

***Cultivating Concrete Utopia: Understanding How Japan's  
Permaculture Experiments are Shaping a Political Vision of Sustainable Living***

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The Asian Conference on Sustainability, Energy and the Environment 2019  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

While the Japanese culture has long fascinated because of its respect for nature, this did not prevent Japanese society from significantly fueling some of today's most burning agro-environmental issues. More recently however, in reaction to the increasing recognition of the problems posed by the industrial agriculture model, diverse alternative models of food production have emerged throughout the country. Within these alternative models, the case of permaculture is particularly interesting, as it merges internationally shared targets for sustainable agriculture with socio-cultural features of sustainable living. Indeed, permaculture was originally constructed from the terms "permanent," "agriculture," and "culture" and it has spread rapidly as a social movement promoting ways of living that tackle sustainability through the nexus between nature, culture and agriculture. Building on the data collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with Japanese permaculture practitioners, this paper gives an overview of the vision of sustainable living shared and conveyed by Japan's permaculture movement, and attempts to show *from where* this vision is experimented. In order to spell out the double bind in which the permaculture movement seems to be caught, I use the concept of "concrete utopia," which refers to concrete experiments with sustainable living that, while localized in time and space, nevertheless carry within them the seeds of a possible – but still utopian – generalization. I thus show how the Japanese permaculture movement seeks sustainability *within* Japanese culture. The Japanese case highlights how cultural and environmental sustainability mutually reinforce each other and thereby enriches the concept of concrete utopia.

Keywords: Permaculture; sustainable agriculture; sustainable culture; concrete utopia; transition pathways; alter-politics.

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## **Introduction: Permaculture experiments of sustainable living as an independence/interdependence dilemma**

In this paper I propose to shed new light on the tension between independence and interdependence – the theme of the 2019 Asian Conference on Sustainability, Energy and the Environment (ACSEE) – by means of the concept of “concrete utopia.” This tension seems to be a paradox that is symptomatic for sustainability (Lockyer & Veteto, 2015): we need to imagine and create a sustainable world – to make ourselves independent – while for an indeterminate time remaining materially and culturally dependent on the present (unsustainable) world. In other words, any attempt to go beyond the extant social system puts us in the uneasy position of having to criticize it while still being embedded in it, making the “widely promoted concept of sustainability [...] ultimately utopian in nature; it is the good state that we must strive for but may not actually exist except in theory” (Lockyer & Veteto, 2015: 52).

I make use of the concept of concrete utopia as a framework to analyze and reflect on the data I have been collecting between 2017 and 2019 during ethnographic fieldwork on the permaculture movement in Japan. It enables me to underscore the dilemma in which permaculture is caught in terms of transition pathways: the scaling-up of what may at first sight look like a-political ecological gardening experiments is, in fact, a highly political issue. The concept of concrete utopia makes it possible to deploy the complex and intricate relations that permaculture has built with the hegemonic system, and to show how challenging it is to think about permaculture without – i.e., in a total independence from – that system.

The paper is structured in four parts. It starts with a description of permaculture and how it merges sustainable agriculture and sustainable living in order to propose a consistent, all-encompassing model of society that could “compete” with the hegemonic, unsustainable system. The second part focuses on Japan, with a short historical overview of its permaculture movement. It also reviews the recent rise of social movements in Japan and how Japanese citizens are more and more aware and critical of the limits of their current model of society. The third part addresses these tensions through the concept of concrete utopia, and shows how permaculture distinguishes itself in the specific way it “makes use” of the system it criticizes. The last part concludes with a perspective on how thinking in terms of concrete utopia sheds light, in any original way, on the possible future developments of the permaculture movement.

### **1. Permaculture: A transnational network of place-based movements**

The issue of sustainability in agriculture has gained momentum in reaction to the increasingly problematic consequences of the industrial agriculture model. As a result, diverse alternative models of food production have emerged under headings such as organic agriculture, natural farming, agroecology, and permaculture. In my own research, I focus on permaculture – a concept coined from the words “permanent,” “agriculture,” and “culture” in the 1970s (Mollison & Holmgren, 1978), at a time when environmental problems became increasingly visible and acquired a material presence on the international stage.

