
ResiliArt x Mondiacult Event:
**Can cultural infrastructures be drivers
of people-centred climate action?**

1 March 2022

A Provocation

Prepared by Andrew Potts for the Climate Heritage Network and the Culture2030Goal Campaign. This Provocation attempts, in part, to apply to the context of cultural policy certain of the ideas found in the paper “Three Decades of Climate Mitigation: Why Haven't We Bent the Global Emissions Curve?”.¹ The author is grateful to that lead author of that article, Isak Stoddard, PhD student in the Department of Earth Sciences, Natural Resources and Sustainable Development at Uppsala University, for suggestions he has provided and sources he has shared, for example the work of Isabelle Stengers. Several of the ideas set forth here are adapted from: Potts, Andrew (2021) “The Role of Culture in Climate Resilient Development”, UCLG Committee on Culture Reports, n°10, and Climate Heritage Network (Working Group 5), Barcelona, 5 November 2021. The author is grateful for the assistance of UCLG in this work.

This Provocation was prepared to provoke conversation at a ResiliArt event being held on 1 March 2022 to provide inputs to the [UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development – MONDIACULT 2022](#) to be held in September 2022. Mondiacult is meant to be “a renewed reflection on cultural policies to tackle global challenges and outline immediate and future priorities.”

In his ‘Circular Culture’ keynote speech at the 2021 UCLG Culture Summit, Mayor Tunç Soyer of Izmir, Turkey argued that economy without culture is what has given us climate change.² It is a provocative assertion, worthy of debate. Let us go a step further and ask: if economy without culture has given us climate change, what will climate planning without attention to culture give us? If the Mayor is correct, what can be said of cultural policies that turn a blind eye to the climate change nexus?

These questions, which bear on the efficacy of both cultural and climate policy, are urgent ones. Six years after the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015, the world remains dangerously off course to meeting its targets.³ The window to “Keep 1.5 Alive” is closing. And yet the cultural dimensions of climate change remain largely excluded from climate planning—despite increasing efforts to flip this paradigm.⁴

Current climate planning tends to be dominated by technocratic forms of modelling and cost-benefit analyses. In an influential article released just before the COP26, authors Isak Stoddard, Kevin Anderson *et al.* characterised mainstream climate planning as tending:

to prioritize large-scale, simple technological and market-based solutions and generally falling short at capturing factors that are less easy to model or quantify. Systemic, uncertain, or

¹ See *infra*, note 5.

² Mayor Tunç Soyer “[Opening Speech](#)” delivered at the UCLG Culture Summit, Izmir, Turkey, 9 September 2021. (“*There is no science without culture. If so, it creates an atomic bomb. There is no economy without culture. If so, there is hunger, there is inequality, there is the climate crisis. There is no politics without culture. If so, there are wars, there is destruction. There is no urbanism without culture. If so, there are floods, there are disasters. Therefore, we cannot build a future without defining a different culture.*”)

³ United Nations Environment Programme (2021). Emissions Gap Report 2021: The Heat Is On – A World of Climate Promises Not Yet Delivered. Nairobi.

⁴ See, e.g., “[Accelerating Climate Action through the Power of Arts, Culture and Heritage: A COP26 Manifesto on Keeping 1.5° Alive](#)”, Climate Heritage Network 2021, accessed 20 February 2022.

contested aspects—often relating to social, political, and ethical issues and trade-offs between different mitigation measures—are more likely to be excluded. Hence, although model outputs are intended to be exploratory rather than prescriptive, they tend to emphasize a narrow suite of technological options for reducing emissions, with typically limited representation of ... more far-reaching changes to socioeconomic structures.⁵

At the 2021 UN Climate Conference (COP26), “Food Day” celebrated GMO crops and lab grown meat, but delegates could not reach consensus on including the word “agroecology” in the workplan for the UNFCCC’s Koronivia Joint Work on Agriculture.⁶ “Transport Day” was more about electric vehicles than walking and cycling or even land use in general; for example, the traditional urban settlement patterns that have enabled low carbon transport for centuries. “Building Day” was largely about building new, “green” buildings. Older and existing buildings, when discussed, were viewed mostly as a problem that needs to be solved through rapid technological interventions.

At the heart of much of the COP26 discussions was Net Zero, a concept which is increasingly viewed with scepticism since implicit in its logic is the idea that we can keep emitting today and rely on speculative, unproven tech-fixes in the future to suck carbon out of the atmosphere.⁷

How can cultural infrastructures be drivers of people-centred climate action?

