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Permaculture in Practice: The 31 flavors of landscape design

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For The New Mexican

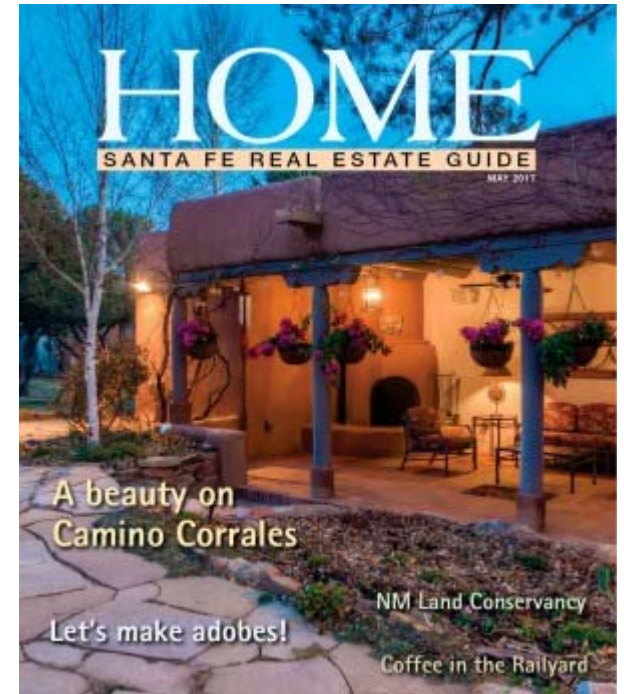
Full-blown permaculture design requires long and protracted observation. Unfortunately, few people want to pay some eco-freak to wander around their property at all hours of the day and night, through every season of the year. I've been designing and installing landscapes professionally for 24 years, and no one has ever had that much patience — or cash.

Instead, before we set foot on any property, PermaDesign's landscape-design process starts with an online, user-friendly questionnaire that potential clients fill out. Periodically, we get pushback from this. Not everyone wants to answer questions about their aesthetic preferences, their level of commitment (or lack thereof) to landscape maintenance, or their deep-seated desires for fruit trees, a cistern, greywater harvesting, a compost pile or a chicken coop.

Potential clients are sometimes simply too busy, so spending a few minutes on a multiple-choice exercise seems gratuitous. Other potential clients have specific goals, so the idea of considering unrelated issues is plain dumb to them. If all you want is to ensure your driveway doesn't wash into the arroyo, questions about the size of your typical social gatherings can seem absurd. (However, if visitors tend to park on the side of your monsoon-threatened driveway, such questions are vital.)

Even if our clients have plenty of time and no specific goals, some people simply do not comprehend why "so-called" landscape professionals can't quickly describe what their final product will look like and how much it will cost. We live in a culture of experts. The orthopedic surgeon says you need a prescription for your hip pain; you get the prescription. The roofer quotes \$10,000; you fix your roof or get more estimates. The landscaper shows up and you get the outcome you desire without much thought. Yes? No.

The landscape design process is very personal. It's more like going to Frogurt than



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surgery or roofing. It's as if a surgeon could provide scores of hip options. How about a femur that provides extra comfort and pleasure? What about an iliac crest that's super cheap but smells like a bed of rosemary? A gluteus maximus of workout-machine-commercial proportions? Just ask!

But, that's not all. While fixing you up, you'd be told, you should get a little heart surgery, a tummy tuck and some root canal since we'll already have surgery's equivalent of backhoe-and-dump-truck mobilized. Yes? No.

Landscape designers need to appreciate the needs, desires, aversions, habits, hobbies and goals of the client. We need to be aware of the land-oriented characteristics that the client has already observed, as well as what has not yet been observed. We need to account for the forces that tend to pass through a property — people, animals, stormwater, winds, extreme temperatures, pleasant or unpleasant sounds, fragrances, views and more. No offense, but surgeons and roofers won't have much to say with respect to such mercurial uncertainties.

Time and money are not only saved when clients provide designers with detailed and comprehensive information, but overall satisfaction with a given project is also easier to attain as a result of such info. If you're interested in diving deeper into the landscape design process, please check out PermaDesign's client questionnaire at permadesign.com/forms/project_questionnaire

Nate Downey started Santa Fe Permaculture in 1992, authored Roof-Reliant Landscaping (2008) and Harvest the Rain (2010), and is the president of PermaDesign Inc. He can be reached via www.permadesign.com or 505-690-7939.

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