

The exhibition *Taking the Country's Side: Agriculture and Architecture* highlights permaculture as a significant attempt to address the existential crisis facing complex societies that we conventionally call civilisation. In this address, David Holmgren shows how the concept was formulated at the interface between civilisation and wild nature in Tasmania, a place recognised as seminal in the emergence of the modern environmental movement. The co-originator of the permaculture concept uses personal anecdote to illuminate how “the action is at the edge”.

“Permaculture: origins at the edge between civilisation and nature”

David Holmgren Speaking Notes to “Talk Talk Talk” conference Lisbon, Portugal  
28<sup>th</sup> November 2019

- It is a privilege to be joining this conference of the 5<sup>th</sup> Lisbon Architecture Triennale from Melliodora, our place on the edge of Hepburn Springs Australia, which is featured in this exhibition.
- In tracing the symbiosis, estrangement and reunification of Architecture and Agriculture through history, Sébastien Marot has recognised permaculture as being one of the conceptual and practical touchstones of this reunification.
- This recognition is part of a wider interest from many academic disciplines in permaculture as a concept, a movement, a form of landuse and a way of life in response to the environmental crisis.
- In a brief essay “The Origins of Permaculture at the Edge”<sup>1</sup> (written nearly 20 years ago) I said:  
*The environmental crisis is one for the whole of civilisation, especially the current centres of power in the global cities. There are good reasons to believe that we will only succeed in dealing with the environmental crisis when we do so in large cities. However, I believe the inspiration, examples and wisdom for the solutions comes not from the centre, but from the margins, where people live at the edge between culture and nature, between modernity and tradition. The idea that the hinterland provides a wellspring of human biological vigour, values and renewal for civilisation is an old one, but I believe the ways in which this is happening are diversifying and intensifying as we approach the end of the fossil fuel era.*
- I would like to enlarge on this theme by explaining something of the geographic origins of permaculture.
- The permaculture concept was born of an intense but brief working relationship in the mid-1970s between myself and Bill Mollison when he was a senior tutor in Psychology faculty of the University of Tasmania and I was an undergraduate student in the pedagogically radical Environmental Design School at the Tasmanian College of Advanced Education.

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<sup>1</sup> Included in *David Holmgren: Collected Writings* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition

- Both schools were located in Hobart, the capital city of Australia's island state located as far as one can go from the great metropolitan centres of western civilisation, and yet still enjoy all the benefits of modern affluent and democratic society.
- The gestation of the ideas and the first horticultural experiments took place, not at either educational institution, but at Bill Mollison's 1 hectare property on the footslopes of Mt Wellington on the suburban fringe of Hobart.
- Although only a 5km car, bus or bicycle ride from the city centre, state parliament and the university, 5kms on walking tracks in the opposite direction put you above the treeline on the south-west face of the mountain with nothing more man-made than a fire trail between you and the great wilderness of SW Tasmania.
- The birthplace of permaculture was at this sharp edge between civilisation and wilderness without any intervening agricultural landscape managed for human needs.
- In some senses this place was emblematic of so many places in the modern affluent world where people live at the interface with wild nature, supported by remote agricultural and industrial sources of sustenance.
- But in the least urbanised state of Australia, with an economy dependent on farming forestry, fishing, mining and hydro industrialisation, the forces of nature were always close at hand and overshadowing all in Tasmania. This was a place where the need to recreate a harmonious agricultural interface between wild nature and civilisation seemed urgent.
- All the more so because less than a decade before, the urban bushland interface had been devastated by the Great Tasmanian Bushfires of 1967. It was inevitable that the early articulation of permaculture included a focus on bushfire resilient landscapes and households, which was generalised in permaculture teaching around the world as natural disaster resilient design, and now, climate chaos resilient design.
- For me, Bill Mollison's life and ideas epitomised the creative bridge between nature and civilisation, and between tradition and modernity. As the fisherman/bushman/farmer who left school at fourteen, he went on to become a wildlife researcher, university academic, environmental activist, co-originator and teacher of permaculture around the world. Through Bill, I met a network of people who were both skilled in the practical arts of gardening, fishing, cooking, building and mechanics and connected to, and informed by, the big issues and ideas of the world.
- The physical and cultural environment that gave rise to permaculture also produced the world's first green political party and was the first place in Australia where the organic agriculture grew from isolated individual farmers to a vibrant network.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Organic Gardeners and Farmers Association founded in 1972.

