Patterns to Revitalize Your Neighborhood

“Re-villagize”

Andrew Millison

I T’S ALWAYS THE SAME DREAM: I’m a goose flying, and
the faces of the flock are my heroes; Bill Mollison, Masanobu
Fukuoka, P.A. Yeomans, and David Holmgren. We’re honk-
ing and circling around my farm: the most artful and organic
mosaic of earthworks, ponds, orchards, gardens, and forests
with stock and poultry, my huge shop, and barn crafted from site
grown lumber, all centered around the most epic hot springs ever.
Then Geoff Lawton is down there firing up the Keyline plow…
and then I awake in my bed, to the diesel roar of the school bus
going by on my busy street in a town of 55,000. It was that rural
permaculture paradise dream again, coming back to haunt my
urban subconscious.

The dream gives way to reality

I’ve got to get over it, because the truth is I’m a city boy,
raised in Philly, where I developed a love of the human-centered
environment. I’ve lived rural, but always migrate back to town,
drawn by my instinct to flock with my species, and ride my bike
to the bookstore. I get really excited about designing and garden-
ing within the human social matrix. One of the most fulfilling
things for me is to see the expression of the kids as they study
my front yard on their way to school. For the neighborhood kids,
my permaculture system is patterning the way they see the world.
They absorb the look and feel of permaculture as they browse
fruits and berries hanging over the sidewalk.

Mark tells a story about the Roman Grid, and how this im-
posed pattern has suppressed our natural impulse to gather with
our community. Our gridded street pattern, a result of the grid
laid out by the US Congress in the Land Ordinance of 1785, was
developed by the Roman army as a means to control a conquered
 territory. Soldiers would stand in the middle of an intersection
and scan each direction to monitor any insurgency as a way to
forcefully control the population.

This same grid of occupation is imposed upon urban and
rural landscapes to this day, regardless of the hills, valleys, and
watersheds that underlie the squared pattern of conquest. The grid
dictates how we perceive our landscape from the day of our birth,
and limits our ability to comprehend non-angular natural patterns
like the watershed tree as revealed by the permaculture general
model. The way I see it, the human ecology of our urban land-
scapes suffers from centuries of suppressing the inner fire.

Mark Lakeman and his many cohorts ignited a controlled
burn of the creative fuel that had built up in Portland, and that
freako-system management is in its 17th year now. The Roman
grid is being re-patterned through a creative revolution using
permaculture design. The urban grid is being transformed in a
very intentional way with a particular set of tools that Mark has
gleaned from his studies of historical urban planning and devel-
oped into the concept of “placemaking.”

The pattern “Intersection Repair” was developed by Mark and
his neighbors; it built upon the work of Kevin Lynch, an urban

City Repair educational talk in Portland, Oregon

In a neighborhood-scaled permaculture design, human psychol-
ogy and perceptions are a strong force. Anyone who’s familiar
with permaculture knows that we have the know-how to fix our
problems. We count many successes in creating abundant food
and water systems with a thriving ecology. The limiting fac-
tor to planetary permaculture paradise seems to be the human
will. In urban permaculture design where the built environment
dominate the landscape, an important goal of a system is hu-
man inspiration, where we inoculate the desire to create physical
changes. So in a neighborhood permaculture design, the eyes,
hearts, and minds of passers-by are a sector to respond to. Es-
pecially children, who are the ones with the greatest capacity to
internalize the paradise patterning.

“Re-villagizing”

There are stunning examples of neighborhood transformations
to share, and I have to make up a new word just to describe what
is going on in Portland, Oregon: “re-villagize.” In my many field
trips to Portland, I’ve had the fortune of touring the City Repair
projects and spending time with Mark Lakeman, the co-founder
of City Repair, Communitecture Inc., the Planet Repair Institute,
and the Village Building Convergence.

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Pattern recognition as biological imperative

Just as a species of bird has specific needs for their nesting site and materials or an ant colony has a pattern to their excavation or bees organize and build their hive, so to does our species have recognizable patterns that make our communities more functional. We are social animals, and a nourishing fabric of place can help organize and support all that we do. The six organizing elements of village design are features that can be expressed at scales from neighborhood or village down to an intersection or a home design site. It’s the inclusion of these design elements at whatever scale that creates better conditions for healthy human interaction.

