

Evolving The New Role of Development:
Healing Places to Heal a Planet
by Regensis

At a time when growing environmental concerns are increasingly being manifested through NIMBY reactions to local developments, it would seem nothing less than absurd to assert that developers can, and in fact do, hold the key to restoring ecological and social balance and health to our communities and the lands they inhabit. Yet it is the assertion of this article that the process of development and the role of developer is, at this point, *the* most appropriate vehicle for transforming the way we inhabit and think about ourselves and our planet, for restoring humans to right relationship with the Earth.

The basis for this surprising assertion lies in the power of the vital, co-creative relationship between humans and the Places they inhabit—a power that has been diminished but never totally erased. Humans have always “developed” the places they inhabit, and developed themselves—their cultures and social institutions—at the same time. At times, they have become very sophisticated partners with ecosystems, helping natural systems move toward very high orders of expression. Mounting evidence indicates that nearly all of the astonishingly rich and productive “wilderness” encountered by early European visitors to the New World (on both northern and southern continents) was the result of conscious and generally skillful management by indigenous peoples.

Regenerative Development reconnects to and unleashes the power of this partnership between people and Place. A radically different process than that of conventional development, it draws on modern technologies even as it returns to ancient roots. Like development undertaken by indigenous peoples, Regenerative Development anchors itself in a world-view and ways of thinking that are holistic, dynamic, relational, and oriented toward evolution. Such a world-view offers an entirely different vantage from which to assess and create the technologies that will be required to grow the life and potential of a given Place.

By contrast, development for most of the 20th Century and into the 21st Century has done much to earn its starring role as a destroyer of Place. Too often, developments fail to take into account a whole picture of the ecological and social forces that generate those distinctive qualities that make a place desirable for development. The resulting placelessness, “geographies of nowhere” as James Kunstler describes them, have created monotonous and deadening landscapes that suppress local meaning and promote rootlessness. Even though many developments have discovered that distinct identities help sell houses, these identities rarely grow out of an understanding of the essence of Place and how life works in that Place. They mistake period architecture and zoning, or

history referencing names for the intrinsic qualities that set one Place aside from another and are the source of true connection.

Environmentalists and community activists, of necessity, have shone the spotlight on the resultant failures, and we owe much to those who were and still are on the front line, fighting to reverse past abuses and prevent future ones. Battlegrounds however are poor sources for reconciliation let alone for evolution beyond the current state. The reaction to the environmental movement has divided communities and solidified polarities. It has become fodder for politicians seeking to enflame supporters, while efforts at meaningful, systemic change are stalled or ignored. If we are to evolve a new way of relating to the places we inhabit, we will need to move beyond the conflict that has framed much of the relationship between developers and environmentalists over the last 50 years.

Regenerative Development, in contrast to both conventional development and to conventional environmentalism, returns Place to its core position in human life. As an integral part of its process, it develops and extends appreciation and caring across all the enfolded, interdependent dimensions that create a Place and the meaning it holds for its inhabitants. Regenerative Development recognizes that Place as a living whole, not land titles or buildings or amenities, is the most important asset of a development. It draws from and amplifies the power of deepening connection to Place in order to form partnerships in Place that are, in effect, joint ventures—investing in the continuing evolution of the whole to serve the parts, and visa versa.

Regenerative Development is grounded in a deep understanding of the integral and interdependent nature of living systems—social and biotic, and the complex and emergent process by which they co-evolve. It has cast aside the self-damaging illusions that we can operate as if there is an “environment” separate from ourselves, or that we can deliver green functions and formulas while ignoring the creativity of the human spirit as a vehicle for the expression of the genius and soul of Place.

Regenerative Development makes possible a new and critically needed role for developers and developments, the full potential of which is still unfolding. We are already seeing developments that, by the way they are built and occupy land, serve as instruments for reversing ecological damage, and as economic forces for constructing sustainable livelihoods. What we are just beginning to see is how, through weaving the many stories of Place into a mutually appreciating whole, a Regenerative Development becomes a harmonizing force within communities and among different stakeholders, inspiring new standards of appropriate relationship to Place. Or how, by introducing larger systemic vision and potential, development becomes a catalyst for the creation of self-evolving bio-regional infrastructures and cultures of regeneration. Or how Regenerative Development of Place can begin to act like global acupuncture points, regenerating the elemental basis of life and restoring the planet’s capacity to regenerate itself and humans’ capacity to live in harmony with our home.

While this new role is beginning to emerge in small scales and at scattered locations, it is largely unrecognized as being part of a larger evolution. What is needed now is to bring consciousness and intention to its emergence as the new pattern shaping the field of development.

Over the last decade Regenesiis has worked toward understanding how Regenerative Development generates place-partnering processes that enable the new role of development and developers. Four phases seem to be critical to working regeneratively through development:

- 1) Understanding the source and aim, or wisdom and potential of the Place: Land and People, and the Project and what needs to be brought into harmony to realize that potential and express that wisdom. (Assessment of place and of aspirations and developing a coalescing common purpose.)
- 2) Defining the structural relationships that need to be created and the cycles of generation that must be integrated and completed to realize this potential while maintaining the awareness of working on evolving the interrelatedness of nested wholes of Place. (Place-grown Design Principles and Conceptual Design)
- 3) Growing the capacity and caring to manifest those relationships through how we work together and in Place throughout the development process. (Integrated Implementation)
- 4) Developing processes for sustaining and evolving the project as an integrated, self-reinforcing whole, and for harmonizing with the evolution of the larger systems of Place within which the project is nested. (Inhabitation, Operations, Ongoing Regeneration and Evolution)

In developing thinking around these phases, a number of key insights and critical questions are emerging that appear to be central to the emergence of this new pattern. Our own work has been greatly enriched through dialogue with a number of talented and dedicated fellow “regenerates”—professionals in the field who understand that green and sustainable is not enough. The call now is to extend this dialogue into a broad conversation about the emerging role of development as a source for harmonizing the multiple dimensions of Place—the diverse historical, ecological, cultural, economic, and political forces that too often turn communities into battlegrounds.

A beginning point for this exploration involves re-viewing our role as humans in light of new scientific understanding of how our world works. It should include exploring processes for growing an authentic sense of Place as a source of unifying meaning, purpose and identity across and between communities (in contrast to past aberrations where a sense of Place was used to isolate and divide). It needs to look more deeply into the process of regeneration—not just its functional/material biological effect, but also its role in evolving a new order of being and its relationship to growing and integrating new and greater spirit into our work and lives. Once this context is built, we can look with

new eyes at the critical intrinsic and extrinsic restraints that must be addressed, and what is required to evolve the current development field toward a regenerative imperative.

Progressing along this journey will require new knowledge and skills certainly but, much more importantly, it will require a new mind and a new way of being, and that in turn will require integrating inner developmental processes with our outer development work. “Success” in Regenerative Development is iterative and progressive, with each cycle moving upward. But it requires, from the beginning, a full-hearted commitment—and that can be the most difficult challenge of all, for when, as a Regenerative Developer we put our full heart into a project and a Place we care deeply about, we make ourselves vulnerable to any and all who, lacking understanding or wholeness in their own thinking, are still trapped in the old paradigm of protection and battle against the “evil developer.” Without the inner work on growing a self that can hold true to its center, and can maintain a sense of compassion for the situation people are trapped in, it is all too easy to slip into the same reactive mode.

Finally, because this is and must be a collective learning journey, those of us who believe development is called to do far more than limit the damage must develop ongoing processes for sharing insights and support as we cross personal and professional boundaries.