- The permaculture vision of a recreated Garden of Eden highlighted the need for ecologically informed and designed “garden farming” (as the most modest, harmonious and democratic form of agriculture) to infiltrate residential landscapes and reform and reinhabit the larger agricultural landscapes that were seen the most damaging and unjust form of landuse, dependent on unsustainable use of fossil fuels.
- In recognising recombinant (novel) ecologies as expressions of nature’s resilient responses to human disruption, permaculture rejected the “war on weeds”.
- In recognising traditional forms of landuse and living as both starting points and models for novel systems, permaculture undercut the arrogance of the modernist arrow of progress that saw urban industrial systems as the pinnacle of progress.
- In recognising the pivotal role of conscious design to generate novel solutions, permaculture was both a critique and an invitation to the design professions.
- The organic and anarchic evolution of permaculture in the garden and society, reflected both the processes of novel ecosystem evolution, and the more fundamental critiques of mechanistic design by Alexander<sup>3</sup> and others.
- In creating our own modest models now, rather than fighting to reform or overturn established systems, permaculture sought to provide small working models that could grow in the shade of – and parasitise – industrial systems doomed to failure over the longer term.
- In doing so, permaculture adopted ideas and modes of activism from the anarchist left and libertarian right in a new social synthesis that started at the back doorstep and the local community.
- This upwelling of intellectual and creative action that gave rise to these modes of design and activism at the edge rather than centre (and without support or recognition from central power) illustrates the permaculture design principle *Use Edges and Value the Marginal*.<sup>4</sup> Based on observation of both nature and managed landscapes, this principle suggests the edges between adjacent systems are the most biologically productive and active. It helps us overcome our cultural bias toward the centre, rather than the edge, in land use and society.
- Tasmania represented both a geographic and a conceptual edge or margin. This extension of the application of the principle of edge, draws on the value of “marginal” land and farming methods articulated by American organic farmer, environmentalist and author Wendell Berry.<sup>5</sup> Marginal systems are ones which provide a space for diversity to survive, and innovation to emerge.

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance Alexander, C. *The Timeless Way of Building* Oxford University Press 1979

<sup>4</sup> For a full exploration and reinterpretation of permaculture principles see Holmgren, D. *Permaculture: Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability* Holmgren Design Services 2002/2017

<sup>5</sup> Berry, W. *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* Sierra Book Club 1977

- Another reason for intellectual innovation in Tasmania is the more human scale of its social and political institutions. With a democratic federal state representing only half a million people, it is possible for innovation at the fringe to directly influence the mainstream of Tasmania society. In the big cities of the great nations, the massive scale of establishment culture and institutions makes for an apathetic acceptance of the status quo. Although I have never been to Portugal, maybe this observation might apply there also.
- It is an ironic reflection of the haphazard and serendipitous processes of evolution of permaculture, that while the birth of the concept was in Tasmania, permaculture as a movement first took root in the suburbs of mainland cities, especially Melbourne. It then spread around the world due to the tireless efforts of Mollison and some of the hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of participants in Permaculture Design Courses held over nearly 40 years since the first ones taught in Tasmania.
- Our own place, Melliodora, on the edge of a small town of population 8,000 is one example of permaculture vision and innovation at the edge between settlement and wild nature, a place where ecological building and garden farming express the permaculture principle of *Integration Rather than Segregation* of our landuse and living.
- In the small society of Tasmania where Mollison was born and spent most of his life, his direct influence was undermined by being an intellectual hot potato that disrupted, rather than husbanded, the social garden. A prophet is always problematic in his own land.
- In Tasmania, as elsewhere in the world, permaculture is just one of many the conceptual and practical threads of action that are weaving the creative solutions to the problematic legacy of urban industrial civilisation, which is hitting the limits to growth,<sup>6</sup> so clearly articulated nearly half a century ago.
- From the origins of permaculture to its spread and role as an agent of positive influence over more than four decade, I believe “the action is at the edge” and so I am very pleased to have been able to contribute to this exhibition in “Taking The Country’s Side”.

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<sup>6</sup> Meadows, D. et al *Limits to Growth* Universal Books 1972