Ever since its invention, permaculture has gradually expanded its scope of action and nowadays refers to a myriad of different practices reaching significantly beyond agriculture and food production (Holmgren, 2002). It has become a worldwide social movement structured around the nexus of permanent agriculture and permanent culture (Morel, Léger, Ferguson, 2018). Permaculture is therefore not so much an agricultural method as it is a framework to design and implement more sustainable socio-agricultural systems. It was originally founded on three pillars: the know-how and wisdom of Australian aborigines, the philosophy and methods of the Japanese farmer Fukuoka Masanobu, and recent scientific findings in soil science and landscape ecology. On this threefold basis, the originators of permaculture, Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, defined permaculture as *a creative design process based on whole-systems thinking informed by ethics and design principles. This approach guides us to mimic the patterns and relationships we can find in nature and can be applied to all aspects of human habitation, from agriculture to ecological building, from appropriate technology to education and even economics*” (Holmgren, 2002).

For educational purposes, Holmgren and his team picture this design framework in the form of a flower (see fig. 2 below). It captures the manner in which the ethics and design principles of permaculture should, in their eyes, infuse all parts of human life rather than merely limit itself to agriculture. The “permaculture flower” gives an insight into what society would look like if we implemented the “permaculture paradigm” (Arnsperger, 2019). There would be non-chemical edible polycultures, lush forest gardens, with a distribution of agricultural products through local markets and community-supported agriculture (*Teikei* in Japanese). As for economic exchanges, there would be a better mix of currencies at local, regional, national, and international levels, including local and complementary currencies, to support emerging local eco-friendly markets and companies. In domains of land tenure and construction, we would see a rise of community-owned land and ecological buildings inspired by traditional know-how but improved to reach ecological requirements (cf. Holmgren, 2002). To implement such changes, we would need a complete and profound mutation of mindsets in order to readjust our existence as humans to the rest of the living realm (Chakroun & Linder, 2018; Arnsperger, 2019).

In reaction to this multi-dimensionality, the academic literature has itself approached permaculture in a plurality of ways. On the farm level, French and US agronomists (Ferguson & Lovell, 2017; Léger *et al.*, 2018) have investigated the conditions of viability of this new model of ecological agriculture. On a societal level, permaculture has been identified as a potential driver for the ecological transition of social and agricultural systems (Ferguson & Lovell, 2014; 2015; Hathaway, 2016) and for the implementation of a participatory and landscape-based approach to territorial planning (Dugua & Chakroun, 2019). It has also become the focus of more philosophically oriented studies, which conclude that permaculture offers a new set of imaginaries for the Anthropocene (Roux-Rosier, 2018), opportunities for mutually beneficial relationships with nature (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012; Centemeri, 2017), and a source of inspiration for a more existentially rooted form of nature education (Arnsperger, 2019). Permaculture design can therefore be regarded as an art of reinhabiting the Earth with care (Centemeri 2019), requiring what Pignier (2017) calls “design *with* living beings.”

In my own research on permaculture, I adopt a more contextual and culturally differentiated approach to sustainable agriculture and to ecological transition, and I focus on the two cases of Switzerland<sup>1</sup> and Japan. This allows me to shed new light on three frequently neglected aspects of sustainable agriculture: the sensorial, the societal, and the territorial aspects.

## 2. “Another Japan is possible”: Japan’s permaculture movement in history

Permaculture’s roots in Japanese culture are widely acknowledged. The founders of permaculture in fact based their concept partly on traditional Japanese farming methods and philosophy. Even the name “permaculture” was inspired by what the agricultural scientist Franklin Hiram King designated in 1911 as “permanent agriculture” after observing the farming practices and the soil fertility management of the time in China, Korea, and Japan (Paull, 2011). Mollison and Holmgren were also greatly inspired by the philosophy of the Japanese farmer Fukuoka Masanobu, one of the founders of the “natural farming movement.” Fukuoka’s book, *One-Straw Revolution: Introduction to Natural Farming* (originally published in 1975), has become a classical reference in the permaculture world.

