

## Broadening Our Permaculture Lens

# Nature, Culture, and Self

Bonita Ford

A FRIEND ONCE JOKED that “Permaculture is everything.” Although I laughed, part of me agreed. For some time, I did think that land-based permaculture design, along with social permaculture, covered the whole spectrum. I later came to realize that for permaculture to be versatile enough to address every aspect of our lives, something was missing for me. I sensed a growing edge.

Prior to my first PDC, my master’s work in holistic health education included “Integral studies.” The Integral approach gave me a framework to join holistic health and permaculture, healing and sustainability, and spiritual growth and social transformation.

In the last few years, as our permaculture work has grown, my practice with nonviolent communication, reiki, shamanism, and listening circles has developed in tandem. As I step back for perspective, I see a pattern of balance and wholeness.

The concept of an “Integral Permaculture” has emerged in the last several years, offering a new creative edge and a broader approach (see Tim Winton, Integral Permaculture Blog, Institute Permaculture Academy, and Brad McManus in the Resources below). In this article, I offer an integrally-informed perspective of permaculture, based on over ten years of my own experience.

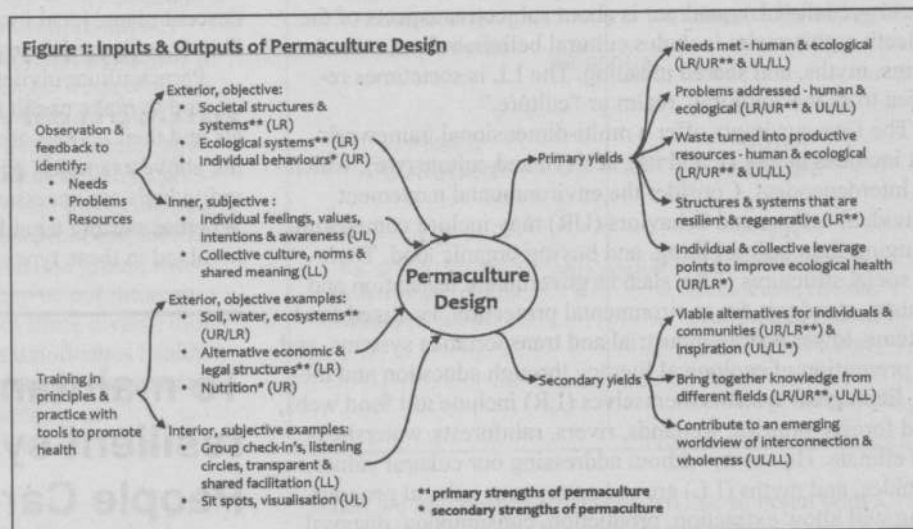
### Inputs and outputs

In our experience with organizational and business systems, as well as land-based systems, the concepts of stacking functions, and of analysing inputs and outputs, provide simple and powerful tools. Needs and yields analysis reveals helps us to understand the element and its place in relation to a larger system.

As we observe and accept feedback, we may examine permaculture design itself through its own lens. What are the multiple yields and functions that permaculture can provide? And how can we support the yields? If we examine the inputs and outputs of the design system, what new understandings can we gain? How can we improve our practice?

Permaculture design responds to systems as wholes and aims to support the health of people, other living beings, and ecosystems themselves. When we apply it skillfully, it serves several primary healing functions: it addresses needs and problems, often by turning wastes into resources; it fosters resilient and regenerative adaptation in systems and structures; and it identifies individual and collective leverage points to improve ecological health. Permaculture design can also play important secondary roles: it offers viable models of low-energy human systems; it

Figure 1: Inputs & Outputs of Permaculture Design



brings together knowledge and leaders from multiple fields and movements; and potentially it contributes to an emerging worldview grounded in interconnection and wholeness.

