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Andrew Zionts Abrams, Joanna Crowson and Jorge Gallardo share their exploration of what it means to live, design and relate from the edge, not as a place of fear, but as a place of power

Recently, it's been hard not to feel that we are standing at the brink of disaster. The climate and ecological emergency worsens, emissions continue to rise, wars dominate the headlines, and the threat of global conflict feels too close for comfort. Meanwhile, political polarization deepens as the far right gains ground. The metaphors that come to mind – teetering on the edge, standing at the cliff's edge, looking into the abyss – all describe edges as threats.

Defining edges

Here at Catalina, that same word edge carries a different set of connotations. In permaculture, edges are zones of increased diversity, creativity and possibility. David Holmgren's permaculture principle 'Use edges and value the marginal' is foundational in our work.

The kind of edge that most immediately springs to mind in permaculture design is the ecotone – the transitional zone where ecosystems meet – which is among the most vital spaces in nature. These edges host greater biodiversity than either adjoining system alone. They are dynamic, fertile and full of interaction. In permaculture, we value ecotones for their productivity and their metaphorical power: contrast creates vitality, tension can be fertile, and life thrives at the margins. A classic example is gorse or other pioneer species that appear where forest meets grassland, signalling an emergent process.

In 2019, soon after we began working on the land we now call Catalina, we hosted a geomantic walk with friends. Silently, we moved across the landscape, pausing to connect in various spots. One place in particular stood out. The shape of the land shifted subtly from a sheltered bowl into a straighter, more defined corridor. There was no sign, no visible marker, yet something changed. The wind felt different. The air cooled. The scent of the plants shifted. We had crossed an invisible edge, a transition between microclimates, receiving an invitation to pause and notice that edges are everywhere, and they may not be immediately obvious.

Edges are rarely clean lines. They are areas of overlap, uncertainty and possibility. But sometimes an edge can be a threshold – a moment of change, a line that, once crossed, alters something fundamental. Thresholds mark transition: from known to unknown, from hesitation to action. They can be as subtle as a shift in vegetation or as profound as a life decision. A wedding, a resignation, crossing into a forest – each is a threshold.

We believe that by understanding edges and thresholds, we can better address both ecological and social challenges – inner and outer landscapes alike – because just as ecological edges bring unexpected biodiversity, social edges offer cultural and relational richness. Living between languages, cultures or identities can be disorientating, but it also invites creativity and transformation. These social ecotones – spaces between the structured and improvised, the rooted and migratory – demand deep listening, care and courage. They are not always comfortable, but they are profoundly alive.

Edges are not endings. They are places of contact, friction and emergence. They are membranes, not walls – responsive, permeable, alive. We've come to see edges as a kind of transitional skin: both protective and porous. They resist simplification. They invite us to dwell in ambiguity.

And from that uncertain place, new forms of resilience can emerge.

Why edges matter

In an increasingly divided world where people cling to fixed identities and wall themselves off, edges offer a different model. Borders isolate. Edges invite. They are fluid, relational and alive. In ecology, this blurriness breeds resilience. Where land meets water, or forest meets field, diversity explodes. In human systems, the same principle holds. When we learn to inhabit liminal zones – to live in the space between – we become more adaptable, more creative, more whole.

To embrace edges is to release the need for purity or certainty. It is to see value in complexity, to listen across difference, to design for cooperation rather than control. This is not just ecological wisdom, it's a social necessity. Regenerating landscapes also means regenerating the ways we relate, belong and build together.

Drover's road: The liminal space created along the drover's road, unclear if it is public, commons, or private

PREVIOUS PAGE People forming edge: a simple walking path forms a natural edge defining spaces in the landscape



Queerness, too, offers a vision of edge-living. It resists rigid boundaries and thrives in transitional space. Queer ecology builds on this insight: nature doesn't conform to binaries. It is fluid, relational, dynamic. The most fertile places – biologically and socially – are often the least clearly defined. Designing from the edges means honouring multiplicity, embracing ambiguity and trusting emergence. Queerness becomes not just a way of being, but a way of seeing. In our community, we've seen how embracing queerness – not only as identity but as worldview – can open space for more inclusive design, for intergenerational connection, and for building trust across cultural divides.

Living and designing at the edge

When we purchased Catalina, over nine hectares of mostly forested land at the top of our watershed in Vejer de la Frontera in Spain, we were drawn to its position. The eastern limit borders a half-kilometre stretch of a centuries-old drovers' road now used daily by walkers from town.

This path, open to the public and offering views to Morocco across the Strait, was one reason we expanded our stewardship. It is a rare edge: between sanctuary and commons, forest and town, solitude and shared space.

We often walk the drovers' road. It is an edge in every sense: between public and private, Europe and Africa, road and trail, forest and reforestation, local and visitor. Here, townspeople, tourists and wildlife cross paths. It is a place where ecological restoration and social interaction meet. A living ecotone.

We believe the edge where the drovers' road meets our land holds immense potential. Four years ago, we inaugurated our Life Cairn there, a memorial to species lost to extinction caused by human activity and climate change. It invites reflection, grief, and connection. When we inaugurated the Life Cairn, something wonderful happened. Many locals who might not otherwise have engaged with a climate-focused memorial came, drawn in part by the poem featured on the installation, punched out of a steel plate, written by a beloved local poet. His adult children,





Working with edges

Where are the overlooked edges in your own life or project? The blurry zones between garden areas, roles, communities or beliefs? What might flourish if you gave it more attention? Here are a few simple, powerful ways to start noticing and designing with edges – ecologically, socially and personally.

