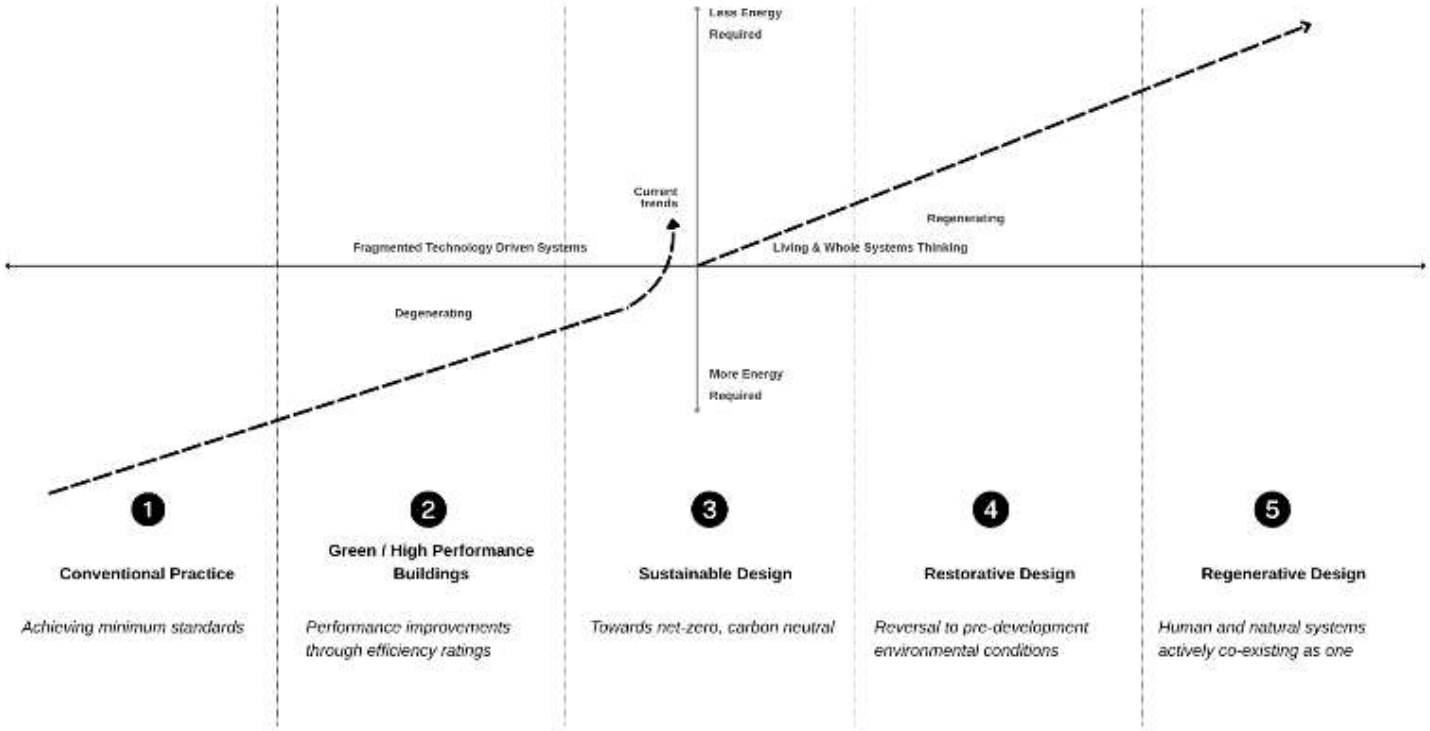
The Next Paradigm:

From Sustainable to Regenerative Design



Regenerative architecture asks us to rethink the limits we've long been working within. For years, the profession has focused on sustainability: reducing energy use, improving efficiency, and meeting established green benchmarks. But as environmental challenges intensify, it's becoming clear that simply minimising harm is no longer enough. The more pressing question now is: can our buildings contribute positively - can they give back more than they take?

In India, this question is especially urgent. Our cities are growing rapidly, often at the expense of the very natural systems that once sustained them. Water bodies are disappearing, soil health is declining, and biodiversity is steadily eroding. At the same time, we are witnessing more frequent and severe climate events- heatwaves, flooding, and resource scarcity- that expose the vulnerabilities of our built environment. Regenerative architecture offers a way to respond, positioning design not just as a solution to minimise damage, but as a means to actively restore and strengthen ecological and social systems.

At its heart, regenerative design is about thinking in systems. A building is no longer seen as an isolated object, but as part of a larger network - of water cycles, energy flows, material lifecycles, and human communities. This shift in perspective also brings a shift in intent: from

reducing negative impact to creating positive outcomes. A project can recharge groundwater instead of just conserving it, support biodiversity rather than displacing it, and even sequester carbon instead of merely reducing emissions.

What makes this approach particularly relevant in the Indian context is how closely it resonates with our architectural heritage. Traditional settlements were, in many ways, inherently regenerative. They responded intuitively to climate, relied on local materials, and worked in harmony with natural systems. Elements like stepwells, courtyards, shaded streets, and mixed-use neighbourhoods were not aesthetic choices - they were deeply ecological responses. The opportunity today lies in reinterpreting this embedded wisdom through contemporary design tools and technologies, creating a meaningful bridge between tradition and innovation.

That said, this transition is not without its challenges. It calls for deeper collaboration across disciplines, more engaged conversations with clients, and a broader understanding of value - one that goes beyond immediate costs to consider long-term ecological and social returns. Even our metrics need to evolve, moving away from checklist-driven certifications towards performance-based measures that truly capture impact over time.

As practitioners, we find ourselves at an important inflection point. Regenerative architecture is no longer a peripheral idea - it is fast becoming a necessity. To design for the future, especially in India, is to design for resilience, reciprocity, and renewal. The built environment must move beyond being a passive consumer of resources and become an active participant in restoring balance between people, place, and planet.