horses, Recipes, and Permaculture

The Transition movement seemed to catch fire right from the beginning, and I confess that its success made me, as a permaculturist, a bit envious. Here was a program for converting to a post-oil society, created by a permaculture teacher using permaculture principles, and it seemed to be becoming better known and more highly regarded than permaculture itself. Over a thousand towns have adopted Transition plans, national Transition organizations have sprung up in dozens of countries, and the *Transition Handbook* offers a clear implementation plan for energy descent, while permaculture lacks formal national and even regional centers in most places, and is a word that not only few people have heard, but one that many practitioners can barely define well enough for others to grasp. What was it that made Transition so comprehensible, exciting, and respectable, while permaculture seemed diffuse, slow-growing, and smelling a bit of patchouli oil?

In a [recent article](#) in *Permaculture (UK) Magazine*, Transition founder Rob Hopkins is quoted as saying that Transition is “a Trojan horse for permaculture,” a way of introducing permaculture concepts to people without their knowing it. I think we need more Trojan horses, because although I am convinced that permaculture offers solutions for our current crises, its growth is slow because few people think of themselves as designers. Trojan horses like Transition can speed the spread of permacultural thinking by giving people who need solutions some concrete recipes to follow, instead of demanding that they retrain themselves to be whole-systems designers before saving the Earth.

One of the barriers to adopting permaculture is that it doesn't spell out exactly what to do. It can be used to design anything from gardens to refugee camps to whole economies, but you have to figure out what you want to design and, even worse, how to develop the design and the techniques that will create it. That's too vague for most people. There are no hard and fast recipes in permaculture. It is site and circumstance specific. Permaculturists often joke that the first answer to any question should be “It depends,” and, although true, that's annoying to someone who simply asks how to control slugs in their garden, and in response gets a slew of questions about their soil type, climate, plant selections, and feelings about slugs' rights. Most people just want to be told how to solve their problem. They want recipes, not a lecture in design principles. And therein lies Transition's strength. Transition, unlike permaculture, tells you exactly what to do. It is a recipe. I don't mean that as a criticism. It's precisely what is needed: a clear example of applying permaculture design to arrive at a concrete set of steps to solve the specific problem of energy descent.

I think of Transition as an *instantiation* of permaculture design. Instantiation is a word used by philosophers to mean a concrete example or instance of an abstract idea. To be sure, permaculture's ethics, principles, and concepts can seem abstract. This is one of the biggest structural stumbling blocks to the spread of permaculture: Only a modest percentage of people think in terms of design and abstract principles. Most people don't. They want specifics. They want recipes. And there's nothing wrong with recipes, properly applied.

Recipes are one way that we learn design. Remember when you first learned to cook? You followed recipes to the letter, and if zucchini wasn't in the fridge but yellow squash was, you probably didn't realize that you could still make ratatouille. After following enough recipes, you started to see the patterns that make up cooking, and soon you could look around the kitchen, see what was on the shelves, and improvise a tasty meal. The recipes taught you the principles and patterns of cooking, and eventually you could go off-recipe and design meals.

Permaculture works from the opposite direction, from large principles and patterns down to specifics. It's as if instead of recipes, you were first taught the theory of flavor blending, of sauce design, of slicing methods and comparative cooking techniques—steaming, blanching, roasting—and given two or three

recipes like herb-spiral dressing and keyhole-bed stew, and then expected to design whole meals. Few people work like that (and those are the few who are drawn to permaculture design for its own sake). More people are comfortable with the bottom-up approach of moving from specifics to patterns (inductive reasoning) than with a top-down system that moves from general principles to specific cases (deductive reasoning). Babies learn that if one stove is hot, all stoves can be hot; they don't reason from a theory of hotness down to specific cases of hot things. Even Einstein used specific examples—his thought experiments about falling elevators and beams of light flashing from speeding trains—to arrive at his General Theory.

But blindly applying recipes can be misleading, frustrating, and even disastrous. How many of us have seen abandoned herb spirals? Few people use all 15 or so different herbs that will fit into an herb spiral, not realizing, as recipe-followers, that they can substitute small veggies or flowers instead of leaving their unused herb spiral to the weeds. As the author of a how-to permaculture book, I've learned that if you publish a recipe, people will follow it whether they need it or not, and in contexts far from anything the lowly author could anticipate. Then, when the method doesn't meet their goals, some will say, "permaculture doesn't work." That's like making the classic beginner's error of cooking an untried dish for a dinner party, having it fail, and, embarrassed before the guests, concluding that "cooking doesn't work in my kitchen."

