

The Permaculture Academy

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The Permaculture Academy, although established in its current form only five years ago, has existed in one permutation or another since 1989. It began as the Great Northwest Permaculture Institute, one of the first permaculture nonprofits established in the US, under the influence of Bill Mollison. I walked across blocks of urbanite (broken concrete that is generally otherwise landfill-bound but makes for great stepping stones, terraces, and more) to Larry Santoyo's front door in Ventura, CA, to conduct our interview. Larry founded The Permaculture Academy, is its lead instructor, and has been teaching permaculture for almost 30 years.

In his words, Larry joined the permaculture movement "kicking and screaming" as a result of being injured on duty as a law enforcement park ranger. Given his injury, he had to retrain through the state and ventured down a land planning professional development path with a specialization in natural resources management. This led him to a conference in Olympia, WA, where he met Bill Mollison and began traveling the country teaching design courses with him, thrown in "trial by fire."

At the time of our interview, Larry had just finished teaching a Permaculture Design Course in Los Angeles with The Permaculture Academy; 66 people were enrolled. The Academy's focus is on urban situations and they generally don't focus on gardens in the class. If they do, they design a prototype that could be used for thousands of gardens – part of bigger picture thinking. According

to Larry, "I think that people still believe permaculture is about gardening and I don't think that it ever was. I worked with Bill Mollison and the stuff I saw him doing, very little had to do with gardening.... one of my biggest things is that we don't do permaculture, you use permaculture in what you do. It opens it up to pick a field and you can use permaculture design. So that's why I kind of cringe when people talk about permaculture and all we talk about is gardens. It's not a gardening system so I don't know how to evaluate it that way. It's not an agriculture system. It's decision making and problem solving protocols based on natural systems. That's my definition, and with that I can pretty much go anywhere."



On the first day of his permaculture classes, Larry asks people to shout out what it would take to make a sustainable human future. He maps out what everyone says and organizes comments by infrastructure and invisible structures – concepts he revisits later. After reviewing the ethics and principles, he revisits the board and brings home that what was said is permaculture. Agriculture and/or gardening is just one bubble on a large concept map.

In teaching courses at various universities and colleges, Larry sees a strong need for more skills-based education. "I've taught at horticulture and landscape architecture departments where some of the kids have never planted a tree! And I've taught at architecture departments where people have never framed a house, you know? How is that possible?" As one way to help build hands-on opportunities Larry has a design firm as a wing of the academy. People can tag along who are enrolled in a permaculture course and learn first-hand. Granted, this creates a bit of a paradox for Larry. "As much as I talk about permaculture not being about gardening, I have a landscape company so there you have it. I'm the reason why people think it's gardening!"

We live in a busy society, and Larry admits that it can be hard to get people excited about attending a six-month certification, which is how his Permaculture Design Course is structured. In his words, “People are bombarded. Everyone’s dangling carrots in front of an audience. Oh we could get tattoos this weekend, or we could go save the whales, or we could learn permaculture. There’s a million things going on.”

And who are these people that decide to come? “It’s so much different than before. The audiences are pretty sophisticated wherever I go, anywhere in the world. That’s one thing I learned from Bill Mollison – never dumb it down or never dumb it up. This is the curriculum. Don’t change it or try to make it simpler. That’s ridiculous and arrogant and not very pattern literate to assume people won’t understand something...What’s interesting about audiences of the past is that people really did work in the field. No one ever said ‘we want more hands on.’ I don’t even think we had that vernacular: hands-on... These days, people are coming to the class that have been exposed to it through media, so there’s a lot that they already have in their minds about what they want and what it is. But very few people have practical experience. Very few people are building stuff.” The people coming are wanting a career change, or to homestead, or to get out of the film industry and learn new ideas and wind up returning reinvigorated about their work. From Larry’s experience, it is incredibly variable why people are seeking permaculture design.

But permaculture courses cost a lot of money and those who want landscaping done with Larry’s design firm pay a whole lot more. According to Larry, “I used to get a lot of shit because I work for the one percent, but if they are switching to organic then who can help them? Very few people emulate the bottom.” I wondered who these people in the movement as a whole are. The permaculture community. Larry responds with: “Whackos, nut-jobs. But I love it. It’s always the whackos and nut jobs that not only create change, but also stand by it.”

Looking ahead, despite his knowledge that our planet will inevitably one day die, Larry concludes optimistically with “the future is abundant.” When it comes to our legacies, he clarifies that what is important is to ensure our handprints are bigger than our footprints. I like that line of thought and hope more people are inspired to grow their handprints, creating the positive change they wish to see.

To discover more about Larry and The Permaculture Academy, visit: <http://www.permacultureacademy.com>



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