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### Value the Edge: Permaculture as Counterculture in Australia

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Permaculture is a creative design process that is based on ethics and design principles. It guides us to mimic the patterns and relationships we can find in nature and can be applied to all aspects of human habitation, from agriculture to ecological building, from appropriate technology to education and even economics. ([permacultureprinciples.com](http://permacultureprinciples.com))

This paper considers permaculture as an example of counterculture in Australia. Permaculture is a neologism, the result of a contraction of 'permanent' and 'agriculture'. In accordance with David Holmgren and Richard Telford definition quoted above, we intend permaculture as a design process based on a set of ethical and design principles. Rather than describing the history of permaculture, we choose two moments as paradigmatic of its evolution in relation to counterculture.

The first moment is permaculture's beginnings steeped in the same late 1960s turbulence that saw some people pursue an alternative lifestyle in Northern NSW and a rural idyll in Tasmania (Grayson and Payne). Ideas of a return to the land circulating in this first moment coalesced around the publication in 1978 of the book *Permaculture One: A Perennial Agriculture for Human Settlements* by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, which functioned as "a disruptive technology, an idea that threatened to disrupt business as usual, to change the way we thought and did things", as Russ Grayson writes in his contextual history of permaculture. The second moment is best exemplified by the definitions of permaculture as "a holistic system of design ... most often applied to basic human needs such as water, food and shelter ... also used to design more abstract systems such as community and economic structures" ([Milkwood](#)) and as "also a world wide network and movement of individuals and groups working in both rich and poor countries on all continents" ([Holmgren](#)).

We argue that the shift in understanding of permaculture from the "back to the land movement" ([Grayson](#)) as a more wholesome alternative to consumer society to the contemporary conceptualisation of permaculture as an assemblage and global network of practices, is representative of the shifting dynamic between dominant paradigms and counterculture from the 1970s to the present. While counterculture was a useful way to understand the agency of subcultures (i.e. by countering mainstream culture and society) contemporary forms of globalised capitalism demand different models and vocabularies within which the idea of "counter" as clear cut alternative becomes an awkward fit.

On the contrary we see the emergence of a repertoire of practices aimed at small-scale, localised solutions connected in transnational networks (Pink 105). These practices operate contrapuntally, a concept we borrow from Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), to define how divergent practices play off each other while remaining at the edge, but still in a relation of interdependence with a dominant paradigm. In Said's terms "contrapuntal reading" reveals what is left at the periphery of a mainstream narrative, but is at the same time instrumental to the development of events in the narrative itself. To illustrate this concept Said makes the case of novels where colonial plantations at the edge of the Empire make possible a certain lifestyle in England, but don't appear in the narrative of that lifestyle itself (66-67).

In keeping with permaculture design ecological principles, we argue that today permaculture is best understood as part of an assemblage of design objects, bacteria, economies, humans,

plants, technologies, actions, theories, mushrooms, policies, affects, desires, animals, business, material and immaterial labour and politics and that it can be read as contrapuntal rather than as oppositional practice. Contrapuntal insofar as it is not directly oppositional preferring to reframe and reorientate everyday practices. The paper is structured in three parts: in the first one we frame our argument by providing a background to our understanding of counterculture and assemblage; in the second we introduce the beginning of permaculture in its historical context, and in third we propose to consider permaculture as an assemblage.

## Background: Counterculture and Assemblage

We do not have the scope in this article to engage with contested definitions of counterculture in the Australian context, or their relation to contraculture or subculture. There is an emerging literature (Stickells, Robinson) touched on elsewhere in this issue. In this paper we view counterculture as social movements that “undermine societal hierarchies which structure urban life and create, instead a city organised on the basis of values such as action, local cultures, and decentred, participatory democracy” (Castells 19-20). Our focus on cities demonstrates the ways counterculture has shifted away from oppositional protest and towards ways of living sustainably in an increasingly urbanised world.

