

# The Future of the Past – Summary Paper

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## Foreword

This essay has been written for the Sustainable Traditional Buildings Alliance (STBA) and paid for by Historic Environment Scotland, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, the National Trust and The Church of England. It arose out of a desire among STBA member organisations, and particularly those of the Heritage sector, to be part of the sustainability discourse in a positive way, rather than being seen as part of the problem. Old buildings have a lot to offer to the sustainability of our country and planet both practically and culturally: practically, in terms of how traditional buildings can contribute to mainstream sustainability targets in energy and carbon, as well as regards economic value and occupant health; and culturally in terms of how heritage thinking and practice, as well as the presence of old buildings, can (re-)connect people with nature, beauty and the past in a way which is essential for the long term survival and flourishing of humankind; they can also challenge our modern ways of thinking and being through their real enduring witness to different ways of life.

In the process of undertaking this work, two things became clear to me, which have to a large extent made the work more complex than envisaged and possibly more controversial. The first is that mainstream sustainability, as found in international and national charters and policies, is dominated by a positivist (materialist), neo-liberal and individual rights agenda underpinned by an almost utopian belief in technological progress and the power of the market. As such, heritage thinking, practice and what is left of the past in our old buildings is considered not only irrelevant but regressive, and cannot be part of the sustainability discourse as currently constituted. The challenge was therefore not how to become part of the sustainability discourse, but how to make it possible for non-mainstream ideas and beliefs to be heard and valued.

The second complication was the challenge of articulating heritage thinking clearly in regard to sustainability. On this my reading suggests that heritage and conservation philosophy is in need of review, in the light of new thinking elsewhere (particularly in philosophy and anthropology) and in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century politics.

As a result, this essay does not say much about how Heritage and Building Conservation can help the current sustainability agenda to achieve its aims. I am not saying that these aims (such as reducing carbon emissions) are not good, but that they are incomplete. They have also been assimilated by a wider technocratic and political agenda (of endless economic growth, destruction of local cultural difference, and aggression towards nature) which is in fact part of the problem.

Instead I focus on the cultural and philosophical contribution that heritage (as part of the wider field of cultural diversity) can and should make in the debate about the future. I think this will not only allow the Heritage sector to defend and promote its values and practices more robustly, but also open it up to other ways of thinking, acting and collaborating. More importantly, it can be part of a wider change in public discourse about sustainability, a change away from the dominant political and economic paradigm to one which is more open, fuller, more human and more natural, where our plans for the future are developed through meaningful engagement with the past.

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In an age of progress, what value has the past?

In modernity, what relevance has tradition?

In an era of technological advancement, human rights and economic growth, how can past societies, practices and artefacts, based as they are upon superseded technologies, incomplete scientific understanding, hierarchical social structures and inefficient economies, be important?

In this time of perceived environmental, economic and social fragility and possible collapse, what use is the past and why should we make efforts to preserve our links to it?

This paper is an attempt to answer these questions in relation to old buildings and the way we think about them and live with them.

The basic argument of this paper is that the way we think about and plan for the future in mainstream political culture is no longer adequate or desirable. It is destroying cultural diversity and the natural world. Humanity and nature are not two separate things- they are intrinsically linked, and so is their survival – our survival. The full flourishing of people and nature is not something additional to survival but is essential to it. We cannot restore the balance of life on this planet by technocratic controls and interventions. We can only restore balance by increasing the beauty and meaning of this world and enjoying it.

In this context, we consider that the past has a lot to offer and that heritage philosophy, traditional practices and the physical presence of old buildings, all of which together speak about past societies and their different ways of living, thinking and being, could have an important role to play in restoring beauty and meaning. Old buildings and their link to the past can provide real inspiration the development of a new political culture which addresses our real needs and aspirations for the future. They do so not by presenting an idealised and politically acceptable version of the present dressed up in old costumes, but through their radical difference and diversity which challenges not only our assumptions about the past, but our more fundamental assumptions about humanity, nature, knowledge, causality and purpose.

They do this in the same way as tribal and non-western societies can sometimes represent themselves in the present day, but with the difference that past societies did not face the technological and ideological onslaught which non-western cultures currently encounter. The past in this country therefore is different and diverse in a different way from non-western cultures in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nonetheless both the heritage of the past and current non-western cultures share the same challenge of facing a totalising and monolithic vision of the future reinforced by technological and political power.