Would attention to the cultural dimensions of climate change and to the cultural enabling conditions of climate action improve effectiveness of climate policy? There is good reason to believe that the answer to this question is yes.⁸ How, then, can cultural infrastructures (including cultural policy) be harnessed to drive more effective climate action and climate policy? To deliver people-centred approaches that tackle the socio-economic structures that undergird the climate and biodiversity crises?

It may help to first examine why artistic, cultural, and heritage voices have so far not been widely accepted into climate planning processes. To some extent, this may be because technocratic climate planners reject the transgressive nature of some cultural interventions. Perhaps the qualitative nature of cultural observation is at odds with the quantitative approaches favoured in climate policy.⁹

In other cases, however, it may be that cultural policy has not been persuasively located within the frameworks of transformative change, the 1.5- and 2-degree pathways that are the formal

⁵ Isak Stoddard, Kevin Anderson, Stuart Capstick, Wim Carton, Joanna Depledge, Keri Facer, Clair Gough, Frederic Hache, Claire Hoolohan, Martin Hultman, Niclas Hällström, Sivan Kartha, Sonja Klinsky, Magdalena Kuchler, Evalövbrand, Naghme Nasiritousi, Peter Newell, Glen P. Peters, Youba Sokona, Andy Stirling, Matthew Stilwell, Clive L. Spash, Mariama Williams, “Three Decades of Climate Mitigation: Why Haven’t We Bent the Global Emissions Curve?,” [Annual Review of Environment and Resources 46:1](#) (2021): 653-689, accessed 20 February 2022.

⁶ Aruna Chandrasekhar and Giuliana Viglione, “[COP26: Key outcomes for food, forests, land use and nature in Glasgow](#)” CarbonBrief, 17 November 2021 (“One of the major sticking points in the Koronivia negotiations at COP26 was the proposed inclusion of a reference to “agroecology” – a term that encompasses a diverse range of agricultural practices with a focus on equity and ecosystem protection”).

⁷ James Dyke, Robert Watson, Wolfgang Knorr, “[Climate scientists: concept of net zero is a dangerous trap](#)” The Conversation, 22 April 2021 (“Unfortunately, in practice [net zero] helps perpetuate a belief in technological salvation and diminishes the sense of urgency surrounding the need to curb emissions now”).

⁸ ICOMOS Climate Change and Cultural Heritage Working Group. 2019. [The Future of Our Pasts: Engaging Cultural Heritage in Climate Action](#), July 1, 2019. Paris: ICOMOS; Julie’s Bicycle. 2021. [Culture: The Missing Link to Climate Action, Summary Report](#), October 2021; “Bridging the gap – the role of equitable low-carbon lifestyles,” Capstick, S. et al. In: UNEP (2020). The Emissions Gap Report 2018. United Nations Environment Programme, Nairobi. 75 (Changes to underlying social and cultural norms are more difficult to accomplish than transitory behavioural changes, but once established they are likely to be more durable and to support a wider range of low-carbon lifestyles).

⁹ For a general discussion of the topic, see ICOMOS Future of Our Pasts, supra note 8, page 2, highlighting the work of Adger et al. (Adger, W., Barnett, J., Brown, K. et al. [Cultural dimensions of climate change impacts and adaptation. Nature Climate Change 3](#) (2013): 3112–17).

aims of most climate policy. Indeed, the discontinuity associated with the “rapid and far-reaching”¹⁰ transitions that the IPCC has said is needed to mitigate the worst impacts of climate change, and the cultural disruption they portend, are arguably at odds with some of the core aims of cultural policy (especially cultural heritage policy), including notions of continuity, conservation, preservation, and safeguarding.

Grappling with this issue begins by recognizing that culture can be as much a part of the problem of climate change as it is a part of the response. The Industrial Revolution began in the late 1700s.¹¹ The transformation, the violence, wrought by the Anthropocene have now been unfolding for hundreds of years. Many traditions, cultures, and beliefs – at least in contemporary, industrial societies – are deeply entangled with fossil fuels and the extractive and colonial systems that attends them. So much so that many multi-generational cultural practices and lifeways in industrialised and industrialising countries can be referred to as “petrocultures”¹² and their sprawling urban, suburban and peri-urban landscapes as “carbonscapes.”¹³

This reality may help explain why climate policymakers have been slow to engage with the cultural dimensions of climate change and climate action – or at least with the ‘culture sector.’ These policymakers understand that petrocultures, including cultures of unsustainable consumption and production, are causes of climate change. At the same time, they are often not familiar with the ways in which culture can be part of the response to climate change. The absence of methodologies to readily distinguish the former from the latter may help explain why policymakers have been slow to embrace unnuanced nostrums about “culture as a solution to climate change.”

