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Library permaculture

Library permaculture 01

Beyond sustainable agriculture and "green" labels

A basic approach to the idea

Although the subject had already been slightly explored by several authors (King, Carver, Yeomans) at least since the beginning of the 20th century, the concept of "permaculture" was created in the 1970s by two Australians, Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, who were at the time exploring stable agricultural solutions for the island of Tasmania. Their response was to merge the ideas "permanent" and "agriculture" and present the result in a book published in 1978, entitled *Permaculture One*.

Permaculture seeks to identify concepts, patterns and processes found in the natural world, and integrate them into the design of human systems. This totally holistic approach seeks to harness, among other things, the efficiency, resilience, adaptability, simplicity, and life-sustaining capacity that characterize natural ecosystems. And, needless to say, it has represented a radical paradigm shift in the field of systems design and strategic planning.

Permaculture summarizes its values and concentrates its findings and learnings into a series of twelve basic principles: observe and interact, catch and store energy, obtain a yield, apply self-regulation and accept feedback, use and value renewable resources and services, produce no waste, design from patterns to details, integrate rather than

segregate, use small and slow solutions, use and value diversity, use edges and value the marginal, and creatively use and respond to change.

These principles will be appearing throughout these texts, being combined applied in various ways.

Beyond agriculture

While permaculture was initially applied primarily to the design of agricultural systems —probably the closest thing to a natural system that humans can manage on a regular basis— its tenets can go (and have gone) much further.

By looking at the intricate relationships present in nature and using them to propose a holistic approach to systems design (one that emphasizes the strategic interconnectedness of the elements within any kind of system), permaculture aims to create harmonious, balanced and self-sustaining environments — which can be agricultural, of course, but can also be extended and extrapolated to other settings.

The ethos of permaculture can influence fields as diverse as architecture, community planning, resource management, food production and energy systems. The principles put forward by permaculture allow the development of resilient, low-impact and high-performance systems, and encourage, for example, the rational use of resources, waste reduction or the protection of biodiversity.

In the field of urban planning, for example, permaculture helps create cities in tune with natural patterns: green spaces, energy-efficient buildings, or mixed-use developments that reduce transportation needs. Economic systems also benefit from permaculture by prioritizing local, sustainable, and regenerative practices, encouraging ethical business and fair trade. Education systems, meanwhile, can adopt the principles of permaculture to create learning environments that foster creativity, critical thinking, and a deep connection with nature.

Following this logic, a sub-current known as "social permaculture" was born, which applies permaculture principles to strictly social and cultural environments and dynamics, supporting, for example, the establishment of stronger and more complex community relationships, and processes of integrated problem solving.

Designing social systems

The "social" variant of permaculture applies the twelve principles of this philosophy to socio-cultural systems and environments. And it does so through different strategies, and with different results.

- Two key elements among the principles of permaculture, **observation** and **interaction**, are perfectly intertwined in the social realm. From a systems approach, all decisions should be based on detailed prior observations, and the development of numerous interactions that allow links within a community to be established, maintained, and strengthened is encouraged.

- Within the social fabrics that make up communities are the threads of **diversity** and **inclusion**. Social permaculture focuses on the development of inclusive spaces, extending in all possible directions. At the same time, it respects and celebrates the rich tapestry of different cultures, perspectives, and identities, and recognizes their collective power.
- By promoting a culture centered on the principle of "integrating rather than segregating", **collaboration** and **cooperation** are fundamental themes within the principles of social permaculture. Collaborative approaches are preferred, cultivating a culture of shared responsibility and collective growth within the community.
- The principle of using small solutions and using the margins leads to an appreciation of **local solutions**. Social permaculture emphasizes tailoring responses to the specific needs of each context, supporting solutions that are as diverse as the communities they serve.
- **Cultural resilience**, based on the principle of responding creatively to change, presents itself as a force that preserves and promotes diversity by honoring traditional knowledge while embracing innovations. Social permaculture strives to weave a tapestry that recognizes and integrates the strength and values found in cultural diversity.
- **Regenerative** practices, based on the principle of using renewable elements, involve initiatives that enhance both individual and community well-being. Such initiatives contribute to the regeneration of the social fabric, fostering both resilience and sustainability.

