

# THE PERMACULTURE 'PIT'

## & Other Post-Design Course Dilemmas

*We hear a lot about how permaculture design courses 'change' peoples' lives, but what about the confusion, doubt, uncertainty and even guilt that can creep in afterwards? Seeing the world through sustainably-tinted spectacles, John Walker feels it's easy to fall into what he calls the permaculture 'pit'. In this slight deviation from our usual 'Of Course' slot, he explores why a course can have such impact, and what we can do to stop ourselves falling over the edge...*

### SAVING THE WORLD?

The last thing you would expect to get out of a permaculture design course is to wake up thinking 'I need therapy'. But hang on a minute, aren't we supposed to feel 'better' after a design course, all charged up and ready to save the world? We hear and read all the time about the 'life changing' experiences of design course graduates, and there's no doubt that ultimately the design course leads to enlightened change on both a thinking and doing level. I've found the post-course fallow period an unsettling time that's left me both dazed and confused, and I know I can't be alone!

### LESS IS MORE

Being hit head-on with intense sessions exploring everything from ethical living to composting toilets and the benefits of hugging is serious stuff – in fact more concepts, ideas, philosophies and emotional and spiritual awakening than is really healthy in just two weeks! I came to permaculture slowly, but have been gradually drawn by the common sense that permaculture is. I'm now spinning after the 'full on' permaculture experience, and acutely aware that I live in a world where complexity is God and simplicity is frowned upon. By waking up to the idea that less really can be more, my mind's awash with a mass of questions bobbing on a sea of uncertainty. It's the beginning of an irreversible process that alters our perspectives on every facet of life. It can be scary stuff.

### PEOPLE POWER

A few days before my course I started to have serious doubts about even being able to do it. 'So you're off with the hippies then?' still echoes in my ears. Would I cope with all that long hair, the daisy chains and sandals? I did quite well in the end, there wasn't much long hair, no daisies in flower, and we all went barefoot anyway. But there was one thing I hadn't banked on, and that was the warmth, openness and tolerance of the like-minded people I met. We valued each other's views, skills and experiences. We acknowledged our diversity. After years



Cartoon: Rob Hopkins

spent swinging perilously on the career ladder, for me this was a most gentle experience of 'people power', and it was very uplifting. I was quietly frustrated by discussions on how to 'do' permaculture – I just wanted to know how people felt about it, and why! Emotional honesty can be as scary as it can be liberating, and it comes as quite a shock to finally discover it part way through your adult life. Sadly it's the stuff we just don't get to experience in most schools, colleges or universities, during our traditional learning years.

### SLIPPING BACK

For me the real post-course crunch came over not wanting to just slip back into everyday life. I've put everything from how I currently earn my living to how often I visit the supermarket (or even whether I should) under the microscope since those two weeks, and although my brain's been buzzing,

I'm glad I did it. Although done reluctantly, I'm certain that for me to 'slip back' was exactly the right move. Get back in the swing, don't give yourself a hard time, and use a familiar environment to regroup your jumbled thoughts, values and goals – use those permaculture principles to help redesign the way you think – they're not just for gardens you know! Have a holiday from permaculture if you need it, but get that foot off the pedal and slow down – guilt-guzzling's a bad habit, moral burnout's no good for anybody, and both are a real waste of energy!

### FIRST CONTACT

Actually taking a design course can be the easy bit. What we need to do back home is make contact with other people, people we've never met, but people who share our concerns and uncertainties. Join (or start!) your local permaculture group. Meet others and get some support. For most it's a struggle, and pretty nerve-wracking if you're not used to it, but it will make you both feel better and get you back on the road to sustainability! Don't be put off by bewildered looks from friends when you explain what it's all about, but do think of a better way of explaining it next time around. Take it slow, observe and build. It takes energy to clamber up out of the permaculture pit, energy we can better use for positive, gentle and gradual changes in our lives. Don't fall in.

*John Walker is boldly taking matters into his own hands! He is starting a local permaculture group in the Ipswich South Suffolk area. So if you are an East Angliaphile why not contact him at: Flat 2, 35 St. George's Street, Ipswich IP1 3NF. Tel/Fax: (01473) 215945. Email: [john.gardening.demon.co.uk](mailto:john.gardening.demon.co.uk)*

We want to hear about your post-design course dilemmas, and your solutions for dealing with them. Send your 'tales from the pit' to Maddy Harland at: PERMANENT PUBLICATIONS (address on page 1).