

Yearn for community but don't know where to find it? **Joanna Crowson, Jorge Gallardo** and **Andrew Zionts Abrams** describe how they have created small gatherings to actively build local communities.

Creating Regenerative

'Catalina' is a land-based project¹ located on 13 hectares of land on a hillside in the region of La Janda in southern Spain. The project is named in homage to a local 15th century woman landowner, and the focus is on exploring different forms of community life and collaboration with nature, based on the principles of permaculture, and developing specific practices in relation to the location and condition of the land. A number of groups, volunteers and specialists have been working on the project since 2014, led by Andrew Zionts Abrams. The work has involved restoring the functionality of the ecosystem by creating a zero-runoff water retention landscape, reforestation, and experimenting with

regenerative agriculture and care for the soil, as well as connecting to the community of life using tools from deep ecology and sociocracy. The shared aspiration is to move beyond the idea of sustainability as sustaining a given situation over time (including what may be an impoverished and degraded landscape and/or community), instead aspiring to create a local version of a regenerative culture, as defined by Daniel Wahl in his book *Designing Regenerative Cultures* (2016):

"A regenerative human culture is healthy, resilient and adaptable; it cares for the planet and it cares for life in the awareness that this is the most effective way to create a thriving future for all."



Singing sacred songs at sunset
Photos © Miguel Gómez

It's Beltane in Catalina, a sunny first day of May, with myriad wildflowers in bloom, splashing the intense green meadows with colour. As the sun rises over the hill, our extended community begins arriving via pathways down through the forest. We are surrounded by the sounds of children playing in the olive grove, the singing of birds and insects, and the excited calls of greetings as people arrive.

Communities

It's our annual Regenerative Cultures festival: a one-day event that brings community to sanctuary, giving us a time and space to share our projects, our interests and concerns, as well as our passions and skills. This is an opportunity to celebrate with good food and music, and to appreciate how the passing of time weaves more resilience and support into our social fabric.

The Starting Point: Finding Community

In 2011, after living in the countryside in Andalusia for a year, Andrew and his partner stumbled upon an alternative festival in the area, and suddenly realised the community they were looking for already existed around them. So many collaborations and friendships (including those of the authors) arose from this event that it remains a watershed moment in the minds of many, highlighting the value of events that bring community together. Later, when Andrew was looking for land to start a permaculture sanctuary, he and Joanna began a dialogue about the viability of co-creating a land-based project even though most of their friends already had a home, some land, and an enormous amount of love and energy invested in their own projects and space. The concept of our 'distributed community' was born out of these conversations. Can we live in community without having to buy land together and start from zero? Wouldn't it be more 'permacultural' – not to mention reducing the carbon footprint – to imagine ways to share our existing infrastructures and resources and in turn become more resilient as a wider community?



Building Distributed Community and Creating Intentional Community

While searching for land to buy, Andrew decided to erect a yurt on Joanna's small permaculture project, Casa Gaia, and use it as an initial space to host events and activities to support the development of this existing distributed community. A creative circle was launched one Sunday a month, yoga happened several times a week, a monthly permaculture roundtable was formed, and events like Five Rhythm dance sessions and a men's circle all became threads in a local community, allowing people to forge connections to each other and the land. This vision of investing in growing a rich and diverse community became an important aspect of our work with the second permaculture ethic, people care.

A few years later, when Andrew and his partner bought land, the yurt was moved there, where it continued to be a hub, not only for our growing distributed community, but for other forms of community too. Upon acquiring Catalina, the adjacent property, more people were needed to take care of the land. A group of friends, volunteers and collaborators came together to form a land-based community, experimenting with sociocracy as a tool for horizontal self-governance. This process of building an intentional community involves constantly refining our social structure, and our daily operation is itself a permaculture design feedback loop that needs regular monitoring, refining and revision to respond to new needs and ideas.

When permaculture is understood as an approach to systems design, the relationship between two elements in a system can be seen as a 'rope', with the total number of 'ropes' forming a resilient web. Our internal community structure is based on circles made up of groups of people who share an activity, interest, ritual, or project. Some of these circles include people from our wider community and resilience is built through the relationships that connect each individual to the others in the circle. Thus, our land-based intentional community and our wider distributed community can be visualised as a complex Venn diagram of overlapping circles, because we often coincide with individuals in multiple circles. When we superimpose the relationships between the people in these groups, the resulting web of connectivity is very complex, and therefore highly resilient.

Ephemeral Community: Small Gatherings, Big Impacts

As we work together to build trust and sensitivity through commitment and transparency, a safe space is created where we can all be vulnerable and share many less visible aspects of ourselves. This transformation could all too easily be dismissed as the creation of an unreal 'bubble' to be contrasted with the 'real world' out there. To avoid this feeling of artifice, we work to open to the wider world, focusing on genuine inclusivity and on the creation of a sanctuary that can be shared. The value of what can be experienced when visiting Catalina has become one of our greatest assets and has led us to recognise the incredible impact that comes from modelling ephemeral regenerative communities in this space.



