RESEARCH VIRUS

ENVIRONMENTAL TRANSITION

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TOWNS IN TRANSITION? THE PERMACULTURE ROOTS OF FUTURE TOWN-PLANNING

PUG

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ENVIRONMENTAL TRANSITION
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TOWNS IN TRANSITION? THE PERMACULTURE ROOTS OF FUTURE TOWN-PLANNING

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Transition is now the priority for most urban and territorial strategies and policies, but the origins of the Transition network are still little known. Far from being yet another pressure group seeking to raise public awareness of the effects of climate change, its primary focus, by various means and at different levels, "is not on being against things, but on developing and promoting positive possibilities"[1]. This pro-active approach is all the more unusual for being rooted in an alternative posture not so much on urban development as on agriculture. For permaculture – a contraction of permanent and agriculture – underpins Transition's ethical stance (concern for habitats and the environment) and the methods (caring for rather than developing) it uses in planning projects for transition towns. At a time of recurrent crises it is instructive to see how permaculture underpins this approach to future town-planning for it casts a new light on the art of (re-)inhabiting the Earth, while facing up to the issue of the social and cultural acceptability of such an undertaking.

An 'energy-descent' action plan

Rob Hoskins started the Transition movement in the mid-2000s. With a degree in Environmental Quality and Resource Management he started teaching Practical Sustainability, then permaculture. But he soon realised that global warming was only one aspect of the environmental crisis and that the concept of sustainable development – primarily focused, in operational and urban terms, on limiting greenhouse-gas emissions – could not encompass all the challenges on the way to achieving a post-carbon society.

1. https://transitionnetwork.org/about-the-movement/what-is-transition/principles-2/ (last consulted on 16/05/2023).

Among the many burning questions peak oil was probably the most important. It posited that in about 2050 oil and gas resources would no longer be sufficient to sustain western lifestyles, overly dependent on fossil fuels, and more broadly the key geostrategic conditions required to maintain the world's economic, political and diplomatic stability.

First of all in Kinsale, County Cork, Ireland, then at Totnes, a green stronghold in Devon, United Kingdom, Hopkins hatched a plan for achieving 'energy-descent'. In this he was assisted by fellow militants, friends and students. Their aim was, collectively, to determine how a given territory could, within a 20-year timeframe, make the transition to a post-oil future[2].

The transition they proposed set three goals: self-sufficient production of goods and energy; resilience (a territory's local and endogenous ability to self-organize); and relocation of essential activities of all sorts, with food a key concern.

Mad Max or greentech?

This form of 'happy de-growth' also depended on the narrative of transitioners, *ad hoc* transition groups comprising residents, consumers and (politically or otherwise) committed stakeholders. They were tasked with proposing alternative visions of the future or cultural stories. This exercise in non-expert forward-looking narration enabled the movement to position various, highly contrasted scenarios for the world after peak oil.

Torn between some Mad Max-style collapse (with the disappearance of fossil fuels putting an end to civilization as a whole) and techno-fantasy (headlong pursuit of technological development) the list of scenarios generally converged towards two fairly plausible, yet entirely opposite outcomes: on the one hand creative energy descent; on the other green-tech stability, a status quo enabled by deploying green technologies. Transition encouraged participants to develop a viewpoint that maps out 'transition initiatives' to be carried out together (such as urban agriculture, pedibus schemes, combating single car-occupancy, promoting local food systems and currencies).

2. Semal, L., Szuba, M. (2010). Villes en transition : imaginer des relocalisations en urgence. *Mouvements*, 63, 130-136.

Raising awareness

On the strength of these ground-breaking experiments, Hopkins published his Transition Handbook[3] in 2008. There followed a host of publications for the general public ranging from academic discourse to practical guidelines, through a summary of ongoing initiatives. In the process he launched the Transition Network, a non-governmental organization with a form of governance flexible and fragile enough to encourage the overall aggregation of initiatives of widely varying origin, nature and scale.

The success of this undertaking was based on both its inclusive stance and whole-hearted endorsement of the basic principles that accounted for its originality and strength. Above all its advocates insist – at the risk of being attacked by more vindictive hardliners – on the need not to appear as a constantly critical force, rather as a source of constructive proposals[4].

More than being yet another drive to raise environmental awareness, the Transition movement seems in fact to be an active form of participation in the cultural life of territories. It is unusual for focusing primarily on individual and collective awareness raising, and on the methods for achieving that goal in the context of the climate emergency.

Care for rather than develop

In many respects the initiatives deployed in the name of the Transition movement reflect, instil and disseminate in the field of cultural, urban and environment public action the key principles of permaculture, a form of "permanent agriculture and horticulture that offers an alternative to industrial agriculture, seeking to achieve a degree of self-sufficiency and suitable (subject to *in situ* adaptation) for sites of all sizes and types"[5].

