

BECOMING A REGENERATIVE PRACTITIONER

Excerpted from an Interview with Pamela Mang, co-founder of the Regenes Group and Daniel Christian Wahl, international consultant and educator specialising in biologically-inspired whole systems design and transformative innovation.

Jul 6, 2017

WHAT IS REGENERATIVE DEVELOPMENT?

Daniel Wahl: *The words regenerative development and design are currently being picked up by many people. How would you define regenerative approaches and how are they different from sustainable design and development?*

Pamela Mang: In the mid-90s, the dominant conversation in sustainable development was around how to limit human impact on the Earth. We started from a contrarian focus and asked the opposite question:

- How do we increase human impacts, but in ways that are consciously, reciprocally beneficial?
- How can human endeavors serve as sources of healing and regeneration for the living systems they effect?
- What capabilities are required in how we develop and inhabit our places if they are to do so?

Those questions led us to defining regenerative development as essentially being about growing the capability of living beings — humans, communities, ecosystems — to co-evolve toward ever higher orders of diversity, complexity, creativity, and life. It's about our taking on a new role, one that goes beyond stewards or caretakers of nature to becoming co-evolutionary partners with nature.

A more important question is, what does it mean to be truly sustainable and what does it require? We're finding that, along with the growing interest in regenerative approaches, there's an unfortunate tendency to see regenerative as somehow 'better' than sustainability. We've been working on developing regenerative approaches, not because we think they're 'better,' but because we think they are necessary complements that enable other approaches to sustainability to be more whole and more effective in realizing the value that they have the potential to bring.

This understanding of sustainability starts with the recognition that natural and cultural systems express themselves uniquely in each place on Earth. Because of this reality, engaging in co-evolutionary partnerships with nature necessarily starts from an understanding of the uniqueness and potential that is core to a specific place.

From that perspective, regenerative development and design provide an integrated conceptual framework through which human communities can grow their shared understanding of the unique places in which they live and work. It is this understanding that provides the armature for creating a system of sustainable design strategies and processes tailored to the unique character of a place, and aimed at building the capability and will of its inhabitants to partner with their place.

I think the real significance of the increasing appreciation of regenerative approaches is as an indicator of how our understanding of sustainability is evolving, becoming more whole and more aligned with the rich complexity of how life works. We're recognizing that life has created the abundance and wealth required to sustain itself on the planet through continually evolving the systemic capacity to be "self-managing, self-investing and self-evolving." That leads naturally to seeing regenerative approaches as vehicles for us to play a value-adding role, partnering with nature in that unfolding process.

What it should *not* do is diminish the importance of other natures of sustainability work — continuing to design and construct increasingly waste-free and environmentally beneficial human structures and activities, and continuing to grow the resilience of human and natural communities in an increasingly complex and turbulent world.

The key is to never allow working on efficiency and resilience to become ends in and of themselves. Rather, we must ensure that functional efficiency and systemic resilience are always designed and developed in ways that further the work of growing the life-giving and life-sustaining capacity of our places and thereby ourselves.

"A regenerative approach is always developmental, meaning that it's working to grow the capacity of the living systems that we are working in. Regenerative projects by definition seek to develop the inherent potential in everyone they touch — this is how communities become regenerative. They build the capacity to become self-managing, self-investing and self-evolving."
— Ben Haggard

HOW DOES ONE BECOME A REGENERATIVE PRACTITIONER?

Daniel Wahl: *What advice would you give to those who want to build their professional career towards being a regenerative practitioner?*

Pamela Mang: That's a big question. There's now a growing body of literature about regenerative development and design. Obviously reading into that is one step. Another important step is finding and talking with others who are further along the path.

Regenerative work doesn't start from a blank slate. Ideally these resources share a similar professional area or background with you. Look at the skills and capabilities and the experience

you've developed as a practitioner. Drawing on what you're learning about regenerative approaches, how can you build on them to make them more regenerative?

I also think it's important to reconnect to what you care about, what is core to you, what led you to the work you've been doing and what's pulling you to lift it to another level. Regenerative work in the world starts from the essence and inherent potential of a community or place, and discovering how to enable that to more fully be manifested. If that's not true for yourself in your own work, you can't do that for others.

From a capability perspective, if you don't already have at least a basic understanding of how living systems work (what Fritjof Capra calls ecological literacy), you need to develop one. This does not mean studying or becoming an expert in ecology. The key is to work on your capacity for understanding — being able to see below the surface to how things work and why — not to load up on knowledge.

