

NicheCulture – Design of a Concept

Permaculture Inspired Design without a Permanent Culture

It's not come from Nowhere, it's just not been here before....

Client: Myself

Design Process: Design Web

Tools Used: Mind-maps/ Diagram of Resource flows/ Analysis of Principles/
Ethics/Pattern analysis/Spirals of abundance/PASTE

Background to the Design (Reflection on how I arrived at this point)

I first heard the term *Permaculture* in 1991 when my then boyfriend showed me a copy of the Designer's Manual by Bill Mollison. I remember glancing through it, having a vague impression that it was about having a house halfway up a hill (somewhere in Australia) and some orchards, pastures, ponds and so on. I thought it all sounded interesting enough but as someone who grew up in a Council house in Stevenage, the concept of having access to more than one Zone's worth of land was entirely alien. Unlike many people of their generation, my parents resisted the temptation of Thatcher's Right to Buy policy. When they died, I inherited a large number of ashtrays and my Dad's demi-john of sulphuric acid that he kept in the garage (for purposes unknown) but no land and no money with which to purchase any. My experience of Permaculture even to the present day is of being Landless (in terms of ownership) and that is one of the influences in this Design. I do not mention this as something deserving of pity – I do not feel sorry for myself that I do not own land. It is just a factor that plays a part in how and where I design.

Some permaculturists, like Sepp Holzer for example, have a strong affiliation with a single piece of land that they have grown up in and come to know through many years of observation. They know the climate and the vegetation intimately and have worked to create new habitats and flows that improve the natural surroundings. They are truly setting up permanent cultures where, through long observation and designed interventions, they work with the eco-systems in their locality but also regenerate depleted landscapes and increase yields through deliberate planting or landscaping methods. For the landless permaculturist, this deep connection with a single site is less easy to acquire.

Yet even as a landless person growing up in a New Town, I was able to connect with nature from a young age. There wasn't much in the way of woodland around but the thin strip of Beech, Elm and Hawthorn that graced the footpath between our house and my primary school was the site of much den – building and the bike ride (on Stevenage's impressive cycle paths) to the old Church of St Nicholas with its eerie graveyard was a favourite outing back in those halcyon days of the 70s when children left the house after breakfast and came back hours later in search of tea.

As a child, there were some things I found quite difficult. I did not really understand the concept of play- especially make- believe. One of the more confusing things for me at Infant school was being offered a place at a sand pit. I had no idea what to do with it and the concept of there being any enjoyment in this strange experience was outside of my comprehension. I was, however, Clever. This is what I was told – I was not pretty or charming or nice or fun but I was Clever. And so, like a good clever child, I did lots of exams and passed them all and I went to University (first person in my

family to do so) and I got a degree in Chemistry with First Class Hons and people said...we knew you'd do well because you are Clever. But I didn't feel clever. I felt depressed. And mad. And scared. And I was especially scared that someone would find out how mad I was and lock me in a mental hospital. So I spent a lot of time trying not to look mad. Despite the growing list of qualifications I possessed, I didn't really feel like I could do anything useful.

As I grew up, I was always interested in the environment and environmental issues. As the 80s progressed and the threat of nuclear oblivion waxed and waned, I joined CND and the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection, became vegetarian and argued with my working class Tory parents about liberation, peace and justice for all. By the time I flicked through the Designers Manual, I had a lot of scientific knowledge about eco-systems and pollution pathways but no real experience of living close to nature. I had never grown a vegetable or built so much as bat-box. So it didn't really sing to my heart and I didn't think about permaculture at all until the end of the decade. By then I was living in Matlock Bath with two other women, two babies (including my own lovely daughter), two dogs, five chickens and a very marmalade cat called Billie. I part-owned land for the first time ever and we had a poly-tunnel but I didn't really know what to do with it.

So, I went to the Centre for Alternative technology to a Gardening course run by Peter Harper (who has gone on to much greater things!) and I went on a straw-bale building course and one on cob-building and one on greenwood building and then I remembered this thing called Permaculture – so I tried to go on a course about that but I could only find residential courses and none of them would take me with my daughter in tow. And so it goes....and by 2004 my Derbyshire life was gone and I was once again in a new build house but this time in Shepshed – now with a subscription to Permaculture Magazine but still no PDC.

It wasn't until 2008 that I finally did an Introduction to Permaculture course and not until 2011, when a friend from Transition Leicester, Andrew Reeves, decided he wanted to do a permaculture course and so set one up in Leicester that I finally did my PDC. We did one weekend a month for six months with the ever-inspiring Hannah Thorogood teaching us. I managed to play the games on the PDC, although I found some of them disturbing and I loved the inspirational anecdotes and flow of the teaching. It made everything make sense and I felt less mad because my world was full of people who felt the same way as me about justice and the interconnectedness of things and the beauty of trees.

And then I was hooked. I wanted it all; the knowledge, the skills, the people, the community, the beautiful, creative, inspiring whirlpool of thoughts and ideas and designs. So I signed up for my Diploma before the ink was barely dry on my PDC certificate.

And I thought – ah..... I'll take my time.... I'll give myself three full years to get my Diploma (no need to rush, eh?). And I cracked off my first Design (for a compost toilet) with all due haste, armed with coloured pens and good intentions. And I took it to my tutor and she said it was fine and dandy and I thought, eh... I can do this.

