

# Permaculture



# Design

Regenerating Life Together

## PERMACULTURE WORKS

**Accelerating Succession  
Working with our Youth  
Using Our Work in Service  
A Permaculture Workforce  
Emergency Preparedness;  
Staying Grounded  
Update on IPC-14**

[PermacultureDesignMagazine.com](http://PermacultureDesignMagazine.com)

May/Summer  
2020  
No. 116  
US \$6.50  
Cdn. \$7.95



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## Permaculture-based Community Empowerment

# Hopewell

Rhonda Baird

**W**HAT IF WE APPLIED PERMACULTURE to our community-scale projects? There are several examples of this happening. Here, we'll look at one group's defined process and consider how it can serve us in this moment.

Permaculture ethics and principles make sense to us. We want to care for the Earth, each other, and the future. People want to see how we can repair the earth. Energy-smart buildings that are healthier for people are practical. Living within the ecological budget of the sites we inhabit is an interesting and worthy goal. We want healthy waterways that nurture biodiversity. Using an ecologically-responsive setting to foster well-being, support livelihoods in the community, and celebrate artistic and civic life is exciting and engaging.

### Hopewell

When a neighborhood leader in my community reached out to see about a short presentation to a gathering of neighborhood residents last December, I agreed. The evening's set up was for there to be four speakers giving five-minute short sessions about their various "sustainability-related" topics. Discussion followed, but it was clear not everyone in the room felt equally empowered to speak. People with strong ties to the city government who were involved in decision-making and had access to information defined parameters

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## These two neighborhoods surround a 23-acre site.

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of what was possible or not. This felt really inappropriate for a group that was in the stage of exploring what it wanted. We happened to be sharing space with two neighborhood associations due to a scheduling mix-up, so there was quite an audience.

Afterward, I connected with the two leaders of the group and met up for tea. In our discussion, it became clear the group, Hopewell, was on a path to clarify their vision, but didn't have a process in place to do that.

I learned more about the Hopewell group. It's an informal group of people from the two historic neighborhoods of Bloomington, Indiana. Hopewell, is the original name of the group which developed the first hospital for the city, and it is



*Rhonda facilitating a group process for 150 people at a GRLPI gathering in Akron, Ohio in January 2018. Photo by Sabrena Schweyer.*

also an homage to one of the indigenous groups which lived in this area hundreds of years ago.

Prospect Hill Neighborhood and McDoel Garden Neighborhood both have historic neighborhoods and very active neighborhood associations. They lie near the center of town—just off the busy urban core, along an economic corridor, and not far from the rail-to-trail which runs through the city connecting the new multi-million dollar Switchyard Park project to other city investments in arts and entertainment and a tech park north of the urban core.

These two neighborhoods surround the 23-acre campus of the current city hospital and medical specialist offices. IU Health is building a new hospital structure on the east side of the city and negotiated sale of the site to the city. IU Health required tearing down all structures except the four-story parking garage, and the city has hired a master planner and company to oversee the redevelopment of the site. All of this includes citizen input and oversight as well as millions of dollars of investment.

The city has already identified interest in commercial office space—which is short in the city for medium-sized businesses—as well as, affordable housing, a health clinic for accessibility, retail space, arts and education spaces, community gardens, reconnecting streets through the campus, etc.... A lot of ideas have been thrown around. In 2019, the Urban Land Institute was consulted by the city and issued a report suggesting many of these components and urging strong



*Rhonda facilitating a group process for 150 people at a GRLPI gathering in Akron, Ohio, in January 2018. Photo by Sabrena Schweyer.*

citizen input.

This is where Hopewell group comes in. This group of people whose lives and properties will be affected by the decisions made have been meeting for months. Through an open process of discussion and collaboration, they had already built trust among a group with diverse experiences and expertise.

As an experiment (with good theory and practice behind it), I suggested leading a series of three meetings through January and February to help the group solidify its platform for advocacy using the design process combined with tools from sociocracy. My yield for the effort was to be able to write up my experience as part of my master's degree work in Eco-Social Design with Gaia University.

### ***Empower groups with design process***

Initially, I could see that the group was interested in permaculture, but not conversant in its aims and strategies. Since there wasn't time or opportunity to provide a full permaculture design course, we used a survey, resource readings, and conversation in the first meeting to draw out the ethics and their possible applications at the hospital site from a permaculture perspective.

The plan was to use the first meeting to identify goals. From there, we could use the second meeting to research and analyze the context and how the goals fit. In the third meeting, we could begin to form a concept for what was needed. The first 90-minute meeting was held at a local art gallery. I used two methods from *Liberating Structures* to draw out the interests and priorities from the group. This became the basis for the survey sent out to city residents (but primarily filled out by Prospect Hill and McDoel Garden residents). Two participants from the first meeting took on the responsibility of compiling results from the survey.