Related to that is building your *pattern literacy*. We can't 'see' systems with our eyes, but we can begin to notice patterns of relational behavior among the elements of a system. From that we can begin to image the working of the system, its health and its potential. Pattern literacy involves being able to read and interpret existing as well as past patterns and, with increasing understanding and skill, being able to image and design for introducing more generative and regenerative patterns.

In many ways, working regeneratively starts with being able to 'see' with fresh eyes. Ecological and pattern literacy are empty toolboxes if you can't see how your own thinking patterns keep you from seeing in new ways. So another capability to work on developing is the capability to notice how your own thinking works — to see how hidden assumptions and beliefs lock you into old ways of seeing.

Equally important, if you want to change those and not just watch them, is working on discovering what triggers those old thinking patterns, and how you can catch the trigger before it flips. What we call 'self-observing' (dividing one self into a "doing" self and an "observing" self) and 'self-remembering' (setting an aim for the self you want to bring to your work) are fundamental capabilities in managing the being state required to engage with and see the value in complexity. Without them, we all tend to collapse our self and what we're working on into something 'manageable.'

And of course, I have to recommend taking The Regenerative Practitioner Series!

THE REGENERATIVE PRACTITIONER SERIES

We have found that people drawn to regenerative work tend to share a set of characteristics, whatever field they work in:

- They feel a deep connection to natural systems.

- They believe that a sustainable future requires transforming social as well as physical infrastructures.
- They recognize that an understanding of how decisions are made is fundamental to creating real change, and they seek to work developmentally and co-creatively with those they serve.

We designed The Regenerative Practitioner (TRP) for working practitioners who are looking to evolve themselves and their practice through integrating regenerative development into their lives and their work.

I think it's important to emphasize that TRP is not a course in theoretical knowledge. Everything that is learned is immediately applicable, and needs to be applied in order to be truly learned. Neither is it learning about design techniques, but rather about what sources regenerative design practices. As Shawn Hesse, a TRP graduate, described what he learned:

“Regenerative Development is not about design per se; it is more a way of working. Specifically, a way of working and thinking with whole systems such that people and nature are stronger, more vibrant, and more resilient as a result of our work. In other words, it isn't about a design project being regenerative, it isn't really about the project at all. Instead, it is about increasing the capacity of human and natural systems to grow and thrive, and the project is a tool, or even excuse, to examine and positively impact those systems.”

— Shawn Hesse (TRP graduate)

One of the distinguishing characteristics of TRP is its multidimensionality. A fundamental premise of regenerative development is that we cannot make the outer transformations required to create a truly sustainable world without making inner transformations in how we think. Throughout the course, learning to work on developing oneself (personal development), developing one's work community (one's practice/team) and one's effect in the world (making a meaningful and significant difference) are consciously woven together.

You could say that, at its core, TRP is a course in applying regenerative thinking toward becoming an agent of evolution. It doesn't just talk about how we need to change the way we think; it provides instruments and processes for doing so.

Outcomes for graduates include greater capability in core aspects of regenerative development:

- identifying and sustaining focus on what is essential or core in a place
- seeing and designing ways to manifest regenerative potential
- managing integrative processes
- creating reciprocal, mutual benefits across scales

- understanding how ecosystems operate and the regenerative role humans can play within them.

Daniel Wahl: *Of the many people who have gone through TRP around the world, could you highlight an example of how people have used what they learned in their professional practice after the course?*

Pamela Mang: We've seen a wide and growing range of creative applications, from using it to re-orient and restructure a practice or a business, or start a whole new one, to redesigning professional education programs to launching new community change initiatives and organizations.

Daniel Wahl: *What is your personal vision for the future of regenerative development and design, and how do you see TRP contributing to manifesting this vision?*

Pamela Mang: I'd put it even more strongly — only by working regeneratively from a deep connection to, and understanding of place will we be able to really deliver on what matters: human settlements and human economies that regenerate rather than degenerate our cultures, societies, and the planet we live on.

There's a bumper sticker with an image of an arrow spiraling down next to the statement: "If we don't change direction, we'll end up where we're going." We've turned globalism into globalization, a soul-crushing movement of mass uniformity that has disconnected people from the uniqueness of their places, and from the source of innovation and will that is required to change that direction. In reaction, localism too often turns into polarizing campaigns of defense, organized around protecting and preserving places from 'the others.'

