

## Permaculture Institute Inc. & Real Earth Design

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Take a moment to reflect on your childhood. Think about the people and environment that led you to who you are – to seeking solutions for internal and external healing. My childhood was free and happy despite a mother's early death, a father's lost heartbreak as a result, and an early concern about encroaching urban sprawl, subsequent loss of wild areas, and destruction of the rainforest. When reflecting on my childhood, I see long days of playing in the forests surrounding my house, biking to the corner store with change found in the couch to buy penny candies or further across the village to jump on my best friend's trampoline, scavenger hunts, tree climbing, ice skating on the back pond, "helping" the neighbors make maple syrup, and playing cops and robbers. My father would yell for me at dinner and sometimes I would hear him, sometimes I had wandered too far off in the back woods and streams. Although there is tragedy and beauty in every childhood, for Jason Gerhardt, director of the Permaculture Institute Inc and Real Earth Design (his own permaculture design company), childhood entailed some of the same things that mine did, but also included gun violence, drug pushing, street gangs and the deaths of close friends under the towering eyes of concrete buildings. Jason's home city of St. Louis, MO, regularly tops national charts as one of the most violent and deadliest. Your chances of becoming a victim to violent or property crime there is one in 12. Compare that with Boulder, CO, where your chances of becoming a victim of violent or property crime are 1 in 367. In a simple google search of "living in Boulder, CO", the first sentence I read was "With a population that strongly supports environmental protections and farm-to-table restaurants, Boulder is considered one of the best cities for liberals." Nothing like this is found when exploring living in St. Louis, MO.

You would think that when Jason worked his way to Boulder, CO, enacting permaculture design privately and through his role as a faculty member at Naropa University, that he "made it". Yet the comfort and security

surrounding him didn't quite sit right at a deeper level. After long and slow internal observation of working in the arid west for over 10 years, he packed his car and drove east to his city of origin. Jason's decision to re-immers himself in regenerative design in a place so scarring and yet meaningful to him serves as a flowing source of inspiration.

As with many environmentalists, prior to this journey a large part of me believed we needed to get the people out of the way in order to restore our environment...that the people were the planetary parasites; even more so than the ticks I've encountered in the eastern US. But to Jason, it's the people where the potential lies and empowerment is needed to shift the cultural paradigm: the problem is the solution, if I may.

Permaculture provided Jason with "a direct pathway to discovering a way to heal human culture and therefore how we interact with the planet as well." The framework, which he first discovered in a Zen monastery, is beyond solutions-based and encompasses the spiritual quest he was seeking to transform human culture. "Permaculture is lastingness of human culture, and design is how we get there...what I was really looking for was culture healing...the planet is fine on its own, it's human culture that causes the problems to the planet. I don't need to solve ecosystems, I need to solve the problems of human culture that lead us to either be destructive or productive and regenerative. Therein lies the choice." This thinking can be seen on his Real Earth Design page, where it's people, or social structures, that take the forefront: "We unite human communities and landscapes with ecological design."

In St. Louis, and many cities like it, "lastingness in human culture means healing people and relationships between people and different cultures. That's because without that, this place has absolutely no future...we could have green infrastructure on all of our streets, we could have food forests in all of our parks, and people are still killing each other. That's not permaculture. That's not an aim high enough. That's not achieving the goal of more permanence in human culture." Jason feels "our natural way of being is more permacultural. It is to care for our place, it is to care for the people around us...recognizing that you have connections to everything else and what you do has a direct impact on other things. And that's our original nature, you could say. But we've had this other paradigm forced down our throats through education, media, entertainment. All of that changes the way we think about and see the world. And permaculture is something that undoes that."



USU Moab

### Permaculture Garden

When Jason designed the permaculture gardens for Utah State University, Moab, I saw the potential and actualization of whole systems thinking in a design process. He brought in the community to discuss the space, history of place, and to visualize its potential. From there, he developed a design that focused on patterns instead of things – patterns of water flow, nitrogen fixation, people, and more. Forty people came to implement what he designed for that space, volunteering their weekend to implement regenerative design. I participated in awe and knew there was more to the permaculture framework than I had understood.

I took my PDC with Jason and Scott Pittman, and I would fall into what Jason describes: “I’d say most students leave the course with a glimmer in their eyes of what the paradigm looks like and they don’t quite know how to get there.” How we get there is through shifting the shallow, degenerative paradigms we were raised to believe in. Now when Jason teaches his courses, he hopes students “have tools to think in ways that are radically different than what they learned growing up.” Regarding this type of thinking, Scott Pittman recently passed the Permaculture Institute Inc. down to Jason who wants to revisit the standard curriculum. I’m looking forward to seeing where he takes it.

Coming back to “making it,” Jason discovered what that means through designing and co-teaching a weekend PDC in St. Louis. The course structure of six weekends over six months fostered a local audience, with the furthest commute taking 45 minutes. “We offered a ton of scholarships so we got a lot of people in the course who otherwise wouldn’t have been there.” Through appropriate networking in the community, Jason had partner organizations sponsor and advocate for the course. This helped pull people in from different parts of the city with different economic, racial and ethnic backgrounds. The realization of finding what he was looking for came on the first day of the course. “Everybody sat down, everybody was there. Class was about to start and I stopped for a second and looked at everybody and

was like ‘wow, I’m back in my home. This place that I ran away from.’ I mean, I RAN away from this place...when I was in Boulder doing design work I was like ‘yeah, I made it, I got out.’ On some level, that’s how I felt. And coming back here, I left all that behind, that joy of ‘I have an opportunity now.’ Standing in front of that class, ‘I made it’ meant a totally different thing in that moment, which was ‘I changed my life and transformed who I am and now these people are showing up to learn from me in my home town.’”

To discover more about Jason, the Permaculture Institute Inc and Real Earth Design, visit: <https://permaculture.org/> and <http://realearthdesign.com/>

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