One way in which this dominant vision is articulated is through the concept of Sustainability, which is perhaps the primary way in which the future is discussed in public discourse. Indeed the Rio+20 Outcome Document in 2012 was entitled The Future We Want and was signed by representatives of 189 countries.

What is the future we want as expressed in this and other international charters? The charters have moved from being primarily about environmental protection to primarily about human development. The 6 aims of the 1992 Rio Agenda 21 were

1. Quality of life on earth
2. Efficient use of the earth's resources
3. Protection of the global commons
4. Management of human settlements
5. Management of chemicals and waste
6. Sustainable economic growth<sup>1</sup>

These have now become the 17 Sustainable Development Goals including

1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere
2. End hunger, achieve food security and improve nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
3. Ensure healthy life and promote well-being for all at all ages
4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education
5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

There are 3 goals (goals 13, 14 and 15) about the environment, one to "combat climate change" (as though it were an alien invasion, rather than a result of our activities), one to preserve the oceans and rivers and one for terrestrial ecosystems. However it is the human dimension that entirely dominates the document. The language of the whole document is missionary and excessive, declaring in paragraph 2 that

"On behalf of the peoples we serve, we have adopted a historic decision on a comprehensive, far-reaching and people-centred set of universal and transformative Goals and targets."

But how is this to be achieved? This becomes clear when one examines the means identified in the sustainability charters. These means promote financial liberalisation and free trade, technology transfer and innovation as the main means of implementation. Everything should be measured. Elsewhere human rights and democratic institutions are also mentioned as means as well as aims in sustainable development.

Within this and other sustainability charters, there is little space currently for the past (or for non-western cultures) to be heard. This is because the past and its manifestation as heritage (as a value system), tradition (as continuity of practice) and remnants (as what remains materially), is considered not only of no relevance, but as regressive and, in many ways, as opposed to the present. Many past societies had completely different notions of society, economics and our relationship with the natural world, many of which notions are not acceptable in modern political discourse. This is the same with many non-western cultures today. Muslim societies (and there are many different types of these societies) in particular are vilified by many as backwards, repressive and ignorant,

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly at this summit both traditional farming and traditional building were considered important resources. The international policy document "recommends the use of local materials and indigenous building sources" and promotes the use of labour rather than energy intensive technologies. This approach has now been largely abandoned in sustainability charters and policies.

when in fact they may just be different and equally valid ways of being human, or as is suggested here in this essay, more viable and better ways.

One way of clarifying the different visions of humanity, nature and meaning is to look at the basic assumptions about people, world, knowledge, causality and purpose in each way of life. The following table is based upon a study of some of the main sustainability charters and policies of the last 50 years.

Question	Answer
What is a person?	An individual with equal rights
What is the world?	As society it is merely the sum of individuals. As nature it is all non-human life and inert matter. These are often considered as “resources”.
What is the relationship of people and world?	Individuals interact with other individuals on what should be an equitable basis. People use nature and the world as a resource for their benefit
How do we know?	Measurement. By reducing things to their basic units and adding them together.
What causes change?	In nature: physical causality and evolution. In society: the actions of individuals in politics and economics. In economics: primarily self-interest, competition which works best in a free market, and technological innovation.
What is the purpose of people/ the world?	Survival (length of life). Values such as equality and personal freedom. Economic growth. Progress (in rights, technology, science).

These are the main answers one get from examining sustainability charters and policies. The purpose of people and the world are all modern western values, entirely focused on human welfare. These in turn relate to ideologies which dominate public thinking and the so called “triple bottom line”:

- Society: Human Rights (based on individual rights)
- Economy: Utilitarianism and neo-liberalism (based on the utility-maximising self-interested individual within a competitive global economy, where the good emerges through the “invisible hand” of the market, and barriers to trade are therefore bad)
- Environment: Positivism (only what is material and measurable exists – qualitative values do not exist in reality) and evolution (all nature is in competition for survival)

What unites elements in the paradigm analysis is reductionism (reducing humans and nature to basic units/ elements) and an almost millennial belief in material progress towards an earthly utopia.

