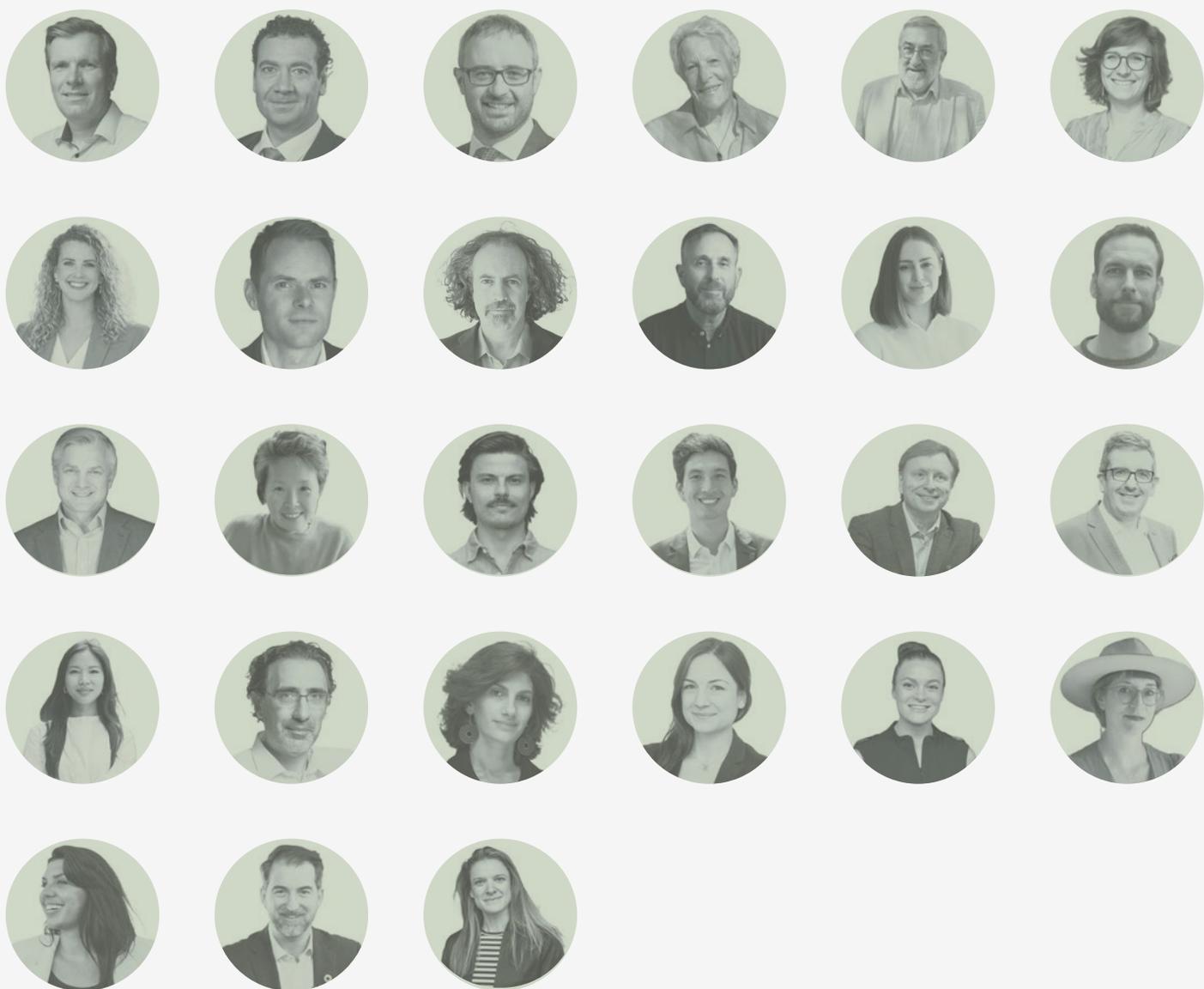


HYB26

Sustainability Edition

The Regenerative Question - What Hospitality Must Become



The Hotel Yearbook

Foresight and innovation in the global hotel industry



HY8



The Circular Prerequisite: Why Regeneration Without Circularity Is Just Greenwashing

Circular economy

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Manuel Maqueda argues that “regenerative” hospitality is meaningless – and often pure greenwashing – if it is built on a linear “take–make–waste” model. He outlines a three-step journey from efficiency (doing things right) to circularity (designing out waste and toxicity) to true regeneration (actively restoring ecosystems and communities), warning that you cannot skip the circular step and still claim to heal.