Permaculture design delivers best when supported by the following inputs: observation and feedback to identify needs, problems, and resources, in both the exterior dimensions of the system (climate, land, flora and fauna, legal structure, finances), and the interior dimensions (values, attitudes, cultural norms); as well as training in principles and practice with tools that promote exterior and interior health. (Figure 1)

### Nature, culture, and self

The integral framework was first developed by Ken Wilber and attempts to provide a “map of everything.” Like other maps, it offers an overview of the landscape. However, where we choose to go on the real terrain is up to us.

For simplicity, I’ll focus on what are called “the four quadrants,” which are central to, but do not comprise the whole integral model. Through his study across many fields, Wilber asserts that everything has interior and exterior as well as individual and collective aspects. In Figure 2 (pg. 22), the left-hand quadrants represent the interior (which is experienced subjectively), and the right-hand quadrants represent the exterior (which is observable or knowable from the outside). The upper half represent the individual; the lower half the collective. The intersection of axes gives us four distinct though interdependent quadrants. The quadrants are different perspectives of the same landscape.

The upper right (UR) quadrant points to the exterior aspects of the individual; it includes the body and behaviors. The UR is sometimes called “behavioral.” The lower right (LR) quadrant points to the objective aspects of the collective; this includes social structures (governance, economies, physical infrastruc-



tures), and ecological systems. The LR is sometimes called the "social" quadrant. Sometimes the UR and LR are also referred to as "it" and "its" respectively, and together as "nature."

The upper left (UL) quadrant is about the interior, subjective aspect of the individual; it includes a person's beliefs, values, attitudes, feelings, needs, intentions, perceptions, and awareness. The UL is sometimes referred to as the "intentional" or "self." The lower left (LL) quadrant is about subjective aspects of the collective; this realm includes cultural beliefs, values, attitudes, norms, myths, and shared meaning. The LL is sometimes referred to as the "cultural" realm or "culture."

The four quadrants offer a multi-dimensional framework that includes nature (it and its), self (I), and culture (we), which are interdependent. Consider the environmental movement. Individual actions and behaviors (UR) may include composting, changing light bulbs, biking, and buying organic food. There are social structures (LR), such as government legislation and industry standards for environmental protection, localized food systems, lower energy industrial and transportation systems, and the promotion of ecological literacy through education and media. Ecological systems themselves (LR) include soil food webs, food forests, prairies, wetlands, rivers, rainforests, watersheds, and climate. However, without addressing our cultural values, attitudes, and myths (LL) around nature, our cultural programming will allow extraction, production, consumption, disposal, and environmental degradation—for the sake of limitless economic growth—to continue unabated. Similarly, our individual values, awareness, and consciousness (UL) also contribute to our lifestyle and thereby to the state of our planet.

### A focus on systems and actions

From my perspective, permaculture traditionally had its strengths in the right-hand quadrants. (Figure 3) Grounded in the study and observation of living systems, it directly addresses systems and structures (LR). Bill Mollison's *A Designer's*

*Manual* most PDCs, and many designs emphasize physical and land-based systems. Permaculture shines with examples of greening the desert, farms that provide a wide array of foods while restoring ecological health, and abandoned urban lots turned into lush gardens with simple waste materials (LR). Similarly, some permaculturists are at the leading edge of redesigning our social structures, helping to create regional energy descent plans, local food hubs, local currencies, Transition Towns, and ecovillages (LR).

Permaculture invites us to observe the "it" and "its" around us, and to make useful connections between them. Individuals and their actions are part of the whole system. With all of the above examples, ecological and social, specific actions by individuals are necessary to carry out a project or design (UR). Whether starting a garden or joining a Transition group, being involved in these types of initiatives may also lead to longer-

## To maintain healthy and resilient systems,... People Care cannot be an afterthought or a secondary priority.

term behavioral changes affecting a person's lifestyle (UR). We design systems, which are made up of individual elements and individual people, by creating beneficial relationships.

