

INTRODUCTION: WORLDVIEW CHANGES EVERYTHING

Every strategy begins with a worldview.

The assumptions we hold about how the world works shape what we notice, what we value, and what we believe is possible.

Worldview is rarely discussed in the context of how it affects our daily lives. Yet it sits beneath every decision we make. It shapes how we define success, how we distribute resources, how we relate to one another, and how we understand our place within the larger world. Over time, these assumptions become embedded in cultures, institutions, and systems, quietly influencing not only the futures we create, but also the possibilities we are able to imagine.

This book explores a particular shift in worldview, one that emerges from living systems thinking and finds expression through regenerative practice, cathedral thinking, and leadership. More fundamentally, it is about recognizing that how we see the world shapes what we are capable of creating within it and how we choose to steward the future.

Underlying this perspective is a simple but profound recognition: life functions as a living system. We exist within a web of relationships connecting people, communities, organizations, ecosystems, and future generations. These relationships are dynamic, interdependent, and continually evolving toward greater diversity, vitality, and resilience. Learning to recognize and work with these patterns changes not only how we understand the world, but how we participate in it.

Living systems thinking helps us see the world as relationships rather than isolated parts. Regenerative thinking takes a further step. It invites us to align our actions with the processes that enable life to evolve, adapt, and flourish over time. Rather than focusing solely on reducing harm or improving efficiency, regenerative thinking invites us to engage consciously as co-creative partners in life's ongoing evolution. Cathedral thinking reminds us that many of our most important responsibilities extend beyond our own lifetimes, inviting us to consider the conditions we are creating for those who will follow.



This shift in worldview changes the questions we ask.

Instead of asking how to sustain what already exists, we begin asking what wants to emerge.

Instead of focusing primarily on solving problems, we become interested in cultivating unrealized potential.

Instead of pursuing growth as an end in itself, we ask how our work can contribute to the vitality and development of the larger whole.

And instead of viewing leadership primarily as the exercise of authority, we begin to understand it as creating conditions in which life can thrive.

Regeneration, in this sense, is less about fixing systems and more about developing the conditions for life to express its potential.

This perspective naturally encourages a longer view. If organizations are living systems embedded within larger living systems, leadership becomes less about achieving immediate outcomes and more about contributing to the development of people, places, and communities over time. Cathedral thinking offers a powerful expression of this responsibility, inviting us to act as stewards of possibilities we may never personally see realized.

These ideas can feel abstract until they are seen in practice.

At its core, this book traces the evolution of Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens from its nineteenth-century

origins, rooted in the assumptions of the Industrial Age, to its ongoing transformation into an institution increasingly guided by living systems and regenerative thinking. Through the story of that evolution, it explores how a shift in worldview becomes visible in the buildings an organization creates, the culture it nurtures, the relationships it develops, and the choices it makes over time. It also considers what that journey may suggest for other organizations navigating their own futures.

In many ways, this is also my own story. During more than three decades as CEO, I had the privilege of participating in and helping guide that evolution. Along the way, my understanding of sustainability shifted from a focus on being less bad toward a deeper appreciation for what it means to contribute positively to the ongoing development of life. What began as an environmental journey gradually became a journey of rethinking humanity's relationship with the living world and our potential role within it.

The transformation described here continues to be shaped by relationships with colleagues across botanical gardens, museums, nonprofits, businesses, and other mission-driven organizations. People often ask how we have been able to accomplish what we have with green buildings and sustainability initiatives. Others assume they could never afford to pursue similar work.

Over time, it has become clear that the greatest barrier is rarely cost or technical capacity.

More often, it is worldview: the underlying assumptions used to define success and justify decisions.

When metrics and assumptions remain rooted in extractive or “less bad” thinking, transformative change becomes difficult, if not impossible, to justify. Moving beyond more of the same, or a little bit better, requires a fundamental shift in perspective.

We live in a world still dominated by extractive and mechanistic paradigms; ways of thinking that separate people from nature and treat the living world as something to be controlled and used. Regenerative thinking offers a different lens: seeing life as an interconnected web of relationships. This perspective challenges us to align our actions with nature’s patterns of growth and vitality, living and working in ways that strengthen rather than deplete the systems around us.

