

# Regenerative

*“You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”* Inigo Montoya,  
The Princess Bride

It is very noticeable that the term ‘regenerative’ has become increasingly commonplace in the built environment: the circular economy being ‘restorative and regenerative by design’; anyone declaring a climate emergency needing to imagine themselves as ‘indivisible components of a constantly regenerating...system’; food coming from regenerative agriculture sources (watch a few episodes of Countryfile and you should get the idea!); university engineering curricula having to ‘commit to the principles of regenerative design’; insetting methods supporting nature-based improvements being a more regenerative approach than offsetting. Even the GLA notes recarbonation in concrete being a form of ‘regenerative design’<sup>1</sup>, (That last one? Really?!)

In the face of multiple environmental and social crises many are drawn to the important and simple idea, as Will McDonough is often credited as saying, of “doing more good, not just being less bad”. It feels a bit like sustainability 30 or so years ago where we had a sense of optimism that we can effect change. But just as with sustainability back then, we need to be clear about what we mean, and do not mean, by ‘regenerative’ (cultures, design, development, sustainability, systems, etc) before a really powerful idea for transformation gets hijacked and becomes yet more jargon for a little bit more of the same.

<sup>1</sup> This is included as part of the [pre-application submission requirements](#) for projects in London (see s 4.10), and one would have hoped gone through some sort of review process that didn’t pick up this sort of trendy but loose interpretation of terminology.

## The Positive<sup>+</sup> Collective

The Positive<sup>+</sup> Collective was founded on a commitment to explore regenerative design and development and the methods we can adopt to help us move beyond some theoretical sustainable steady state. We do this by collaborating with others to identify new system solutions, designing from place, and finding practical ways to redefine our relationship with nature. The term, and the methods associated with this, are still emergent. We therefore need to help shape our understanding of this concept and find ways to implement ideas in practice. This is the think-do ambition we employ.

Multiple academics and practitioners ([Andreucci et al](#), [Brown](#), [Capra](#), [Cole](#), [du Plessis](#), [ETH’s MOOC](#), [Krone](#), [Lyle](#), [Orr](#), [Mang and Reed at Regenesi](#), [RESTORE](#), [Wahl](#) etc) have already set out important thinking on the origins and meaning of regenerative design and development which we can work off. A quick scan of posts on social media and you’ll see there are plenty of new (and re-hashed old) ideas about. Even The Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851 – the very guardians of The Industrial Revolution – have set up a research fellowship to investigate regenerative design and its impact on the built environment.



The shift in mindset through ego and eco to seva suggested asks searching questions both of ourselves and how we should transform embedded industry methods. So when we use the word 'regenerative' we mean something that is:

### Ecological not Mechanistic:

Critically – as one prof weighed in about on LinkedIn a while back – the ideas crossing over to the built environment are based on ecological systems thinking not established building industry mechanistic (reductionist) methods. This is a major step change in both worldview and methods for engineers and architects and a bit lost in the many wedge-like diagrams showing a seamless transition from degenerative to regenerative states. We need to forget about just being a bit more efficient!

For example, a Circular Economy mirrors natural systems with no waste, but doesn't fit with limited and linear product manufacturing methods and established market incentives. It's not without reason the UKGBC is currently looking for Circular Economy system enablers.

We have seen similar reactions to systems thinking when presenting our Positive House concept, having to explain why our emphasis was not just on using bio-based materials and distributed manufacturing (good, but limited ideas) but understanding the potential benefit of the adoption of UK-specific timber species and products to forestry, and component circularity and reuse to increasing carbon pools over time.

### About Potential not Existence:

We know clearly from advances in scientific research and modelling the scale and speed of impacts we are having not just on climate, but also biodiversity and pollution. We are having to reappraise what we had assumed would be ever-present<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> As we are really talking impacts in The Great Acceleration, perhaps we might call this time of global rethinking The Great Reflection?

People, habitats and our built environment are one integrated living system. While we strive to provide for our needs, regenerative concepts require us to do the same for non-humans species. If we accepted the idea that we are part of nature<sup>3</sup> we would also recognise nature needs a similar ability as ourselves to evolve.

Much of our (weak sustainability) thinking however – including the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) we should point out – accepts the substitution of nature for economic benefit. Until we adopt an alternative (strong sustainability) viewpoint, the tendency will always be to favour 'growth' over the intrinsic value of nature of itself.

(Importantly part of this transformation could be for humans to set the conditions for nature to thrive, and then maybe leave it well alone.)

### Derives from Place not Product:

Any systems approach should understand the underlying social, cultural and ecological aspects connected to place. It's why detailed mapping and engagement with communities, landscape and environmental experts should shape design responses.

This is very different to most approaches that impose standard strategies and products onto place. It's the opposite of what one fabulous regenerative-based checklist notes as designing 'icons of the apocalypse'.

For Bristol's Climate Smart Cities Challenge to make affordable zero carbon homes viable, our approach was to address the root system failures, team up with local community groups to work at a hyper-local level to understand real needs, and leverage broader opportunities for impact with residents. We'll see what Bristol City and UN Habitat think about this in June when they announce the winning team for their competition.

**So when you spot the word 'regenerative' being used, maybe just ask yourself if you think it means what they think it means.**

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Morton makes the point that we already co-exist without the billions of bacteria, so maybe were are all ecologically minded, but just don't realise it?

