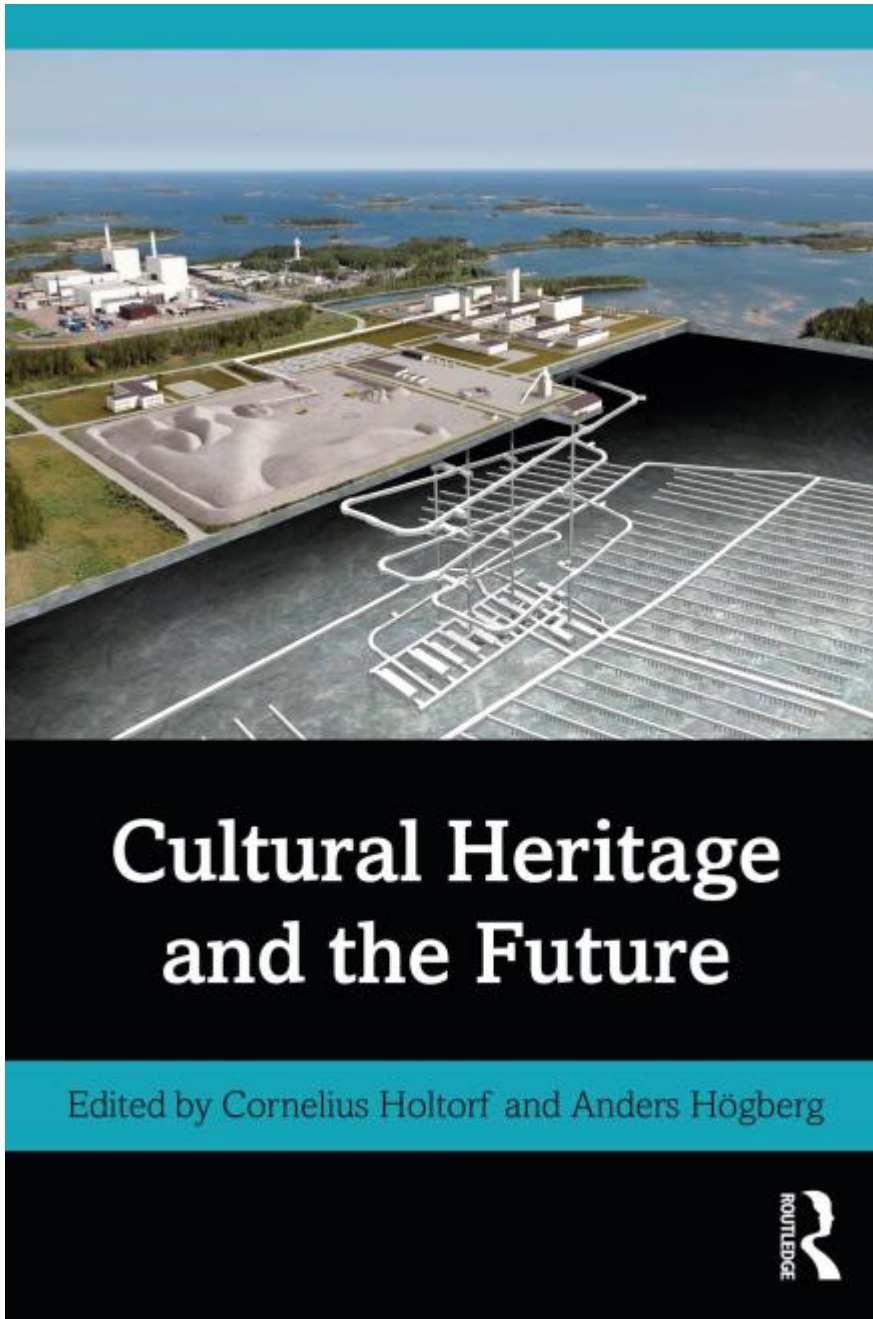


Book Review: Cultural Heritage and the



Reviewed by Jane Henderson

Cultural Heritage and the Future

Edited by Cornelius Holthoff and Anders Hogberg

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This book is an edited compilation of papers organised for a 2012 conference and developed through subsequent discussions. Caitlin DeSilvey's chapter on palliative curation, for example, tells the story of a lighthouse slipping into the sea and the many ways that people responded. She uses the gap between the inception and publication of this volume to add reflections, but not to edit the story with hindsight, offering this lovely perspective: "the future always lies in wait, ready to rewrite your conclusions and undermine your well-crafted arguments" (p. 217). DeSilvey captures the challenges and distractions of preservation focussed on the material aspects of a thing and how focussing on the tangible may distract, if not disturb, both other presents and the future. She counters this approach by urging conservators to be concerned with how to manage transitions.