At Phipps, this nature-sourced perspective has become a guiding compass. It reminds us that meaningful change begins not with new technologies or strategies, but with how we think, what we value, and how we understand our role within larger systems.

The pages that follow are not intended as a collection of best practices or a blueprint to replicate. Regeneration cannot be copied from one organization to another because every place, community, and institution possesses its own history, relationships, gifts, and unrealized potential. The goal is not to become more like Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens. The goal is to discover what regeneration might look like where you are.

At its heart, this is a story about assumptions challenged, perspectives expanded, relationships deepened, and possibilities discovered. It is an account of what can happen when individuals and organizations begin to see themselves not as separate from the world around them, but as participants within a larger living whole.

The ideas explored throughout this book did not emerge in isolation. They have been shaped by decades of learning from colleagues, mentors, and thought leaders working in the fields of ecology, living systems, regenerative development, and sustainable design. Among those whose ideas have most influenced my thinking are Carol Sanford, Pamela Mang, Jason F. McLennan, Robin Wall Kimmerer, David W. Orr, John Boecker, Sonja Bochart, and many others. While the story that follows is uniquely Phipps’ own, it is also part of a much larger conversation about how human beings can better understand and participate in the living systems that sustain life.

To help make that journey more tangible, several frameworks that influenced our thinking will appear throughout these pages. Among the most important are the **Four Paradigms** and the **Three Lines of Work**. I was introduced to both through the work of regenerative educator Carol Sanford. While the Four Paradigms were developed by Sanford, the origins of the Three Lines of Work can be traced to the teachings of George Gurdjieff.

The Four Paradigms describe fundamentally different approaches to leadership and organizational development, ranging from extracting value, to reducing

harm, to creating positive outcomes, to developing the capacity and potential of people, organizations, communities, and ecosystems in service to the larger whole. More than management frameworks, they represent different ways of seeing the world, and therefore, the questions we ask, the decisions we make, and the futures we create.

The Three Lines of Work provide a complementary developmental pathway that links personal growth, collective capacity, and systemic contribution.

The **First Line** focuses on personal development and self-awareness, and learning to see through a living systems lens.

The Second Line explores relationships, culture, and collective development, recognizing that transformation is shaped through our interactions with others. The **Third Line** turns outward to the larger organizational, ecological, and social systems we influence and inhabit, emphasizing our responsibility to contribute to the health and evolution of the whole. Much of the first section of this book is organized around these three lines of work.

Later sections introduce additional regenerative frameworks, including the Seven First Principles of Regeneration, the Law of Three, and the practice of cathedral thinking. Together, these helped Phipps translate theory into daily decisions and long-term stewardship.

The final chapters show that regenerative leadership is ultimately about culture, not projects, about how people grow, relate, define success, and make decisions together based on shared principles. By

shifting beyond purpose to clear direction and from control to shared stewardship, organizations become capable of evolving over time, expanding what becomes possible for those who come after us.

This narrative is not intended as a comprehensive treatise on living systems or regenerative theory. At Phipps, we are still very much on that learning journey—one we know will never truly end. Instead, these pages offer an introduction to regenerative thinking through lived experience. It is a case study of how one institution has worked to put these ideas into practice.

As an institution and as individuals, we have made meaningful progress and faced challenges that have become essential to our reflection and growth. The journey has reshaped both our organization and our understanding of what is possible.

We could never return to the way we were.

Ultimately, my hope is that this book serves as an invitation to others to explore regenerative thinking through the experience of one institution's evolution and to consider how these ideas might transform your own work and how you engage with the world. From our experience at Phipps, we know that this kind of change is not only operationally possible, financially feasible, and strategically beneficial, but also that it is increasingly essential.

Regenerative practice begins by seeing life in everything. When we design, build, and live in ways that reflect nature's principles, we start to heal the divide between human and natural systems and cultivate the kinds of places where all life can thrive.



Tropical Forest Conservatory

Because once you begin to see yourself as part of a living system, you cannot unsee it.

Different questions emerge.

Different possibilities become visible.

And the work of creating a better future begins to look less like managing problems and more like developing potential.

The story that follows is one example of what can happen when a worldview begins to change.

To understand that transformation, it helps to begin at the beginning—with the origins of Phipps Conservatory, shaped by the worldview of its time and the conditions from which all of this work emerged.