

Landscape Healing and Community

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[Bernd Walter Mueller](#) is a member of the Tamera community and the director of the Global Ecology Institute (GEI). In July he was interviewed by Yael Marantz, a graduate student from the University of Cape Town exploring how we can reimagine communities through biomimicry, biophilia and living labs. They discussed the integration of natural ecosystems with community life, listening to the land and its energies, and Bernd's cooperation with partners around the globe.

Yael Marantz: Dieter Duhm has said, "Water, energy and food are freely available for all humankind when we no longer follow the laws of capital, but rather the logic of nature." I couldn't agree more with this sentiment. Can you tell me a little bit about the work that GEI focuses on and your approach to creating models for autonomous sources of water, energy and food?

Bernd Mueller: As a young man I tried to study civil engineering. I gave up because I got the most stupid answers to even simple questions like "What is water?" Then I studied natural principles on my own on an organic farm in Spain. There I came across the principles of Victor Schauberg. He's very connected to considering water as the basis of life and as life itself. He said, "When human beings relearn to move water in the right way, then, and only then, nature responds with such an abundance that all living beings on Earth have access to basic needs like water, food and energy." This is so far away from our lived political reality that I thought, "I have to find out if this is really true, and if so, learn how to do it." That gave my life

research a goal, i.e. studying and understanding the principles of Natural Water Management.

Y: Does your work focus mainly on water autonomy and self-sufficiency?

B: Our main focus in Tamera is on social design, but you get to the point where you see that regional autonomy is essential for a new culture. The first and most effective way to work on regenerative ecology is to start with water management. Many permaculturalists say that if you start with water, everything else will follow.

When I came to Tamera ten years ago, we had the question of whether it was possible to sustain three hundred people here. We were completely dependent on bore-holes, generators and imported food then. To answer that question, I needed to see the potential the land carries. And then you help nature to develop its potential, which includes human culture. Human culture is an integrative part of nature. You don't design water parks or other places where nature is intact without humans. You design an ecosystem of which human culture is a conscious, active part.

Y: Can you give an example of how Tamera's human culture is integrated into the natural ecosystem?

B: I would have to ask, "Where are we not connected to the ecosystem?" We came here, we saw the potential of the land, and it was us humans who decided to help nature become how it is here now. To do that, we have to know that we are in full contact with nature. If I always have the subconscious question, "Am I allowed to interfere here?," I won't develop the potency that is needed to change the situation. It is a spiritual work to know that you are in contact, and that you will be corrected if something is wrong. Then you can develop many things through a concept of cooperation, rather than a concept of "exploitation through superior intelligence." The whole community is on the same track here.

In 2007 the community believed in scarcity of water, even of drinking water. Through natural water management, showing the abundance of water that is there, the community could make an inner shift of believing in abundance. We made the cellular experience of being part of abundance. Over the years we start to know that we are part of a natural world that can provide for all our basic needs.

Y: Is "Water Retention Landscape Design" the model you've implemented?

Yes. It involves studying natural water cycles, how they've been broken and how they can be restored. The key to that is rainwater management for soil reconstruction.

Y: Is there something about where Tamera is located, the actual geographic location, the climate, the context, even the spiritual energy of Tamera, that inspires working on certain types of solutions?

B: Yes – and every land has such a spiritual call, if humans listen to it. Here in Tamera we start to feel where we have resonance and actively support these energies that we perceive. We build places on the land where this contact can be felt by community members, for example our “nature cathedral”, the stone circle. There we can feel a deep spiritual connection and receive answers out of normal reality or outside the obvious answers.

Y: Are there certain holders of the stone circle, or is it open to anyone?

B: It is open, and the energy there is also held by a group who is especially responsible. There is a weekly prayer at sunrise where the community is invited to the stone circle for common prayers, and almost all our common events begin in the stone circle.

Y: I'm interested in how ecology and architecture come together through biophilic and biomimetic design. A principle in biomimetic design is to follow the function, not the form. So if you're building a house, for example, you imagine what you want the space to accomplish rather than jumping into creating a house with four walls and a roof. Is there an example of this in Tamera?

B: Yes. We have very few properly built structures, many are like shade roofs that change with the seasons according to people's needs. We are looking for architecture that is flexible and connected with nature. I am not the specialist in architectural design. But I can see that the link is seeing how far it is possible to build with regionally available materials. We are quite advanced in building with straw bales. And our main architectural focus is architecture for crisis areas – what can people do without money, with the materials available where they live. I don't have time to convince people with modern lifestyles to change things; but there are many people in the world who don't have access to their basic needs and they need practical support. For example, the people who suffer from flooding in Pakistan: on the one hand we need to focus on water management strategies, because floods are not supposed to occur. At the same time, we need practical solutions for the people whose clay houses have just disintegrated. We have connected with a designer who is experimenting with lime-stabilized clay. She says she always finds knowledge about lime-stabilized clay building in ancient cultures, and so it is in Pakistan. She found it in spiritual buildings, thousands of years old,

that have survived. So it is inherent to the local culture. She trained local people to use these materials to make flood-resistant houses. In the last few years, more than 15,000 houses were built with this technology. The impulse to help came from the West, but it was connected to the existing culture in Pakistan. This is a goal: not to develop architectural concepts, but to develop principles of design which can then be applied according to different cultures.

Y: How can flooding be stopped?

B: With Water Retention Landscape Design. One principle is that the landscape is designed in such a way that there is no runoff. Landowners take back responsibility for rainwater retention, from the very tops of watersheds. All structures are made so that water infiltrates the ground, thus preventing flooding and causing water to be available during dry periods. This prevents falling groundwater tables and rising sea levels.

Y: How did you connect with that project in Pakistan? How do you find cooperation partners?

B: It started six years ago. I went to Haiti after the earthquake, where many international aid agencies were mobilized. I held a workshop for aid agencies in London about Water Retention Landscape Design, to talk about regenerative reconstruction after crises. Some of the participants were fascinated and some were angry – they asked me to repeat myself or to provide answers there on the ground in Haiti, in the face of the crisis. I was nervous because it was my first time consulting in such an extreme crisis. I knew I had an answer but I didn't know if I could prove it.

I was happy to see how easy it was. I was accompanied by two engineers who were very critical, because they were so depressed and frustrated by the suffering and the hopelessness of the Haiti situation. I gave them an intensive experience of my view of the situation, the chance to look at the landscape with my eyes and to see what I could see. After doing that, you can develop a very local action plan that can be immediately implemented. They were fascinated by this new viewpoint on the crisis area.

Afterwards I was supposed to give a talk on my work in London, but one of the engineers was so excited that he took over and gave the talk instead. He was inspired and motivated by the principles of natural design. That was the start of the Blueprint Alliance initiative, where we gather specialists and practitioners from various fields to design a "blueprint" solution for a crisis situation. It started with a regenerative design for the situation in Haiti.

It's very important to bring all the fields into one common frame. Architecture should consider meaningful energy balance, good materials, meaningful social design, and embedment in an ecological system that is supported by human activity. We design open kitchens like the solar village. At the moment we are designing a model refugee camp for the refugee crisis in Europe. We will build the first model in Tamera next year, which we will use for the high peaks of our guest season. It is so important to live our knowledge and to test it on ourselves. That makes a big difference. Knowledge transfer can only be successful if you have lived it and it is a cellular part of you, not something you are teaching theoretically.

Y: That is the importance of being a living lab, embodying the principles.

B: Yes, our aim is to be a living lab. Nothing else really makes sense.