A Defined Perimeter is an edge that creates a “within” and “without.” Lynch describes how edges hold together generalized areas, as in a city wall or a waterway. We permaculturists are almost religious about maximizing edge in the system, and edge is everywhere in a neighborhood environment: property lines, sidewalk/yard interfaces, boundaries tying commercial to residential zones. Which edge in your neighborhood marks a perimeter that you want to enclose? How does it relate to flows of wind, water, and harvest?

The Portal is a gate or entryway, and is implied by the presence of a perimeter. It lets you know that a shift in space has occurred, and you are now inside the defined space. The portal can be an artful transition unto itself, a birth into a different pattern of spatial arrangement. Oftentimes the gateway compresses and then opens up into a space, just like in a watershed where small branches collect from a mountain range, concentrate into the trunk of a single river, and then fan out into the sea through an estuary. Where can portals be distinguished to articulate the transition between permaculture zones in your neighborhood or design site?

The Center is the heart, or plaza. In a neighborhood district, the entire character may be identified with a core gathering planner who wrote the groundbreaking classic: *The Image of the City* in 1962. From Lynch’s work, Mark articulated the common organizing elements that we see in cohesive villages throughout the world: The Perimeter, Portal, Center, Sub-centers, Pathways and Monuments.

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place and radiate out from it. It is often the convergence of many pathways. This is the essence of intersection repair, where the crossroads of the grid is turned into the village plaza, often with a mural painted on the street, places to sit and gather, socialize, eat and play. Where is the center of your design, the gathering place where invisible structures are organized?

Nodes or sub-centers can be crossroads, where paths intersect. A bench placed at a node creates a net in the human flow, in which people may be caught for a moment when they pause to rest. Creating nodes for people to pause is like inducing a meander in a stream. Just as the water contacts more surface area of the bank and soaks into the earth, allowing for more vegetation to grow and shade the stream, when humans meander there is space for them to make contact with other humans. This casual contact is the foundation of a community where neighbors know each other. Deeper connections build on top of superficial meetings, and community resilience is built on top of that.

Nodes can also be focal points where important elements of a water system or high-maintenance garden system are located. Permaculture food, water, waste recycling, wildlife movement, and domestic animal systems can all be superimposed over human circulation and collection patterns, for a beneficial integration of all the relevant pieces of a permaculture paradise.

Paths are the connective linkages of place from which people observe their surroundings. People know a place because they move through it. Kevin Lynch speaks of “imageability” which is the quality in a physical object that evokes a strong mental image. The image that most people have of a neighborhood (or a permaculture site) is predominantly viewed from a pathway as they pass by. Can we induce the passerby to meander into one of our nodes? Can we lure them into weeding the corn?

Landmarks or monuments are places of memory or story, strong images within the landscape that may ground us to a particular event to remember, as in a memorial; to a religious belief, as in a shrine; or tell a particular story, as in a mural. It is common for people to navigate a city or town based on landmarks. There are also natural landmarks like a distant hill, a big tree, or where a road crosses a creek. The act of placemaking has a lot to do with creating landmarks where there are none: visual elements in the landscaping by which people navigate and orient themselves. What images does your permaculture design use to help people navigate within your neighborhood? What stories will future adults tell about their childhood memories of your permaculture? Around what images will children organize their thought patterns?

The six organizing elements of a village are tools we can use to revive and re-villagize our neighborhoods, and as permaculture designers we are also called to integrate zones and sectors, topography, and water flow. Geomorphic settlements are villages or neighborhoods that conform to the landscape. Unfortunately, we have to design for the challenging fact that the grid was placed over the land often without regard to geomorphology. So when we design for perimeter and portal we must consider wind and water flow. When we create a village plaza we must consider solar access and food production. When we create paths we must design for nutrient flow and harvest times. When we create monuments, we must carefully plan the images that will soak into people’s minds, visit them in their dreams, and whisper patterns of paradise in their ears. Re-villagize!  

Andrew Millison has been practicing, designing, and teaching Permaculture since his PDC in 1996. He lives in Corvallis, Oregon, where he practices neighborhood scale permaculture on his urban homestead. He now teaches in the Horticulture Dept. at Oregon State University where he has established a Permaculture program, including a number of demonstration sites and various course offerings. In his consultancy he designs mostly farm-scale rural properties in the hinterlands adjacent to his town. You can view his online portfolio as well as OSU’s site-based and online Permaculture course offerings at www.beaverstatepermaculture.com. Andrew can be reached at amillison@gmail.com.

We are social animals, and a nourishing fabric of place can help organize and support all that we do.

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