

WOU PACK Session 2023

Hitchhiker's Guide to Spaceship Earth

Sample Reading: Community Permaculture and the Environment

Permaculture Magazine November 2021

- *Citizens are Designers*
- *The Grassroots Community Ecosystem*

Earlier this year Sarah Macbeth and I ran the 'Citizens Are Designers' project for the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill, Sussex as part of their 'Care and Citizenship' series. We were representing Transition Town Hastings (a collective move towards sustainable living). Concerned about our communities – soon to be hopefully emerging from the fog of the pandemic – but conscious of all communities in the same boat, we wanted to come up with a generic and easy to use design tool to help facilitate community activists become designers for local, place-based positive change.

Staying at home over the last year has at least made us get to know the few streets around our homes like never before. How many of us have ever stayed so deeply in the same place for so long, in any one year? It is when we walk through our local places that we truly have a chance to observe life on our doorsteps: the changing seasons, maybe local animal and bird-life, species of wildflowers coming up through the pavement and identifying local trees, ones that might be in blossom or provide fruit for foraging. It is by walking that we notice our neighbours too, common spaces that are unused and sometimes things that need addressing, like where a bench could be put or an extra street bin or a gap in the hedge that needs filling.

Small but Beautiful Interventions

Our model (shown overleaf) is designed to operate on this level, in our own backyards, and is about a shift from being consumers to being citizens. It's important to have agency over our home environments, our neighbourhoods, over our collective destinies, actively designing and creating the future we would like to live in. It's really not hard to make small, but beautiful interventions in our everyday life that might be game-changers for some of our neighbours, bring joy to someone's day or practically help solve a problem – like sharing plants, providing a needed seat to gather and connect, or planting a fruit tree to create a community food legacy. It doesn't take much.

Our model has both discovery and designing phases – many of the 'stepping stones' will be recognisable to a permaculture designer. The model has been set out like a winding footpath that

Citizens are

Anna Locke explores how we can move from being consumers to citizens, where we design and create the future we want to live in



Photos left and right: © Aranya – Learn Permaculture; centre: © Anna Locke

we walk along with others, and this first stage is about taking an actual, or metaphorical, walk to look for opportunity (there is a downloadable audio guide). The discovery phase starts with asking a motivational question (MQ): 'Is there a problem you wish to tackle? Are you aware of any needs or opportunities you wish to support through a small group effort?' It's very

much about forming a small group with similar aims and intentions, connecting with others around the question in order to vitalise everyday life in our community. We walk with this group on a journey and really observe, talk and knuckle down our vision for solving the problem or creating an opportunity in order to live more sustainably! We choose a site, map it, observe our conditions,

e Designers



People learning how to use permaculture to design new spaces for their community at Ourganics and, centre, a guerrilla forager's garden, the community contributes plants and time

species, talk to passers by and make an inventory of the resources freely available to us and the ones we might need.

Then we move into the designing phase. It's worth a pause here to really think about what design means. With permaculture we are all about design, but why? When making this model I ended up going down a bit of a rabbit

hole and would like to share what I found down there! There are some awesome papers to read if you like the academic nitty gritty (see Further Information at the end of this article). The most exciting ones I found were from Terry Irwin, who heads up the School of Design at Carnegie Mellon University, USA.

Transition Design

There is an emergent discipline called Transition Design, which really each and every permaculture design falls into, i.e. designs for more sustainable futures.

Transition designs are longer-term design solutions that always acknowledge the natural world and are seeking to make our lifestyles more integrated with where we live. This gives rise to sharing the concept of 'cosmopolitan localism – a place-based lifestyle in which solutions to global problems are designed to be appropriate for local social and environmental conditions'. Or put another way, where we, the citizens, are the designers and the visionaries of new sustainable lifestyles. A future where most of our needs are being met locally or regionally, where 'the economy is designed to meet those needs, rather than grow for its own sake'. In short it is about reimagining the future and making 'everyday life' be positive, enhancing and enriching (in the true sense of the word), but most importantly **REGENERATIVE**. We are the designers. We are the ones that conjure up compelling visions of sustainable futures and truly desire them. Conceptual design frameworks (like our model) can guide the tangible actions we need to take to realise our visions. We are more powerful than you can possibly imagine. We can affect our community in small, but beautiful, ways, we really can.