The publication offers multiple perspectives on conservation futures, and I admit I enjoyed some of the papers more than others. Some of the chapters felt, to me, like elaborate case studies with conclusions attached—situations where I felt the effort of explaining the case study was not in proportion to the evidential qualities brought. Other chapters are constructed on an "if this, then that" premise, building complex layers of conclusions upon an original premise which does not concur with my reality. When driven by the complex narrative and strongly made arguments, the logic started to pull me in, but when tested against my own experience with museums and conservators, it didn't hold water.

Whilst this is a limited test, the one recurring argument that I found entirely inconsistent with my own experience was predicated on the idea of conservation as stasis. For example, González Ruibal (p. 100) argues that "It should not be an anathema to deal with some ...[heritage by] ...allowing processes of decay and transformation and putting more emphasis on maintenance through interaction than on pristine creation and fossilisation through conservation".

Conservation is as diverse as any other profession and while the example of ossification as outcome may exist, it has been rejected by many for quite some time. This is evidenced within the book. For example, Avrami (p. 209) provides a quote from 2008 about the heritage sector having a stronger claim by managing rather than preventing change. The anti-entropy caricature makes no sense in the heritage world of mining museums, contemporary art, or social change that I encounter in pretty much every museum in Wales where loss, change and renewal are part of the normal life of heritage managers.

There are many other chapters that I found more stimulating. When we are managing the conservation of intangible cultural heritage, Lou Li asks us to consider whether we are preserving the tangible aspect of intangible cultural heritage or the transmission of intangible qualities such as identity, beliefs and faith. Li reminds us that preservation activities of intangible cultural heritage are the activities of the living—activities such as using, wearing and eating. Similarly, Sarah May encourages us to connect the emotions and practices of gifts from parents and grandparents to children: they are not always wanted, and although they can be powerful,

their meaning may lie in ways possibly or probably unimagined by donors. She reminds us that inheritance is not necessarily automatically good.

James Dixon encourages us to expand our conception of the phases of building, recognising that some buildings are never completed as intended; nonetheless, this is a meaningful phase and one which sits at the junction of multiple distinct futures. I could not help but reflect on the people, lives and identities lost in the building phases of the sporting stadiums for the recent FIFA World Cup. I know that many of us will never be able to view the tangible legacy of the event and separate in our memories issues of lives lost in construction from memories of the sporting event itself.

Robert Charlotte Maxwell uses the tangible symbols created by Scientology to examine how we represent ourselves and how the tangible form in the present indicates our current beliefs and perceptions of the future. Rosemary A Joyce's critique of the use and longevity of archaeological materials as a benchmark for the creation of symbols to signify nuclear waste is also an intellectual delight that exposes the progressivist bias in our belief, indicating that we can always improve on ancient practice. She also asks, "how have archaeologists failed to convey even to other academics the reality that the places we make into heritage sites were not designed and imbued with meaning at a single point in time but rather accrued and continued to unfold different kinds of relations, including relations of meaning, throughout complex histories of emergent form?" (p. 171). This is a plea that resonates deeply for me as I wonder how conservators have also failed to convey our purpose.

Erica Avrami firmly bridges heritage conservation to wider social factors as in when she states that "heritage has an affirmative obligation to prevent and mitigate climate change" (p. 208) and provides the warning that "conser-vation is not merely an act of stewardship that privileges the past over the present; it is a creative destruction of alternate futures" (p. 213).

The book ends with chapters that really develop the editors' idea that "heritage negotiates people's understanding and a society's relationship between past, present, and future" (p. 148). Sanford and Cassar provide a very useful roundup of foresight-thinking which has been gaining some traction in the sector since they raised these points back in 2012. Their conclusion underlines the message repeated throughout this volume: that those of us involved in conservation, connecting the past and present, must continue to focus on our actions in the here and now and "by changing the present, a way to actually create a future that perhaps we never imagined before" (p. 268).

Although I was a little frustrated with some of the arguments that describe an unrecognisable (to me) conservation profession, much of the book is illuminating and provides a valuable compendium and a fascinating timeline for the last decade of thinking. What I took the message to be is that with an unknowable future, we should question all our assumptions about how and what we pass on to those beneficiaries. We should open our minds to the fact that what we pass forward as a result of our conservation attempts may be understood very differently by the recipients than we intended or even imagined. My takeaway action is to reflect on why the lazy stereotypes of conservators attempting to ossify is so resilient and to ask which lazy stereotypes I default to and why.

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Jane Henderson, FIIC, is a professor of conservation and the Secretary General IIC. Jane serves on several boards and committees concerned with heritage and conservation including the British and European Standards bodies concerned with heritage conservation and is a co-opted member on the trustee board of the Welsh Federation of Museum and Art Galleries.

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