In the second meeting, we clarified the priorities and goals identified. This feedback from the larger community helped the Hopewell participants see how their ideas were reflected in the community and what was important to people. With this information, we turned to asking "What do we need to know now?" We generated several key questions to research and analyze and divided the work up among the group in pairs for accountability. They had until the next meeting to do their research and report back to the group. We could see that this would be a longer process with so many perspectives (our group regularly had 12-15 people or more participating). My own homework included developing, as a consultant, recommendations based in permaculture design for each of the redevelopment goals the group had identified. Our hope was that this would become the core of the conceptual design recommended by the group. Because it is grounded in the feedback from the first meeting and the survey, and I know the community well, it is a good first draft for the group.

In the third meeting, everyone reported back, and we were able to begin processing the information. While we

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## **They were planning THEIR next steps and excited to meet again.**

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didn't clarify the concept completely in 90 minutes, we did select a group of seven people to carry forward the discussion and act as coordinators for the advocacy effort needed to see the platform accomplished. My own recommendations for best practices were turned over to the group for them to use and modify as they got new information.

It was very gratifying to see the group lively and animated at the end of that third meeting. They were planning THEIR next steps and excited to meet again.

At the same time our process had been unfolding, various city council people, the architect with the group chosen as master planners, and numerous community advocates participated or observed our collaboration. By the conclusion of our third meeting, the master planning group had been chosen and a timeline announced for citizen input. Participation from community leaders and other players also seems to have empowered the group of organizers and bodes good things for the process which will be moving forward over the years ahead.

### ***Sociocratic methods clarify aims***

As a permaculture designer, educator, and community organizer with 25 years of organizing experience, I feel

confident about supporting group process. When I joined the Great Lakes Permaculture Design Collaborative, I was introduced to *Liberating Structures*, as a set of tools for the classroom. These tools for group discussion are useful for learning situations, but they work really well for group process and advocacy.

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## Things are safe because our group dynamics make them so.

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Working with the Hopewell Group, I used *Liberating Structures* to ask clarifying questions in small groups, and then sociocratic process for rounds and consent to gather feedback and find a path forward. Because our group was relatively large for a working group, the breakouts and rounds gave everyone opportunity to share and still brought forward the key ideas everyone could agree on.

I used a similar process at two Great Rivers and Lakes Permaculture Institute convergences where the groups were of 150 and 50 people. It's pretty amazing to see the empowerment of large groups and the energy generated. Those moments are only useful, though, if that energy is moved into action and leaders can sustain the project through to completion.

### Stepping back when it's time

This experiment with Hopewell was designed for me to step back after the third meeting. Rather than take on another community organizing project, it was appropriate for me to support (and continue mentoring as needed) the leadership identified and already in place within Hopewell. They have capacity, passion, and attention for the road ahead with the city and the developers. I was honored and humbled by Hopewell's trust, which

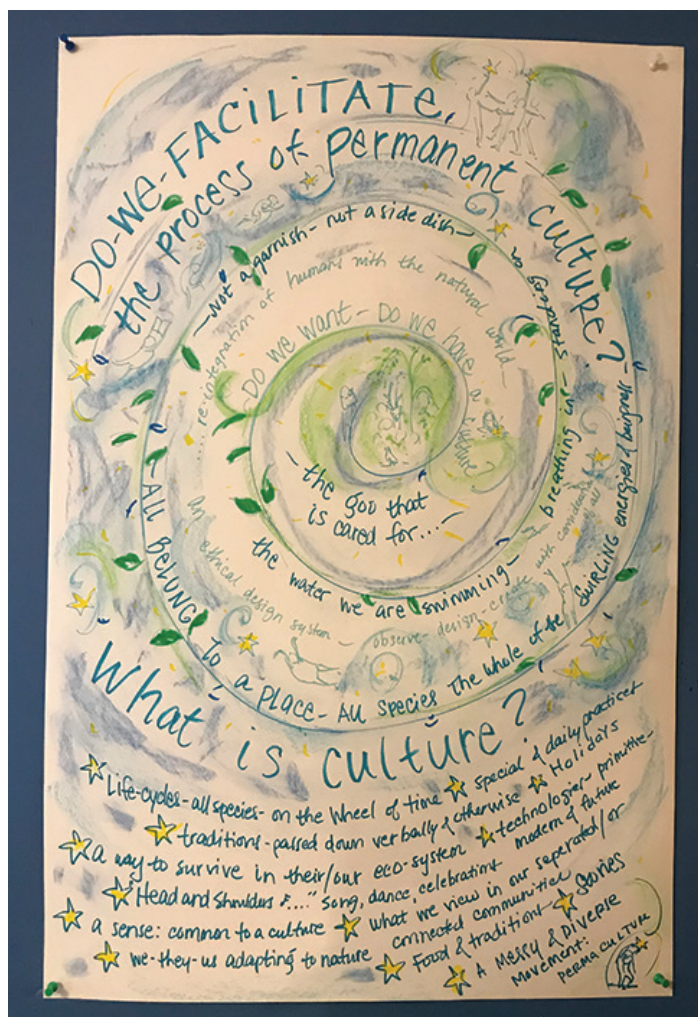
I found was not given easily. I found my own transparency, honesty, and belief in the group and in what we were doing earned that trust. In the end, at the last meeting when everyone was buzzing with excitement, I packed up my things and left the room quietly. It was a perfect ending to this phase of their project.