In fact we already do. I'm sure everyone here can think of numerous examples where our communities have invented simple systems of sharing – books, seeds, seedlings – community 'shelves' that are autonomous, self regulating and well, just nice! It shows we care and are thinking of others. Although seemingly small efforts, these simple interventions really can enable people to be more sustainable, (by recycling books or growing food for example). The sky is the limit – mobile community cafés, street fridges, urban forager's gardens, book clubs, eco-verges, community composting, clothes swaps – there is so much creativity already in action. It's much more fun being a citizen than a consumer!

In our Care and Citizenship project our motivational question was, 'How can we create more urban foraging in Bexhill?', calling this part of the project 'In Search of Common Food'. In the spirit of 'gather skills and resources' I led a short permaculture workshop

DISCOVERY



DESIGN

with De La Warr Pavilion on how to design an urban forager's garden. By the end of the morning, participants had some sketches for their sites and the beginning of a plan of what to do. Some participants met up (online) and some joined forces afterwards.

Design is Alchemy

If you know and love permaculture, you will be familiar with the design half of the model. This step, that of skilling ourselves up (before going through the rest of a design process) is what we do best! We also love DESIGN: communicating our vision, making our intentions known to ourselves and the world, whilst setting out how we will implement our ideas in the real world. With design we turn imagination into practicality. It's an alchemy that is addictive, as we all want to feel our own efficacy and bring things to life! Developing simple systems (that can do the work or help us do the work) is addictive too and also, as you are aware, quintessentially permaculture.

Transition design proposes that we need compelling, future orientated visions to inform and inspire projects and that the process of design makes this happen. This is why permaculture, especially right now, is so important.

Visioning is crucial for its role in opening conversations, generating alternatives to the status quo, spending time dreaming about what a 'better' (more sustainable) future really looks like – it needs us 'to suspend disbelief and forget about how things are now and wonder about how things could be'. This last sentence to me seems really pertinent and pivotal to the moment we are in now. Let's not waste the 'suspended belief' that the pandemic experience has given us. What we had thought of as being fixed has actually turned out to be more fluid than we thought. The truth is we can always change the future, it has always been this fluid (quantum theory), it's just that we need to start creating our futures more locally and on a community level and stop relying on grandiose politics that simply hasn't been truly thinking sustainably – the bigger machine has had its chance and failed us, and now the smaller cogs, in smaller places, even in the smallest place, just need to get on with it. Climate change is not going away, the pandemic has taught us to value Nature and our immediate communities, so let's keep showing them some love and positivity so we can TLC the future into being. After all, when it comes to the future of our communities – who

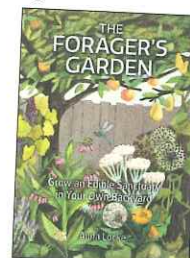
is imagining it, who is deciding it and who is our future for? We think we are!

Further Information

The Citizens are Designers project can be downloaded at
www.transitiontownhastings.org.uk
www.dlwp.com/care-and-citizenship/citizens-are-designers
 Article ref: Terry Irwin (2015)
 'Transition Design: A Proposal for a New Area of Design Practice, Study, and Research', *Design and Culture Journal*.