Permaculture resonates with Castells’s definition and with other forms of protest, or what Musgrove calls “the dialectics of utopia” (16), a dynamic tension of *political* activism (resistance) and *personal* growth (aesthetics and play) that characterised ‘counterculture’ in the 1970s. McKay offers a similar view when he says such acts of counterculture are capable of “both a utopian gesture and a practical display of resistance” (27). But as a design practice, permaculture goes beyond the spectacle of protest.

In this sense permaculture can be understood as an everyday act of resistance: “The design act is not a boycott, strike, protest, demonstration, or some other political act, but lends its power of resistance from being precisely a *designerly* way of intervening into people’s lives” (Markussen 38). We view permaculture design as a form of design activism that is embedded in everyday life. It is a process that aims to reorient a practice not by disrupting it but by becoming part of it.

Guy Julier cites permaculture, along with the appropriate technology movement and community architecture, as one of many examples of radical thinking in design that emerged in the 1970s (225). This alignment of permaculture as a design practice that is connected to counterculture in an assemblage, but not entirely defined by it, is important in understanding the endurance of permaculture as a form of activism.

In refuting the common and generalized narrative of failure that is used to describe the sixties (and can be extended to the seventies), Julie Stephens raises the many ways that the dominant ethos of the time was “revolutionised by the radicalism of the period, but in ways that bore little resemblance to the announced intentions of activists and participants themselves” (121). Further, she argues that the “extraordinary and paradoxical aspects of the anti-disciplinary protest of the period were that while it worked to collapse the division between opposition and complicity and problematised received understandings of the political, at the same time it reaffirmed its commitment to political involvement as an emancipatory, collective endeavour” (126).

Many foresaw the political challenge of counterculture. From the belly of the beast, in 1975, Craig McGregor wrote that countercultures are “a crucial part of conventional society; and eventually they will be judged on how successful they transform it” (43). In arguing that permaculture is an assemblage and global network of practices, we contribute to a description of the shifting dynamic between dominant paradigms and counterculture that was identified by McGregor at the time and Stephens retrospectively, and we open up possibilities for reexamining an important moment in the history of Australian protest movements.

## Permaculture: Historical Context

Together with practical manuals and theoretical texts permaculture has produced its foundation myths, centred around two father figures, Bill Mollison and David Holmgren. The pair, we read in accounts on the history of permaculture, met in the 1970s in Hobart at the University of Tasmania, where Mollison, after a polymath career, was a senior lecturer in Environmental Psychology, and Holmgren a student. Together they wrote the first article on permaculture in 1976 for the *Organic Farmer and Gardener* magazine (Grayson and Payne), which together with the dissemination of ideas via radio, captured the social imagination of the time. Two years later Holmgren and Mollison published the book *Permaculture One: A Perennial Agricultural System for Human Settlements* (Mollison and Holmgren).

These texts and Mollison's talks articulated ideas and desires and most importantly proposed solutions about living on the land, and led to the creation of the first ecovillage in Australia, Max Lindegger's Crystal Waters in South East Queensland, the first permaculture magazine (titled *Permaculture*), and the beginning of the permaculture network (Grayson and Payne). In 1979 Mollison taught the first permaculture course, and published the second book. Grayson and Payne stress how permaculture media practices, such as the radio interview mentioned above and publications like *Permaculture Magazine* and *Permaculture International Journal* were key factors in the spreading of the design system and building a global network.

The ideas developed around the concept of permaculture were shaped by, and in turned contributed to shape, the social climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s that captured the discontent with both capitalism and the Cold War, and that coalesced in "alternative lifestyles groups" (Metcalf). In 1973, for instance, the Aquarius Festival in Nimbin was not only a countercultural landmark, but also the site of emergence of alternative experiments in living that found their embodiment in experimental housing design (Stickells). The same interest in technological innovation mixed with rural skills animated one of permaculture's precursors, the "back to the land movement" and its attempt "to blend rural traditionalism and technological and ideological modernity" (Grayson).