### Community empowerment; cultural change

This experience of serving as a facilitator, mentor, and empowering consultant to a group seemed to come out of nowhere and uplift everyone involved. In a rare few moments of chatting before the monthly SoFA (Sociocracy for All) Permaculture Circle meeting, I mentioned this project. It turns out Les Moore of the British Permaculture Association, is facilitating a similar conversation about a redevelopment project in London. He also remarked on the trust placed in him by the group—when other actors were not trusted to do the facilitation. We agreed that the principles and values of permaculture combined with those of sociocracy create a solid foundation for doing “the good work.”

Jerry Koch-Gonzalez and Ted J. Rau begin *Many Voices, One Song*, by saying that “Sociocracy is a set of tools and principles that ensure shared power.” They go on to say that “Power is everywhere all the time, and it does not appear or disappear—someone will be holding it. We have to be intentional about how we want to distribute it.... The only way to counterbalance the concentration of power is intentionality and thoughtful implementation.” (Page 1)\*





This beautiful poster was created by Penny Krebiehl acting as a graphic facilitator of a session taught by Rhonda Baird in a Permaculture Teacher Training course. The poster captures the conversation among everyone in the room.

A group has power, but it is only able to do effective work when there is good organization and leadership. It is only able to sustain that power and effort when the group is aligned behind the mission and vision (and acting so consistently) and power and responsibility are distributed.

Whether groups use sociocracy or another set of decision-making tools, my hope is that many groups like this will emerge. Already, in the onset of the pandemic, I see many mutual aid groups coming together across many communities. Those I see are already aligned to permaculture, or run by former PDC students. Sustaining the groups will require group empowerment, good leadership, and the capacity to hand off leadership to others. My hope is that permaculturists can help to seed the novel, practical cultural responses needed as our mainstream culture changes.

My project with the Hopewell Group helped to align the aims of the group while also bringing out competencies, building group trust, and establishing patterns of flow in

communication and decision-making. I learned that I saw success because I was competent, trustworthy, and able to successfully communicate what I had to offer.

Our work as leaders and cultural change-agents requires us to be in integrity with our profession of permaculture ethics and practice. From the foundation of our integrity, our individual capacities, passion, and vision can lead us to the right arenas for action and service. I am convinced that the days of leadership for the sake of ego and extracting power in self-serving ways are short.

I introduced Hopewell to the phrase I learned in SoFA's leadership training program: "Good enough for now, and safe enough to try." Among a group learning to embrace group power and practice care of each other, this phrase allows us to move forward among living systems and learn from feedback. Things are safe because our group dynamic makes them so.

No one is coming to save us. We don't need them to. It's time to reclaim our power and invest it in each other. What if—to use Rob Hopkins' title—all over the world, PDC grads and permaculturists stepped into their communities and empowered groups to act on solutions which nurtured the elements of a dynamic, new culture? △

Rhonda Baird is senior editor of this publication, as well as a cultural change agent. Her work is done primarily through Sheltering Hills Design, but also in collaboration with others. You can find out more at [shelteringhills.net](http://shelteringhills.net). If you want to explore these ideas more, find out about the "Touch the Earth" project and community.

## Resources:

1. *Liberating Structures*: [LiberatingStructures.com](http://LiberatingStructures.com)
2. *Sociocracy for All*. [SociocracyforAll.org](http://SociocracyforAll.org). Ted J. Rau and Jerry Koch-Gonzalez, *Many Voices, One Song*, 2019.
3. Great Lakes Permaculture Design Collaborative, [GLP-DC.info](http://GLP-DC.info).
4. Great Rivers and Lakes Permaculture Institute, [greatriversandlakes.org](http://greatriversandlakes.org).
5. Rob Hopkins. *From What Is to What If*. Chelsea Green Publishing, Vermont, 2019.

\*Unfortunately, in much of my experience with groups, everyone is scrambling to "just get things done." This saps that intentionality and capacity. Those who hold onto that intentionality often hold power—and too often, everyone is happy for them to do so whether this is appropriate for the group or not. We can become more competent in our eco-social designs.

"... having a vision and manifesting it in reality is nothing less than revolutionary. Pioneers are visionaries who take the first steps into new territory, unexplored country where the risks are great and the rewards are unknown."—Richard Reames, Arborsmith, [www.arborsmith.com](http://www.arborsmith.com)