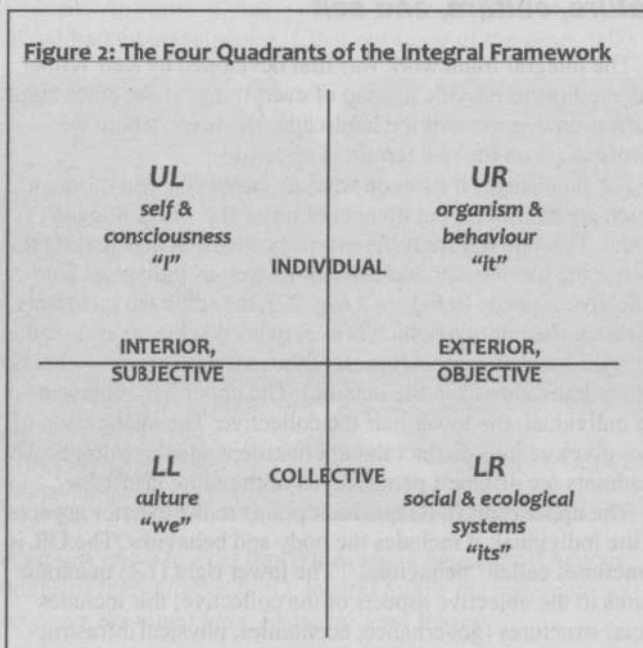
### Add culture and personal experience

Numerous authors and teachers in permaculture and related areas (see Resources list) include the social (LR) and cultural (LL) dimensions in permaculture design. Good design implemented on the physical landscape alone does not ensure "permanent systems." When relationships break down—from conflicts, power struggles, lack of clear agreements or vision, burnout, disillusionment, depression, or addiction—some physical systems may be lost. If an intentional community breaks up, and the land is sold and cleared for cookie-cutter houses and lawns, we can say goodbye to the food forest, water harvesting, and aquaponics systems, no matter how well-designed.

Tim Winton, from his early experiences at Tagari Farm, reminds us of the importance of both Earth Care and People Care. To maintain healthy and resilient systems, he underscores that People Care cannot be an afterthought or a secondary priority.

With our strong roots in "permanent agriculture," I find that permaculture has had less integration and emphasis on the left-hand quadrants: inner experience and the subjective. Even what we call "social permaculture," can sometimes focus more on the structures and systems that help groups function—such as consensus decision-making or facilitation processes—which are still in the exterior collective (LR).

Figure 2: The Four Quadrants of the Integral Framework





Inclusion of the left-hand quadrants goes beyond the ways we communicate or make decisions; it addresses our awareness, our experience, and our feelings. We could describe zone 0 (or zone 00) and the inner landscape as the personal and subjective (UL). Similarly, the inner, cultural landscape of our group is the inter-personal and inter-subjective (LL).

As I consider the four quadrants, I can see what I added to my own toolbox to complement what permaculture already offered. Nonviolent communication develops our awareness of feelings and needs, as well as the distinction between observations and interpretations (UL); reiki and shamanism teach us that life energy, intention, and intuition can be helpful forces; and listening circles foster a culture of expression, empathy, care, and mutual support in groups (LL). All of these tools cultivate an experience of connection, aliveness, presence, compassion, and gratitude. In ways unique to each person and group, these practices can help to deepen our appreciation of our interconnectedness with all life. The combination of these diverse tools has given me a more balanced approach that nourishes healthier people and systems. Greater personal and interpersonal understanding also informs the wholeness of our designs.

### Well-rounded inputs

When we apply our understanding of the four quadrants to the input and output analysis of permaculture, we notice the richness of yields that permaculture offers when supported by a well-rounded investment of inputs.

