
Driving Urban Regenerative Hospitality



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Abstract

Regenerative hospitality has often been described as a prerogative of small boutique hotels in nature-based places. These properties are usually very connected with the natural and social ecosystems around them and provide extraordinary experiences for guests. The general manager – often the owner – can embrace net-positive thinking and guide the property alongside the staff towards regeneration. However, regeneration can be for all types of hospitality properties. This research presents a case study of a Swiss city property that is working towards regeneration; thanks to data triangulation and a structured workshop, the property's board of directors generated a better understanding of regeneration and prioritized the actions towards it.

Key Words: Regenerative Hospitality; Regeneration; Net-Positive Hospitality; Mindset; Regenerative Canva.

Track: Ethically Driven Innovations

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Introduction

The discourse on sustainability in the hospitality industry has evolved beyond merely mitigating impacts to positively contribute to natural and social ecosystems (Legrand et al., 2024). Regenerative hospitality sees accommodation businesses as agents for change at the destination level (Inversini, 2024). Despite a growing interest in the topic, there is scant research related to urban regeneration in the hospitality context (e.g. Caniglia et al., 2019). To date, the majority of research focuses on regeneration in a nature-based context where properties already benefit from the pervasive natural and social environments and those are able to foster some sort of positive place innovation (e.g. Dacin & Dacin, 2019).

This research, through a case study, examines the potential for hospitality establishments to adopt regenerative practices within urban environments. The paper triangulates three different sources of data to assess the current status of the property under investigation; after that, researchers ran a focus group based on the affordance theory (Jones, 2003) to promote a regenerative thinking that goes beyond net-positive approaches (Legrand et al., 2024).

Review of The Literature

Compared to sustainability, regeneration departs from a net-positive standpoint (Legrand et al., 2024); instead of doing less harm, in regeneration, businesses are called to have a positive impact on nature and the community around them (Inversini et al., 2023). The regenerative paradigm (Bellato et al., 2022) departs from the awareness that sustainability is not delivering its promises (Legrand et al., 2024): focusing solely on limiting and compensating business negative externalities may not be sufficient to address global environmental and social issues.

Therefore, a different approach is needed. An approach that conceives businesses as positive contributors and eventually building blocks of a net-positive society (Inversini et al., 2023). In this vision, businesses are not designed as ‘stand-alone’ entities but as a living system which can make an active contribution to other living systems around them (Raworth, 2017). New forms of business can then stem from this active and positive living systems interconnection (Bellato & Frantzeskaki, 2021); within this, regenerative leaders emerge as advocates for this change (Hutchins, 2019) promoting living system design and living system culture.

Within the wider travel field, the concept of regeneration has often been associated with destination strategies (Chassagne & Everingham, 2024) starting from a net positive approach (Polman & Winston, 2022). Hospitality represents the forefront of regeneration in travel: hospitality managers have the possibility of changing the narrative around their hotel and transform their business into a positive contributor for the destination (Inversini et al., 2023). Instead of thinking about the hospitality business as extractive and degenerative, regenerative hoteliers do their best to play an active role within the firm (i.e. with employees and guests) and outside the firm (i.e. to the natural and social ecosystems). What has been noted as crucial in these contexts is the presence of a regenerative leader (Taveras-Dalmau, 2024), that is often the general manager – who went through an inner journey of transformation enabling her/him to have a different and more rounded vision of their responsibility to the reality around them.

However, to date, research on regenerative hospitality mostly focused on boutique hotels in remote places endorsed by natural beauty (Dacin & Dacin, 2019). In these contexts, hoteliers are immersed in an overwhelming natural and social surrounding and they are – to some extent – more inclined to pursue a regenerative journey, both at a personal level and at a business level. On the contrary, city hotels seem less prone to go through a regenerative

journey. They are often challenged by the competitive environment around them and by a diluted perception of the natural and social ecosystems.

Therefore, this research was designed to understand to what extent city hotels can also participate in the regenerative movement by fostering a net positive contribution to all living systems.

Methodology

This study aims to discuss possible strategies and tactics to embrace regenerative hospitality in urban contexts. The investigation is based on a case study (e.g. Fusté-Forné & Hussain, 2022) of one single property of a major hotel chain located in a city center.

