

# Towards regenerative design workshops: lessons from an IStructE–UKGBC collaboration

A fresh setting, wider range of voices and trusting relationships are just some of the factors that can help design workshops embed regenerative thinking, explains **Will Arnold** in this summary of a recent event exploring this aim.

On a bright September afternoon, 21 practitioners – engineers and architects, but also a housebuilder, a community psychologist, a finance specialist, and more – gathered in a park in central London for a simple but ambitious task: to reimagine how design workshops might help us practise more regeneratively.

Autumn was in the air, but summer still clung on. Leaves were turning, but the sun was bright. We met at the centre of St Luke's Garden, a place that has seen countless layers of human activity – some of benefit, some extractive. Old Street roared away, a block to the south. We paused to reflect on how this small patch of land had changed – a reminder that every site holds stories far longer than our projects, and that design must therefore always be seen in the context of time, place and influence.

The purpose of the afternoon was simple: to share ideas about how we might embed regenerative practices into the way we run design workshops. Workshops are where collaboration happens and direction is set; if we want our projects to move towards a more regenerative built environment, these moments are where it must begin.

This article summarises what we heard, what we learned, and how others might bring these ideas into their own practice.

## What is regenerative design?

Regenerative design is about creating projects that restore rather than deplete. It asks us to leave places healthier than we found them – not only at the building site, but also at the 'second sites' from which our materials are drawn<sup>1</sup>. While sustainability aims to minimise harm, regenerative design seeks to actively do good: rebuilding ecosystems, strengthening communities, and generating value that endures.

Regenerative design is a journey, not



➤ Regenerative practice requires a reimagining of design workshops

a destination. It is the act of doing that matters – we aren't trying to *produce a regenerative design*, rather, we are striving to *design regeneratively*. Personally, I like to treat it more like a verb than a noun\*. Design workshops are where that practice begins – the moments when assumptions can be challenged, boundaries widened and ambitions reset. Embedding regenerative thinking into workshops is therefore critical if we want our projects to deliver genuine change.

## The approach

Our afternoon was structured into three stages, designed to ensure every voice was heard and to distil collective insights for wider sharing.

➔ **Sharing** – each person contributing their reflections on regenerative workshops.

➔ **Assimilating** – small groups drawing out overlaps, tensions and new insights.  
➔ **Projecting** – agreeing the key messages we wished to share with others.

Ideas flowed from individual experience to collective synthesis, resulting in a set of themes that anyone could take into their own work.

## What did we hear? Language and framing

For some, *regenerative* remains an unfamiliar term – one that can feel daunting to clients. The group recognised that it is not the terminology that matters, but the methods of practice and the outcomes they lead to. Call it a resilience workshop if you prefer.

Building on the framing, a regenerative workshop should foster honesty and openness. We agreed that sometimes fun, play or roleplay can help with this, enabling people to step outside professional roles and speak more freely, unlocking empathy and creativity.

## Who is in the room?

A regenerative workshop broadens participation – including both those who need to contribute and those whose support will shape outcomes. Clients and funders should be part of defining what success looks like; those who will live with or near the project must be part of the conversation.

Equally important are voices that are often missing: communities, younger practitioners and future users. Younger designers often bring fresh perspectives and a stronger personal stake in the future. Beyond the conventional 'design team', those with lived experience can reveal opportunities that technical expertise alone may overlook.

## Time and trust

Trust does not happen by chance. It needs preparation: understanding the people involved, the relationships between them, and any existing tensions. This social groundwork is as important as revising the technical brief.

\*Though linguists assure me that regenerative design is technically a noun.

Workshops should be designed as part of an ongoing process rather than one-off events. Allowing time for reflection – or creating small pauses to return to difficult topics – helps build continuity and confidence. Instead of posing endless questions, participants should consider how time, pace and sequencing can cultivate trust and shared ownership.

### Grappling with the system

Regenerative design cannot be isolated from the wider systems in which projects exist. To design regeneratively, teams must first consider the social, ecological and economic networks their projects touch: from local supply chains to long-term stewardship.

A building will only ever give back to the world – to people and to the rest of nature – if it has been designed with full awareness of everything it affects. That means looking far beyond the site boundary, considering how its impacts and relationships evolve over time, and recognising how one project can influence the design of many others. We need to acknowledge that every act of building, regenerative or not, sends ripples through place and time – and ask how we can harness that influence for good.