What if instead we imagined a global movement to reinvent localism? What if we envisioned a localism in which each place is a uniquely creative node where people from all walks of life are coming together as citizen designers, working to reconnect human activities with the aspirations of nature by reinventing their work, their places, and how they live in them.

Each place in turn is a node within open networks of exchange, working to amplify its richness and well-being while nourishing the diversity of the network as a whole. Wolfgang Sachs named this cosmopolitan localism, localism that "cherishes a particular place, yet at the same time knows about the (necessary) relativity of all places" in a nested and interdependent world.

It's a localism that regenerates people's sense of connection to their place as a living entity co-created by nature and people, one in which they have a meaningful role to play. It is a localism in which the search for place-centered diversity provides an unprecedented opportunity to discover, place by place, opportunities and solutions indigenous to specific locations rather than generic to everywhere — solutions that grow wealth by growing local capacity, natural and social, to continue to evolve new orders of value.

It is a localism in which place becomes a touchstone of shared meaning and caring, enabling people to make common cause with one another and with nature. This is the future I believe regenerative development is called and uniquely equipped to serve. Regenerative development, by its nature as an integrative and developmental way of working, is itself a co-evolutionary process. It will continue to deepen and ramify as new practitioners, disciplines, and cultures, working from a deepening understanding of their place, bring their perspectives to defining a new, participatory role for human beings on a rapidly changing planet.

Regenerative development is also a framework for rethinking what design and development have the potential to accomplish within this new vision of localism.

As we wrote in the epilogue to our book: “Within the context of regenerative development, designers evolve beyond problem solvers. They become resources for reconnecting places and people to their inherent potential. As such, they facilitate learning and develop the capacity of local citizen designers. By collaborating in the creation of shared images and stories, they help make tangible what sustainable well-being is in specific places. When they are most successful, their radical insights can evolve the questions people are asking and the goals they are pursuing. In short, regenerative practitioners are conscious and highly skilled agents of systems transformation.”

For us at Regenesi, the work we’ve been developing and pioneering in the field of Regenerative Development over the last 20 years has been a journey of deep learning and development. It is work that requires radically new ways of thinking about and being in the world, and in pursuing it we’ve come to treasure the vital importance of being part of a regenerative learning community. It is not work that can be kept alive and evolving by oneself.

When we launched TRP, we wanted to share our work, but our ultimate aim was growing a regenerative practitioners’ learning community, working to continually extend the thinking and professional practice of this emerging discipline. We recognized that, if regenerative development is to make the changes that are called for, that community must grow. In particular, because the fundamental ground of regenerative development is place, it must grow as a network of place-sourced communities of regenerative practice.

We’ve seen TRP as a vehicle for this vision from the beginning.

RESOURCES

Daniel Wahl: *Are there any books, articles or resources you would suggest to learn more?*

Pamela Mang:

An Ecology of Mind, Nora Bateson’s video about her father Gregory Bateson’s work that is a delightful introduction to the experience of ecological thinking and the creative insights it produces. (<https://vimeo.com/ondemand/bateson>)

The Regenerates, a 45-minute documentary is available on Vimeo. It was composed by award winning filmmaker Alexander Melck using footage from the research for the book *Designing for Hope* (mentioned below). (<https://vimeo.com/120837455>)

In the resources section of our website there are downloadable articles, ranging in length and density, about how Regeneration has approached regenerative development:

- the Projects section has case studies of projects we've worked with
- there is a downloadable bibliography on the Resources page that lists works by many of the seminal thinkers on which regenerative development drew.

Some books I think would be useful.

- **Regenerative Development and Design: A Framework for Evolving Sustainability** by Ben Haggard and myself introduces, with examples, a number of the concepts we work with in TRP.
- **Designing Regenerative Cultures**, (your book – Daniel Wahl) gives a great overview of the range of fields in which regenerative approaches are emerging, the challenges that exist, and a taste of the kind of questions this work leads to and benefits from exploring.
- **Designing for Hope: Pathways to Regenerative Sustainability** by Dominique Hes and Chrisna Du Plessis offers a good overview of key aspects of regenerative development and the people who are practicing it, opening with a rich description of the different paradigms that have shaped and are shaping how we think about sustainability and regenerative development and design.