Two research objectives have been defined for this research:

- Obj1: To assess the current sustainability efforts of the property and to what extent they have a net-positive contribution to ecosystems.
- Obj2: To accompany the organization towards a transformative regenerative strategy based on the opportunities presented by the ecosystems.

The research was divided into two steps: the first step was designed to understand the current practices, triangulating three data sources, while the second step was based on a focus group to discuss and prioritize future regenerative strategies. Particularly:

In step 1: the website analysis codified all the major efforts of the hotel in terms of sustainability and regeneration; 118 online reviews from tripadvisor.com were analysed with infranodus.com (Paranyushkin, 2019); and 6 members of the hotel's direction were independently asked about the major net positive initiatives of the property.

In step 2: a visual tool called 'Regenerative Canva' based on the regenerative hospitality model (Inversini et al., 2023) and on affordance theory (Jones, 2003) was used to steer a focus group, highlighting and prioritizing potential regenerative practices to be implemented in the property.

Results

Step 1: Current practices analysis

Website Analysis

The property under investigation belongs to an international brand and therefore its website is nested within the group's website. Therefore, from a pure website personalization standpoint, creativity and realization of the actual official website is limited by the template given by the group. However, by analysing the website, it is possible to find at least 9 sustainability practices put forward by the hotel. Table 1 summarizes these practices and indicates the areas of impact (nature, social and people) and the type of impact (i.e. net-zero and net-positive).

As it is possible to observe, the majority (except the last one) of the sustainability practices falls into the 'natural' area of impact, and they are therefore concerned with the natural ecosystem; all of them (again, except the last one) have a net-zero impact that is to say they are mitigating the operational externalities of the business and most of them refer to the actual building.

The last observed practice focuses on local food sourcing: in the narrative that supports these practices, it is possible to notice both a natural (i.e. local food) and social aspect (i.e. regional producers); therefore, this practice has more than one area of impact and given the network created at the local level has the potential to be net positive.

Initiatives	Area of Impact			Type of impact	
	Nature	Social	People	Net Zero	Net Positive
Geothermal Energy	X			X	
Electrochromic Glass	X			X	
District Heating System	X			X	
Ventilated Façade	X			X	
Green Mobility	X			X	
Cocktails Infused with Home-Grown	X			X	
Ingredients					
Wines Optimized with Long-Lasting Barrels	X			X	
Reusing Plastics for Sustainable Uniforms	X			X	
A Standard Focus on Responsibly Sourced	X	X		X	X
Food					

Table 1: Initiatives, Area & Type of impact

Online Review Analysis

118 online reviews from tripadvisor.com, resulting in 11'511 words were analysed with infranodus.com (Paranyushkin, 2019); the hotel has 71% of positive reviews, 20% neutral and 9% negative. When looking at the nodes and their influence in explaining the corpus, there are essentially five clusters explaining 95% of the entire corpus (Table 2).

Cluster	Influence	Nodes	Percentage	Category
1	38%	25	26%	[City Name] Stay
2	24%	41	25%	Culinary Experience
3	13%	32	18%	Room Quality
4	12%	30	19%	Airport Access
5	11%	17	7%	Staff Excellence

Table 2: Online Review Analysis

The first cluster refers to the actual location of the hotel; cluster two reflects the culinary experiences that travellers can have in the property; cluster three refers to the amenities and the rooms; cluster four is about the direct transportation to the airport and cluster five is about staff excellence.

There is no reference to ‘regeneration’ per se within the corpus; however, there are a couple of occurrences related to sustainability:

“Sustainability is its hallmark. It has very pleasant social areas, an excellent structure for events, a modern restaurant and bar with an excellent breakfast and tasty dishes” and “We were excited about the hotel’s sustainability aspects, and it didn’t disappoint”.

Besides these two recitations for the review corpus, the only trace of net positive and/or sustainability can be related to the culinary experience, as it is possible to understand from the website (i.e. previous section) it is all sourced locally.

Direction’s Perception

A short questionnaire was sent to the members of the direction (n=6) to understand their perception of the most important initiatives carried out as a regenerative property. These initiatives were synthesized and classified in terms of areas of impact and type of impact (Table 3).