In the high-stakes arena of global hospitality, we are navigating a semantic storm. “Regenerative” has arrived like a hurricane, threatening to displace “sustainable” as the industry’s buzzword du jour. We see it everywhere: regenerative tourism, regenerative resorts, regenerative travel.

Alas, even if the people I advise don’t want to hear this, regeneration is not a feature to add to an existing portfolio, nor a new “app” to patch a buggy interface.

Regeneration is a new operating system for hospitality. To install it, we must first acknowledge that the industry is running on an obsolete system: the linear “take-make-waste” model. No amount of efficiency can fix a system designed to extract and discard—where toxicity hides in cosmetics, paints, wall coverings, insulating foams, carpets that shed microplastics, and even cooking equipment laden with PFAS. Reaching the destination of regeneration (actively healing living systems and communities) requires a structural transformation through circularity. Without circularity, regeneration is merely poetic aspiration.

This journey involves three steps: escaping the trap of Efficiency, embracing the structural shift of Circularity, and leaping toward the ultimate destination of Regeneration.

THE DESIGN FLAW: WHY INNOVATION FEELS SO SCARY AND EFFICIENCY FEELS SAFE

To understand why our industry struggles to move beyond basic sustainability, we must return to the drawing board. There is an axiom I half-jokingly tell hotel owners to print, frame, and put up on the wall: 80% of environmental and social impacts are determined during the design phase. In other words: pollution, toxicity, bad mojo, emissions, and waste are design flaws.

The journey requires abandoning the comfort of “doing things right” (efficiency) and embracing the challenge of “doing the right things” (effectiveness), which demands ditching the linear mentality of the past. Messy? Yes. Innovative? Required. Courageous? Absolutely. Scary or not, it’s the only path I see to a future where hospitality heals rather than just consumes.

1 STEP 1: THE EFFICIENCY TRAP AND LINEAR LOCK-IN

For decades, sustainability has been synonymous with eco-efficiency: we have optimized hotels to use less water, consume less energy, and generate less waste per guest night.

Efficiency asks: How can we reduce the damage we cause? It focuses on being “less bad.” Unfortunately, greater efficiency in a linear system often optimizes a model designed around extraction and depletion—one where formaldehyde off-gasses from carpets and microplastics shed from paint.

Out of frustration, I used to say efficiency was the enemy, but I was wrong. Efficiency isn’t evil; it’s just wildly insufficient. Here’s the problem: efficiency lets us move faster, but it doesn’t change direction. We’re sprinting down the wrong road, getting better at something we shouldn’t be doing in the first place.

Efficiency also creates a trap: by investing millions in optimizing linear infrastructure—recycled single-use plastics, biodigesters for biogas—we entrench the very systems we need to dismantle. Worse, efficiency gains often fuel increased consumption. (We economists call this the Rebound Effect, but you don’t need jargon to see it: “greener” flights mean more flying.)

Here’s the point: we can’t optimize our way to regeneration. You can’t add regeneration to a linear system any more than you can ice a cake you haven’t baked yet. We need to shift from efficiency (doing things right) to effectiveness (doing the right things)

2 STEP 2: CIRCULARITY: HERE’S WHERE IT GETS UNCOMFORTABLE

The only bridge I’ve found between our extractive past and a regenerative future is circularity. And I am not the only one.

First, circularity is not recycling. Many think it is, even some savvy hotel executives I have encountered. However, recycling is what you do after you’ve designed something wrong—it’s damage control. Circularity is different: it’s designing so there’s nothing to throw away in the first place. By design, circularity decouples our operations from resource extraction, toxicity, and waste.

Making this shift means abandoning the “cradle-to-grave” flow of materials and adopting a “cradle-to-cradle” mindset. Organic materials return to soil. Technical materials—machinery, plastics, furniture—circulate in closed loops.