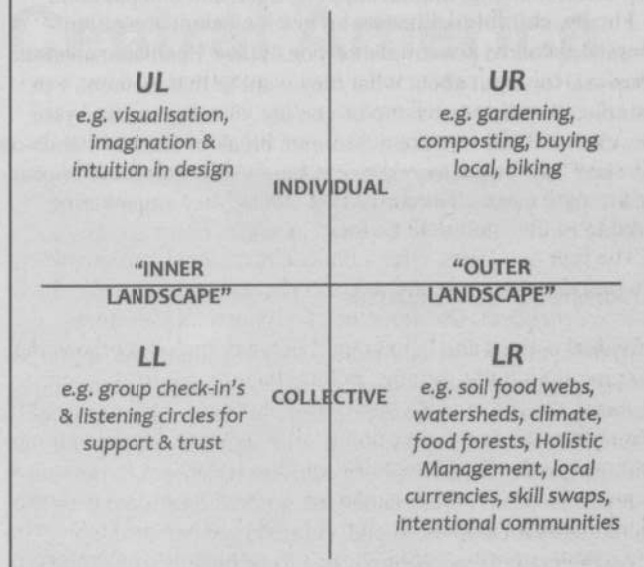
Starting with inputs in Figure 1, we observe and receive feedback to identify needs, problems, and resources. In the exterior, objective world, we observe ecological systems and social structures (LR and already typical in the observation process), as well as individual behaviors (UR). With the interior, subjective aspect, we may notice our own awareness and felt experience (UL), as well as our cultural myths and shared meaning (LL).

Training in principles and practice with tools that promote health are also important inputs. In the exterior, we learn and practice how to cultivate ecological health through water, soil, ecology, and microclimate (LR); societal health through alternative economics and governance (LR); and personal health through nutrition and exercise (UR). In the interior dimension, we learn how to develop our own relationships with ourselves and nature, including our feelings, thoughts, and awareness (UL); as well as healthy group cultures, including attitudes of collaboration, support, and harmony (LL).

In our permaculture courses and design-coaching work with clients, interior (left-hand) exercises that help to cultivate the UL and LL, may include such things as “sit spots,” guided visualization, and listening circles. (Figure 3)

As part of the PDC, we have our students do regular observation sessions in the same place in nature (the sit spot) and with awareness of all their senses. This exercise helps the person notice the outer landscape (UR) and the inner landscape (UL) simultaneously. What do I see and notice as I sit here? What do I feel and experience (UL)? Similarly, Dave Jacke encourages us to receive and gather information in a holistic way: “What must you do in your design to support and heal the land? Ask this question and note the answers that come to mind, heart, and gut.”

Figure 3: Permaculture Examples in the Four Quadrants



When we lead design processes, we like to begin with a guided visualization to help the client connect with vision and core intentions (UL). “What does my ideal system look like? As I imagine moving through a day, 10 or 20 years in the future, what do I notice? What qualities do I sense (energizing, peaceful, warm)? How do I feel?” Through this process, we help people identify the needs to be met in the design (security, sustenance, health, livelihood, community, creativity), building the foundation for solutions that come later in the design process.

In our courses and community groups, we model a culture based on people care, respect, and connection (LL). We use regular group check-ins and “temperature checks,” where people are invited to share inner states—for example, by giving a few sentences or one word, describing a “weather report” as a metaphor of their emotional state, or using hand signals for “okay,” “neutral,” or “not okay.” Similarly, our listening circles often



Taking a moment to observe and interact in the garden.



focus on a theme: when one person speaks at a time, conversations reach a more meaningful, heartfelt dimension that includes deep understanding, mutual support, trust, and compassion.

Finally, skillful facilitation invites inclusion, choice, collaboration, shared power, and responsibility. Facilitators can the group ask for input about what they want in that moment. For example, "I notice that some of you are yawning or have your eyes closed. Shall we take a 5-minute break or start the hands-on exercise?" All group members can be given training and encouraged to take turns facilitating. This can be very empowering, building more cultural and social capacities in the group.

### A richness of outputs

In these critical times, Joanna Macy highlights the importance of slowing the ecological damage, offering alternative structures, and shifting consciousness. If we've invested in well-rounded observation, as well as a cultivation of health in all four quadrants, we're more likely to cultivate a richness of outputs from permaculture. We broaden the scope of our work from the ecological to include the social, cultural, and personal.

As the systems we design prove to be healthy and abundant, they offer viable alternatives, as well as inspiration and hope to individuals and communities; these are all-quadrant yields. Similarly, by working across multiple fields and movements, we can help bring together knowledge and leaders from all quadrants: organic farming and gardening; ecology and forestry; energy and environmental building design; sustainable community and land development; alternative economics; social and environmental justice; social and behavioral change models; cultural and spiritual ecology, ecopsychology, deep ecology, and more. When we explicitly acknowledge that all four quadrants contribute valuable understandings to our design approach, we create new opportunities for collaboration and synergy.