### Outcomes, not metrics

When success is defined narrowly, the conversation narrows too. Regenerative practice asks us to reframe outcomes: not only carbon, cost or square metres, but contributions to health, wellbeing and joy. This shift can transform the brief itself.

Examples might include measuring the number of local businesses supported during construction, the restoration of a habitat, or the creation of community amenities. Equally valuable are qualitative outcomes: stories of personal growth, local pride or environmental recovery that show progress in human terms.

### Negotiation and psychology

Progress depends on behaviour and culture as much as on tools. Practising regeneratively requires humility, empathy and mutual learning. No one arrives fluent in these ideas. The role of the facilitator is to empower others to contribute, helping teams feel a shared stake in the outcomes.

When every participant feels heard – from client to contractor to community voice – the group is more likely to co-create bold yet realistic goals. Avoiding jargon, appealing to different motivations, and recognising that *regenerative* can mean slightly different things to each party can make the process inclusive rather than prescriptive.

## Points of tension

### Ideal vs real

The largest challenge is the gap between what today's systems enable and what regenerative practice aspires to achieve. But that cannot be a reason to wait. Designing regeneratively (reminder: verb) is something we can begin doing now regardless of what the system around us is doing. By delivering projects that prove a different way is possible, we help other sectors – finance, insurance, planning, regulation – to be bolder too. They, in turn, can then help us be even braver next time.

### Process vs content

While some participants focused on the process around design workshops (our rituals, facilitation, spaces), others emphasised the content of those (understanding system boundaries, metrics, goals). Both are vital. Regenerative design workshops need new forms *and* new frames.

### Client motivations

A common starting assumption is that our clients are primarily focused on cost, but this is rarely their only driver. Legacy, reputation and social impact also matter. If a client has invited you to change the process, that is already a sign of openness. The task is to understand what truly motivates them and align regenerative goals accordingly.

## How can we approach workshops regeneratively?

**Think about the space.** A different setting can change mindsets. Even a short, well-placed outdoor session – in a garden, courtyard or roof terrace – can reconnect the conversation with the living world.

**Frame around outcomes, not jargon.** Use plain language, discuss tangible benefits both quantitative and qualitative. What are your (collective) goals?

### We thank the following companies for giving their staff time to participate in this workshop:

- |                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| →  Allford Hall Monaghan Morris  | →  Hoare Lea                           |
| →  Arup                          | →  Institution of Structural Engineers |
| →  Buro Happold                  | →  Lloyds Bank                         |
| →  Clarion Housing Association   | →  Marks Barfield Architects           |
| →  Elliott Wood                  | →  OnePlanet                           |
| →  Essex County Council          | →  Perkins & Will                      |
| →  Exploration                   | →  Polygon Place Strategy              |
| →  Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios | →  Ramboll                             |
| →  Foster + Partners             | →  UK Green Building Council           |
| →  Grimshaw                      | →  WSP                                 |



tse@istructe.org



@IStructE  
#TheStructuralEngineer



#TheStructuralEngineer

**Widen the circle.** Include those who need to input and those you wish to influence. Seek out community voices, younger practitioners, and those representing nature or future generations.

**Prepare for people, not just projects.** Map relationships, trust levels and motivations in advance. Design time for reflection and iteration... trust takes time.

### Encourage play and storytelling.

Creative exercises or scenario games can open empathy and imagination. Sharing personal or local stories of positive change helps ground ambition in reality.

**Be humble negotiators.** Meet others where they are. Empower the group to shape goals together rather than prescribing them.

**Remember the engineering.** If this feels different, that's the point. The calculations will still come – this is about setting the right trajectory first.

## Closing thoughts

Regenerative design workshops are not about finding one perfect method. They are about cultivating conditions for new kinds of conversations – spaces where empathy, curiosity and practical action can coexist.

We cannot wait for the system to change before we begin; every workshop offers a chance to practise regeneration in miniature. Each time we convene a team, we can choose to listen more deeply, broaden the conversation, and design for outcomes that give back more than they take.

*NB This summary is reflective of the views of the organisers from the IStructE and UKGBC and so should not be assumed to represent all participants.*

### Will Arnold

CEng, FIStructE, CEnv

Will is Head of Sustainable Materials at Useful Simple Trust, and a Visiting Professor at the University of Bath. He wrote this article in his former capacity as Head of Climate Action at the IStructE.

## REFERENCE

- 1) Broadbent O. and Norman J. (2024) *The regenerative structural engineer*, London: IStructE Ltd