Human library in the olive grove



In 2022, we hosted our first New Eco-Narratives course through the Erasmus + framework of non-formal education. These courses are a way for us to share the tools of permaculture, deep ecology and decolonial approaches with youth workers in an immersive experience in what becomes a temporary sanctuary for burnt-out activists. In the course of a week participants experience the potential we have to connect and form a regenerative community, including the more-than-human world, providing an ephemeral experience which plants permanent seeds in the hearts of the participants. Each person who experiences regenerative community here connects deeply to the web of life, feeling a loving connection to the land and to our greater purpose, plugging into what is effectively a 'love-retention' landscape in the heart of our water-retention design. The love for the land and the loving experience of being here is contagious. An intimate connection to this place, and to the experience of being here, leaves people with a desire to keep coming back. And importantly it reconnects us to nature and the hope we need to be able to imagine a shared regenerative future.

Building Diverse Community through Radical Inclusivity

As permaculturists, we recognise the importance of bio-diversity for the resilience of an ecosystem; human diversity is equally important to the resilience of our human communities. To this end, some years ago at permaculture convergences we started offering spaces where the 'permaqueer'² community could gather and share. We were approached by many people who couldn't see the need for a separate space for LGBTQI+ people since "we're all OK with that, aren't we?" But the fact is that the permaculture community is largely a monoculture of heteronormativity, and – just like our society – dominated by privileged, white, heterosexual, cis men. And it is the worldview arising from this prevailing monoculture of power that is at the root of the current ecosocial crisis.

To foster the diversity we want to see in our communities, safe spaces must be created for all who feel they need them. Only by looking at our own lack of diversity as a community, whether of gender, race, sexuality, etc., do we begin to see our own blindspots, and where we need to shift collectively. Perhaps part of the issue here is how we can value what is often invisible, and in time make it visible. In a capitalist system that intentionally externalises costs, impacts and collateral damage, shining light on the invisible is a radical action. We know for instance that so much of what makes soil alive is invisible to us, yet we still appreciate and understand its importance in the web of life. But how aware are we of the invisible, externalised violence that underpins our systems of production? How can we find inclusive ways to honour and embrace the less visible, less powerful aspects of our social systems, incorporating their wisdom?

Recently we hosted a week-long gathering of the Radical Faerie community called 'Seeking Sanctuary'. The coming together of this particular community and its own well-established regenerative culture with our 'love retention' landscape was very inspiring, bringing new focus to our people care and our framing of regenerative cultures. Never heard of the Faeries? As a community, it has been



Guests heading up to a workshop

growing around the world since 1979 and is defined by Wikipedia as “a loosely affiliated worldwide network and countercultural movement seeking to redefine queer consciousness through secular spirituality.” Gatherings are typically held in safe inclusive natural spaces, and the faeries model the permaculture ethic of people care in a radical and beautiful way. The balance of social structure and flexibility is held artfully. Each day begins with a morning circle with a playful round of names in which everyone is seen and heard. The plan for the day emerges out of this circle, all roles and responsibilities are voluntary, and can be revised at any time. By the end of the morning session, everyone knows what they need to do for the day, and facilitators are chosen for the next circles and activities. Transparency is paramount, as is an absolute inclusivity and respect for the needs of all of the participants. As a regenerative community they create a space where everyone can share their gifts, express themselves, and feel safe and held.

Radical Inclusivity, Radical People Care

The word radical comes from ‘radix’ or root – the seeds we plant together provide roots from which all else grows, the visible and the invisible. Spending time modelling regenerative community, whether permanent and distributed, or temporary and ephemeral, gives us an incredible insight into what we are capable of achieving as a diverse group of human beings, but requires learning and sharing new skills. It also needs time, space and dedication. Some concrete examples taken from our practice include:

- Using tools from deep ecology, such as the Council of All Beings, to connect us to the web of life and consult our more-than-human community about our planned climate action;

- Exploring decolonial thinking as a group in an attempt to shift our perceptions, making existing violent power structures more visible;³
- Creating events that bring a large variety of people together and facilitating whole-system social activities, like the human library we run during our Regenerative Cultures Festival to access the wisdom and purpose of our distributed community;
- Actively seeking to mitigate entrenched power dynamics, leaving room for less powerful groups to be more visible and empowered.

We still have so much to learn, but the tools gained and the experiences lived provide us with renewed purpose, an enlarged sense of community and a contagious sense of the possible in a world where alarm and fear occupy more space each day. In these difficult times of multiple crises, the work we permaculturists do to develop this aspect of permaculture’s triple ethic with our distributed and ephemeral communities is fundamental to imagining – and therefore creating a regenerative future for all.

¹ For more information about our project, visit www.almenara.online

² www.permaqueer.com

³ The Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures collective have produced some educational materials that we highly recommend <https://decolonialfutures.net>

Andrew Zionts has a background in fine arts, industrial design, permaculture and yoga. He has been implementing a rainwater retention and reforestation design on his farm since 2014, sharing the work and his passion and knowledge with volunteers and friends.

Joanna Crowson discovered her passion for permaculture in 1993 when she and her family bought land and started creating Casa Gaia in Cádiz. She currently works as a translator, educator and writer, focusing on creating regenerative cultures through reconnecting to the earth.

Jorge Gallardo, co-founder and coordinator of the cooperative Be.Time SCA, created in April 2017, works as a cultural mediator in a small town south of Cádiz, developing projects for the regeneration of species and landscapes and mobilising civil commitment in the protection of the commons.

More on regenerative communities:

‘Building a Life Cairn’ (PM118)

‘Inspirational Stories of Regeneration’ (PM117)



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