An exception, perhaps, is the culture of Indigenous Peoples (and to a lesser extent, that of “local communities” – a parallel concept found in climate policy). Increasingly, international climate policymakers have included, at least superficially, references to Indigenous Peoples’ cultures in climate frameworks.¹⁴ This is a direct result of concerted advocacy by Indigenous Peoples’ groups. Indigenous Peoples have already been through transformations of their societies induced by extractive economic systems and colonial violence. Drawing on this lived experience, their climate policy advocacy has consistently foregrounded the unfolding threat of cultural extinction.

This advocacy is bolstered by convincing evidence¹⁵ that Indigenous cultures (as distinguished from “western” cultures) align well with climate action. This passage from a *Scientific America* article is indicative:

¹⁰ IPCC, 2018: Summary for Policymakers. In: Global Warming of 1.5 °C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty [Masson-Delmotte, V., P. Zhai, H.-O. Pörtner, D. Roberts, J. Skea, P.R. Shukla, A. Pirani, W. Moufouma-Okia, C. Péan, R. Pidcock, S. Connors, J.B.R. Matthews, Y. Chen, X. Zhou, M.I. Gomis, E. Lonnoy, T. Maycock, M. Tignor, and T. Waterfield (eds.)]. World Meteorological Organization, Geneva, Switzerland, 32 pp.

¹¹ N. Abram, H. McGregor, J. Tierney et al, “[Early onset of industrial-era warming across the oceans and continents](#)” *Nature* (2016): 411–418.

¹² *Petrocultures: Oil, politics, culture*, Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, and Imre Szeman, eds (McGill-Queen's Press- MQUP, 2017).

¹³ H. Haarstad and T.I. Wanvik, “Carbonscapes and beyond: Conceptualizing the instability of oil landscapes,” *Progress in Human Geography*, 41(4) (2017): 432-450, doi:10.1177/0309132516648007 (“Cities and their suburban spaces of car-based lifestyles are the paradigmatic image of oil dependence and inertia (Huber, 2013). However, urban forms can also be subject to rapid change; seemingly inert urban forms can be retrofitted, converted and undermined”).

¹⁴ Arguably, the sole reference to cultural heritage in the Paris Agreement is the provision found in Article 7.5 which states that adaptation action should be guided “as appropriate” by “traditional knowledge, knowledge of indigenous peoples and local knowledge systems.”

¹⁵ See, e.g., ICCA Consortium. 2021. Territories of Life: 2021 Report. ICCA Consortium: worldwide. Available at: report.territoriesoflife.org (“Indigenous peoples’ and local communities’ extensive contributions to a healthy planet are rooted in their cultures and collective lands and territories – in essence, the deep relationships between their identities, governance systems and the other species and spiritual beings with whom they co-exist. Thus, they are also contributing significantly to the world’s cultural, linguistic and tangible and intangible heritage.”)

... many indigenous and local communities tend [to] have a reciprocal relationship with nature, rather than viewing nature as existing to serve humans—as much of Western culture has historically regarded things. “The institutions, the cultural values, the way of living and the way you see nature itself—as [inseparable] from your social life and identity—that creates a different view of what to use, how to use and how to deal with the tradeoffs of use,” [IPBES Co-Chair Dr Eduardo] Brondizio says. As [Prof Pamela] McElwee notes, “Even if we don’t acknowledge it, the water we drink, the air we breathe, the food we produce—it all depends on healthy ecosystems. That is a lesson we can learn from indigenous peoples and local communities who know this already, and who are actively conserving and managing lands.”¹⁶

In other words, Indigenous cultural values are almost broadly harmonious with the aims of climate policymaking, while engagement by climate policymakers with the culture of industrialised places would require considerable nuance and indeed contestation – work that has largely not yet been done by culture advocates.