Best laid plans.....What happened next is still hard for me to describe. By 2012, I was leading a double-life flying to the USA to be with my partner, Simon, as much as possible, whilst also home-educating my daughter Molly (Niko) and being self-employed. I was working with variety of clients, including Mercenfeld Primary school where I was delivering outdoor education with my colleague, Dani Pattuzzi. Dani and I were also convening the PDC in Leicester for a new group of participants and I was shadowing Hannah on the teaching with a view to becoming a PDC teacher myself

someday. To this end, I did the Permaculture Training of Teachers course in 2013¹. In both the UK and USA, I was also studying plants and gardening and learning a lot about water harvesting and retention in the landscape.

Between 2012 and 2014 I wrote a couple of designs based at Simon's house in Arizona. It was a huge learning curve for me and working in the desert eco-system felt like I had to discover everything again from scratch. All the principles I would usually apply in the UK needed turning upside down and inside out as I tried to work out ways to create more shade, cool rather than heat and deal with extremes of temperature. I felt quite uncertain about the design decisions I made but proud of the amount of research I had done.

When I came to have these designs assessed as part of my Diploma, I was expecting to get feedback on the technical aspects of the designs; whether I'd chosen the right plants and locations/applied the right technical know-how but actually the assessment focused more on my understanding of the stages of the Design Process (in that case, OBREDIMET). I felt hugely disappointed by this. It felt like I had completely misunderstood what the purpose of the Diploma was. I had seen it as a framework on which to hang a deepening of my ecological and technical understanding, as well as a chance to explore new skills, I also felt that the content of my designs was personal and bound up with my sense of identity/Self-hood, so being told that I'd allocated things to the wrong box made me feel constrained and irritated.

I spent a long time railing against this. It was emotional for me. I felt excluded and angry and sad. Clearly this was about more than just the Diploma – so I spent a long time looking at why I felt so negative and whether there was any justification for me to be angry at the Diploma system but also looking at what was going on for me as a learner. In terms of the Diploma system, I do think there are ways that it could be improved to clarify apprentice expectations and I have now joined the Diploma Working Group. I am planning to help revise some of the documentation and clarify some of the language used. This may help with clarity but it won't deal entirely with the source of my disappointment, which was more about wanting a qualification that would reflect my personal journey and development, rather than me having to squash my experience into boxes that are not of my own creation. I was finding that taking time to write up designs in the format required was detracting from other ways I wanted to spend time (especially writing time as I have limited amounts of this). However, in the end I had to decide whether to continue with the Diploma as it is, or whether to quit.

I reached a point, in discussion with two different tutors, where I described my experience of permaculture and of designing and they both said words to the effect of...that's all fine but it's not Permaculture Design because Permaculture Design has to conform to a certain standard i.e. Every design has to contain Ethics and Principles, Use of a recognised Design Process, Use of a variety of design tools and contain both Evaluation and Reflection.

¹ I cried a lot on the TOT. I found it the contradictions between what we were being taught was good practice and what was happening in reality on the course confusing and upsetting. I passed the PTLLS at Level 4. To do so, I found I had to write things to demonstrate competence against a set of criteria which I do not genuinely believe to represent either common or necessarily best practice. I found this painful. I feel similarly about placing things in Design Process boxes. Inside my head, things don't always belong in straightforward boxes and I still cannot differentiate between Evaluation and Reflection using the definitions in the Diploma guidance. This gave me a strong sense of failure for a while.

This raised one very big contradiction for me because I had also been told from the outset of the Diploma that I could apply Permaculture Design to *anything* but when I looked at the real life projects I was involved in, trying to apply a full Design Process and a variety Tools was unwieldy at best and unworkable at worst. So many of the places where I take my permaculture thinking and creativity are short-lived projects or projects where I am not employed to create permaculture design per se and the actual remit doesn't necessarily fit into a design framework. Changes occur too rapidly to record every detail.

Constantly reiterating the ethics and principles in every design started to feel counter-productive. I was becoming bored and irritated by phrases that I had hitherto found inspiring – not because I had tired of the concepts behind them but because I felt that they were already integrated into the real creation of the designs and drawing them out on paper over and over was taking time and energy that I could otherwise have devoted to coming up with more imaginative solutions.

I decided not to quit but I was still feeling frustrated. I was pacing around, talking to the walls and trying to get to the bottom of why when everything I do is inspired by permaculture ethics and principles, why is it not then Permaculture? I tried to look for the common features of my real life projects to see why so much of what I do doesn't seem to naturally fit into lengthy and detailed design frameworks and why some tools seem redundant or counter-productive. For example, a web of connections to me is of limited use. I can see that having many connections indicates a more resilient system but multiple lines with no explanation of the nature of the connection just disturbs me.

Unlike a lot of people, I haven't found that switching from OBREDIMET to the DESIGN WEB (Looby McNamara)has helped. I've used it for this current Concept Design (so that I have an example of using it in my portfolio) but previous attempts to use it haven't worked out for me and I settled on generally using simple, broad processes such as the Action Learning Cycle, Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) or Collect-Evaluate-Apply-Plan. Using a combination of these and the classic land-based approaches of OBREDIMET and SADIMET, I managed to write nine designs which I hope will meet the criteria for me to pass the Diploma.

This is the tenth design and it differs from all my other designs in both using the Design Web as a Design Process and in being a design of a Concept rather than anything tangible. To illustrate the design I will be using four examples of projects that I am currently involved in.

The Concept I am designing is called NicheCulture (permaculture inspired design). It relates to the work that I do on a range of separate sites trying to encourage food growing, nature awareness, health through contact with nature and ultimately creating permanent healthy cultures. I think my approach could also be useful to others who work across a variety of projects rather on a single piece of land. For the purposes of this design, I am looking at NicheCulture as it applies to land-based projects or organisations. It could be interesting to further develop the concept at a later date to apply to non-land projects.

