



Visionaries

What inspires London-based permaculture activist, **Kayode Olafimihan** and documentary filmmaker and Earth restoration pioneer, **John D. Liu**?

Kayode Olafimihan is the chair of the London Permaculture Network. He organises the annual London Permaculture Festival, founded PermaBlitz London and has established a permaculture LAND project at Cecil Sharp House, headquarters of the English Folk Dance and Song Society in London.

“Climate change is one of the biggest issues facing society today. It will affect us all in our everyday lives – some more than others. I have made it my work at Good Energy to increase public awareness of the issue and provide an optimistic response to human-made climate change, by promoting renewable technologies and sustainable energy use. I took my Permaculture Design Course (PDC) in the summer of 2010. I left it inspired to use what I had learnt to further develop a small-holding in Essex. Three years later I decided to experiment with applying permaculture as a design science to grassroots activism. As a first step, I took over organising the 2013 London Permaculture Festival. This one day celebration regularly attracts over 700 people – more than a quarter of whom are new to permaculture. From that festival in 2013 I launched PermaBlitz London.

PermaBlitzes emulate the give and take seen in natural ecosystems in which each contributes and all benefit. They bring people together to install edible, wildlife-friendly, permaculture designs through free permaBlitz days open to all. These spread by stimulating networks of reciprocity and mutual support: once you have helped at a few you can have one of your own. Our designs don't just apply this principle of reciprocity to the people involved but also to our relationship with the plants, animals and minerals in the garden – and to the relationships between them. As a result, we always co-garden with the soil-food-web, wildlife and plants, in permaculture guild alliances, to maintain health and build fertility.

Since summer 2013 we have done over 50 permaBlitzes. The numbers attending have exceeded all my expectations. We generally have between 15-20 people and a few permaBlitzes have had over 30.

For me this experience in itself has been richly rewarding: meeting and working with diverse people learning how to apply the forest garden pattern in an urban context and all the specific 'how to' techniques to install the design at each permaBlitz. As one young permaBlitzer memorably has said of their involvement since 2013: "It has been like a mini school – teaching exactly what I most want to learn – how to implement change in my community with permaculture."

I have been surprised and delighted by how this kind of positivity can get out of hand – and the partnerships that can result! Through the clarity derived from this work I have designed an award winning permaculture learning and demonstration (LAND) garden for the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS) in the grounds of their headquarters at Grade II listed Cecil Sharp House (CSH).¹ This garden has been installed by permaBlitzes over the last three years.

The design is inspired by the folk adage: one for the birds, one for the bugs and one for me, which chimes well with the permaculture ethos of earth care, people care, fair shares and showcases key aspects of urban permaculture. As a result, in another example of reciprocity, EFDSS/CSH now donate house and garden for the annual London Permaculture Festival (standard charge £4,000) as well as other rooms during the year for teaching and meetings. This helps us both keep the festival entrance affordable while still paying presenters.

It has also helped us establish the garden as a permaculture training and education centre as well as a Capital Growth London Grows hub where people come and learn about permaculture and sustainable, ecologically regenerative gardening. It is an outdoor classroom for the local primary school and an invaluable teaching aid for the PermaBlitz London design guild which now regularly has 15-20 attendees at our weekly meetings. We are developing a profile for permaculture at companies (notably Lloyds Bank, Wellcome Trust and Dentsu Aegis) who have sponsored us both financially and by sending work groups to help maintain the garden. We are also partnered with Camden

GoodGym who send 20 plus people every month. Three years on, having won Camden in Bloom best business garden several times, the council have asked us to give a presentation about 'this permaculture' that has produced our award winning garden – and involves people in multiple ways.

It has been very heartening to work with others developing this kind of grass roots connecting, inspiring and partnership-building. Doubly so to be part of an ongoing succession that is involving more people able to play multiple functions in sustaining the work we are doing.

But most positive for me personally has been the opportunity to wrestle the objectifying reflex we all share in modern culture, even in this new paradigm of 'permanent culture', that treats the natural as mere anonymous resources, systems, inputs and outputs to be subjugated and consumed. In doing so, perhaps it would be fruitful to hold an 'edge' between old ecological understandings and the new design science of permaculture.

My own Yoruba heritage insists on a reverence for the Orisa: those mysterious alivenesses that live in the crust of the earth in the orun odo (the sky below) who continually re-sprout life and show their faces through traditional stories and songs. And by some serendipity I find myself at EFDSS/CSH who have themselves gathered a rich compendium of traditional stories, songs, dances and folk customs from the British Isles, Europe and even beyond.

As we experience more deeply – through our planting, growing and harvesting – the reality of how our lives depend on interrupting others, perhaps we can become the kind of future and face of those we eat. When we are in gratitude, we find it impossible not to want to make a song and dance about it. We start to exercise what Martín Prechtel has called "... the natural function of a much-atrophied organ of human obligation that says we must give **gifts** to nourish and keep alive those who give us the gift of life."² (*my emphasis*) What gifts, given how? Who knows – but what better place to make a start!



