

A NEW LOOK FOR A NEW YEAR

Although he lived 2600 years ago, the Chinese sage Lao Tse has come to the aid of the ALTER Project. His advice goes like this: "If you want to achieve anything, start with its opposite. If you want to keep anything, admit that something in it is worth discarding. If you would be strong, admit that you are weak."

After five years of trying to interest various public and private groups in the building of a thirty million dollar mega-structure for experimentation and development of alternatives in agriculture and energy production, we've concluded that we were attempting to achieve too much, too fast. With Lao Tse's guidance we've placed that dream way back on the stove and begun with its opposite. The remarkable thing is this: once we began, people rallied 'round. People relate to something that costs thirty dollars a lot quicker than they do to something that costs thirty million.

We began by inviting Dan Hemenway to campus last summer to run a three week, 145 contact hour, Permaculture Design Course. For those who don't know what Permaculture is let me offer a brief description. Permaculture is an acronym for "permanent agriculture," a concept that is changing the way farmers, designers, and others look at and use the land. Australians Bill Mollison and David Holmgren coined the term in 1978 to describe a new way of arranging structures, trees, gardens, and animals for maximum production, integration of all elements, less labor and the conservation of natural resources. In essence, a permaculture mimics natural ecosystems. It uses ecological principles consciously in the design of self-sustaining food, fiber and energy producing systems: weaving together the elements of microclimate, annual and perennial species, water and soil management and human needs into harmoniously and interdependently connected human communities.

The idea of Permaculture is not new. As early as 1911, an agronomist named F. H. King traveled throughout the Far East studying natural methods of farming employed by people there. Upon his return, he wrote a major book on the subject called **Farms of Forty Centuries or Permanent Agriculture in China, Korea and Japan**. The reprint of the complete text is available from the Rodale Press of Emmaus, PA.

Dan Hemenway, one of three certified Permaculture instructors in the U.S., and his students left us with a tentative design for an old farmhouse and the five acres immediately around it on a portion of our campus. Early in November '86,

we began to implement and refine that design. So far, well over a hundred students, faculty and people from surrounding communities have shown up, with their tools, to do the labor. It's cold around here in November, but the physical and communal warmth we generated was more than enough to see us through. Before it became impossible to put a shovel into the ground anymore we had dug a pond thirty feet long, fifteen feet wide and five feet deep through solid grey clay which will provide irrigation for the gardens downgrade. We also cleared away brush and strategically planted trees and hedges and felled a huge spruce which would have provided too much shade for the greenhouse which we will be adding to the house. We made Christmas decorations from the spruce and realized \$400.00 for the project from their sale.

The house itself needs everything done to it and we are starting at the top. We will insulate the roof and continue with the north and east walls with a view to retaining enough heat to reconnect the electricity and water. When that is accomplished, we will proceed to reorganize the interior according to standard building codes and in keeping with Permaculture Design which attempts to integrate what goes on inside a dwelling with what is going on outside. The end product will be a permanent demonstration site which will be open to the public for interpretation and education. What we are doing is readily transferrable and adaptable to anyone who has a house and some land around it and is interested in developing a healthier and more self-sustaining style of life and one which does not make a negative impact on the environment.

ALTER's ambition to experiment with alternatives in agriculture and energy survives, but on a scale much more "human" than our original vision. How long it takes to accomplish this depends on the availability of materials, manpower and money. One thing is certain. We will heed Scott Nearing's advice and "pay as we go."

Among other more general purposes which we hope to serve through *The Alternator*, will be monthly updates on our progress with this Permaculture Design. If you live near enough and would like to participate in what we're doing you are welcome to join us. There will be something worthwhile for you to do regardless of your age, special talent or physical strength. Subscribing to this newsletter would be a start. Since we are not seeking advertizing, our only interest is in covering our printing and postage costs while sharing useful information.

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