This character of remix remains one of the characteristics of permaculture. Unlike movements based mostly on escape from the mainstream, permaculture offered a repertoire, and a system of adaptable solutions to live both in the country and the city. Like many aspects of the "alternative lifestyle" counterculture, permaculture was and is intensely biopolitical in the sense that it is concerned with the management of life itself "from below": one's own, people's life and life on planet earth more generally. This understanding of biopolitics as power of life rather than over life is translated in permaculture into malleable design processes across a range of diversified practices. These are at the basis of the endurance of permaculture beyond the experiments in alternative lifestyles.

In distinguishing it from sustainability (a contested concept among permaculture practitioners, some of whom prefer the notion of "planning for abundance"), Barry sees permaculture as:

locally based and robustly contextualized implementations of sustainability, based on the notion that there is no 'one size fits all' model of sustainability. Permaculture, though rightly wary of more mainstream, reformist, and 'business as usual' accounts of sustainability can be viewed as a particular localized, and resilience-based conceptualization of sustainable living and the creation of 'sustainable communities'. (83)

The adaptability of permaculture to diverse solutions is stressed by Molly Scott-Cato, who, following David Holmgren, defines it as follows: "Permaculture is not a set of rules; it is a

process of design based around principles found in the natural world, of cooperation and mutually beneficial relationships, and translating these principles into actions" (176).

## Permaculture Practice as Assemblage

Scott Cato's definition of permaculture helps us to understand both its conceptual framework as it is set out in permaculture manuals and textbooks, and the way it operates in practice at an individual, local, regional, national and global level, as an assemblage. Using the idea of *assemblage*, as defined by Jane Bennett, we are able to understand permaculture as part of an "ad hoc grouping", a "collectivity" made up of many types of actors, humans, non humans, nature and culture, whose "coherence co-exists with energies and countercultures that exceed and confound it" (445-6). Put slightly differently, permaculture is part of "living" assemblage whose existence is not dependent on or governed by a "central power". Nor can it be influenced by any single entity or member (445-6). Rather, permaculture is a "complex, gigantic whole" that is "made up variously, of somatic, technological, cultural, and atmospheric elements" (447).

In considering permaculture as an assemblage that includes countercultural elements, we specifically adhere to John Law's description of Actor Network Theory as an approach that relies on an empirical foundation rather than a theoretical one in order to "tell stories about 'how' relationships assemble or don't" (141). The hybrid nature of permaculture design involving both human and non human stakeholders and their social and material dependencies can be understood as an "assembly" or "thing," where everything not only plays its part relationally but where "matters of fact" are combined with "matters of concern" (Latour, "Critique"). As Barry explains, permaculture is a "holistic and systems-based approach to understanding and designing human-nature relations" (82). Permaculture principles are based on the enactment of interconnections, continuous feedback and reshuffling among plants, humans, animals, chemistry, social life, things, energy, built and natural environment, and tools.

Bruno Latour calls this kind of relationality a "sphere" or a "network" that comprises of many interconnected nodes (Latour, "Actor-Network" 31). The connections between the nodes are not arbitrary, they are based on "associations" that dissolve the "micro-macro distinctions" of near and far, emphasizing the "global entity" of networks (361-381). Not everything is globalised but the global networks that structure the planet affect everything and everyone. In the context of permaculture, we argue that despite being highly connected through a network of digital and analogue platforms, the movement remains localised. In other words, permaculture is both local and global articulating global matters of concern such as food production, renewable energy sources, and ecological wellbeing in deeply localised variants.

These address how the matters of concerns engendered by global networks in specific places interact with local elements. A community based permaculture practice in a [desert area](#), for instance, will engage with storing renewable energy, or growing food crops and maintaining a stable ecology using the same [twelve design principles](#) and [ethics](#) as an educational business doing [rooftop permaculture](#) in a major urban centre. The localised applications, however, will result in a very different permaculture assemblage of animals, plants, technologies, people, affects, discourses, pedagogies, media, images, and resources.