- Guided by the core tenets of permaculture —care for the Earth, care for people, and fair distribution of resources—, **ethical decision-making** goes beyond the twelve principles and becomes a guiding compass. Social permaculture encourages the decision-making that considers the deeper, long-term impacts and promotes sustainable coexistence within a broad social framework.

By integrating these principles into human systems, social permaculture seeks to generate and maintain communities that are not only environmentally sustainable, but also socially just and resilient. In a way, this branch of permaculture promotes a holistic and interconnected approach to designing socio-cultural systems that are balanced, sustainable and in harmony with their environment.

Such systems include, by the way, those of knowledge and memory management: libraries, archives, and museums.

Library permaculture 02

Social permaculture and libraries: starting the dialogue

Back to the basics

As stated in the previous post in this series, social permaculture is an extension of permaculture principles, beyond the traditional focus on sustainable agriculture. It applies permaculture principles to social systems, emphasizing the implementation of holistic, systemic, sustainable, and regenerative practices within human communities. This way, the basic values of permaculture (care for the Earth, care for people, and equitable sharing of resources), along with its twelve principles, are adapted to address the various social dynamics and activities. It thus promotes an innovative use of schemes that work perfectly well in natural systems and that, in one way or another, are able to inform and nurture the many structures present within any human society.

Including, of course, knowledge and memory management systems — which comprises libraries, archives, museums, and related institutions.

How can the elements developed from social permaculture be integrated into the world of knowledge and memory management, and specifically into the world of libraries?

At the heart of any library design is (or should be) a commitment to understanding and responding to the unique needs, preferences, and challenges of the community it serves.

Observation and active interaction with the community —one of the principles of permaculture— become one of the cornerstones of the process: both, in a fully collaborative framework, allow for the shaping of library spaces and services. In such an inclusive design process, community input is essential, ensuring that the library is a true reflection of the people it serves.

Diversity and inclusiveness —components of another of the permacultural principles— are an essential element in any natural system (hence the current concern about the alarming loss of biodiversity the planet faces), and the source of the strength and resilience of much of it. Such elements must necessarily be present in physical and virtual spaces, and in the activities and services of a library — especially in its collections. Library acquisition policies, generally colonized and subordinated to the powers that be throughout a significant part of their history, should be dedicated to selecting materials that transcend traditional boundaries and structures and represent the rich cultural, linguistic, and informational fabric of a good part of human communities. The ultimate goal should be that spaces, collections, and services clearly reflect the diversity of voices and perspectives within the human group served, creating an integral whole that resonates with each individual who walks through the library doors.

A third principle, that of collaboration, should be one of the main thrusts of the library's mission, fostering knowledge sharing through programs, workshops, and discussions led by and for the community. The library thus becomes a dynamic space that not only hosts information and transmits it in a uni-directional manner, but facilitates the multi-

directional exchange of ideas, empowering participants to actively contribute to the shared body of knowledge.

Ensuring equal access to information for all members of the community (one of the many applications of the principle of "integrate rather than segregate") should be a primary consideration for any library. Library spaces should implement practices that seek (and achieve) information accessibility for all; this may include the use of alternative formats, inclusive digital spaces, ethnic and cultural considerations, or assistive technologies for people with disabilities. Library engagement should focus on breaking down as many barriers as possible and providing an environment in which all members of a community have the opportunity to interact with their knowledge and memory, stored in the library.

A space, the library, that becomes a custodian of local knowledge, history, and cultural heritage —applying the principles of using small solutions and margins— by collaborating with different individuals and groups in the community. Documenting and archiving their stories, traditions and contributions becomes a shared responsibility, and allows the richness of local heritage to be preserved for generations to come.

