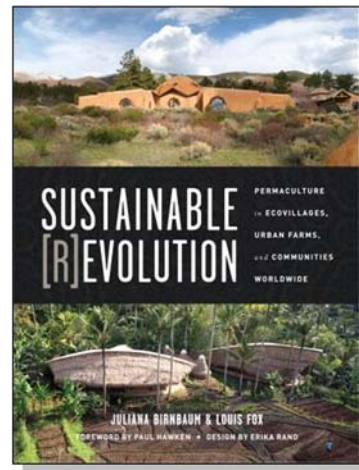


A worldwide tour of (almost) permaculture

Book review by Angela Gordon Gloré*
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Review of *Sustainable [R]Evolution: Permaculture in Ecovillages, Urban Farms, and Communities Worldwide*, edited by Juliana Birnbaum and Louis Fox. (2014). Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books. Available in paperback and Kindle eBook; 368 pages. Publisher's website: <http://nabcommunities.com/shop/sustainable-revolution/>



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Sustainable [R]Evolution, edited by Juliana Birnbaum and Louis Fox, is a survey of permaculture (and permaculture-like) projects and

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communities throughout the world. Multiple authors have contributed short profiles of ecovillages, urban agriculture projects, farms, and teaching centers, interspersed with writings on permaculture design principles.

Permaculture was coined—as a word and a design system—by Australians Bill Mollison and David Holmgren in the 1970s as a type of ecologically based permanent agriculture. Mollison's *Permaculture: A Designer's Manual* stands as the seminal work describing the elements of and values embedded in permaculture. It is an inherently personal form of gardening, tailored to a property's specific microclimates, topography, and use patterns.

Sustainable [R]Evolution starts with a brief overview of permaculture principles, followed by

five sections of site profiles that are grouped by climate in order to “call attention to specific techniques appropriate to their particular ecosystem...and encourage the sharing of ideas and resources between sites with corresponding environments” (p. 20). The sections are Equatorial/Tropical: Forest and Savanna; Arid: Desert and Steppe; Subtropical/Temperate: Humid and Highland; Subtropical/Temperate: Mediterranean and Maritime; and Snow: Continental and Taiga.

The articles within each section range in length from a single page to six or seven pages, so the depth of information varies considerably. Longer profiles highlight particular “domains of action,” a concept developed by Holmgren. These include Land and Nature Stewardship, Tools and Technology, and Land Tenure and Community Governance, among others (pp. 24–25). The editors include descriptions of the domains of action as sidebars throughout the book, often excerpted from other, longer works.

Several of the communities featured are inspiring: indigenous groups taking control of ancestral lands; modern Italians renovating centuries-old structures and giving them new life; urban farmers creating havens of inner-city food production in red-lined minority neighborhoods; a children’s village in Tanzania providing new hope for orphans of the HIV/AIDS crisis. These stories afford a glimpse of how much we can learn about community, healing, re-use, and sustainable change.

There are also surprises. I was aware of the Russian tradition of *dachas*, or home gardens, before reading this book, but did not recognize their productivity. According to contributor Leonid Sharashkin, the production from Russia’s 30 million home gardens represents almost 2.5% of total GDP and 80% of the domestic fruit, berry, and vegetable supply (p. 315).

The most successful stories are those that discuss how projects started, the legal structures that underpin the communities, or that pull back the curtain for a look at the process of making resilient communities. These include the Chikukwa and CELUCT projects in Zimbabwe, Findhorn Ecovillage and Transition Norwich in the UK, the Antonio Núñez Jiménez Foundation in Cuba, and Growing Power and the Los Angeles Eco-Village

in the USA. Some of the larger permaculture teaching and resource centers around the world are also discussed in useful detail. Many other pieces, unfortunately, are short, superficial, and offer little substance. Few contributors mention enough detail to meet the goal of “sharing ideas and resources” referenced above. The single-page resource guide at the end of the book does not correct that defect.

In truth, it is difficult to identify the intended audience for this book. The editors and contributors do not provide enough data for it to act as a resource guide. They do not provide contact information, even for those sites clearly seeking interns, guests, and students, so it is not a travel guide. For readers completely new to the concept of permaculture, the introduction supplies an inadequate framework for the rest of the book. The book is perhaps most suitable for readers looking for good news in the midst of climate change, violent conflict, extreme drought, and the lack of governmental response to these crises. It offers up almost 60 antidotes to the nagging possibility that we humans are incapable of change for the better. Its contributors present a variety of hopeful views for the future of human communities. Experienced permaculture gardeners may also enjoy the book for the permacultural diversity it showcases.

That diversity ends up being a liability. In striving to be inclusive in their definition of permaculture, Birnbaum and Fox stray into territory they said they intended to avoid. In their introduction, they are explicit in their opposition to intellectual colonialism and the privileging of Western knowledge over traditional local knowledge. They approvingly quote one permaculture trainer’s desire to avoid turning permaculture into “just another kind of colonialism—an Australian concept taught by an Australian teacher” (p. 10).

Yet many of the permaculture projects they feature in developing nations were founded by Australians, Americans, or Europeans, and while some locally driven projects highlighted in the book specifically identify with permaculture, many others do not. These profiles either avoid using the word or include a disclaimer that participants do not call what they do “permaculture.” By embracing these projects as permaculture—including a few that predate the concept—Birnbaum and Fox

are in danger of laying claim to traditional and indigenous knowledge just as surely as if they'd planted a flag. For example, I was struck by their description of *hugelkultur* as “a permaculture technique that was traditional to Eastern Europe” (p. 303) rather than as a centuries-old European practice recently adopted and promoted by permaculturalists.

Despite this, *Sustainable [R]Evolution* does shine a welcome spotlight on a growing movement

toward more human-scaled, ecologically minded living. Readers wanting a substantive lesson in permaculture should look elsewhere, but those looking for signs of positive change will find it here, in an easy-to-digest format that will leave them hungry for more.



Reference

Mollison, B. (1988). *Permaculture: A designers' manual*. Sisters Creek, Australia: Tagari Publications.