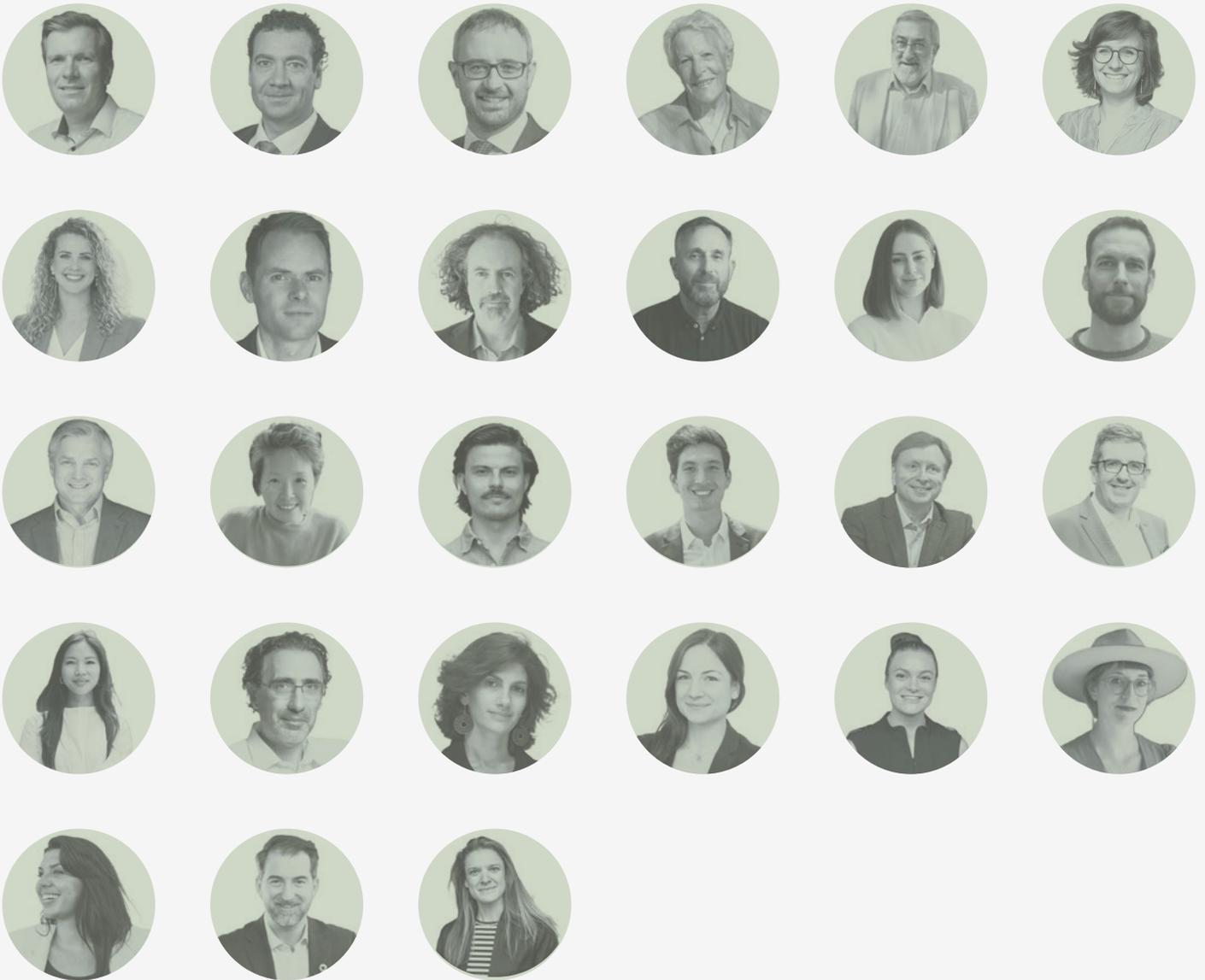


HYB26

Sustainability Edition

The Regenerative Question - What Hospitality Must Become



The Hotel Yearbook

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The Regenerative Question: What Hospitality Must Become

Long-term thinking

Dr. Anne-Kathrin Zschiegner
Executive Director, The Long Run

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Dr Anne-Kathrin Zschiegner argues that the real shift hospitality needs is not from “sustainability” to “regeneration” as buzzwords, but from short-term optimisation to long-term contribution to ecosystems, communities, culture, and commerce. Regenerative hospitality is framed as a collective, long-horizon practice that embraces complexity, openly navigates trade-offs, uses standards and technology as tools, and puts responsibility and long-term outcomes at the centre of leadership.