Community-led decision making should become one of the cornerstones of library governance. The society the library serves should not just be a recipient of unilaterally programmed services, but an active participant in the planning and implementation of library policies, programming, and activities. Advisory councils and community forums should become channels through which the library evolves, always in direct response to the changing needs and aspirations of the community.

As a physical space, the library should adopt regenerative practices to align with sustainability principles that go beyond worn-out "green" labels. From energy-efficient technologies to waste reduction measures and the inclusion of green spaces, the library should become a model sustainable initiative. Collaborations with local environmental organizations could further amplify the impact of such ideas.

Cultural resilience could be celebrated, in a library, through a wide variety of programs. Language learning classes, cultural events (including storytelling and oral tradition), and partnerships with local artists and community organizations (to contribute "non-traditional" documents such as weavings or engravures) could contribute to the creation of a tapestry that reflects and honors the diverse cultural practices within the community.

By adopting the principles of social permaculture, libraries can be transformed into dynamic, community-centered spaces that actively contribute to the social and cultural vitality of their communities. This approach fosters a more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable relationship between libraries and the people they serve, cultivating a space where knowledge, memory and their users thrive together.

Library permaculture (III)

Libraries and the principles of permaculture (I)

In the previous posts, the ideas of permaculture and social permaculture were reviewed, and a possible interaction was outlined between the latter and the disciplines of knowledge and memory management. In the present post, a review will be carried out of each of the twelve principles of permaculture and, very briefly, potential connections with libraries, archives and museums will be analyzed.

Principle 1. Observe and interact

In the field of knowledge and memory management disciplines (librarianship, archival science, museology...), observing and interacting with the community is fundamental to creating relevant, coherent, diverse, and inclusive spaces and services. In fact, it is one of the first mandatory stages in any strategic planning process.

(A stage that, however, is often ignored, overlooked or, with any luck, just poorly executed, leading, for example, to the implementation of library services that are not needed or spaces that cannot survive in a given community or territory. Thus are born the "white elephants" of the library world: large computer rooms in places without access to Internet or electric service, Latin American collections in Spanish in places where indigenous languages are the majority, and a long and varied "etcetera").

Through the application of this principle, essential background information can be obtained about the needs, possibilities, and preferences of the community; about their origins, cultural patterns, and learning styles; or about their searches, interests, and expressions. Such an application, moreover, can extend far beyond interactions with the user community: it can, for example, encompass social and technological trends at a general level, thus ensuring that knowledge and memory management spaces evolve in harmony with their users and the external environment.

Principle 2. Catch and store energy

For knowledge and memory management spaces, capturing and storing energy is not only directly related to the physical realm (architectural structure of libraries, archives and museums, use of solar panels, etc.). It also has to do with the intellectual and community spheres.

As reservoirs of knowledge and creativity, these spaces capture "intellectual / cultural / creative energy" through events, workshops, publications and collaborative projects, and store and organize it for later use — as an incubator of innovative ideas or, following the indigenous perspective, as a spring from which the community drinks to nurture its future ideas and proposals.

And in this aspect, it is necessary not to lose sight of all kinds of "sustainable practices" for managing such cultural energy: a point on which numerous parallels can be drawn with the use of renewable energy sources and efficient technologies that contribute to

the conservation of environmental energy. That includes ethical practices, control of cultural extractivism, and respect for languages, beliefs and identities.

Principle 3. Obtain a yield

"Yield" is a word that, in the capitalist and extractivist logic, is associated with exploitation and economic gain. However, from a permaculture point of view, "yield" is the output of any system: a harvest, for example, in an agricultural system, or a book in a publishing system.

Knowledge and memory management spaces can obtain yields, beyond the merely economic, by providing intangible and tangible benefits to the community. There are many products, resources, educational materials, and skills development programs that can contribute to individual learning, collective critical development, community building and support processes of change and struggle; in these cases, the returns are understood as global "gains" at a socio-cultural and, why not, economic and political level.