Initiatives	Area of Impact			Type of impact	
	Nature	Social	People	Net Zero	Net Positive
Support for local producers and promotion of the territory	X	X			X
Eco-responsibility in the use and creation of resources	X			X	
Community engagement and social responsibility		X	X		X
Innovation in building construction and operations	X			X	
Education and training		X	X		X

Table 3: Proposed Initiatives

Particularly, the members of the direction mentioned the following initiatives:

- Support for local producers and promotion of the territory: (i) direct relationship with local producers to support their activities; (ii) educating customers about more responsible choices and highlighting local products through cuisine (95% of products sourced locally)
- Eco-responsibility in the use and creation of resources: (i) working with local suppliers; (ii) installation of filtered water fountains; (iii) use of electric shuttles; (iv) paperless hotel; (v) technology for the reduction of food waste.
- Community engagement and social responsibility: (i) collaboration with local charitable associations; (ii) engagement with schools as a training hotel; (iii) support for local start-ups; (iv) gender equality and inclusion (internships for 2 people with disabilities) and (v) integration of refugees in training.
- Innovation in building construction and operations: (i) use of geothermal energy for building cooling; (ii) technological innovation of facades; (iii) use of district heating for hot water supply and heating;
- Education and training: (i) training young chefs and apprentices on the importance of local cuisine and respect for products; (ii) continuous education of staff on sustainable actions

Overall, for step one, it is possible to affirm that the property under investigation has a good level of sustainability and incorporates net-zero initiatives; the building is relatively new and was designed in accordance with sustainability standards. There is a clear effort on the food and beverage side to support local producers, and the reviews generated by customers also recognize this. What is interesting is the perception of the members of the direction: the richness of their answers depicts a slightly different picture for the property under investigation:

there is, in fact, a more rounded picture of the social, natural and people impact. Additionally, when it comes to the actual contribution, it is possible to see more net-positive initiatives. Therefore, the website and the user-generated reviews do not depict all the efforts that the members of the direction have put in place.

Step 2: Future regenerative practices

The workshop utilised a collaborative tool called ‘Regenerative Canva’ which is theoretically based on the affordance theory (Jones, 2003). Affordances can be defined as what the environment offers, provides, or furnishes to animals, be it good or bad (Jones, 2003). Affordances are specific to how an actor uniquely perceives materiality, which means one artifact can provide multiple affordances and, by extension, produce multiple outcomes (Hutchby, 2001). During the first phase of the workshop, the natural, social and relational (i.e. host-guest) affordances were discussed. For the natural ecosystem, social ecosystems and relational ecosystems opportunities and challenges were highlighted.

- Opportunities for the natural ecosystem could be summarized in: (i) move from net-zero to net-positive energy (e.g., surplus solar shared with community); (ii) educate guests via infrastructure tours (e.g., cocktail in technical zone); (iii) explore grants to offset long amortization of solar investments.
- Opportunities for the social ecosystem could be summarized in: (i) local storytelling and precision in origin of the product used at the restaurant; (ii) partner with nearby farms for immersive guest/staff experiences; (iii) culinary workshops or rooftop garden activations; (iv) staff visits to partners to deepen engagement and sense of purpose; (v) create a hub for social innovation in the hotel; (vi) develop partnerships with schools, offer training days for children or young people.
- Opportunities for the relational ecosystem could be summarized in: (i) need to build a strong narrative that links innovation to guest experience; (ii) balance operational efficiency with experimentation; (iii) scheduling and resourcing staff time for non-operational activities; (iv) ensuring continuity and mindset amidst turnover; (v) continuous training, especially around sustainability.

In the final part of the workshop, participants worked on identifying practical initiatives for the property to support its regeneration efforts. The discussion focused on the potential net positive impact of these initiatives. In total, eleven initiatives were agreed upon, including hands-on culinary experiences, residencies for local artists, staff development through training and field visits, and energy generation and distribution within the community.

Decision Matrix Quadrants

To rank these initiatives, participants were asked to assign a value to each one in terms of its impact, cost and feasibility. This allowed researchers to compile an impact-cost matrix (Figure 1) where the four quadrants represent (i) actions with high impact but low costs; (ii) actions with high impact and high cost, (iii) actions with low impact and low cost and (iv) actions with low impact and high cost.