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Observing what is beautiful and pure helps guide us. Realizing that we are called to serve the Earth and future generations of life defines the purpose of our lives.

John D. Liu is a renowned film director. He made the documentaries *Green Gold*, a Prix Italia award winner, and *Hope in a Changing Climate*,³ named the best ecosystem film at the International Wildlife Film Festival.

“Breathing consciously, feeling the breath entering our lungs and leaving again, is something we don’t do often enough. There are many experiences we often miss. When did you last hear that we are, each of us, connected to all life since the beginning of time? Too seldom do we consider the microbial communities living in the decaying remains of all the generations of life that came before us.

We may fail to perceive the complexity of life because we too readily accept the cultural veneer that overlays it. Embracing the sum of human knowledge and enlarging it can give life meaning and purpose. Accepting and celebrating the mystery beyond our understanding is a pathway to a transcendent state where

lesser issues fade away and the majesty of Nature can come to the fore.

Nature seemed perfect in my childhood. The evidence came through all my senses. Gently rippling water flowing over stones was the most joyous of laughter. Sweet smells wafting from closely bunched cress growing in the curves where streams meander intoxicating. Reflections of clouds on the water changing in the wind, every time a turtle’s nose pokes up and with each insect walking across the surface. The unique sound the cows make as they bite down on clumps of grass while slightly turning their heads to tear off the grasses somehow spoke to me. I can hear it even now.

Since I was a child I have been fascinated by the subtle color differences in leaves of grass. Early on I began to notice how the older stalks turn yellow, then russet and tower over new green shoots. Time used to go slower, summer days seemed endless as I watched plants turn and open to the sun. The forests seem more somber and awe inspiring than the fields. Stretching up to meet the sky

the trees challenging the sun and dappling the light. Dark and cool in the summer, the wood is both embracing and foreboding, on a still day quiet but in a gale, noisy as the trees creak and sway. Occasionally you hear a crack as a limb that couldn’t bend breaks as evidenced by large branches lying across the deep leaf mould where storms have brought them down.

Our oversights are not a new phenomenon. When I began to study ecology in my middle age I found that all the cradles of civilization had landscapes that were largely denuded of vegetation. I became interested in understanding why this happened and whether this was an inevitable outcome. It took some time, but I found that in the era of human beings (the Anthropocene), the landscape represents our human consciousness. We are supposed to be *Homo Sapiens Sapiens* but we have become ‘*Homo Sapiens Materialensis*’.

It is not inevitable that humans must destroy their habitat. We have valued things that have been extracted, fashioned into other things and bought and sold

higher than the natural evolutionary systems that created the oxygenated atmosphere, the water cycle, the soil fertility, the natural regulation of weather and climate. We destroy our habitat because we have created a perverse incentive to destroy it. This is such a colossal mistake that it is hard to even fathom, let alone correct. For us to evolve as a species, we have to unlearn what for thousands of years we thought was true, but now know is false.

Through the study of evolution we have learned how the oxygenated atmosphere and the hydrological cycle were created, constantly filtered and continuously renewed. We know that soils are not just mineral sediments but are teeming with microbial life that release minerals from geologic materials making nutrients available for biological life, and have done so for all of evolutionary time. We also know that the water cycle, the weather and the climate are naturally regulated by the retention of

water in the living soils as well as geologic cavities underground, in the living bodies of plant materials and through the respiration of all living things.

It is not inevitable that humans must destroy their habitat.

Juxtaposing infinitely renewable natural systems with finite cultural landscapes reveals a new horizon beyond the materialistic world that has been so relentlessly sold by modern society. Seeing through human history to evolutionary, geologic and cosmic time allows one to imagine all of accumulated human endeavor and our own lives in context. Observing what is beautiful and pure helps guide us. Realizing that we are called to serve the Earth and future generations of life defines the purpose of our lives. This seems to be the path that

is our best chance to ensure that human civilization will survive.

As individuals we are helpless in the face of issues like climate change, food insecurity, deforestation and desertification. Our only hope is to act together as a species collectively conscious of how Earth Systems function. We must also value life higher than things in order to manifest this understanding on the Earth.

This is the worldview in which human beings restore all degraded land, and where it becomes impossible to pollute or degrade. We are called now to consciously evolve to inhabit this paradigm.

¹ Featured in *PM85* in 'Permacult'.
² Prechtel, Martin, p.377, *The Unlikely Peace at Cuchumaquic: The Parallel Lives of People as Plants: Keeping the Seeds Alive*, Berkeley, North Atlantic Books, 2012.
³ Watch John's films at:

www.permaculture.co.uk/videos/Green_Gold/
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