But interestingly, and perhaps because of this constant praise for Japan’s traditional culture within and outside the country, permaculture – which was, after all, as a foreign concept – did not spark all that much interest in Japan itself. For a long time, its development was driven by a very small group of pioneers who encountered permaculture in 1993 thanks to the publication of the Japanese translation of Bill Mollison’s book, *Introduction to Permaculture*<sup>2</sup> – the first permaculture book ever to be released in Japanese. From then on permaculture slowly started to gain a modicum of popularity, mainly thanks to two men: Shidara Kiyokazu, a rice farmer at the time, and Itonaga Koji, a landscape architect. They both travelled to Australia to take a permaculture class at the famous permaculture hotspot of Crystal Waters, and this allowed them to organize the very first Japanese permaculture workshop in Nagano Prefecture in 1993. They then decided to create a permaculture school, the Permaculture Center Japan (PCCJ) in Kanagawa Prefecture, in 1996. That same year, Bill Mollison decided to visit Japan and was able to inaugurate the PCCJ. A non-profit organization was created later, in 2005, in order to support and ensure the PCCJ’s continuity. Meanwhile, several permaculture courses were held in different areas, such as the “Urban Permaculture Course” in Tokyo in 2004. That year and the following, David Holmgren, with the help of Itonaga Koji and Shidara Kiyokazu, came to Japan twice to investigate the indigenous, traditional features of Japanese agriculture and food culture, which share significant common ground with permaculture (see Holmgren, 2004, the article where he reports his findings).

After attending permaculture courses, most of the graduates started their own projects and some collaborated to create regional permaculture associations: the group Permaculture Kansai<sup>3</sup> in 2007, Permaculture Kyushu in 2008, Permaculture Okinawa in 2009, and Permaculture Hokkaido<sup>4</sup> in 2013. The Tokyo Urban Permaculture group

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<sup>1</sup> The Swiss case will not be addressed in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Originally published in 1991.

<sup>3</sup> The region of Kansai is located 300 km to the west of Tokyo and gathers cities such as Kyoto, Osaka, and Kobe.

<sup>4</sup> The Island located North of the main Island.

was created in 2011, shortly after the Fukushima nuclear accident, by a small group of activists who wanted to “regenerate Tokyo into an urban culture that supports life rather than consuming it.”<sup>5</sup> This “urbanization” of permaculture enabled the movement to extend beyond rural areas and to acquire new members from several of the huge metropolitan areas of Japan. More recently, two new permaculture centers were created (2016-2017): Stonebridge Permaculture Forest Garden in the Prefecture of Chiba and the Permaculture Center Kamimomi in the Prefecture of Okayama (see fig. 1 below). Both are located next to densely forested areas and have therefore infused their permaculture model with the wisdom of Satoyama – the traditional way of managing the surrounding forests and of living harmoniously with the natural elements. New forms of collaboration thus emerge between the need to revive some vanishing features of traditional Japanese culture and the worldwide experiences of the permaculture network (Itonaga, Shidara & Konuma, 1997).



**Figure 1: Drawing of the Permaculture Center Kamimomi illustrating the different elements and zones included in permaculture design. Credits: Permaculture Center Kamimomi, 2017**

In Japan, the permaculture movement can be understood as part of what Oguma (2016) designates as “the new wave of social movements.” This new wave, also called the “new protest cycle” (Chiavacci & Obinger, 2018), is named in such way as to signify the awakening of Japan’s “slumbering activist culture from decades of sleep” (Ogawa, 2016). During the decades from the mid-1970s to the 2000s, social movements were not strictly absent but they were localized, focusing – in the case of environmental movements – on locally occurring pollution and what might now be referred to as “Not In My Back Yard” (NIMBY) issues in reaction to construction projects of nuclear power plants (Chiavacci & Obinger, 2018).