- **Quadrant 1: Actions with high impact but low costs:** also known as “Quick Wins”, these actions could be executed immediately because they require minimal resources. They should be prioritised because they offer immediate returns with little investment.

- **Quadrant 2: Actions with high impact and high cost:** these actions are usually considered “Major Projects” not just because of the immense impact they have but also because they require significant investment. Therefore, they should be carefully planned to ensure long-term success.
- **Quadrant 3: Actions with low impact and low cost:** these actions should only be executed when resources are sufficient. Although they need fewer resources, they should not take priority over the previous two quadrants.
- **Quadrant 4: Actions with low impact and high cost:** these actions offer limited benefits despite requiring a considerable amount of resources. They should be avoided or minimized as they do not significantly contribute to the overall objectives of the company.

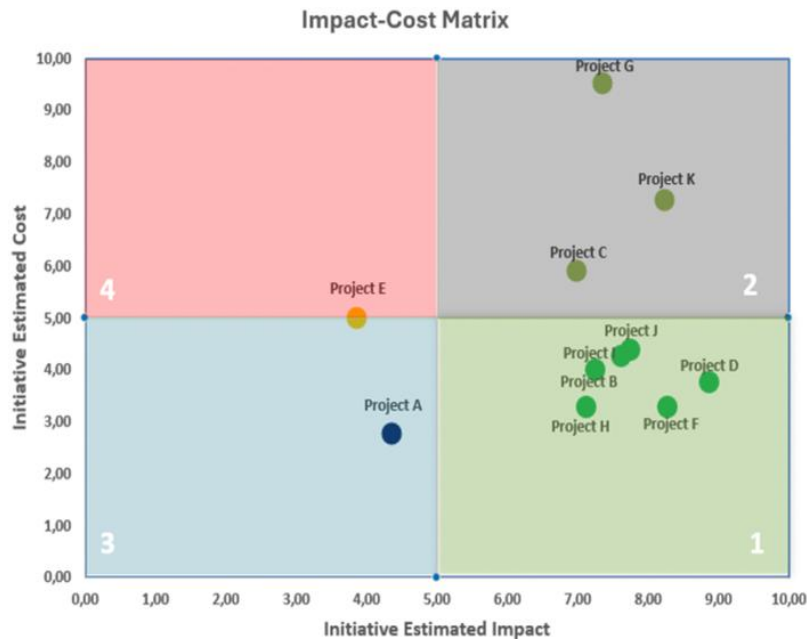


Figure 1: Impact & Cost Decision matrix

Discussions and Conclusions

This research illustrates through a case study the journey of a city-based hotel to regeneration; what is clear is that the hotel manager, along with the members of the direction, have a clear interest in sustainability and, as a team, they are trying to shift the organization from net-zero to net-positive. There is no evidence that the firm can be considered a regenerative property yet, however, there is a clear commitment to net-positive actions as a crucial step towards regeneration.

Some of the key takeaways from this case study are related to:

- “Mindset over perfection”: the property under investigation is not fully regenerative; this can only be done by impacting all living systems around and within the hotel, being true to nature, community and guest and not fearing the greenwashing and/or regenwashing accusation. However, the management is clearly working towards a net-positive and even regenerative future. The mindset is there, the constraint of a city hotel as well.

- “Authenticity vs. Green noise”: avoid sustainability and regenerative buzzwords unless backed by precise stories and immersive experiences. Regeneration builds on authenticity towards living systems. The board of directors understood the importance of authenticity during the workshop: being authentic in your approach towards living systems and communicating it to your customers would rarely be called greenwashing.
- “Hospitality as a platform”: The hotel should be seen as a hub for change in all ecosystems—not just as a provider of rooms but as an enabler of guest, staff, and community transformation.

Additionally, two significant issues emerged from the workshop and were prevalent in all discussions: (i) revenue tension: many initiatives necessitate a shift in revenue logic from short-term financial returns to long-term cultural and reputational value, emphasizing the need to share value with living ecosystems; (ii) staff satisfaction: employees are content working at this property due to the values embodied by the hotel, which supports staff retention and must be nurtured for the long term.

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