Anna Locke is a gardener and community gardener, permaculture designer, facilitator and small farmer, living in Hastings. She loves growing and preserving food.
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Anna is author of *The Forager's Garden* available from PM's online shop, which is available with 10% off the RRP:
<https://shop.permaculture.co.uk/the-foragers-garden.html>





The Grassroots Community Ecosystem

Ian Solomon-Kawall shares how he's used permaculture to design an ecosystem that helps local people to grow food, connect with the Earth, learn new skills and eventually find employment

Ian Solomon-Kawall aka KMT Freedom Teacher is a guide who uses art [hip-hop] for social awareness and social cohesion. He is co-founder of the May Project Gardens which connects people to nature through personal, social and economic transformation.

New Microphone Cyphas was his main project which provided safe spaces for UK hip-hop and international artists to perform and come together in a format called a Cypha. The Cypha was the opposite of an MC battle, where artists compete to see who is the best, instead being a real community cohesive format for hip-hop artists to come together to hear and express their lyrics usually in freestyle format. It is no surprise that MCs gather in a circle (the shape we see in Nature) to perform at these events. This format became popular almost decades later with MTV Cypha and UK Beatboxer Beardy Man and Leen.

Ian has spent over 20 years leading positive social change and raising awareness for a multitude of social issues through the powerful words and rhythms of hip-hop music and a non-exhaustive passion for the environment and conservation.

Using permaculture design principles, Ian has created a grassroots community ecosystem, which is working for the community, with the community.



How has your own experience shaped the projects you're involved in?

There are four main aspects that I've focussed on over the last 15 years:

MENTAL HEALTH: The majority of my youth I cared for my Mum who suffered from a multitude of illnesses, including bipolar. She passed away in 2005. Sixteen years later I'm still working on my personal healing with counselling, martial arts and meditation.

EDUCATION: In 2017, I discovered that I'm dyslexic. My test results were in the 90% range. I went through all my schooling and work life without a diagnosis. I have just secured a professional admin / PA to alleviate this burden.

HOUSING: My home is the hub and base for all the projects; it carries a lot of responsibility. Grant funding isn't an option for me, so I have created a methodology that places people care at the centre of a living economy.

EMPLOYABILITY: I've applied for about eight jobs in the last three years, the latest being Head of Activism for Eco Talent at an organisation called Feedback. Despite navigating my way into some consultancy work for the same company, I was not even shortlisted for this role. As a consultant, compared to my counterparts, I'm not paid the full rate of other consultants. I would like to have the space to invest more resources developing a Consultancy and Training course, which increases racial justice and awareness in organisations, so that others in my community and beyond are given equal opportunities.

Can you tell us about your grassroots ecosystem?

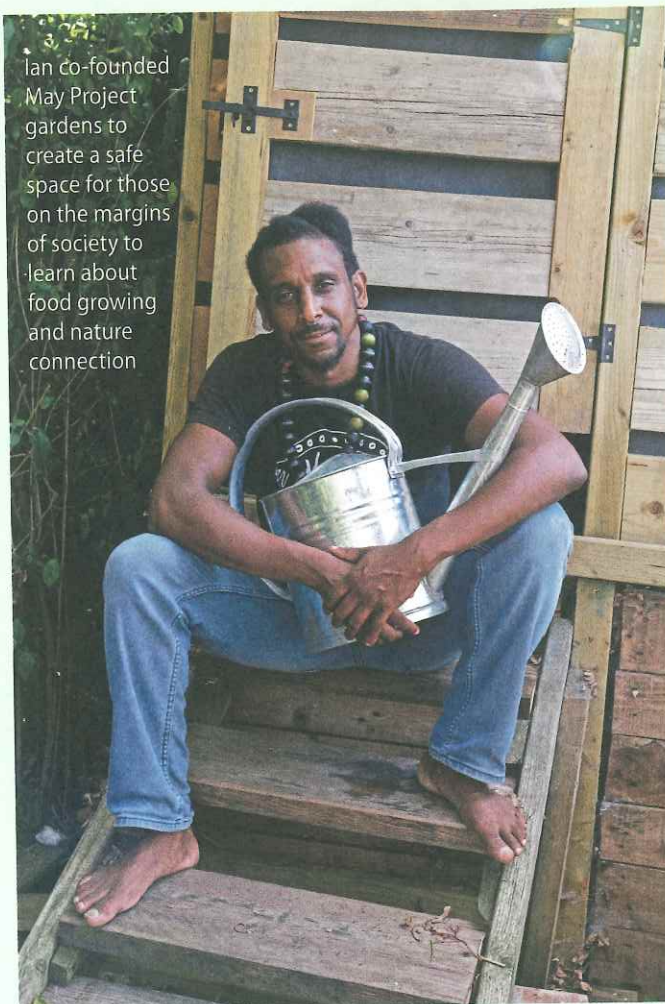
I'm one example offering an alternative vision to 'Build Back Greener'.[†] Over 15 years I've demonstrated this locally in Morden, London, by creating a Grassroots Community Ecosystem, consisting of:

- May Project Gardens MPG (Community Hub)
- Hip-Hop Garden (Transformative Youth Program)
- Come We Grow (Outreach and Fundraising Event)
- KMT Freedom Teacher (Eco Artist for Social Change), www.3kmt.co.uk
- Bee Rooted Consultancy (Environmental and Biodiversity Inclusion Trainer and Consultant)

Although COVID-19 disproportionally affects the most vulnerable in society, like me, it has allowed me time to reflect and bring into focus the important aspects of my work.

Please tell us about May Project Gardens (MPG), which we featured in PM93

MPG was established in 2006 from the derelict garden of my mother's council house. I wanted to create a legacy for her with a community space, open to the public. For nine years it was self-funded through working several part-time and freelance jobs. It is a safe space, a brave space, and is open to the public 2-3 days a week. The project allows people to connect, learn about food growing and permaculture.



Ian co-founded May Project gardens to create a safe space for those on the margins of society to learn about food growing and nature connection

The garden itself was designed using permaculture by co-founder Randi Mayers. He is a Jedi of permaculture with a particular focus on Earth Care and when he departed to start his own family, I had no idea how I was going to maintain and manage what he had created.

I spent the first year observing and living in the garden, which enabled me to understand its seasons, microclimates and how it changes throughout each day. This gave me a fundamental understanding before implementing my own design elements.

Although I've made numerous mistakes within the garden (see panel) and the project itself, they have been my greatest teacher, transforming myself and how I look at the world.

Working for the community

Half of England is owned by 25,000 landowners, so it was important for me to provide a space for the landless. The open days are for anyone to come to learn about food growing and permaculture in an experiential and participatory way. The garden gives examples of simple methods that others can adopt, such as rainwater harvesting systems, a compost toilet, herb spiral and urban forest garden, ponds and a mini orchard. A straw bale outdoor classroom provides a year-round space for the Hip-Hop Garden programme, which I set up to support young black men (but not exclusively) who are struggling to find work.



Ian in the veg garden

Lessons Learned

- * I used compost from the compost toilet to feed and mulch fruit bushes and trees, but I think the compost was too 'raw' and it led to disease.
- * We recently created a straw bale classroom and the lime from the structure may have leached into the pond, which has caused many problems for the amphibians.
- * Giving some people too much responsibility for the maintenance and management of the garden when they lack experience in permaculture has led to damage across the site.
- * Thinking that I knew as much about permaculture and Earth Care as Randi – I don't think I ever will. My expertise is People Care, and I am constantly learning.
- * Putting others first in order to create, maintain and further the project. This has often led to me being burnt out and the direction of the project becoming unfocused.
- * Not identifying that I was dyslexic earlier and not being able to explain the vision of the project and gain support, especially with funding.
- * Giving people within the project too much power when I was diagnosed with dyslexia (2017) and needed support. This often led to a conflict of interest as they did not recognise the power of my dyslexia and my ability to think holistically.