Note on Use of Design Web

I am using the labels from the Design Web to delineate the different sections of the design but not necessarily in the order in which they appear in Lobby's book, People and Permaculture. I'm going to be starting with an overview of the PATTERN² of my current lifestyle which then leads into an

² Use of Capitals here denotes anchor points on the Design Web.

explanation of the IDEAS that form the core of NicheCulture, including those things which HELP and those things which LIMIT Niche-systems . I'll be including an analysis of how NicheCulture INTEGRATES with permaculture ethics and PRINCIPLES.

The ACTION section will look at four current examples of how I use NicheCulture in my life and what the MOMENTUM is to INTEGRATE with each other to create a wider system of mutual support, including those things which can be shared between niches. I will also then look at what I APPRECIATE in each Niche.

From this I will develop a VISION for the further development of the NicheCulture concept including ways of sharing this more widely and for incorporating moments of PAUSE, REFLECTION and APPRECIATION.

What is NicheCulture? (IDEAS)

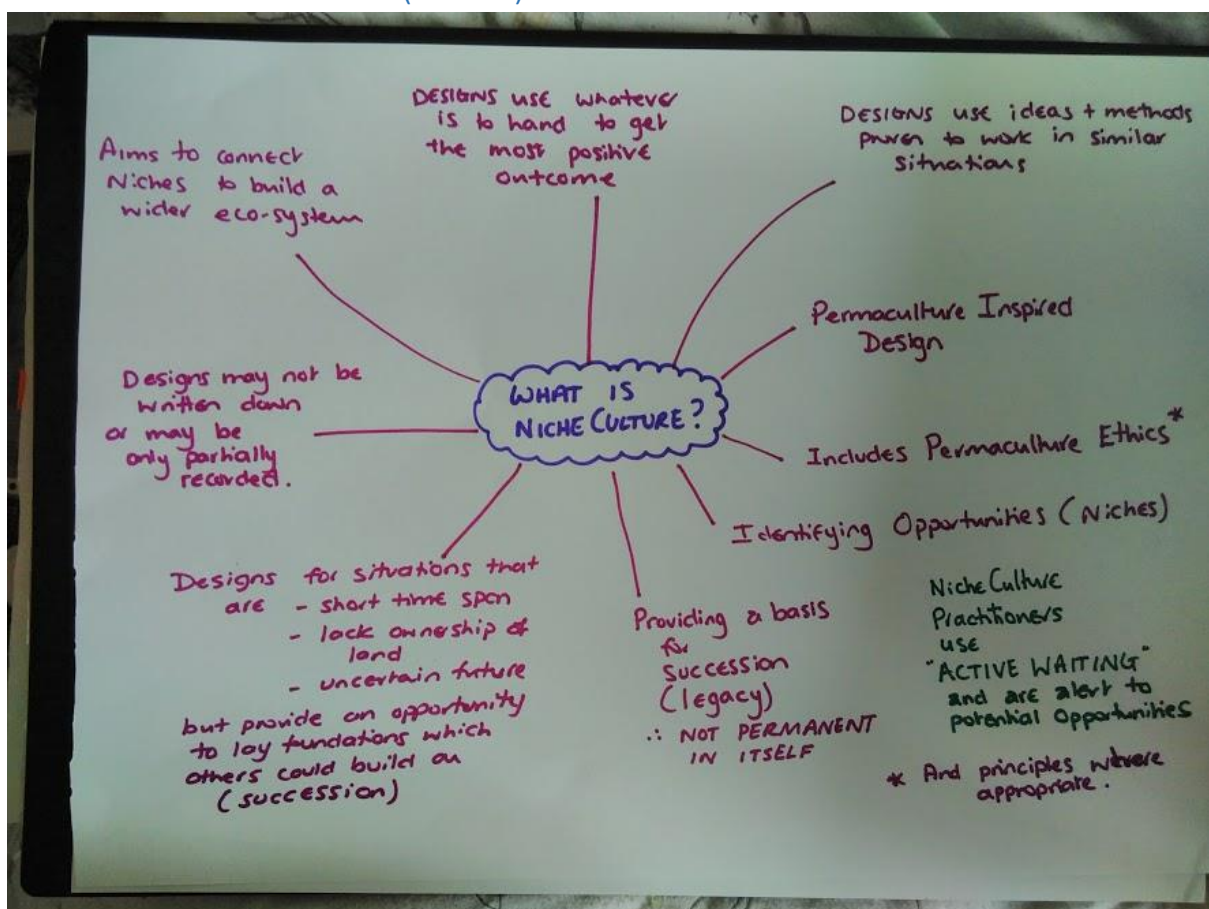


Figure 1 Mindmap of Key Features of NicheCulture

Definition of Ecological Niche

A niche is the place or function occupied by a particular organism within an ecosystem. Where there is bare ground, pioneer species will colonise and lay the foundation for successor species leading eventually to climax vegetation for that habitat. Niches and the organisms within them connect through complex, dynamic webs of connection to create eco-systems.



To me, every project or organisation or physical space that is not currently embodying permaculture thinking is like the bare rock and this creates an OPPORTUNITY for the NicheCulture Practitioner to be like the lichen and start to lay down the initial organic matter that will allow for everything which comes after to build upon, until finally everywhere is fully using permaculture thinking (climax vegetation state!).

