A Process for Permaculture Design

A. Set your aims

1. Client interview.

Identify the vision and aims of the project along with any constraints (potentially including limited initial resources (time, money, skills); a need to accommodate particular existing land uses, etc.).

B. Gather data

2. Base map.

Create a base map of the property, with boundaries, existing infrastructure (buildings, fences, pathways), trees and gardens, etc. Some of these features will be more fixed, and others relatively malleable. For now, just take note.

3. Observation.

Walk systematically around the property. Note boundaries created by landscape features and fixed structures. Describe and record what you see without judgement.

- Look at various elevation levels, not just the ground.
- Whenever possible, spread your observations across different times of day, different seasons, and different weather.

4. Sector analysis. (Map overlay)

Note conditions that surround the site, and flows into and out of the site that will influence your design.
Nature: Sun (summer/winter); wind (prevailing and dominant); rainfall patterns; temperature patterns, fire, etc.
Built infrastructure: power, water, sewer lines, roads
Other influences: noise, people movements (nearby pathways, security risks, teaching opportunities), trees near the property (do they create shade or take soil nutrients?), etc.

5. On-site water analysis. (Map overlay)

Note where water comes from and where it goes: pay attention to waterlines, gutters, downpipes, outdoor taps, wells, watertanks, greywater and blackwater, septic tanks and leach fields, boggy spots.

6. Soil analysis. (Map overlay)

Consider soil types, soil pH, and also nutrient sources such as leaf fall.

7. Microclimates. (Map overlay)

Indicate existing microclimates.

C. Design according to the Permaculture Principles.
At each step, refer to permaculture principles to help you think critically and holistically about your choices.

8. Zones and Broad Design. (Map overlay)

In broad strokes, indicate your relevant zone divisions, from most visited to least visited, for example:

1. Home
2. Garden
3. Food forest
4. Grazing areas
5. Harvest forests
6. Conservation areas

Then add any other client-specific features at a broad level (e.g. kitchen garden, main crop garden, orchard, chicken house, entertaining area, propagating shed, herb garden, water harvesting tanks, etc.). This is the "quick tour" level. If you were introducing a visitor to the property, what would you identify as distinct areas, and what would you call each of them? How would you move through these areas? Design appropriate connections and people flows.

9. Poorly Placed Elements?

Now that you have determined your distinct areas and how they are connected to one another, is there something on the existing property that needs to be moved? (Earth works, plants, infrastructure, microclimate alterations, etc.).

10. Detailed Design.

Focusing on one area of your design at a time (e.g, the kitchen garden), add more detail (internal pathways, plants and materials used, etc.).

This handout is suitable for supporting outdoor, land-based projects such as garden, orchard, and farm designs. Other types of design projects (social and economic projects, buildings, technologies, etc.) follow the broad strokes of (1) setting aims, (2) gathering data, and (3) designing according to permaculture principles, but depart from the more detailed steps outlined here. This handout has been adapted by S.Stevens, for RECAP, from various handouts without attribution that generally "belong" to the NZ permaculture community--may this similarly serve that community, if useful. July 2015.