Similarly, if we consider permaculture as a network of interconnected nodes on a larger scale, such as in the case of national organisations, we can see how each node provides a counterpoint that models ecological best practices with respect to ingrained everyday ways of doing things, corporate and conventional agriculture, and so on. This adaptability and ability to effect practices has meant that permaculture's sphere of influence has grown to include public institutions, such as city councils, public and private spaces, and schools.

A short description of some of the nodes in the evolving permaculture assemblage in Sydney, where we live, is an example of the way permaculture has advanced from its alternative lifestyle beginnings to become part of the repertoire of contemporary activism. These

practices, in turn, make room for accepted ways of doing things to move in new directions. In this assemblage each constellation operates within well established sites: local councils, public spaces, community groups, and businesses, while changing the conventional way these sites operate.

The permaculture assemblage in Sydney includes individuals and communities in local groups coordinated in a city-wide network, [Permaculture Sydney](#), connected to similar regional networks along the NSW seaboard; local government initiatives, such as in [Randwick, Sydney](#), and [Pittwater](#) and policies like [Sustainable City Living](#); community gardens like the inner city food forest at [Angel Street](#) or the hybrid public open park and educational space at the [Permaculture Interpretive Garden](#); private permaculture gardens; [experiments in grassroot urban permaculture](#) and in [urban agriculture](#); gardening, education and landscape business specialising in permaculture design, like [Milkwood](#) and [Sydney Organic Gardens](#); loose groups of permaculturalists gathering around projects, such as [Permablitz Sydney](#); media personalities and programs, as in the case of the hugely successful garden show *Gardening Australia* hosted by [Costa Georgiadis](#); germane organisations dedicated to [food sovereignty](#) or [seed saving](#), the [Transition Towns movement](#); [farmers' markets](#) and [food coops](#); and multifarious private/public [sustainability initiatives](#).

Permaculture is a set of practices that, in themselves are not inherently “against” anything, yet empower people to form their own lifestyles and communities. After all, permaculture is a design system, a way to analyse space, and body of knowledge based on set principles and ethics. The identification of permaculture as a form of activism, or indeed as countercultural, is externally imposed, and therefore contingent on the ways conventional forms of housing and food production are understood as being in opposition.

As we have shown elsewhere (2014) thinking through design practices as assemblages can describe hybrid forms of participation based on relationships to broader political movements, disciplines and organisations.

## Use Edges and Value the Marginal

The [eleventh permaculture](#) design principle calls for an appreciation of the marginal and the edge: “The interface between things is where the most interesting events take place. These are often the most valuable, diverse and productive elements in the system” ([permacultureprinciples.com](#)). In other words the edge is understood as the site where things come together generating new possible paths and interactions. In this paper we have taken this metaphor to think through the relations between permaculture and counterculture. We argued that permaculture emerged from the countercultural ferment of the late 1960s and 1970s and intersected with other fringe alternative lifestyle experiments. In its contemporary form the “counter” value needs to be understood as counterpoint rather than as a position of pure oppositionality to the mainstream.

The edge in permaculture is not a boundary on the periphery of a design, but a site of interconnection, hybridity and exchange, that produces adaptable and different possibilities. Similarly permaculture shares with forms of contemporary activism “flexible action repertoires” (Mayer 203) able to interconnect and traverse diverse contexts, including mainstream institutions. Permaculture deploys an action repertoire that integrates not segregates and that is aimed at inviting a shift in everyday practices and at doing things differently: differently from the mainstream and from the way global capital operates, without claiming to be in a position outside global capital flows. In brief, the assemblages of practices, ideas, and people generated by permaculture, like the ones described in this paper, as a counterpoint bring together discordant elements on equal terms.

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