In some places, the rock may not be completely bare; there may already be some good practice in place and in this case, the NicheCulture practitioner may be more like moss or bracken or the first flowering plants – their role is to take things to the next evolutionary stage.

The length of time the Practitioner has to spend in different Niches may vary. So for example, I have been working in the Niche of Mercenfeld Primary school for six years and have strong bonds there and have been able to be present for more than evolutionary stage myself but in other Niches I may only have a matter of days or even hours with the client group. I may also not be directly employed to give Permaculture advice as such. Usually my remit will be to give Food Growing advice or deliver an outdoor learning session or even help a company audit its environmental impacts. But as a NicheCulture Practitioner my permaculture thinking will be integrated into whatever specific advice I give and my sessions will incorporate permaculture thinking even though I do not use that word.

A second vital role of the Practitioner is to have an overview of the Niches and be able to make connection between them. I regularly move physical resources (plants/pots/tools/ building materials) between Niches. I also move ideas between Niches, using things that have worked in one place successfully in other places. I also move information and contact details, putting people from one Niche in touch with each other so that they can help and support each other in my absence. See Patterns section below.

Relationship with Permaculture

NicheCulture is totally steeped in Permaculture. It is based on exactly the same Ethics and Principles but it is applicable to bringing about change in situations where (from the Practitioner/ Designer's perspective) there is:

- Short term contact with Niche/ No guarantee of future involvement

- Lack of land ownership/control
- Insufficient time to do a full permaculture design cycle
- Opportunities to lay foundations on which others can build
- Opportunities to build connections with other existing Niches
- A Practitioner with sufficient knowledge of permaculture thinking and enough previous project experience to be able to quickly apply this knowledge and experience in new situations

It differs from Permaculture in that it recognises itself as being an evolutionary stage rather than the final desired outcome.

In my Diploma Action Learning Pathway, I have listed all the projects that I am involved with and analysed which of these is most suited to a traditional permaculture design approach (using a full design process and a range of tools) and which use a NicheCulture approach.

Going Deep and Going Wide

I have long considered that sometimes a Practitioner has to choose between deeply developing a single project, thereby entrenching permaculture or covering a range of projects and being able to spread ideas more widely but having less time and influence in which to truly embed the thinking and practice. I have described the Niches in this in terms of this – so a WIDE niche is one part of a wider multiple site or short term project and a DEEP niche is where I can repeatedly work on the same project.

Four examples of NicheCulture projects are given in this Design. I have differentiated between

DEEP³ and WIDE niches. DEEP niches are those where I have worked over longer periods or time or have more INFLUENCE over what happens in that Niche. Two are well established/DEEP Niches (Mercenfeld/Graceworks), one is a medium Niche (Home) and one is a wide Niche (Kestrel). Within the examples given it explains why they are NicheCulture projects.

Niche as a concept in my Work as a Community Gardener and Teacher

In my working life as a Community Gardener and Teacher, I work in many different locations each week. I may be in up to five different locations in a single week. Sometimes I am working with groups who have no prior knowledge of creating food gardens/vegetable plots and sometimes I am working with established organisations. Some of the places I work, I have an established connection and long-standing relationships, in some places I am forming relationships as time progresses but in other places I am meeting people for the first time and trying to offer them advice and get to know them at the same time.

Much of my work is geographically centred on the LE5 district of Leicester City, which is also where I live but I also work one day per week in the County at a school in Markfield, called Mercenfeld Primary.

I work with schools, mixed age community groups and with groups of adults. The area has an ethnically mixed population. One of the schools I work with is a Muslim Girls' school and another of the primary schools is 90% Muslim. Much of the work I do focuses on teaching people of all ages to grow food but generally I also try to incorporate wider nature awareness. My work is funded by a

³ Use of capitals here denotes key vocabulary, which if I were writing a book about NicheCulture I would define more expansively.

variety of means. Sometimes I am paid directly by an organisation or school or I may be working as a sub-contractor to another funded organisation. I also work as a volunteer one day a week (sometimes more) at an organisation called Graceworks. This is open to all members of the community and runs a variety of events, as well as drop in gardening sessions.

Each of these locations where I work is like a separate Niche. In terms of what I am trying to achieve there, each will offer different opportunities and each will have different limiting factors as to what I can achieve. In all of them I am ACTIVELY WAITING⁴ for opportunities to arise to apply permaculture thinking- especially the ethics and principles.

Patterns

NET/WEB PATTERN

Looking at my personal current NicheCulture it may seem to lack patterns because my work is often on short contracts or has very limited resources and it may seem quite chaotic. To compensate for this I have developed ways of moving resources between projects in a form of constant exchange and flow.

So for example, I sow extra seeds in those projects where I have poly-tunnel and potting space and I move these when they are strong enough to all the Niches that don't have this facility. The pattern of movement changes as needs arise and opportunities emerge. This creates an inter-connecting network or web.

⁴ ACTIVE WAITING for me is similar to ACTIVE LISTENING – it is a state which may appear passive as there is no visible action taking place but in reality the Practitioner is constantly alert and consciously waiting for the moment where an opportunity will arise to further her deeper aims of creating permaculture solutions.