Don't overlook your flower borders or hedgerows: these can protect the garden from harsh conditions, provide habitat for beneficial wildlife like pollinators, and help control unwanted elements like weeds or pests.

Maximise path and bed edges: use materials like logs, stones or other natural items to define boundaries, add fertility, thermal mass or provide shelter for wildlife.

Create artificial edges: you can intentionally create edges by designing ponds, swales or terraces, supporting both aquatic and terrestrial life and enhancing biodiversity. Remember that an easy way to increase the length of an edge is to avoid using a straight line in your design.



Pond edges: maximizing edges in a pond occurs in three dimensions, at different depths

Design for intercropping: planting crops in strips or patches creates more edges between different plant communities, increasing yields and attracting beneficial insects.

Use urban/rural boundaries: the edge between urban and rural areas can be designed to create a buffer zone that supports both urban and rural life – offering natural, green space to town dwellers while protecting the more vulnerable wild areas. And for those of us that have a permaculture project, this is a great place to start our outreach.

Look for social diversity: take a look at your social life too – do you tend to only talk to people you agree with? Only read the publications that say what you'd like to hear? At this time more than ever, we permaculture practitioners need to get out of our echo chamber to share our solutions to the polycrisis. But we'll probably need to improve our skills in acceptance of the other and deep listening before we can start sharing our best practices.

extended family and friends gathered in this liminal space at the edge of the drovers' path. It became a moment of quiet connection: between grief and beauty, between the town and our project, between past and future.

That edge – between ecological loss and cultural memory – reminded us how powerful it can be to design spaces that invite people into shared presence, even when their reasons for arriving are different. Now, through a European research project called EMCCINNO (www.emccinno.eu) we're developing placemaking strategies along this edge. Our aim is to cultivate community resilience through raising awareness of the climate and ecological emergency and cultural memory.

Simple actions can shift perception: sitting in the shade of a tree and feeling the change in microclimate; following a map to ancient springs now dry; listening to elders' stories about farming, water and the commons – these small invitations help people pause, connect and remember. Our first earthworks in 2015 revealed the power of design to shape perception. A once-undefined slope, subject to erosion became a series of legible spaces as swales and access paths carved new edges into the land. Each space, framed by trees, invited attention. The landscape began to speak in a changed language.



The wildlife edge corridor planted along the edge of the property is formed by multiple species, at this stage clearly marked by taller Cypress trees

From a design standpoint, edges are essential. Constraints spark creativity. A path, once drawn, creates margins. And those margins become powerful: they hold water, host wildlife and guide movement. Over time, our network of edges has thickened into a web. Hedgerows have become wildlife corridors. Swales have become food-growing zones. Edges once sketched in theory have become ecological reality. In the process we've also learned how to adapt to the subtleties of invisible edges. That early microclimate shift – the bowl to corridor – now informs our revegetation strategies. Different conditions on either side demand different plantings. Edge awareness leads to smarter design. Expanding and creating more edges increases opportunity and, consequently, biodiversity.

Embracing the edge

This year we have introduced the Edge Walk to visitors who want to get to know Catalina. In this new kind of exploratory walk we invite guests to begin in silence at the top of the watershed, walking the drovers' road before heading down the steep forested slope and across the former pasture land, over another road, all the way down to the valley below, crossing many different ecotones and thresholds as we descend.

There, held in the heart of the landscape that is a now rehydrated water basin, we pause to reflect: what has infiltrated into our beings on the way down? What new awareness has taken root? On the return walk, we invite sharing, emergence and deep listening. Just like water in a functional landscape, ideas flow best when held and slowed. And just like water, ideas arise when given an opening.

Edges teach us to notice, to relate, and to transform. In ecology, design and life, they are where the magic happens. They ask us to stay with the in-between, to let go of control and to trust what wants to grow. For us, right now, it feels important to cultivate and take care of them rather than fear them.

Edges as opportunity

In this moment of global instability – ecological, social and political – the concept of edge offers more than metaphor. It offers a guide. At the meeting points between landforms, cultures and identities, we find the conditions for transformation. Edges are not only ecological hotspots, but also spaces for social healing and creative emergence. They teach us to listen across difference, to dwell in ambiguity, and to welcome what is unfamiliar.

We often treat ambiguity as a problem to solve. But what if it's a place to dwell, to learn, to connect? At Catalina, we've come to believe that tending to these edges – ecological and social – is not just good design. It's a form of care, a political act, and a path forward. Living at the edge may be uncertain – but it's also where we meet the future.

For more on permaculture design:

'Demystifying Permaculture Design' PM74

'Why Permaculture Needs Design' PM72



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Andrew Zions Abrams 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.

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.

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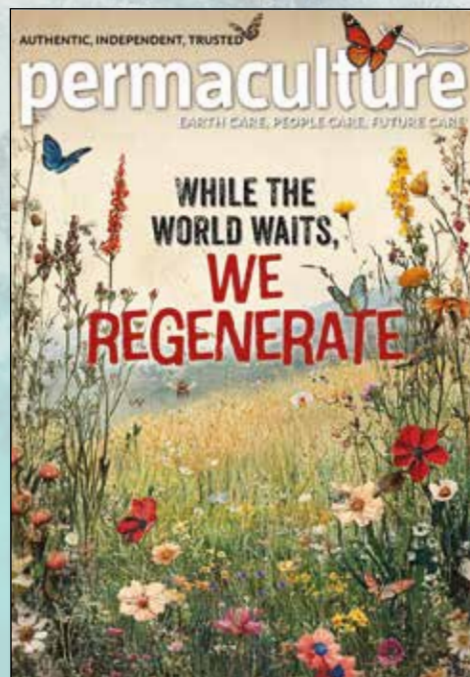
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