The conversation around regeneration in hospitality often begins with a search for definition. What does it mean? How is it different from sustainability? Has sustainability failed?

From my perspective, this framing risks missing the point.

Regeneration and sustainability are not opposing concepts, nor sequential stages. They are two sides of the same coin, different lenses through which we look at the same fundamental question: *what impact are we creating over time, and is it the impact we actually want?* The real issue our industry faces is not a shortage of terminology, but a shortage of long-term thinking.

Too often, hospitality decisions are made for the here and now. Regenerative thinking, whether we choose to call it that or not, requires a shift in mindset: from short-term optimisation to long-term contribution. It asks businesses to define the future state they want to help create and then work backwards to align strategy, operations, and investment accordingly. Labels matter far less than intent, direction, and commitment.

At its core, regenerative hospitality is about aspiration. It is about being clear on the change we want to drive, ecologically, socially, culturally, and economically, and recognising that this change cannot be achieved in isolation. No hotel regenerates a place alone. Impact happens at the level of communities, ecosystems, and industries, not individual balance sheets. This is why regeneration is inherently collective and why its measurement must be multi-layered.

One of the most persistent challenges is how we measure progress. There is no single set of metrics that can capture regeneration in all contexts. What success looks like for biodiversity over a 50-year horizon will be very different from what success looks like for community wellbeing or cultural continuity. Numbers matter, but they never tell the whole story.

Quantitative data can track trends, scale, and efficiency. Qualitative insight reveals depth, lived experience, and real change. For example, it is easy to report how many people have access to a community health programme; it is far harder, but far more meaningful, to understand how lives have changed as a result. These outcomes take time to surface. Regenerative impact is often longitudinal, not immediate, which makes it harder to prove and easier to dismiss. Yet this long time horizon is precisely what distinguishes genuine commitment from performative action.

This same complexity shows up when navigating trade-offs. Sustainability and regeneration are often presented as win-win propositions. In reality, every decision carries tension.

Supporting improved nutrition or education in a community may strengthen long-term resilience, but it may also alter local dynamics or create unintended dependencies. Paying higher wages may empower employees while putting pressure on neighbouring businesses. Conservation priorities may limit short-term revenue in favour of long-term ecosystem health.

Frameworks like the 4Cs (Conservation, Community, Culture, and Commerce) do not eliminate these tensions. They make them visible. Their value lies in helping businesses pause, ask better questions, and understand the ripple effects of their decisions. Regenerative leadership is not about finding perfect solutions; it is about making informed choices, acknowledging trade-offs, and adjusting course as conditions change.

Standards and certifications can play an important role here, but only if they are understood as tools, not endpoints. The most effective frameworks are not prescriptive checklists that reward perfection, but flexible structures that establish a baseline, support strategic planning, and encourage continuous improvement. A meaningful standard combines where a business is today with where it aspires to go tomorrow. It creates space for ambition while remaining grounded in operational reality.

Crucially, regeneration is not limited to small, owner-managed properties. Smaller operations often move faster because they are more agile. Larger organisations face greater complexity, more stakeholders, and slower decision-making, but their potential impact is enormous. Small changes within large systems can create significant ripple effects. The challenge for scale is not feasibility, but mindset. If sustainability and regeneration remain peripheral rather than central to business philosophy, progress will always be incremental. Systemic change requires cultural change at the core.

Technology can support this transition, particularly in conservation and biodiversity management. Today's tools allow businesses to monitor ecosystems, analyse data, and track impact at a scale and speed previously impossible. Far from replacing the human touch, technology can empower teams to work more effectively, deploy resources more strategically, and amplify the impact of human expertise. Used well, it accelerates learning rather than distancing people from place.

So what must regenerative hospitality become?

It must become less concerned with labels and more committed to long-term outcomes. It must embrace complexity rather than simplify it away. It must measure what matters, even when that measurement is difficult. And it must place responsibility, not perfection, at the centre of leadership.

The regenerative question is not whether hospitality can do better. It is whether we are willing to think far enough ahead, act collectively enough, and commit long enough to make that better future real.



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bed bug-safe hotels.”



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