The recent resurgence of protests at a national level, after this relative absence, happened “in the context of three conjunctural forces: neoliberalism, militarism, and nationalism” (Chan, 2008: 2). The resurgence, led by social movements that formed in the 1990s (Chan, 2008; Chiavacci & Obinger, 2018), happened mainly through two historical moments. The first, identified by Amagasa (in Chan, 2008: 136), is the

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.tokyourbanpermaculture.com/english>

campaign against the import of Monsanto's genetically modified wheat in 2004, under the banner "Another World Is Possible," and contributes to the revival of alter-globalization activism (*ibid.*). The second is fueled by citizens' increasingly anxious discontent about the way in which the government has tackled the consequences of the three-pronged catastrophe of Fukushima (i.e., the earthquake, the tsunami, and the meltdown of the nuclear reactor) (Ogawa, 2016). It has given a significant impulse to grassroots environmental movements, especially since the citizens cannot really count on environmental organizations because of their "widespread co-optation by a political and industrial establishment that has, since the Kyoto Protocol, promoted nuclear energy as a solution to global warming" (Dreiling, Lougee & Nakamura, 2015: 1).

In the shape and role it has acquired today in the Japanese context, permaculture sets itself apart from the more confrontational political activism characteristic of post-Fukushima protests. Permaculture resembles more what Hage (2015) proposed to call "alter-politics" – a form of action driven less by oppositional concerns than by the search for, and experimentation with, radical alternatives. The political dimension of the permaculture movement today is therefore not to be found in public spaces, but rather expressed discreetly in everyday practices and in specific, relatively unknown places. The political message of permaculture experiments lies in their very literal *rootedness*: permaculture materializes in ways that are not mobile in space and that require several years of engagement in one particular location. It is true that the permaculture movement includes the refusal of both industrial agriculture and capitalist society, but this rejection does not lead to confrontational, ephemeral protests and demonstrations. Instead the political practice of permaculture develops in the form of direct but long-term, engaging actions, such as collective gardens, agroecological farms, and community cafés. It may convey its specifically political message at a later stage, when the alternative is already well implemented and part of society, and when politicians are no longer able to simply say "no" to the project.

Since its emergence twenty-five years ago, the Japanese permaculture movement has gradually expanded and, although there are no official numbers, the network is believed (by the members themselves) to include between 15,000 and 20,000 people. The network is mainly sustained by two means: regular meetings and collaboration between members, and the sharing of information about their practices and events through personal blogs and various NPOs' webpages and social networks. The relaying of information on the Internet is, in fact, characteristic of recent post-Fukushima movements (Oguma, 2016). It is one of the "transnational networking strategies" (Lockyer & Veteto, 2015: 114) through which practitioners open up the possibility of connecting place-based commitments with what is happening in permaculture movements of other regions of the world.

However, despite its positive dynamics and its recent rise in popularity among urban dwellers, permaculture is still all but unknown to most Japanese citizens and relatively ignored by the national governments and ministries.<sup>6</sup> It is precisely this gap between the long history and the current buzz of permaculture within a specific

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<sup>6</sup> With the exception of the Ministry of Environment, which lists permaculture as one of the strategies to revive traditional places of coexistence with nature (under the name of "the Satoyama Initiative"). [https://www.env.go.jp/nature/satoyama/syuhourei/pdf/pe\\_2.pdf](https://www.env.go.jp/nature/satoyama/syuhourei/pdf/pe_2.pdf)

section of the Japanese population, and the invisibility of permaculture for the remaining majority, that I wish to tackle through the concept of concrete utopia.

### **3. The concept of concrete utopia: Between hope and political struggle**

Doing research on ecological transition requires that one identify where the potential levers of social transformation reside. As described in the previous section, the permaculture movement merges the issues of sustainable agriculture and sustainable living and thus sheds new light on the sustainability of agriculture, currently empowering people to change not only this specific sector, but to create the basis for a completely new vision of sustainable living. I make use of the concept of “concrete utopia” to address the tension between the materiality and spatiality of the permaculture experiments of sustainable living, on the one hand, and the ideality of the radically new model of society they are conveying, on the other. Etymologically, the concept of “utopia” plays on the ambiguity of the Greek words “*ou-topia*” (no place) and “*eu-topia*” (good place) to designate an as yet placeless ideal. It was created by Thomas More in the sixteenth century (Lockyer & Veteto, 2015) and publicized in his critical essay on the repressive government of the time, *Of a Republic's Best State and of the New Island Utopia*.