Ultimately, this principle of permaculture emphasizes knowing how to recognize the benefits obtained from the services and activities developed from libraries, archives, museums, and related spaces.

Principle 4. Apply self-regulation and accept feedback

Knowledge and memory management spaces can apply self-regulation by efficiently managing the resources at their disposal and actively seeking feedback from the community.

This implies adapting services according to the requirements and contributions of users, creating libraries, archives and museums that change, evolve, and adapt according to the needs and, above all, the possibilities of the community and its territory. These spaces cease to be rigid, limited and limiting (and even colonized and colonizing), and become flexible, malleable elements, fully responsive to the changing circumstances of any human society. They seek to adapt their structures to the community, and not the other way around — which is usually the most common (and evidences a series of hierarchies, authorities, and unhealthy centralisms).

They can thus create environments that respond dynamically to diverse characteristics and concerns, ensuring that libraries, archives, and museums are relevant and pertinent spaces.

Principle 5. Use and value renewable resources and services.

Prioritizing renewable resources and services is fundamental to permacultural practices. The principle can be translated into several lines of action in the field of knowledge and memory management disciplines.

The best-known line is to use renewable energy sources and sustainable materials. In this last aspect, it should be considered that most of the materials used in the construction of traditional library buildings are resources that have nothing "green" about them: iron beams from open-pit mines, cement from deforested areas, and a long "etcetera" that is well researched and very little publicized. Perhaps the most sustainable libraries in this respect are those made of cane walls from the Peruvian coast or adobe from Bolivia: building structures that, in the end, are even compostable.

The adoption of digital technologies, which supposedly reduce the demand for physical resources (e.g., paper materials) can be a double-edged sword: the amount of resources and energy used to maintain such technologies and products, and the waste generated, are elements that are generally not taken into consideration in these contexts.

The most promising line of action is to offer services and activities that promote sustainability, adding value to both the community and the environment. Offering programs on sustainable living and environmental education allows users to adopt sustainable practices, while libraries become advocates of responsible consumption and waste reduction, contributing to a socially sustainable community.

Principle 6. Produce no waste

Minimizing environmental impact is fundamental to the permacultural principle of no waste. In its most obvious aspect, knowledge and memory management spaces can

achieve this by implementing strong recycling programs, encouraging the use of reusable materials, and fostering a culture of minimalism and degrowth.

In a less obvious but more sustainable long-term aspect, libraries, archives, and museums can support, through their spaces, resources and services, community initiatives such as book exchanges, tool-borrowing "libraries" or repair and reuse programs, fostering a culture of sharing and reuse of resources, discouraging rampant consumerism, and promoting responsible consumption, thus contributing to socially sustainable living practices.

Library permaculture (IV)

Libraries and the principles of permaculture (II)

Having reviewed, in the previous posts, the ideas of permaculture and social permaculture, and having outlined a possible interaction between the latter and the disciplines of knowledge and memory management, we will continue to review each of the twelve principles of permaculture and, very briefly, to look for potential connections with libraries, archives and museums.

Principle 7. Design from patterns to details

Going from the general to the particular, progressing from the broadest outlines to the smallest levels, has always been a common strategy in strategic planning processes. It is a matter of perspective: start with broad strokes and end with the finest brushstrokes.

Libraries can apply this permacultural principle in approaching the community by first understanding its broader patterns of organization, social participation, cultural expression, and learning, and then progressively delving into the details of each experience and process — even at the personal level, depending on the size of the constituency being served. Understanding the educational schemes and cultural dynamics of actual and potential users allows knowledge and memory management spaces to adapt their collections, structures, services, and activities to reality, effectively

aligning their operations with changing trends in information consumption and technology use.

On the other hand, designing the library from the general to the particular makes it possible to first establish a rough sketch and then outline it as we get to know the community, its possibilities and its needs. In this way, the level of detail of the library plan will go hand in hand with the level of knowledge of the target community.