3. Hopkins R., The Transition Handbook: from Oil Dependency to Local Resilience, Green Books, Totnes, 2008.

4. Semal, L., Szuba, M. (2010). Villes en transition : imaginer des relocalisations en urgence. *Mouvements*, 63, 130-136.

5. Marot, S. (2020). Imaginer et projeter la descente énergétique : les quatre phases du parcours de David Holmgren, *Marnes – documents d'architecture*, 5, 348-360.

Following on directly from this concept, it is clearly essential to take good care of land and the humans it supports. For a little over 40 years David Holmgren and [the late] Bill Mollison – respectively environmental designer, and biologist cum researcher in environmental psychology – have been exploring this conviction. In their pioneering work, Permaculture One[6], the two scientists urged 'soil workers', or farmers, to care for rather than develop the soil, paying more attention to its reproduction than an exclusively productive function. Their aim is to halt the growing trend towards one-crop farming and the systematic use of artificial inputs. Instead they advocate focusing on longstanding traditions and ways of enriching the soil that make greater allowance for its organic, physical and chemical structure.

Permaculture One advocates the use of in situ know-how, recycling, leaving fields in fallow, integrating not segregating. It also encourages growers to diversify, rotate crops and cultivate complementary plants side-by-side, thus boosting quality and preserving the environment and biodiversity, all the while using various growing techniques.

An art of re-inhabiting the land

Since then a real art of re-inhabiting[7] has emerged, underpinned by a series of publications, sharing of practical experience and training courses staged by countless organizations carrying on the permaculture tradition[8]. This "practical philosophy of existence and subsistence"[9] promotes a conception of "permanent culture" which, far from focusing merely on managing the Earth and nature, aims to embrace all activities and the organization of individuals, taking in the built environment, tools and technology, education, healthcare and more besides[10].

6. Mollison, B., Holmgren, D., Permaculture One. A Perennial Agriculture for Human Settlements, Transworld Publishers, Melbourne, Australia, 1978.

7. Re-inhabiting means connecting with a place but above all with the earth, in the primary meaning of the term. In concrete terms 'taking care of the earth' is a vehicle for a form of active learning, perceived as a necessary condition for permacultural activism (our translation), Centemeri, 2019.

8. Centemeri, L., La Permaculture ou l'Art de Réhabiter, Éditions Quæ, Paris, 2019.

9. Marot, S., *ibid*.

10. *Ibid.*

As Laura Centemeri explains, "this strategy aims to create the cultural conditions for a broader front, as diverse as possible, bringing together actors involved in the permacultural transformation of their individual and collective life-practices". The advocates of permaculture also present themselves as being "open to a range of possible variations on practical environmental commitment, from setting up demonstration sites (from a whole farm to a group garden), permaculture training courses, transforming and re-inventing individual professional practice (by landscape designers, agronomists, architects, teachers and small farmers), through changes in the patterns of everyday life (eating, washing, housing, heating)"[11].

Permaculture towns tomorrow?

The Transition movement is part of this tradition. Hopkins has made this perfectly clear, openly advocating the development of a permacultural approach to developing urban areas. Pursuing this idea writer and 'collapsologist' Agnès Sinaï[12] has identified definite links between the thinking of permaculture theorists and their north American bio-regionalist counterparts[13]. As the latter see it, suburbs, cities and bio-regions are all spaces that may serve to catalyse and demonstrate permacultural action. This starts in our homes, the domestic world that constitutes an elementary scale, the territory where an individual can put into practice their own energy-descent strategy, pay greater attention to their habitat and learn from experience, before sharing the resulting benefits with the rest of the community.

Some urban activists, such as Toby Hemenway[14], have gone so far as to propound a theory of the permaculture city, proposing a rethink of the (British and North American) pluridisciplinary tradition of urban design in the light of concepts and methodology derived from permaculture. According to this approach

11. Centemeri, L., *ibid.*

12. Sinaï, A. (dir.), Politiques de l'Anthropocène. Penser la décroissance ; Économie de l'après-croissance ; Gouverner la décroissance, Presses de Sciences Po, Paris, 2021.

13. Such as Lewis Mumford, Ian McHarg, Gary Snyder, Murray Bookchin and Kirckpatrick Sale.

14. Hemenway, T., The Permaculture City: Regenerative Design for Urban, Suburban, and Town Resilience, Chelsea Green Publishing Co, White River Junction, 2015.

architecture, planning and landscaping are all forms of applied ecology that base the design of any object (soil, building, urban fragment, landscape) on identifying and applying various key principles at work in natural ecosystems.

The message is clear. We urgently need to transform our scales of value from top to bottom, be it the way we behave, how we inhabit our surroundings and, to an even greater extent, how we design that environment. In conclusion we may surely agree with Hemenway that "understanding nature can do more than improve how we grow, make or consume things; it can also teach us how to cooperate, make decisions, and arrive at good solutions"[15]. Much food for thought.

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15. Hemenway, T., *ibid.*