The concept of “concrete utopia” was proposed much later by the German philosopher Ernst Bloch (1885-1977), who was greatly influenced by the writings of Karl Marx and by the situation of his time: the dark period of the two World Wars, especially the rise of Nazism (he was from a Jewish family). Bloch bases his notion of concrete utopia on the assumption that humans have the possibility and the ability to transform their world and therefore to change the extant system. This assumption was not shared by the early pragmatist American thinkers such as William James, who admitted that another system might have been better but never considered a change of system to be feasible. This difference in perspective is crucial, since it attributes a totally different agency and power to the people in navigating the system they are in. Bloch also created the concept to go beyond Marx's thought, in which, according to him, materialism is too simply opposed to idealism (Hage, 2015). The power of “concrete utopia” thus lies in its ability to critique the mono-realism characteristic of Western modern philosophy: “the idea that there is one, and only one, reality that our thought is, or can be, connected to,” and according to which “thought that corresponds to a reality is described as materialist, and thought that doesn't is described as idealist” (Hage, 2015: 327). Permaculture acts as a proof that we are “always inhabiting a multiplicity of intersecting spatialities and realities” (*ibid.*); its political dimension lies in the way it sheds light on the current dominant reality of environmentally destructive capitalism, which is repressive and even destructive of the multiple other “minor realities in which we are equally enmeshed” (*ibid.*).

The contemporary German philosopher Arno Münster, a specialist of Bloch's thought, has recently revived the concept of concrete utopia. He lends it an ecological interpretation and even proposes a new corresponding form of governance: eco-socialism (Münster, 2013). Starting from the concrete utopia of Bloch, which he conceives as “the projection of desires and dreams of the advent of a better world onto the sphere of feasible possibilities,” Münster suggests the concept of “ecological utopia.” This concept is interesting because it designates a response to the ecological challenges faced by our societies that is simultaneously feasible, possible, and *utopian*

(Münster, 2013; Dinerstein, 2016). In Bloch's and Münster's thinking, "utopian" does not mean "unrealistic" – but rather "desirable, as yet unrealized." The objective of ecological utopia is to realize the transition towards a sustainable world through the transformation of the relationships between humans, nature, and the environment.

In parallel to the above works, several related concepts have emerged to further characterize the possibilities to transform the system through grassroots actions motivated by reflection and hope. Among these are *Real utopia* (Wright, 2013), *Spaces of Hope* (Harvey, 2000), *Critical acceptance* (Arnsperger, 2009), as well as *Ecological utopia/ Ecotopia* (Lockyer & Veteto, 2015). Without going into the details of each of these concepts, I personally prefer to use concrete utopia, in part because it conveys not only the idea of experimentation but also the presence of political struggle what Dinerstein (2012) calls interstitial revolution. In addition, the epithet "concrete" displays an epistemologically interesting ambiguity it has in English: *cum-crecere* means literally "to grow together" (Berque, 2015). The concept therefore conveys the tension inherent in our paradoxical relation – of dependence, interdependence, and independence – with the extant social and economic system. This particular position is what I designated earlier as non-confrontational "alter-politics" (Hage, 2015).

#### **4. Can we characterize Japan's permaculture movement as a concrete utopia?**

The concept of concrete utopia is based on concrete actions which embody a critique of, and resistance to, the present (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003, cited in Grinberg & Machado, 2018), while rooted in future prefigurations (Dinerstein, 2012; 2016). Even micro-scale experimentations which share values that radically differ from those of hegemonic society are a way of materializing the refusal of that system and of "destabilizing the inevitability of a future that comes before us as catastrophe" (Rose, 2007, cited in Grinberg & Machado, 2018).