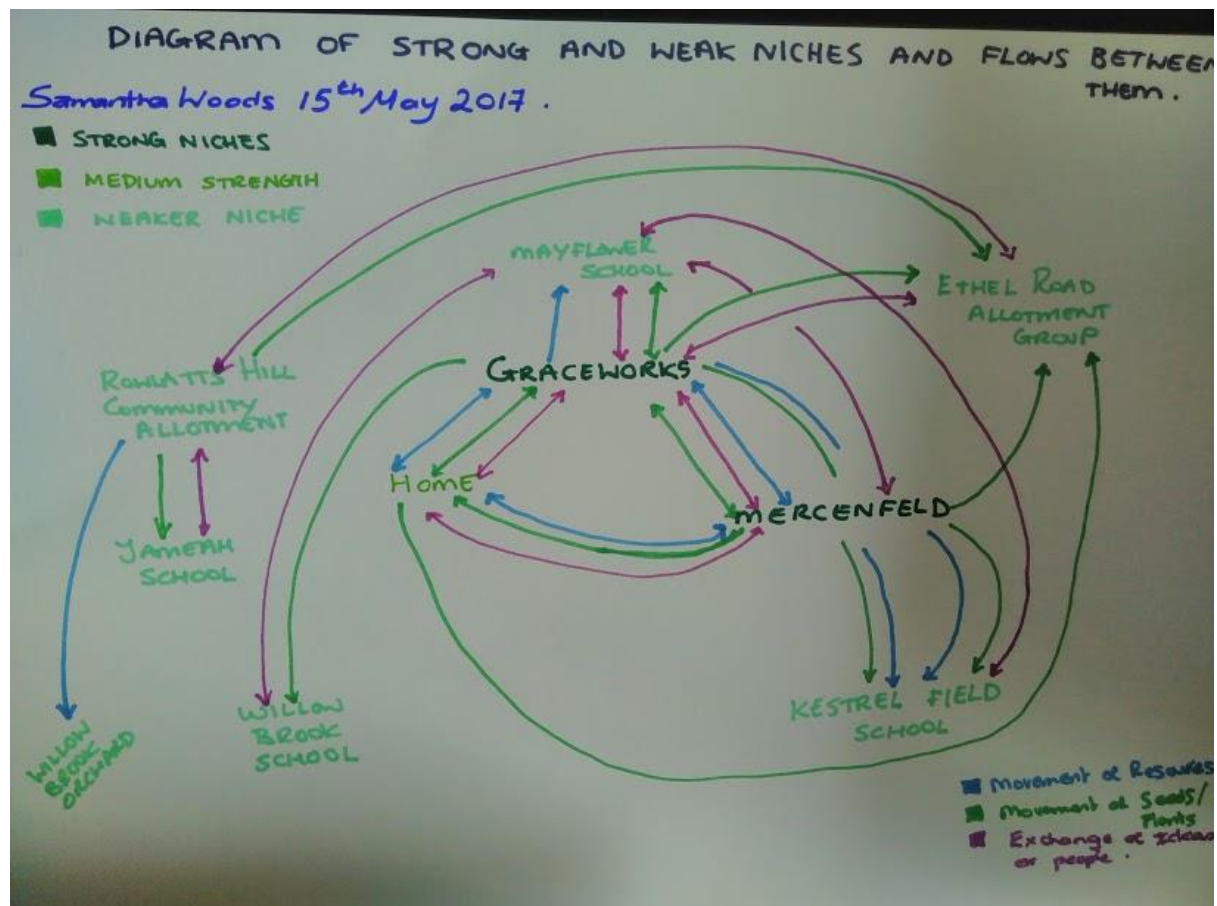


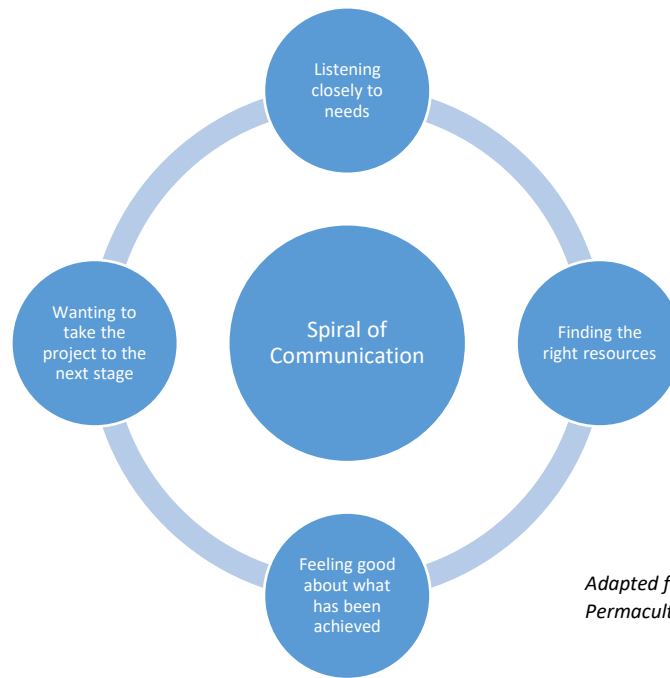
Figure 2 Flows between Niches

SPIRAL PATTERN

The NicheCulture approach is also about creating SPIRALS OF ABUNDANCE again through the movement of ideas and resources within and between Niches.

For example, I was employed by TCV (Trust for Conservation Volunteers) to provide some Food Growing advice to three different local schools at varying stages of developing food gardens. I realised that one of the schools, Mayflower, already had staff who knew loads about growing food and that my advice was essentially going to be superfluous. So instead, I used the time allocated to them to create funding bids to get them more physical resources. I did something similar at Kestrel Fields (see example) which has resulted in additional funding coming in, which means that the school will have more resources to develop their garden even though I'm no longer paid to be involved.