But here’s what keeps me up at night and makes my hotel stays uneasy: material health. The Crans-Montana fire killed 41 people; prior similar fires killed even more. The investigation is ongoing, but we know the pattern: synthetic furnishings make modern fires faster, hotter, and really toxic. In many cases, ‘recycled’ building materials—marketed as sustainable—are turning hotels into flammable time bombs. And even when these don’t burn, they may slowly offgas nasty chemicals for years.

For a hotel, embracing circularity also means embracing eco-effectiveness: shifting from owning assets to accessing the functions and performance they provide.

Take buying light instead of lightbulbs. In the old model, a hotel buys 5,000 bulbs and the manufacturer profits when they fail. In a circular model, the hotel contracts for “light as a service.” The provider owns the fixtures and maintains them — incentivized to make equipment that actually lasts. The hotel gets lighting without capital expense or disposal headaches.

Sounds perfect, right? Actually most owners, CFOs and tax codes hate it. They want assets, not services. Another example of friction.

Now apply this thinking to furniture, appliances, and laundry systems. Everything circulates instead of being replaced every five years, while material health is non-negotiable.

The technology exists: digital product passports, IoT monitoring, closed-loop logistics. But most operators still default to ownership. Purchase, depreciate, dispose. The circular model requires a different mindset: paying for performance rather than acquiring assets, and trusting external providers to maintain quality and control.

That shift—from ownership to stewardship, from assets to access—remains both an opportunity and a barrier.

3 STEP 3: REGENERATION—THE ULTIMATE HACK

Once we have established circular operations—stopping the hemorrhage of waste and extraction, and the encroachment of unhealthy materials—we can pursue regeneration.

A Regenerative Economy, as I define it in my classes and publications, is a Circular Economy designed to restore the biosphere and its capacity to provide ecosystem services, while supporting the health and well-being of human communities. These services underpin everything we do—including the operations of a hotel.

The layering and the distinction is critical: circularity gives us the tools—closed loops and systems that circulate; regeneration gives us the goal—living systems and communities that thrive. Circularity without regenerative intent is just efficient resource management. And regeneration without circularity? That's funding a local ecosystem restoration, while your operations generate toxicity and waste locally and abroad.

The ultimate step is entering a relationship of reciprocity with living systems and communities. In a linear model, the relationship is extractive: we take from the destination—its culture, ecosystems, labor—and package it for guests. In a regenerative model, we ask: how does our presence actively heal what we depend on?

What does this look like operationally? A regenerative hotel manages grounds to recharge aquifers and rebuild soil biology, not just minimize water use. It sources from farms practicing regenerative agriculture, strengthening regional food systems. It employs locals as partners in long-term community resilience, not line items on a balance sheet.

Not offset elsewhere. Not minimize harm. Restore.

THE DANGER OF LINEAR RECIPROCITY

Here's the trap: attempting reciprocity from a linear mindset creates contradictions.

A luxury resort funds coral reef restoration—genuine reciprocity—while continuing to use single-use plastics, toxic cleaning chemicals that leach into groundwater, and extraction-based supply chains. This is "Regenerative Washing." One hand heals; the other harms.

True regeneration requires the integrity of circularity... and here is where most people fail: it is not about doing or thinking new things, but doing and thinking all things differently.

Watch for transition fixes that promise future solutions while permitting business as usual today. Replacing tiny plastic amenities with larger pump bottles that are not refilled, or break after minimal use; or specifying furnishings made from recycled ocean plastics that turn out to be toxic and flammable are examples of ideas that may feel like progress but fall short of creating safe, healthy spaces.

To answer the call of future generations, we must do the hard work of system redesign

CONCLUSION: WHAT COMES NEXT

The hospitality industry is splitting. On one side: "efficient linear" operators, sustainable in name but fragile when supply chains break and resources become volatile. On the other: regenerative operators.

These operators understand that resilience has replaced efficiency as the key performance metric. Circular supply chains and regenerative relationships with local ecosystems provide insulation from global shocks. Regeneration is not a marketing tier above luxury—it is a survival strategy in an age of limits.

This path requires abandoning "doing things right" (efficiency) for "doing the right things" (effectiveness). It is messy, expensive in the short term in ways your CFO will hate, and demands both innovation and courage. But it is the only path I can see that doesn't end in collapse. If you see another, I'm listening.



“Show me only chemical-free,
bed bug-safe hotels.”



What becomes searchable
becomes bookable.