In the case of permaculture, these grassroots actions share ecological values and a human-centred ethic. Even though they remain marginal, these micro-scale experimentations are nevertheless prefiguring a sustainable vision of society – but one only shared, for the moment, within permaculture and related movements. As a network, they are therefore opening new possibilities for the future by creating the basis for a different model of society.

Permaculture has developed in multiple directions and dimensions. In the following picture, I propose to illustrate how each of the dimensions of permaculture, as identified by David Holmgren, materialize within the Japanese movement.





**Figure 2: How Japan's permaculture experiments are shaping a new vision of sustainable living.**  
 Photo credits: Leila Chakroun (2017-2018). Credit for the drawing: Permaculture Center Kamimomi. Credit for the Permaculture Flower: Holmgren Services.

Starting for the upper left-hand corner, one can see the daily harvest of a permaculture garden; rice husk covering the soil to preserve its humidity and its quality; a spiral herb garden built with local rocks and growing about ten species of herbs in a very confined space; an ecological house built by a group of skilled permaculturists, merging traditional methods and innovative ecological elements; the preparation of the soil before planting winter wheat; the spraying of efficient microorganisms (EM) to boost the life in the soil; numerous books about permaculture-related issues that are proposed to permaculture students and visitors; the drawing of the permaculture design of Permaculture Center Kamimomi; a plate filled with a diversity of food thanks to a potluck meal; the notes of the local currencies in Transition Town Fujino; and finally, the day permaculture students shared the rice they had learned to grow and harvested during the year.

## **5. Conclusion: From agricultural lifestyles to the political co-creation of a sustainable culture**

In this paper, I showed how the concept of concrete utopia can be mobilized into a useful framework to think about the complex relation between the system in place and the need to accelerate the transition towards a sustainable society. It also sheds new light on the tension between independence and interdependence, i.e., the need and willingness to imagine and create alternative worlds in reaction to, but *within*, the current – unsustainable – system. The concept of concrete utopia implies a dilemma in terms of permaculture's future development and embeddedness within transition pathways.

Along the independence axis, we have a multiplicity of instances of “utopian sustainability,” in the form of perfectly sustainable micro-scale projects being

developed within the interstices of capitalism itself. They are self-consistent and, in this sense, exemplary – but here is the first horn of the dilemma: How are they to be scaled up? Do we do it through education, or do we wait for either revolution or collapse? Along the interdependence axis, we have “sustainable concretization,” in the form of larger-scale projects at the territorial level, with a political vision. These are urgently needed in order to coordinate and render mutually compatible the multiplicity of micro-projects – but here is the second horn of the dilemma: *How are they to be scaled up? Can we count on democratic processes and on collaboration with territorial authorities?*

For future research, the ideas set out in this paper point towards the need for a model and a set of practices that will link prefigurative actions with transition pathways. We somehow need to progress towards a “political and territorial permaculture project,” probably at the Prefecture or Municipality level.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to give special thanks to all the Japanese permaculturists who offered me time, kindness, and hospitality, among whom Shidara Kiyokazu (Permaculture Center Japan), Kyle Holzhueter and Jimoto Kazuko (Permaculture Kamimomi), Phil Honda Cashman (Permaculture Awa), Hamish Murphy (Stonebridge Permaculture), Sawyer Kai and Kawamura Wakana (Tokyo Urban Permaculture), Yuki Mitsukuri (The Permaculture Institute, Sapporo), Usui Kenji and Tomoko (Shanti-Kuthi), the Saihate Ecovillage, Yotsui Shinji and Chisato (Soil Design) and the staff of Kurkkufields, and finally Gokaichi Yasuyuki.

I would like also to acknowledge the valuable comments I received from my supervisor, Prof. Christian Arnsperger, and my co-supervisor, Dr. Yoann Moreau. I am also very grateful to Prof. Usami Makoto, Prof. Horita Makiko and Prof. Itonaga Koji. Last but not least, I want to express my gratitude to the Swiss National Fund for Research for granting me a seven-month doctoral mobility scholarship to visit Kyoto University’s Global Environmental Policy Laboratory.

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