Principle 8. Integrate rather than segregate

Adding and connecting, from the point of view of planning and system design, has always been much more advisable than subtracting and dividing. That is why permaculture includes among its basic principles of integrating rather than segregating.

Something that, unfortunately, is not so common in the world of knowledge and memory management. Generally speaking, cultural heritage is divided and fragmented between spaces according to the interests of the various specialized disciplines that study it (librarianship, archival science, museology...). It is true that after segregation, an (artificial) integration is sought, which, as is to be expected, is rarely achieved completely.

The principle invites libraries to create integral, comprehensive, and multifunctional spaces and processes that accommodate diverse activities, breaking down silos and proposing the construction of cohesive spaces and interconnected services — even with

other institutions. At the same time, it suggests that the work of libraries should foster the integration and union of the community, internally and with other social groups.

Principle 9. Use small and slow solutions

Doing things on a small scale and at a slow speed is often behind the success of many system designs.

Libraries and all other knowledge and memory management spaces can benefit from such a perspective, especially in a world where the fast and the grandiose seem to be dominating the scene.

From this permacultural perspective, they can adopt a measured, reasoned, and critical approach, both for their own growth and development (in terms of space, collections, or services) and for that of their community. Activities can be tested at slow paces, ensuring a sustainable trajectory for long-term success. At the same time, services can more easily adapt to the changing needs of the community if such adaptations are made through small, manageable changes, fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

Sometimes, the best, most innovative decision is to stand still or move slowly. And it is often advisable to be two steps behind the cutting-edge line of progress and novelty — simply to have enough time to think about what you are doing and what you want or need to do.

Principle 10. Use and value diversity

Diversity is one of the main riches of any space or system, whether biological, social or technological. The most resilient fabrics have always been those with the greatest diversity of threads, yarns, wefts and designs, and the healthiest ecosystems, those that keep their biodiversity intact.

Diverse libraries are vibrant spaces that support, with their staff and activities, a rich tapestry of perspectives, cultures, and voices. They draw on everything from environmental biodiversity to artistic expressions from all backgrounds and eras to enrich the community's experience, and to sustain its intrinsic natural and human diversity.

But it is not just about services: all spaces of knowledge and memory should manage collections that represent the widest possible range of viewpoints, ensuring inclusiveness and reflecting the richness of human knowledge and creativity. The knowledge, languages, histories, and memories of all members of the community should be among the documents managed, and not only those of the "dominant" or "victorious" group, the "academic" classes, or the "hegemonic" publishers. Accepting diversity also means fighting against colonialism and the cultural and socio-political pressures that libraries and the knowledge they manage have to face.

Principle 11. Utilize the edges and value the marginal

This permaculture principle encourages knowledge and memory management spaces to recognize those opportunities for learning, innovation and community participation that may occur at the margins.

It is not just about serving underserved or "marginal" groups (thereby ensuring that no part of the community is overlooked) or establishing programs that address the needs of marginalized groups, fostering inclusion and community dialogue. Above all, it is about taking the gaze away from the center and placing it on the peripheries of all kinds that surround libraries — or those which are inside the library.

By recognizing that the margins are not empty but have their own voices, concerns and quests, a range of ideologies and perspectives that include resistance, engagement, responsibility, activism, and militancy, among many others, are added to the library work.

Principle 12. Use and respond creatively to change.

Faced with the unstoppable evolution of global structures and dynamics, both natural/environmental and social, libraries and their related management spaces must respond creatively to change. Through a number of pathways —which may range from implementing environmentally conscious practices to developing socially responsive

programs—, all such places should embrace adaptability, innovation, and resilience as their core strategies.

It is not a matter of the community adapting to what the library has, wants, or chooses to offer. Quite the contrary: the library must always be attentive to changes in its environment, and must react promptly to adapt to these changes, modify its actions, its objectives and even its mission, and provide a rapid response to the information needs of its users, both actual and potential.

By embracing and accompanying change, libraries respond to the needs and aspirations of their community, remaining dynamic and resilient institutions that contribute positively to the well-being of their users.

