

PARTICIPATORY GREEN BUILDING IS REGENERATIVE

BY DAVID LEVENTHAL, PRINCIPAL, PLAYA VIVA



After countless hours planning, permitting and constructing, the typical green building opens amid fanfare, speeches and possibly even doctored tours. The new building saves energy, creates a healthy indoor environment, and substitutes recycled for virgin materials.

If the budget allows, building owners install small museum-like plaques in public areas identifying the various green building products. But for green building practices to become mainstream, we need to move beyond passive, one-directional communication to true, participatory green building where every visit, on every day, regenerates the site and improves the health of living systems.

A model for this approach is taking shape on the Pacific Coast of Mexico at a place called Playa Viva. Playa Viva (www.playaviva.com) is a 200-acre eco-resort and residence community located 30 minutes south of the Zihuatanejo/Ixtapa International Airport (ZIH), near the town of Juluchuca. The native coastal forest was cleared for government-sponsored coconut palm plantations in the 1930s. When the export market collapsed, plantations were abandoned — leaving behind vegetation monocultures. On the sandy beaches, thousands of green turtles and tens of endangered leatherback turtles return each year to lay their eggs. Poaching in other coastal areas of Mexico have left these marine species at risk. Finally, Juluchuca's population grows older as young people move north to find work. Building an eco-resort in this area using traditional green building practices isn't enough. Green building in this context means regeneration of land, of people, of spirit.

Playa Viva is working to restore the land's flora and fauna, which has been squandered during the past century. With a world-class, resident permaculturalist, Playa Viva is restoring 80 percent of the land to coastal forest and wetland, bringing back mangroves, beautiful hardwood trees, and a variety of indigenous flora and fauna. Seeds from local, native forests have been collected and a nursery established to raise saplings for restoration work. Offsetting carbon emissions from vacation flights takes on a new meaning when it's performed onsite and with your own hands.

At the southeast corner of Playa Viva, an all-volunteer staff, comprised of members of the local community, has set up a turtle sanctuary. These are fisherman and farmers who recognized the damage being done to the



local turtle population and decided to make a difference. This group took on the name "La Tortuga Feliz" or "The Happy Turtle" and obtained training from government scientists. The Playa Viva community provides these volunteers with equipment, supplies, and a long-term guarantee that their work will continue. Playa Viva guests will join La Tortuga Feliz in its nightly patrols down the beach, searching for tracks that lead to egg-laying turtles. Collecting and reburying these eggs in a safe nesting place, and then releasing the hatchlings to the sea, is the preferred method of conservation. In 2006, the team released more than 100,000 baby turtles, including more than 100 endangered leatherbacks.

Playa Viva is designed to not only revitalize and nurture the land it's built on, but also the community that surrounds it. The first step was teaching organic agriculture courses to farmers within the watershed to ensure that the water flowing into the Juluchuca river and estuaries is cleaner and healthier for the entire community. Playa Viva staff also worked with area farmers to establish a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program that created a market for organically grown fruits and vegetables. Nearby city residents in Zihuatanejo now have access to organically grown food and Juluchuca farmers have a steady income stream.

At Playa Viva, regeneration goes beyond LEED, beyond sustainable, it is about constantly making the whole place better, the living systems stronger and entire ecology more resilient. Now that's the future of green building. 🌱

David Leventhal is principal of Playa Viva, an eco-resort and residence community. David, along with his wife Sandra Kahn, are developers of Casa Viva Troncones, a popular B&B located north of Zihuatanejo, and founders of Rainforest2Reef, a preserve in Mexico's Yucatan peninsula protecting more than 350,000 acres of jaguar habitat.

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