In contrast, in societies of the past and in much modern heritage thinking, the notions of knowledge, person, world, causality and purpose are quite different. Heritage philosophy has much in common with the philosophy of cultural diversity and uses the same expressions in many cases to justify the significance of cultural and historical difference and preservation. For example knowledge within such philosophy is not just about what is measurable, but also about what is felt. The “intangible” is as significant as the tangible<sup>2</sup>. This requires an epistemology which includes the value of beauty, sense of place, connection, spirit, craft. Such an epistemology implies a different kind of person, a different world, and different purposes. It also implies that there are different causalities operating

<sup>2</sup> see Jokilehto J. 2006, Considerations on authenticity and integrity in world heritage context. City & Time 2 (1): 1.[online] URL:<http://www.ct.ceci-br.org>

in the world, an idea which is extremely challenging to policy makers and western rationalism and science; however the articulation of different causalities in heritage thinking is currently absent, (though it clearly existed in the past in many forms ranging from occult sciences to the belief in the power of prayer). Hence we can put these also into a table. The italicised answers are those that might exist in some past societies

Question	Answers
What is a person?	A part of history and nature. A creator and ideally a craftsman and enjoyer of culture and nature. <i>In past societies, people were often considered as creations of God, part of a cosmic drama and plan.</i>
What is the world, nature?	A place of history, beauty and diversity <i>Part of God's manifestation and part of the cosmic drama.</i>
What is the relationship of people and world?	People are stewards of culture (here buildings) and nature for future generations. People and nature interact. Buildings are the expression of this interaction. <i>People are part of nature not separate. All things have souls. Buildings express our relationship to others, nature and the divine.</i>
How do we know?	By science and by feeling. (not properly defined) <i>Through revelation, tradition and experience</i>
What causes change?	No real theory of change. Conservation philosophy is about responding to change and preserving value. <i>Change is part of the divine plan. Nature and humanity are affected by the morality of human activity.</i>
What is the purpose of people/ the world?	Participation in society, culture and nature. Beauty. <i>"To worship God and enjoy Him forever"</i>

The main reason why heritage (and cultural) values do not and cannot appear in sustainability charters and policies therefore is because of what might be called paradigm incompatibility. However this incompatibility is not just a logical one, but is also based upon deeper fears and anxieties, such as fear of the irrational (particularly in regard to communal expressions of culture and the prejudices these often encompass), the threat to scientific understanding of the world (which gives a sort of psychological security) and dislike of traditional hierarchical social structures (particularly in regard to the position of women). The past is not just irrelevant, but dangerous.

Any attack on mainstream sustainability therefore seems to be an attack on choice, human rights, equality (particularly racial and gender equality of individuals), technological and economic "progress" and science. So, instead of opening-up the debate, culture and heritage values can end up being seen as the opposites of mainstream values, rather than as complementary or enriching. Such an opposition might be set out on the terms below:

Mainstream Sustainability	Culture and Heritage
Quantification	Qualitative values
Scientific	Superstitious, irrelevant
Rational	Emotional/ irrational
Objective	Subjective
Democratic	Elitist
Individual choice	Communal coercion
Progressive	Reactionary

This is to misrepresent the values of culture and heritage. It may, however, explain to a large extent why culture and heritage is largely excluded from the debate about the future.<sup>3</sup>

It should be said at this point, that there are many sustainability thinkers who accept non-quantitative values such as beauty, sense of place, even “connection with the infinite”<sup>4</sup> and try to integrate them into sustainability policies and metrics. Similarly conservation philosophy and practice has been engaging with much of the mainstream sustainability agenda for many years and has learnt much about old buildings and the past through assessing buildings in terms of energy, carbon, and functionality in modern society. The STBA has been successful recently in introducing both health and some aspects of heritage value into the discussion in the UK in its work on Responsible Retrofit.

However the deeper and more profound values found in heritage thinking and practice, such as the importance of craft, beauty, spirit of place, memory, connection to nature, and the relation of the part (such as building, person, community, activity or feeling) to the whole (in many forms, but including the whole of creation and that beyond), which relationship is radically different in traditional society compared with modernity, are still largely missing and unexamined within the mainstream sustainability discourse.

Furthermore the use of the past as a way of gaining perspective on the present in a truthful, rather than in a caricatured way, as well as the use of examples from the past of how different societies operated under different constraints - constraints which we will almost certainly face in the future (ie bio-regional societies, societies based upon steady state rather than growth economies) - are also missing from current sustainability discourse. These are all important gifts of the past to the present and the future.