Here's an example of how we can be misled by recipes. Holistic Management (HM) is a decision-making framework to help ranchers improve grazing-animal and grassland health. In a [revealing article](#) in the HM newsletter *In Practice*, permaculturist Aspen Edge describes her evolution from thinking of permaculture as a set of practices to seeing it as a way to design solutions. Aspen and her husband, David, with four years of permaculture experience in a temperate region, bought a farm in the hot, arid Mediterranean climate of southern Spain, and decided to create a food forest. Aspen writes, "Our permaculture mind applied those techniques which, if applied in a temperate or tropical environment, would build soil and conserve water. . . . Four years on, far from a complex, multi-stacking sward of vegetation, we had even less biodiversity and increased bare ground. . . . Nothing was performing in the way that we had expected." They shifted gears, and tried the specific methods of Holistic Management for brittle (hot, dry, and fragile) landscapes, which involve rotational grazing and building soil via animal manures, and provide specific steps for ranch financial planning. The land, animals, and their finances rebounded beautifully.

Their initial conclusion was that HM was simply better for drylands than permaculture. But they soon realized that HM is a recipe tailored for managing brittle landscapes like theirs, and nothing in HM was out of keeping with the strategies that a good permaculture design would arrive at. It was their perception of permaculture as a set of practices—that sheet mulching should be done everywhere, that all land wants to be a food forest—that was the problem. Holistic Management originator Alan Savory did not use permaculture as such to create HM, but he arrived at it by using the same observation skills and understanding of ecological processes that any good permaculture designer would. It is a recipe specifically for operating ranches, with brittle landscapes as its particular focus. Just like Transition, it wisely tells the user exactly when and where to use it, how to monitor progress, and what outcomes and milestones to be watching for.

This last—context—is what is often missing when we first hear of the iconic permaculture practices that embody permaculture's principles so aptly. Techniques like herb spirals and keyhole beds are teaching tools that richly apply multiple principles and patterning, but they are often taught as general panaceas without giving clear guidelines. You need to really love herbs to keep up with the many species that stack into an herb spiral. Keyhole beds, in turn, can be difficult to irrigate, tend to be so intricately planted that newbies often lose veggies in them, and are hard to navigate on slopes. And food forests, often touted as the goal of every permaculture land design (and *Gaia's Garden* is partly responsible for this misconception), can be, in hot, dry climates, failure prone resource-gobblers, and in most places are usually so densely planted that fungi, bugs, and rodents romp happily in their moist thickets, and harvesting in the dense growth is difficult. Permaculturists, being recipe-lovers like everyone else, can forget to apply criteria for choosing, monitoring, and evaluating our hallmark methods, and we often ignore the fact that there are situations when we *shouldn't* use them.

We're drawn to recipes like herb spirals, sheet mulch, and even process recipes such as consensus and non-violent communication because they are elegant solutions to specific problems. But they work because they are instantiations of good design that embody organic principles and pattern literacy, not because they are cure-all techniques to be plugged in everywhere. Sometimes a coin-toss decides just as well as hours of consensus process.

When designing a strategy or selecting a technique, it's useful to ask, "What problem am I trying to solve with this?" rather than being drawn to a sexy method for its own sake. Transition and HM, by clearly laying out where and when they are to be used, and by being focused on specific problems, are excellent models of how permaculture-like memes can be propagated successfully to solve widespread challenges like oil depletion and range degradation. Another promising Trojan horse for permaculture is disaster relief. Recipes for solving disaster and refugee crises are being designed by first-responding permaculturists in places like Haiti and hurricane- and drought-struck communities. These are opportunities for permaculture to become part of policy for large NGOs and even nations.

To enrich our ability to use recipes and put them into context, without engaging in a full-blown design analysis from scratch, we can use pattern languages. The term was coined by architect Christopher Alexander to mean a structured grammar of good design examples and practices in a given field—architecture, software design, urban planning, and so forth—that allow people with only modest training to solve complex problems in design. A pattern language is like having a box full of wide-ranging recipes from large to small scales, from "how to cook a week of meals for 40 people" down through recipes for single dishes, to instructions for tasks like sharpening a knife, organized and notated so that we can understand the context and application of each recipe, or pattern. Like recipes, pattern languages are plug-and-play rather than original designs, but they allow plenty of improvisation and flexibility in implementation, and can result in rich, detailed solutions that fit. A handbook of pattern languages for the basic human needs and societal functions, structured along permaculture principles, would be a worthy project for a generation of designers.

We love recipes, and they are useful. But permaculture is not a collection of recipes or practices, or even patterns. It is a way of developing strategies to design or choose the recipes to solve virtually any problem. Those recipes, however, need to come with guidelines for when to use them, what to expect, and how to evaluate progress. Through those criteria, and an understanding of the limitations of recipes, we can avoid imposing recipes wrongly, and instead can arrive at them as useful solutions. Plus, a well-designed, properly specific recipe doesn't need to have the stamp of permaculture branded onto it, but rather can be a benevolent Trojan horse to introduce the new paradigm of whole-systems thinking to those who need it. Which, if you think about it, is most everyone.

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