So rather than seeing my role as an Expert who arrives, delivers advice on how to plant lettuce (or whatever) and then leaves, I see myself as a facilitator who arrives, listens to the people on the ground and then searches her internal database of all possible resources and solutions for that situation and makes a range of suggestions. Building confidence with staff, especially in schools, is important. Very often staff don't really need specific information (although they certainly appreciate tips on growing specific things) so much as they need someone to listen to them and to encourage and support them in whatever steps they want to take. So I spend a lot more time telling other people how good their ideas already are than I do telling them clever things about vegetables. I make the process fun and heap enthusiasm and encouragement into every step. This also benefits me, because often if people then get more funding, they will invite me back.



Adapted from Looby McNamara in People and Permaculture

HELPS and LIMITS in NicheCulture Systems

NicheCulture works because the Practitioner is constantly alert and ACTIVELY WAITING for opportunities. The Practitioner will take her acquired knowledge and skills from Niche to Niche and also be acquiring new knowledge and skills along the way.

On arriving at a new site/project, the Practitioner will be assessing the available resources and boundaries through:

- Direct observation
- Interviews with key people
- If time allows, other survey methods – especially identifying aspect/slope/access/ soil types/PASTE (plants, animals, structures, tools, events) at a broad/superficial level.

This is similar to the Survey stage of SADIMET but often has to be carried out quickly and not necessarily to great depth. The important thing here is to gather the key information in the time available. The depth and breadth of this stage depends on how long the Practitioner can spend in the Niche. Rather than seeking the permaculture perfect solution (identifying every single item that

could help or limit the project) the Practitioner is trying to identify anything which could thwart the success of the project. The skill here lies in knowing what to prioritise.

For example, in school food gardens a common and recurring problem can be that the Grounds Contractors (or Caretaker/Grounds staff) damage the pupils' garden areas either by mowing or applying herbicides inappropriately in growing areas. Therefore it always a good idea to identify who the contractors are and check what kind of relationship exists between them and the staff actually working in the school garden on the food growing /wildlife project. If the staff closely involved are Teaching assistants, for example, they may not feel empowered to negotiate with contractors or grounds staff and they may appreciate an outsider politely stepping in.

Identifying Opportunities for HELPS

There are a lot of potential HELPS that can turn up in Niche sites. For example, old tyres are easy to come by. These can make instant growing areas if projects don't have capacity to build raised beds but could also be turned into tyre wormeries. Most projects starting out have capacity for tyre growing but not for doing wormeries – so the Practitioner needs to assess whether this something that could be done with time and staff confidence level available. I call this creating Niches within the Niche. Likewise Pallets can be compost bins (easy and quick), Bug hotels (easy and quick), Vertical gardens (needs a bit more time for planning) or pallet furniture (lots of planning and extra tools and safety requirements, especially if working with children). The Practitioner needs to identify the best use of an available resource for that Niche at its current state of evolution.

Parents of school pupils and the wider Community are also a potentially huge help in starting gardens from scratch. Donations of materials, pots, tools, compost and time and energy can get the project off the ground. Local companies are often happy to donate materials. There are also funding streams such as Awards for All and the Bags for Help schemes (which redirect the tax on carrier bags), which are relatively quick to apply for. They have the drawback that they usually require money to be spent within a fixed time limit and usual require the bid to be for things which have never been funded before. I call this the Curse of Novelty.

Identifying LIMITS

One of the key limits in a lot of school gardens and allotment sites can be related to watering. Sources of water may be an issue but more likely the real limiting factor will be volunteers to do the actual work. The Practitioner needs to identify how this limit can be addressed. Mulching helps(if materials are available) and established vegetable gardens should not require much watering except in drought conditions but poly-tunnels and greenhouses will need some kind of input.

For example, on the Rowlatts Hill Community allotment where I teach sessions, there is nobody available to water regularly and so there is nothing growing in the poly tunnel. I am ACTIVELY WAITING to come up with a solution to this. I do this mainly by trying to get to know nearby plot holders and forming bonds with them. I am gradually identifying which ones might be persuaded to take a role in watering but I don't want to rush this (Small and Slow Solutions) as there is a history in the area of people being pressurised into volunteering with poor long term results.

Again, the important thing in NicheCulture is for the Practitioner to be able to prioritise dealing with the key limiting factors and laying the foundation for those who come after to be able to deal with any residual limits.

Another key limiting factor can be related to decision making power in a Niche. It may be that the person who has invited the Practitioner in has only limited financial or executive control. It is

important to identify this early on and if necessary, try to access the people who hold the real power!

Permaculture PRINCIPLES in NicheCulture (INTEGRATION)

Permaculture Principles are essential to NicheCulture.

