

Building a Regenerative Company and a Whole Community

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It's time to look beyond sustainability. As a term, it just isn't enough anymore. Sustainability orients us to a zero sum equation, trying to maintain the status quo. But what exactly are we trying to sustain? What kind of value does that create – for ourselves, for our clients, or for our communities?

Rather than striving to create *sustainable* companies, I believe that we need to start thinking about *regenerative companies*. Like nature, how can we better company models to achieve more abundance, supporting themselves and the many others within their business ecosystem through products, manufacturing, capital, employees and our communities? Instead of a net zero, how can we rework the equation so that our businesses are constantly *netting positive success and value*?

Regenerative companies are built from the ground up, providing a net positive impact on the triple bottom line. They take a systems view of business, and understand the interconnectedness of what the company produces, and how it benefits an ecosystem of people, place and purpose. Being a wholistic, regenerative company is about the impacts you are supporting or opening up for stakeholders that they identify as positive, about improving the environment, and creating economic viability for others.

To achieve the highest-quality standard, regenerative companies are also built upon equal consideration of three key elements: processes, product, and purpose. They honor the environment through thoughtful management, procurement and refinement of materials; honor the people by providing fair wages and maintaining training and methods for employee growth; and honor the community by creating new income streams, revitalizing economies, and respecting all stakeholders.

How can this relation be expressed in a built environment company's work?

People

Regenerative companies support vendors to be prosperous, to stay on their land that they love and keep communities intact - supporting cultural value as well as economic value. They also reconnect customers back to the essence of nature, which provides a place of nurture and comfort in the built environment - where we spend 90 percent of our time. We help keep local farms in business; it's about building spaces where people can meet to engage with one another, like the pocket park we coordinated building in our community in downtown Spruce Pine, North Carolina.

Planet

This includes creating clean, healthy products using clean, healthy processes - including renewable energy. It also means improving outputs - finding a waste stream that actually sequesters carbon and holds it in the built environment, while working within and advocating for improving the water balance in local and vendor watersheds.

Shared Prosperity

To create shared prosperity, companies need to support vendors in purchasing equipment needed to improve their operations and increase the value of a waste product economy. They also need to put significant company income back into the local community through the intentional design of purchasing local. And they must support employees to be true to themselves and even move into more independent roles of business ownership.

By this measure, we consider ourselves a wholistic, regenerative company, and see more and more companies engaging in the same model, striving towards what I believe is a coming sea change in how businesses orient themselves around a value- and values-driven ideal.

We started cementing regenerative principles into our company when we first opened our doors in 1990. From our home in rural North Carolina, we wanted to celebrate reclaimed Appalachian wood waste materials (planet), a culture of fine craftsmanship (people) and independence in business ownership (prosperity).

Our handcrafted wall coverings for interiors and exteriors are made to evoke the substance and the essence of trees themselves, in a product that builds an authentic connection between nature, individuals, and the built environment. We believe they are beautiful, unique and bridge a widening gap between the built environment and the organic, natural world in which we are all truly a part.

But we also wanted to see beyond our products, to the way we operate as a company. We wanted stakeholders to know that we are a business that values pure products; is regenerative for people, planet and shared prosperity; and desires to build whole communities. We wanted to create a new industry around what was formerly considered a waste product in a community hit by years of economic decline. And we've worked hard to bring those benefits home. At [Highland Craftsmen](#), 100 percent of the manufacturing electricity for our poplar bark product comes from

onsite renewable energy, and we closely monitor and record our water and energy use. 100 percent of our vendors and 35 percent of our employees take advantage of professional development programs, and all are paid a living wage. 70 percent of our expenditures go to local suppliers. More than three-quarters goes to low-income areas to help stimulate economies in communities that need it most.

Regenerative companies are also called to reveal their true nature. Through transparency with their stakeholders and credible third-party assessment of their impact, they can signal and prove their intent with engaged partners in commerce.

Having models to help orient, evaluate and certify our efforts is fundamental to our work at Bark House. Studying the patterns in nature and unearthing whole systems constructs is fundamental to our work at Bark House, and certifications can help organize and verify that effort.

This year, The Bark House at Highland Craftsmen was proud to earn **Cradle to Cradle Certified Platinum**, the highest level of certification ever achieved in the rigorous framework, for its poplar shingles and wall coverings. In the history of the Cradle to Cradle standard, we have the only product yet to meet requirements for Platinum across all five Cradle to Cradle certification categories, including [material health](#), material reutilization, renewable energy and carbon management, water stewardship, and social fairness. We're proud to have created a product that combines fine craftsmanship with certified manufacturing processes that support regenerative business.

Regenerative companies are often considered disruptors. We, for one, disrupted the building industry by introducing organic shapes in a world of linear forms. We disrupted the forestry industry by reclaiming and creating a market for what had previously been considered biomass waste. We disrupted community perceptions that companies profit on the backs of their people. But we need [a lot more disruption across industries](#) to create a [fully regenerative global economy](#).

I have great faith that we can get there, not in the least because regenerative companies are so much more attractive to customers, employees, investors, and all stakeholders. They create beauty outside and within. For us, it's more than just a reference to our products. It's about how companies have a great potential to be building communities beautifully. This is the "clean energy" that lies at the core of human nature. Regenerative companies aren't just tapping it, they're setting it free.

Chris McCurry is the co-founder and owner of The Bark House at Highland Craftsmen Inc., a B Corp Certified, award-winning company that utilizes Reclaimed Appalachian Wood Waste (RAW™) to create pure architectural products. She lives in the mountain mist of... [\[Read more about Chris McCurry\]](#)