So when is culture a part of the response to climate change? Stoddard *et al.* have argued that a pervasive failure in industrial, modern societies to imagine desirable ways of living not wedded to the carbon economy has been critical to the persistence of current business as usual approaches. Arguably three dimensions of culture and heritage are best equipped to help dismantle the ‘epistemological monoculture’ they argue has impoverished the collective global capacity to imagine and realize forms of living not dependent upon exploitation of people and natural resources.”¹⁷ These are:

- Traditional knowledge that pre-dates (or worked independently of) the era when fossil fuel combustion and extractive land-use change have underpinned economic development, which can point the way to post-carbon living at scale.
- The worldviews and endogenous interpretations of development of Indigenous Peoples’ and local communities that were never co-opted by modern take-make-waste approaches. “These in confluence with many sites of long-standing resistance and emerging counterpoint perspectives to modernization offer openings toward an enriched social imagination.”¹⁸
- Artistic and imaginative tools support a profound examination of inherited assumptions and desires that hold the potential to “transformatively reinterpret today’s carbon-scape and its accompanying mindsets.”¹⁹

How can cultural policy and cultural institutions prioritise and support these elements? Can this be done within existing cultural infrastructures while still achieving the levels of contestation, impact, and urgency required by the climate crisis? Traditional and Indigenous Knowledge is often a part of complex social and political systems. Maintaining holistic spiritual and relational foundations can be key to its perpetuation. How can cultural institutions, many steeped in ethnographic, colonial traditions, avoid extractive approaches to traditional knowledge?²⁰

¹⁶ Annie Sneed, “[What Conservation Efforts Can Learn from Indigenous Communities](#)” *Scientific American*, 29 May 2019, accessed 20 February 2022.

¹⁷ Stoddard *et al.*, *supra* note v.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ See Potts, *supra* note 1, at page 18. One test that has been proposed is the Accomplice-Not-Ally framework which calls for actually ceding material and professional capital to Indigenous people. Valerie Bondura, “[Fear, Contradiction, and Coloniality in Settler Archaeology](#)” *Anthropology Now*, 12:3 (2020): 146-155, drawing upon Indigenous Action, “[Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex](#)” 4 May 2014, accessed 2 - February 2022.

And what of the cultural practices and heritage that are tied to the causes of the climate emergency? How do culture and heritage advocates, administrators and professionals articulate a coherent theory of what culture is part of the response to climate change, what culture contributes to the causes of climate change, of how one differentiates between the two, of how cultural policy proposes to tackle the former while advancing the latter?

This touches in part on what the Belgian philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers has called a “fear of regression”²¹ – a fear that “there are things in our heritage that must not be renounced.” She asks: can we abandon without nostalgia “the heritage of a nineteenth century dazzled by the progress of science and technology”? Will we not be accused of “inciting a betrayal of that for which fidelity must be maintained”?²²

These questions are not new, even to the world of heritage conservation, although the rapidness with which they must be addressed may be. Heritage management is the process of managing change. One example of this is the heritage of human slavery. Indeed, around the world, debate still rages on how to address both the material (e.g., monuments to slavers) and intangible legacies of slavery.

Responses from cultural scholars and professionals have aimed

“to forge a close link between the ethical exigency of preserving the memory of the slave trade, which historians now consider to be ‘the biggest single tragedy in the history of man on account of its scope and duration,’ and the current requirements of economic and social development,” noting the need to address the “deep-rooted causes and methods of the slave trade together with the cultural consequences and interactions it has unleashed in and among the continents and regions concerned.”²³

Do the methodologies developed to document slavery’s customs and interpret and contextualise the places it has marked on our landscape, as well as approaches to other so-called “toxic heritage”²⁴ hold analogies for addressing petrocultures?

In the end: How do cultural actors help societies to transcend the petrocultures found in industrialised countries, with their extractive, take-make-waste economies, and to contextualise and interpret the heritage of the carbonscapes they have unleashed? How can cultural institutions be accomplices, or even just allies, in the resistance of local communities and Indigenous Peoples to unsustainable, extractive models of governance and living? How can they help lift up traditional and Indigenous ways as counterpoint perspectives to unsustainable models of ‘progress.’

These will be among the most important questions which will have to be answered if cultural policies are to help tackle the global challenges of the 21st century.

²¹ Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*, trans. Andrew Goffey (Open Humanities Press in collaboration with meson press, 2015), 107-108.

²² *Id.* at 58.

²³ World Tourism Organization (1995), ‘[Accra Declaration on the WTO-UNESCO Cultural Tourism Programme “The Slave Route”](#)’, UNWTO Declarations, volume 5, number 2, UNWTO, Madrid, DOI.

²⁴ “[Toxic Heritage Collaborative research](#)” Toxic Heritage, accessed 20 February 2022.