Permaculture Principle The authors of these are: DH – David Holmgren MS – Mollison/Slay BM – Bill Mollison	Application Example in NicheCulture
Relative Location (MS)	Applies but there may be limited space available. E.g. at Kestrel one of the reasons for siting the growing area near the woodland was so that children could play in both spaces. Children at Kestrel are all under 7 so tend to be closely supervised and not have much access to wilder space.
Each element performs many functions (MS)	Same as in Permaculture. For example the Polytunnel at Mercenfeld is both a growing space and a sheltered teaching space, it's also a micro-climate and habitat for frogs due to the damp end staying wet most of the year.
Functions supported by many elements (MS)	Same as in Permaculture: For example – Forest Garden at Graceworks has a range of different apple trees all fruiting at different times – also has a range of different kinds of fruit occupying different microclimates around the site. So the function of creating a fruit yield is split between multiple elements.
Energy Efficient planning: Zone, sector and slope. (MS)	It can be harder to do a full analysis of this in NicheCulture due to time and resource constraints – it depends on the strength of the bond between the Practitioner and the Niche. A rough analysis may be all that can be achieved but the important thing is to prioritise. For example at Kestrel Fields, there is quite a distance between the garden and a source of water and no quick way of harvesting water at the site – so the design prioritised planting in the ground (with fewer raised beds) and mulching.
Using Biological Resources (MS)	An example of this would be that I regularly pass on comfrey plants or lumps of root from Niche to niche and encourage people to set up their own comfrey patches. The patch at Graceworks started off from plants at Mercenfeld and more bits of root were given to all the PDC participants so they could take these back to their own Niches.
Stacking (MS)	Time-stacking occurs when I use time at one Niche to create resources for another (e.g. seed sowing) or funding from one project to pay for time to apply for additional funding. Also classic stacking techniques such as setting up Forest Gardens, as at Graceworks.
Cycling of Nutrients, energy and resources (MS)	This occurs both within and between Niches. I am constantly shifting surplus from one Niche to another. Recently I brought the dregs of the manure pile at Mercenfeld home in bags to start my squash bed. I've also used the chipper from school (which is already borrowed) to chip up my apple tree prunings to make mulch for my Forest Garden strip.
Accelerating succession and evolution (MS)	This is a core function of Niche Culture – by occupying a Niche everything done in that Niche should be leaving a legacy on which the next stage of succession can build. For example – building staff confidence makes it much more likely that projects will continue to evolve long after the Practitioner has left the site.

Diversity, including guilds (MS)	Working across many sites and organisations with different mixes of age, ethnicity and ability creates a strong interconnected network. For example at Graceworks our older Asian volunteers have brought knowledge and skills from their own cultures and encourage us to grow exotic veg. Last year we feasted on Bottle gourd in many different dishes created by our volunteer Vinay Patel.
Edge Effect (MS)	Really important in NicheCulture – looking for ways of extending Edge is a key part of ACTIVE WAITING and opportunity identification. I have a constant flow of edges and interconnections. For example, the work I'm doing at Ethel Road allotments started because I met Ibrahim at the One Roof Night Shelter and we got talking about home education and food growing. His home ed group were looking for help and advice on their allotment and I was looking for groups wanting food growing advice for my TCV funded work. I'm now planning to run a mini permaculture course with a focus on food growing for their group – so we met outside the permaculture community but on a project that bordered both our separate lives and that edge has been very productive
Attitudinal Principles: PC is information and imagination intensive (MS)	NicheCulture creates interconnections through which ideas and information can flow. For example – Graceworks hosted a teachers meeting so that schools could share ideas – one of the attendees then joined the PDC. I have borrowed ideas from Binita and Moomtaz (Garden Club leaders at Mayflower) for craft in the garden and taken this to other schools. I try to act as a conduit to allow flows of information and imagination throughout the loose network.
Work with Nature rather than against (BM)	The reduced survey time available time in wide Niches can make this harder but in stronger Niches where there is more time for Observation, this principle can be applied as usual. For example, at Mercenfeld we created a Bog garden on the flowline of the run off from a mobile classroom (Niche within a Niche).
The Problem is the Solution (BM)	NicheCulture as a concept evolved from my problem of wanting to apply permaculture thinking in every project that I am involved in but not finding full design cycles or design tools to be useful. So the concept grew from a problem but it is itself the solution to that problem.
Make the least change for the greatest benefit (BM)	This principle applies especially in Wide Niches where the practitioner has limited time to create a legacy. For example at Mercenfeld, I applied for funding for an Outdoor Classroom, which now allows all the teaching staff to use the outdoor space even for standard teaching. The application took me less than 1 hour.
Yield of a system is theoretically unlimited (BM)	In NicheCulture - the Practitioner may never witness the final yield of the work they carry out because the yields should continue and multiply from the initial input. The important thing is to leave a legacy on which succession can build. A lot of my work focuses on trying to inspire others and I have no way of knowing what the total yields may be from that process. Maximising yield in Niche Culture may involve a combination of using tried and tested approaches e.g. creating wormeries everywhere but also the processes of Actively Waiting and Identifying Opportunity can lead to far more imaginative solutions.
Everything Gardens (or modifies its environment) (BM)	Each Niche has a life of its own and modifies both the physical site it occupies and the participants. For example at Graceworks by re-purposing a Church to create a

