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## Cultural heritage facing climate and environmental change

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# Why cultural heritage needs foresight

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**Abstract :** In this text, we argue that the cultural heritage sector, including Heritage Science, needs to address an inherent lack of capability in futures thinking by enhancing foresight and 'futures literacy'. The sector ought to take seriously the consequences of the insight that the uses and values of cultural heritage in future societies will be different from those in the present and in the past. Foresight and futures literacy will allow the cultural heritage sector to respond to climate change and other global developments, risks and challenges anticipated by futurists.

There are many studies addressing 'the future of heritage', but most assert that, in crucial aspects, the future will resemble the present (see discussion in Högberg et al. 2017). Many such studies adopt an essentialist approach and take the value of heritage for granted; they reduce questions about the future of heritage to issues of preservation and accessibility alone. But future generations will have different needs and desires, and they may require different resources and knowledge compared with us today (Holtorf & Högberg 2021).

When heritage institutions commission foresight studies, their time frame is commonly short, their aim is to support current policies, and their content describe what is the case now (e. g. Historic England 2015). There are hardly any analyses of how future generations might benefit, and be affected, by cultural heritage in different ways than today, which would require different future strategies of management (but see RAÄ 2006 for an exception).

The reason for this lack of appreciation of foresight is that the need to conserve the remains of the past for the benefit of future generations is axiomatic in heritage policy globally (Spennemann 2007). There is a lack of serious concern with likely changes over time and the anticipated needs of future generations.

The climate crisis, among other prospects, are putting questions of long-term sustainability and preparedness for future risks and change on the agenda of societies world-wide. There is a rapidly evolving discourse about cultural heritage and sustainable development, but it has not yet considered sufficiently that the ways in which people think and act are bound to particular cultural contexts and therefore specific to time and place. As circumstances are going to change over time, cultural heritage management will have to change, too. But addressing specific uses of cultural heritage in anticipated future presents, is little developed in the heritage sector (Högberg et al. 2017, see also Harrison et al. 2020, Holtorf & Högberg 2021).

There is a risk that opportunities to make a difference to future societies could be lost in an uncritical continuation of present-day heritage practices. In order to address this issue, we need more foresight and 'futures literacy' in the cultural heritage sector. Futures literacy is the ability to think futures, by recognising existing assumptions about the future and by anticipating alternative futures (Miller 2018)– appreciating that the uses and values of cultural heritage in the future will not necessarily be the same as today.

Professionals in the cultural heritage sector have an ethical responsibility in the present to take the wellbeing of future generations seriously and consider intergenerational equity (Brown Weiss 1989).

They must do the best they can in escaping the shackles of presentism, i. e. the assertion that things will stay the way they are now, and in considering the anticipated interests of future generations.

The cultural heritage sector, including Heritage Science, needs to generate more knowledge about alternative values and uses of cultural heritage in scenarios reflecting climate change and other global developments anticipated by futurists. Arguably, there is a paradox: when the world needs global solidarity and collaboration, cultural heritage serves as a totem of the nation states, and when societies prepare for changes ahead, cultural heritage looks to conserve what was before. To address this need, the cultural heritage sector needs futures literacy and foresight.

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