

# The Acceptance of Permaculture

by Gary Bentrup

As designers, we sometimes tend to overlook the sociological factors that encourage public acceptance of permaculture. For permaculture to be accepted by the mainstream, we must explore

and incorporate the sociological factors that will encourage society to embrace it.

**EDUCATION:** Acceptance of permaculture design is dependent on people's understanding and appreciation of the ecological principles that are incorporated into a project. Ecology as a design basis will result in complex relationships where for

example, energy and food production will be interrelated to water reuse. Education is an ongoing process where we develop an awareness of the environment and our relationship to it. Skills and commitment follow with the ultimate goals being informed decision making, responsible behavior, and constructive actions regarding a sustainable lifestyle. Consequently, education is vital to the acceptance and success of a permaculture installation. For example, two housing projects in Berlin, Germany incorporated greywater recycling systems that needed to be maintained by the tenants. One project held classes on the reasons for the system, how it worked, and the maintenance it required. The other residential project only held a brief introduction to the system. The housing area that incorporated the educational continuum encouraged acceptance in a successful system while the other project was not able to develop commitment and thus became inoperable.

**INTEGRATION:** Permaculture encourages the integration of necessary processes such as energy production and waste disposal in the closer context of our everyday lives. When society segregates these elements, people lose the necessary understanding of these processes and their impacts which results in unsustainable approaches to these issues. However, if waste disposal is not delegated to the edges of cities, but rather made a component of our urban life, a more responsible ethic would evolve. We would see the end result of our waste and would incorporate measures to reduce and reuse our waste stream. Integrated systems can become a source of pride and motivation in a community that can act as a catalyst for other aspects of sustainability. For integration to succeed, designers must seek creative ways to promote public acceptance and support as we bring these processes back into the realm of everyday life.

**MINIMAL DISRUPTION:** Shifting toward a sustainable society will require some major changes in our lifestyles. However,

permaculture design is most effective where it incorporates a graceful and natural approach to the transition. Designers can make significant contribution by paying attention to the details of life and focusing first where minimum changes can produce maximum effect. When a sustainable design project requires only minor change, the project stands a better chance of being accepted by users. The architects for the Audubon Society's headquarters in New York understood this principle and thus set about a recycling system that was user friendly. Their solution was to have separate chutes on every floor that carry recyclable materials to a recycling center in the basement. This system was easily incorporated into the office routine and has proved quite successful. If the effort were required to carry the material to the basement, the recycling effort would most likely have diminished.

**OPEN-ENDED:** If our designs are truly based on ecology, they must be open-ended and therefore capable of evolving. It is critical that we do not see our designs as static but rather as flexible enough

to allow for change. On a social level, design should be adaptable to meet changing conditions within family or working arrangements. On the physical level, an open-ended design should acknowledge and accept inherent changes in a guild planting as it cycles through succession. This open-ended approach should encourage users' participation and interaction with the design, and ultimately support acceptance.

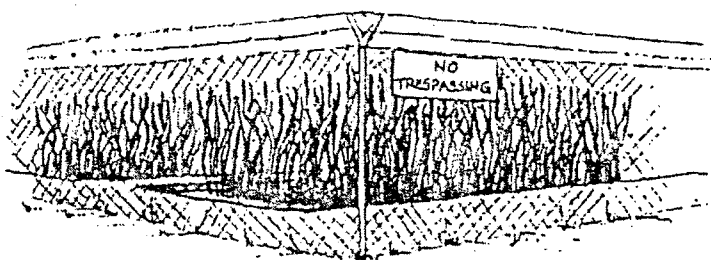
**AESTHETICS/EXPERIENCE:** In our enthusiasm to produce permaculture-based projects, we may overlook the inherent aesthetic qualities that can result from sustainable design. For example, many constructed wetlands being built to treat waste water are rectangular basins full

of monotypic stands of cattails surrounded by chain link fence. What a missed opportunity! Instead, permaculture should be a celebration of processes and relationships. These systems based on natural wetlands with incredible diversity and come an amenity for the community rather than an eyesore. However, we must push beyond the creation of a picturesque

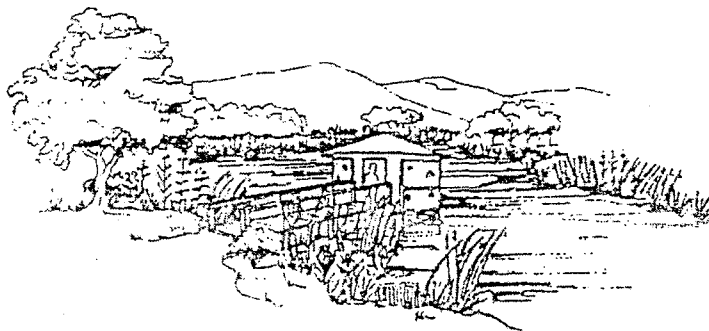
ecological design and strive toward creating experiences that encourage interpretation of interrelationships between society and nature. Experiencing permaculture can provide for lessons and interpretations that will be critical in our shift toward a sustainable society. Only by creating beautiful sustainable designs that evoke a variety of interpretations and experiences will the public understand and desire permaculture.

From this brief discussion of sociological factors that support permaculture design, it is clear there is a close interrelationship. Obviously, this list is not meant to be inclusive but rather a starting point for designers to begin a dialogue on sociological factors that need to be woven into the fabric of our designs. The journey toward a sustainable society may be a long and difficult one, but by consciously addressing the factors that encourage acceptance, we will be able to hasten this transition. As designers we have a responsibility and a mandate to create sustainable landscapes, buildings and ones that are so beautiful, so ecologically sound, and so emotionally satisfying that we will want to embrace sustainability in all aspects of our lives.

Gary Bentrup is a landscape architect and illustrator who works for an architectural consulting firm in Boulder, CO. He'll soon be pursuing graduate work in watershed management and landscape architecture at Utah State University.



*A constructed wetland treating wastewater. What a missed opportunity!*



*A wetland constructed as an amenity and educational opportunity*

