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From Living Buildings to An Ecological Civilization

On September 20, 2025, David Korten delivered this talk for “The DEATH and Life of the Green Building Summit,” held in the Cascadia bioregion and hosted by the [School of Regenerative Design](#).

My friends in the [Living Building Challenge](#) movement,

For two decades, the Living Building Challenge has set the world’s boldest standards for architectural design. It called for buildings that are self-sufficient in energy and water, free of toxic materials, and designed for beauty and human well-being.

That was a breakthrough. It changed the conversation about what architecture could be.

But today—our moment calls for much more. When Jason invited me to present at this gathering, I assumed I was to talk about architecture. Turns out that he is interested in a much larger topic.

The challenge is not simply better buildings. It is the redesign of civilization itself.

Humanity’s collective way of living overshoots the carrying capacity of our one finite Earth. According to the Global Footprint Network, sustaining current consumption would require nearly two Earths. The result of our overshoot is climate disruption, species extinction, inequality, and growing conflict.

What kind of society builds highways for private cars, pipelines for carbon fuels, and luxury estates for the wealthy while billions lack shelter, clean water, and food?

The Living Building ethos—life-centered and restorative—must now scale up: from buildings to infrastructure, from projects to communities, from communities to civilization.

I call it an Ecological Civilization—a future aligned with the Earth Charter, securing meaningful lives for all people while sustaining the living Earth.

Life itself shows us the way. The microbiologist Mae-Wan Ho once pointed out to me that our human body is sustained not by central command but by the bottom-up self-organization of trillions of individual living cells that together create this extraordinary vessel of our consciousness and instrument of our agency.

Living Earth takes this process of life's self-organization to a much higher and more complex level: a self-organizing community of communities that together create the only planet we know with the capacity to sustain life.

Yet our current systems act as though our role is to dominate and consume rather than participate. That false story has given us infrastructure designed for profit and convenience of the few, while undermining the prospects of the many.

The Living Building Challenge taught us that we can design for life. The next step is to align our infrastructure, economies, and governance accordingly.

Here are five priorities for transformation:

1. We must move beyond dependence on private cars. Streets must serve people. Walkable neighborhoods, bike networks, and electrified public transit can replace car dependency—cutting pollution, improving health, and strengthening community.
2. We must end reliance on carbon fuels. Every community can run on sun, wind, and water through resilient microgrids that integrate rooftop solar, shared storage, and smart controls. They will deliver clean, reliable power even when larger grids fail.
3. Every community must steward its watershed. Rain can be harvested, wastewater reused, and aquifers replenished. Water managed as a commons will secure human needs while sustaining nature.
4. An Ecological Civilization cannot flourish while billions are excluded from life's essentials. Housing, food, health care, and education must be recognized as rights. Vacant luxury properties can be repurposed for community use. Shared facilities can replace isolation with belonging.

5. None of this is possible while we depend on a money supply created as interest-bearing debt by private banks. They create only the principal, never the interest, trapping society in endless borrowing. We need a public money system that creates debt- and interest-free currency to fund essential work—rebuilding infrastructure, restoring ecosystems, and employing people in dignified service. Money must serve life, not exploit it to grow the numbers we call money.

From Buildings to Communities

Imagine communities designed as ecosystems: safe, efficient, affordable housing that facilitates sharing.

Food produced by regenerative local farms.

Clinics, schools, and cultural spaces as anchors of care and learning.

Forests, wetlands, and green corridors restored to provide shade, clean air, flood protection, and beauty.

In such communities, elders offer wisdom, youth bring creativity, and all share responsibility for stewardship.

By melding with the global movement for an Ecological Civilization, the Living Building Challenge can extend far beyond architecture. It can become a catalyst for systemic redesign of infrastructure, economics, and governance.

We stand at a turning point. The task before us is not only technical—it is moral. We must reimagine infrastructure as the architecture of community, sufficiency, and Earth care.

If we succeed, we will not only shelter human beings; we will secure the conditions for life itself to flourish.

The time is now. The responsibility is ours. Thank you.

(Source : David Korten Newsletter)

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January 2016- Best wishes for a productive year.