The fact however that we are discussing such things and that a variety of approaches to the past and future do exist in our current world and even in public discourse in conservation charters and in the work of bodies like UNESCO shows that “paradigm incompatibility” is not an exclusion of certain ideas from our whole society (or even within individuals) but a relationship of dominance within it. These alternative approaches exist as a subordinate set of ideas and values, ones which we often hold in private or in alternative spheres of activity, and which we associate with our personal values and with family, community, faith and home. The problem is that we cannot integrate our home values properly with the dominant public value system. This is partly because the public dialogue is meant to be neutral and objective but it is mainly because of the dominance of the ideas, which in fact cannot be understood as neutral in any sense, unless you accept the basic assumptions about reality, knowledge, causality and purpose embedded in them. The idea that the mainstream approach is neutral and scientific only makes sense if you accept the mainstream approach.

The challenge then for the allowing these ideas to be accepted in public discourse is not one of innovation but of acceptance of incompatible ideas within discourse. We currently exist in a dualistic society with a dominant approach which does not accept the validity of other approaches. As pointed out by many commentators, this is a kind of fundamentalism similar to religious and other fundamentalisms. However, like most fundamentalisms, it cannot see itself as such. As John Gray

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<sup>3</sup> There are of course other reasons, not mentioned as yet, which are more sinister and are to do with the cynical use of sustainability across the globe to trample on indigenous peoples in order to steal their lands or their labour, or to destroy historic places for economic growth. This is a natural consequence of the mainstream paradigm’s belief in free markets, competition as the main driver of change (and particularly the notion of “the survival of the fittest”) and the invisible hand (the metaphysical belief of neo-liberals that the market will lead to the best outcomes overall).

<sup>4</sup> See Throsby in xxx

writes “Today liberal humanism has the pervasive power that was once possessed by revealed religion. Humanists like to think they have a rational view of the world; but their core belief in progress is a superstition, further from the truth about the human animal than any of the world’s religions”<sup>5</sup>. While Gray focuses on the delusions of liberal notions of human rights and of human progress, others such as Ian McGilchrist and Mary Midgely point out that the positivist approach in science (a reductionist approach where only that which is physical and can be measured has any real existence and causal power), so powerful in policy and in some branches of science, is not tenable as a philosophy or a scientific method. Yet this cannot be addressed in public discourse because of the strength of the dominant paradigm.

What is required is a pluralist discourse, which gives equal value to competing ideas and values, and allows and encourages diversity. This is not an easy position to take. It requires constant revisiting and discussion, but its benefits are creativity, reciprocity, self-understanding and a thriving cultural diversity. Dualist positions which exclude anything which is not logically and internally consistent are much easier. But their downside is that they are always incomplete and unreal, and furthermore they are the cause of violence and rebellion in those oppressed, as well as exploitation and fanaticism in their advocates and agents. This is not to say that materialist science doesn’t work, or that economic liberalism or human rights are wrong. But they are incomplete and illogical in their claims for completeness and priority over other ways of knowing, living and being, and have now become serious stumbling blocks to a sustainable future.

The dominant paradigm might be acceptable if in some ways it worked practically. However the failure of many policies in sustainability (in regard to the “triple bottom line” of environment, economics and society) and particularly in regard to the built environment, even on their own terms, is a clear indication that we need to find new ways of thinking and acting.

For example, who can say that 25 years of international and national sustainability charters and policies have made our world more sustainable overall in a practical sense? On the one hand people will point out to increase in communications technology, technical innovations and medical advances as evidence that we are “progressing”, as well as the international adoption of climate change charters and sustainable development goals. However against this view, we have many long term trends which are evidence that in sustainability terms we are in fact going backwards.

In *environmental* terms we have seen a massive acceleration of greenhouse gases, the increasing loss of species and habitats, and threats to resources such as water, oil, soil, all of which are now reaching critical levels. In *economic* terms the last 25 years have seen huge increases in unsustainable personal and national debt, the redistribution of wealth from poor to rich nationally and globally, and the creation of a huge global property bubble which will eventually have to burst. In *social* terms, the breakdown of communities, terrorism, mental illness and addiction have all increased. We have increasing instability and violence in many regions, and the most refugees worldwide since World War II.

In the built environment in the UK the policies of the last 15 years, from xxx to the Code for Sustainable Homes, the Green Deal and the various schemes such as CERT, CESP and ECO have all either collapsed under their own inadequacies or have created many unacceptable unintended consequences for the health of buildings and occupants and for the community character and streetscapes. This is not to say that there have not been good schemes which have worked technically and improved the areas where they have been carried out. But even here the question needs to be raised as to whether they have improved the long term sustainability of the occupants and communities, or whether this work has been an unintegrated measure which has not addressed

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<sup>5</sup> Foreword to the paperback edition: Page xi Straw Dogs by John Gray, publ. Granta 2002.

fundamental problems of how we live, how we interact with each other and nature, and how we build a flourishing culture. The programmes have all been formulated within a neo-liberal and reductionist understanding of society which excludes such issues.

