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Analyze these: the forces flowing through your land



Permaculture in Practice

by Nate Downey

Anyone involved in real property would be wise to use a permacultural method of design called "sector analysis." For buyers, this might mean a smart purchase or an expensive mistake. For sellers, this might mean a quick closing or a lesson in patience.

Sectors are places on a property through which certain forces flow. Fire, wind, water, light, noise, views, wildlife, people and zoning ordinances are some examples. Analyze these and you have begun to understand your land, especially as it relates to appropriate ways to develop it.

First, brainstorm a site-specific list of all of the potential forces on your property (as in the sample list above). Second, determine when, where and to what degree these forces could effect the property and its inhabitants. Finally, after you analyze your land in this way, steps can be taken to ameliorate the negative and accentuate the positive effects of these forces.

Let's look at each force in our sample list in order to understand something about the basic nature of these sectors.

- Here in the Southwest, fire should be considered before buying a piece of property and choosing a building site. Catastrophic fire will typically climb up a wooded, southwest-facing slope. But your fire sector will depend on a site-specific analysis of the existing topography and the size, density and dominant flora in a given fuel supply (i.e., dense evergreen forest or sparse grassland).

Ideally, your house is nowhere near a threatening fire sector. This could prove costly, not only in terms of lives and property, but also in terms of work needed to ameliorate the dangers.

- Wind is another force to be analyzed. In Northern New Mexico the prevailing winter winds come from the northwest and the prevailing summer winds come from the southwest (which is part of the reason why the fire sector is often in

this sector). In April, wind often blows through fiercely from all directions, especially due west. But, like the fire sector, local topography, tree cover and existing structures will play a significant role in determining the various fire sectors that change with the season.

Sometimes you may prefer to place your house in a wind sector. In hot climates, cool summer breezes are essential. But often the windiest part of a piece of property is the last place you would want to build a home: Not only is wind uncomfortable and annoying, it can wreak havoc on plant life and produce very high utility bills.

- Water is an example of a sector that you want to have flowing through your property, but there can always be too much of a good thing. Erosion caused by our summer monsoons is often fierce. Careful observation of the land should be applied here so that erosion control measures can either be avoided or can be as low-cost as possible.

- The powerful forces of light, noise, and views have a common denominator in that their negative effects (for example, city lights, loud neighbors, busy roads) can often be reduced by trees. On the other hand, positive effects of these forces (solar gain, bird songs and mountain vistas) often help sell properties.

- The potential paths of wildlife and people should be analyzed so that they can be encouraged in some places and discouraged in others. Living among wildlife can be a life-enhancing experience, but steps must be taken to keep wildlife from ravaging our gardens and garbage. Our fragile soil demands that pathways are determined so that people and their vehicles do not destroy the landscaping that we use to accentuate the positive and ameliorate the negative effects of the other forces.

- Local zoning ordinances also need analysis, because that mountain vista you have could some day feature a spanking, new Wal-Mart. If you want mountain vistas and don't want to be a NIMBY ("Not in my back yard!"), don't forget to analyze this important sector in great detail.

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