AQA accredited modules

WELLBEING: addressing trauma from racism and developing resilience. Much of our delivery is in natural environments which boost immunity (vitamin D) to fight against COVID-19. We advocate social workers, foster parents and participants of their right to be outside at least once a day and provide socially distanced work experience at May Project Gardens.

HIP-HOP: using music to educate young people about permaculture, nature, and create confidence and literacy and verbal skills.

EVENT MANAGEMENT: young people working together and gain skills from what they enjoy as opposed to getting a job. Several of the participants DJ and provide customer service at our events.

ENTERPRISE/EMPLOYMENT: addresses challenges of entering the increasingly competitive labour market. Presents enterprise (especially green enterprise) as a viable alternative to employment. One participant has gained an apprenticeship at Sutton Community Farm, a community-owned mixed crop vegetable farm growing veg according to organic principles.

FOOD GROWING AND COOKING: 60% of illness comes from poor diets. The food industry thrived during COVID-19, but it is one of the least diverse industries. One of our young participants got work experience at Haven Coffee, a pop up coffee shop set up by refugee Usman Khalid, with each coffee sale helping to support and raise awareness for refugee communities across the UK.



Come We Grow is an immersive fundraiser for the project, bringing together musicians, MCs, performers and activists to collaborate and awaken their eco-consciousness through music, dance and song

The May Project Garden team



The project engages urban youth with Nature through hip-hop; it transcends language and cultural backgrounds. Five AQA accredited modules are taught (see panel).

The more recent project, Team Away Days, focuses on wellbeing, mental health and helping people adjust to the return to work after the COVID-19 outbreak. We believe that looking after the wellbeing of staff will result in happier, healthier and more productive work-spaces.

Our Come We Grow events are an immersive celebration of our creative approach to environmentalism. Acclaimed musicians, DJs, artists and activists come together to awaken the eco-conscience through music, dance, art and collaboration.

How do you use permaculture design in your projects?

Environmental health and proximity to Nature also plays a key role in marking differences in experiences between ethnic groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. People of colour are more likely to live in urban areas with a 'deficiency of access' to green spaces, defined by the London Plan in terms of how far households need to travel to access a space, but also its quality and size.

So my role is to find ways to make visitors feel welcomed and safe in the garden. This is a massive opportunity to learn about myself and people. Through communication and interacting with visitors we learn how the garden can work best for them but also what doesn't work so well, which allows us to accept feedback, and adapt. My focus has always been on People Care, so we make sure that everyone who visits is given the attention they need.

My approach embodies permaculture and its principles.

Diversity reduces vulnerability to a variety of threats and takes advantage of the unique nature of the environment

in which it resides. Hence why there are so many different elements of the ecosystem. Whenever I was blocked with the project, I created alternative strands which have now become the ecosystem, i.e. when Randi the co-founder left, I spent a year in the garden, literally following his footsteps. I soon realised I could combine my own skills within community education and creativity to create the Hip-Hop Garden.

In permaculture we know that edges and interfaces are where the most interesting events take place. These are often the most valuable, diverse and productive elements in the system and the same applies to people; receiving more resources and support would make these strands more resilient. This runs through all elements of the ecosystem, from the community garden where I pioneered making green space accessible and safe for people on the margins of society, including people from African, Caribbean and Asian backgrounds, women, people with mental health issues and refugees, etc.

More recently we launched a mentor scheme to provide a six month program for Black, African, Caribbean and Asian employees, providing a pathway for senior management positions for those who are underrepresented in the business. This was done through my training organisation, Bee Rooted Consultancy, and with my business partner and mentor Ian Philips from Lush UK.

† The UK Government has set out a 10 Point Plan for a 'Green Industrial Revolution', pledging a £3 billion spending package titled the 'Build Back Greener' initiative.

Ian Solomon-Kawall has over 20 years of leading positive social change and combines his love for music and Nature in all his work, including May Project Gardens (www.mayproject.org). He mentors young people, offers safe spaces for learning and raises awareness to a multitude of social issues.