Finally, we may also foster deep transformation in individual awareness and consciousness (UL), as well as cultural values and norms (LL). With more inclusion of the interior (left-hand) aspects, I believe we can more effectively contribute to an emerging worldview of connection and wholeness (compared to a worldview of separateness and fragmentation).



*Learning about ecological systems, connecting with nature, each other, and ourselves.*

### An integral permaculture

The integral framework, coupled with permaculture design, offers an approach that is widely applicable and far-reaching. By bringing it to permaculture, we give ourselves a new map that points to all the ground we may wish to cover. In our aim to take care of Earth and people, while returning the surplus, let us address our ecological systems and social systems (LR), our individual behaviors (UR), our cultural values and myths (LL), as well as our personal intentions and consciousness (UL). Together, this four-pronged design approach may better nourish the creation and maintenance of more sustainable, regenerative and deeply enriching ways of life. Δ

*Bonita Ford is co-founder of the Permaculture Institute of Eastern Ontario ([www.eonpermaculture.ca](http://www.eonpermaculture.ca)). In her workshops and coaching, Bonita blends permaculture, nonviolent communication, reiki, shamanism, and body-based awareness. She has led workshops and groups worldwide for over ten years, including in Port-au-Prince, Soweto, Budapest, San Francisco, Seattle, New Mexico, Vermont, Toronto, and Ottawa.*

### Resources

1. Christian, Diane Leafe. 2003. *Creating a Life Together: Practical Tools to Grow Ecovillages and Intentional Communities*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers.
2. Clayfield, Robin. [www.dynamicgroups.com.au](http://www.dynamicgroups.com.au).
3. Dresdale, Abrah Jordan and Connor Stedman. "A Toolbox for Social Permaculture." *Permaculture Activist*, August 2013.
4. Hernenway, Toby. "What Permaculture Isn't—and Is." [www.patternliteracy.com/668-what-permaculture-isnt-and-is](http://www.patternliteracy.com/668-what-permaculture-isnt-and-is).
5. Integral Permaculture Academy. [www.IntegralPermaCulture.org](http://www.IntegralPermaCulture.org).
6. Integral Permaculture Blog. [www.integralpermaculture.wordpress.com](http://www.integralpermaculture.wordpress.com).
7. Jacke, Dave and Eric Toensmeier. 2005. *Edible Forest Gardens, Volume Two: Ecological Design and Practice for Temperate-Clienate Permaculture*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Company. p. 196.
8. Macnamara, Looby. 2012. *People & Permaculture: Caring and designing for ourselves, each other and the planet*. Hampshire, England: Permanent Publications.
9. Macy, Joanna & Maddy Harland. "The Great Turning or The Great Unravelling? Maddy Harland in conversation with Joanna Macy." *Permaculture: Practical Solutions for Self-Reliance*, June 2011. [www.permaculture.co.uk/articles/great-turning-or-great-unravelling-maddy-harland-conversation-joanna-macy](http://www.permaculture.co.uk/articles/great-turning-or-great-unravelling-maddy-harland-conversation-joanna-macy).
10. McCurdy, Robina. *Grounding Vision—Empowering Culture: How to build & sustain community together*. Earthcare Education Aotearoa.
11. McManus, Brad. "An Integral Framework for Permaculture." [www.sustainabilitycentre.net/IntegralPermaculture.pdf](http://www.sustainabilitycentre.net/IntegralPermaculture.pdf).
12. Olson-Ramanujan, Karryn. "Women in Permaculture." *Permaculture Activist* #89, August 2013.
13. Winton, Tim. "An Integral Permaculture." [www.thepattern-guy.com/2012/05/21/an-integral-permaculture](http://www.thepattern-guy.com/2012/05/21/an-integral-permaculture).