	community garden, we hope to create a modified environment that will allow a positive succession even if Graceworks as an entity ceases to exist. Within the project, everything we have established and planted has a role in making it less likely that the land will just be sold off for building plots.
Observe and Interact (DH)	In wide Niches the time available for observation may be curtailed before action has to take place e.g. in a funded project there may be strict time limits. One way to mitigate the negative effect of this is to take Observations from place to place and apply common knowledge and skills at different sites. So for example, a quick assessment of aspect can give enough information for the Practitioner to make reasonable suggestions e.g. shady areas are likely to be able to support blackcurrants (unless there are other limiting factors).
Catch and Store Energy (DH)	In NicheCulture, identifying opportunities is a key part of the process. For example at Graceworks, we have a large South facing roof . We are ACTIVELY WAITING for the opportunity to use this for energy capture. Recently we received £1000 funding for Rainwater harvesting, which will also make use of the large roof area.
Obtain a Yield (DH)	Same as in permaculture generally. Identifying opportunities for yields is a key part of the process. For example at Kestrel the proximity of the school to the huge TESCO store means that they can harvest a lot of resource (Tesco supplied tools and compost for Grand-parents gardening) and then use this to create their own garden yields – both vegetable and educational.
Apply Self Regulation and Accept feedback (DH)	As I work for so many different clients and depend heavily on my professional reputation to gain work, I have to be constantly vigilant that I am providing the right service to my clients. Sometimes I get feedback through comments on forms. My best feedback is whether I get invited back for more work.
Use and Value Renewable Resources and Services	As in any permaculture project but again, possibly on a reduced scale in wider niches. Identifying opportunities for water retention in the landscape/harvesting/recycling/ using solar gain and renewable technology can occur in any niche but will be scaled to the available time/funding. For example, at Mercenfeld we have an extensive collection of water butts which help our Volunteers to keep the polytunnel watered over the Summer but we hope in time to replace these with an IBC, as in dry Summers they can run out of water. This is a strong niche. In a wide niche, Kestrel, I have talked to the staff about collecting water but they are not confident yet about installing collection so we are relying on mulching to reduce water stress but as the garden progresses they are likely to see why they need this and to value it more highly.
Produce No waste(DH)	Applies both within and between Niches. By moving resources from Niche to Niche, this improves efficiency. I use Home and Graceworks as place to nurture plants eventually destined for other Niches because I know if I leave vulnerable seedlings in the wrong place, they will die and be wasted.
Design from Patterns to Details (DH)	I work in a whole range of different school gardens that are all superficially different. However, there is a whole range of things which form common patterns when working with schools - such as safeguarding procedures, issues around term time and holiday time (care for the

	garden/harvesting times) , curriculum pressure and so on. These are common to all schools, By understanding the over-arching patterns these can be worked into all designs e.g. choosing crops that mature in term time. Once determined these patterns can be taken from Niche to Niche, and then the detailed plans for each Niche can be tailored to that specific site.
Integrate rather Segregate (DH)	I create connections between all of the Niches I work in. Where appropriate I will invite people from one Niche to meet and work with people from other Niches e.g. Between Graceworks and Rowllatts Hill there is a lot of cross-pollination of folk. All my sessions are designed to be inclusive.
Small and Slow Solutions (DH)	In some Niches it is not possible to work slowly (as the project may be short lived) but even where this is the case, using the small and slow approach can be useful. For example, I only had a short time to work with Kestrel Fields but one of the messages I tried to pass on to Natalie (my contact there) was to take her time with the project and let it build slowly and not to worry so much about whether crops grew or failed but to enjoy playing with the plants and with the children in the garden.
Use and Value Diversity (DH)	As in permaculture – it is the diversity of Niches which give the overall network its resilience.
Use Edge and Value the Marginal	As in permaculture generally and see Edge Effect comments above. Some of the Niche sites are quite marginal. For example , access to Rowllatts Hill is an issue. The site is also at the bottom of a slope, which has made that particular plot not popular with other allotment holders. However, it is a good plot for the community allotment, being close to the main gate and relatively isolated so community groups can run around without disturbing others.
Creatively Use and Respond to Change	In my world, change is a constant factor. The balance of my clients, the vagaries of funding, the location of my work are always in flux and I have to be able to adapt and use each new environment positively. This is a key part of why I have developed the Niche Culture concept because I do not have a PERMANENT culture – things are always shifting. But my ultimate idea is that eventually there are so many Niches interconnecting that this becomes a PermaCulture.

Action

I have chosen four Niche projects to illustrate NicheCulture in action. The four examples all follow the same pattern of describing the project:

- Short Description of the Project
- What's My Role?
- Why is this a Niche?
- What kind of Niche is it?
- How are the Permaculture ethics lived here?
- What are the Identified Opportunities?
- What is the Legacy/Next Stage of Succession?
- What Links are there to the wider (social) eco-system?

- Momentum(Design Anchor Point)
- Appreciation(Design Anchor Point)

Pause

I find being involved in lots of different projects invigorating but I do also really value times of rest. This is the last design in my Portfolio and I plan to take some time out to absorb all the learning. I use meditation on a regular basis and I practice Kundalini Yoga but the Diploma process has impacted on me a lot in mental health terms and I will be glad to move on to other things.

In terms of the NicheCulture concept, there is an obvious pause ahead as I will be sharing this with other people for the first time and getting feedback for the first time, which feels nerve-wracking but also interesting. I think it will also take me some time to absorb this and to consider where to go with this next.

Vision

My Vision for the NicheCulture Concept is that I continue to use it to be able to integrate permaculture thinking into every project in my life without being constrained by having to develop ideas within a fixed design framework. I can therefore work in a more organic way- pursuing opportunities as they arise.

I can see this possibly being something I could adapt into a workshop format and possibly a magazine article or even a short stand-alone publication.

I could see myself expanding this concept to look at different kinds of Niche in more detail and different types of Legacy/Paths to Succession. I think this could become a useful thinking tool even in standard permaculture design.

Reflection

I would really be interested to know if this concept is useful to other people and whether there are people who would like to work with me on developing it further. It would be fascinating to develop it for non-land based as well land –based projects.

I can't tell really whether this would be of use to anyone other than myself but it has worked for me as a way of recognising the permaculture influence that pervades all of my work – even those parts that are not suitable for a full permaculture design.

Evaluation Plan

I am giving this Design to three key members of my planned Accreditation Peer Review panel to read and give me feedback over the next few weeks. This will help me evaluate how clearly I have described the concept and also I have asked them to comment on whether they would find this useful in their own practice.