Economic neo-liberalism is also reaching the end of its credibility in a philosophical and practical sense. The idea that the market is full of rational, utility maximising individuals and that it will always work for the best (through the marvellous “invisible hand”) has been undermined by the failure of such economics to account for recent economic crises, by the exposure of corrupt practices at the top of banks and businesses, and more generally for persistent non-rational human behaviour. Furthermore neo-liberal approaches to environmental and social survival are increasingly seen as unviable. Tim Jackson’s book *Prosperity without Growth*, for example, shows how the idea of continuing economic growth in unrestricted markets cannot possibly address the carbon reductions that are required for the survival of the planet. Santarius’s paper on the rebound effect shows how even in a country with good skills and understanding, improvements in energy efficiency in buildings have not led to reduced energy use because of the economic growth model continually creating more energy use than can be saved by efficiencies. We need to re-think economics, quickly.

In the context therefore of the indefensibility of much sustainability thinking and assumptions along with its practical failure, there should and must be space for different ways of thinking about the world. The problem is that much of the different thinking has been undermined by years and decades of suppression or by attempts to align itself with the dominant paradigm. The past is not what it was anymore. As Prof Richard Tombs points out in his review of David Lowenthal’s *The Past is a Foreign Country –Revisited*:

‘Historical heroes have their views and actions bowdlerised; sometimes they are denounced for failing to measure up to 21st-century sensibilities; sometimes they are simply dropped from the canon and pushed out of history; and often they are just “defanged by marinating in trivia”. For Lowenthal these seemingly contrary responses are symptoms of the same problem: failure to understand the past, for which the first requirement is to realise that it was different from the present — a “foreign country”, in L P Hartley’s famous words, where “they do things differently”. It took human beings many centuries to comprehend this, and now we are forgetting it again in a culture obsessively focused on the present. We imagine our ancestors as merely ourselves “in fancy dress”. History has become an incoherent global costume drama without context or continuity. Lowenthal argues that this is a huge intellectual and psychological loss, for we need “a realistic, liberating and self-respecting past”. He ends with a heartfelt call to accept collective responsibility for the past and its consequences: “The past is integral to our being ... live courageously with its totality.”’

If we can look more honestly and less judgementally on the reality of past societies then the values, assumptions and the physical reality of heritage, tradition and old buildings have a significant role to play in helping us towards a better future. If we are now able to propose that the future is not just about economic and scientific progress based on individual rights, but has to be based on different relationships and assumptions then heritage and old buildings, rather than being primarily objects or relics of outdated societies, can be useful in a profound way. They can help to tell us a broader truth about human beings, and their potential to interact differently with each other and nature, as well as improve and preserve our material world. They might even be important or essential in addressing the challenge of climate change. As such there could be many useful lessons for the future to be found in them. Some of these might be

- Contrast: providing a critique of the present and its paradigm, in particular
  - Societies based on a sense of wholeness not fragmentation, hierarchy and reciprocity not class and individual competition
  - Societies based on non-growth or steady state economics, which were about balance, and harmony not about disruptive progress
  - Societies which were bioregional –living within the constraints of their local regions
- The value of meaningful work in construction and repair, connecting human beings with nature, as well as opening up the creative and revelatory aspects of man through the physical world and the body.
- The importance and power of non-quantitative values
- The possibility and the importance of a pluralist society and culture

It should be clear in this, that we are not proposing an idealised and unrealistic view of heritage or the past. There was indeed exploitation, ugliness, stupidity, drudgery and superstition but this was not all that was present. Who can stand in York Minster and not wonder at the astounding vision of humanity, nature and God which this embodies, and also not wonder at the fact that such a building was built without computers and cranes, without a free market economy or a democracy? In fact, of course, we could not start to build such a building nowadays, not having the money, skills or time to do so, but more importantly not having a sense of the whole, of the importance of the Other, of the value of the invaluable. It is not just such magnificent buildings however which we can no longer build. We seem, on the whole, unable to build towns and villages with any real beauty. It is this, and the questions that arise from it, which old buildings in different ways ask, that is important for our times and for the future.

We should not however revert to a position where heritage values are in opposition or contrast to mainstream values, based particularly on scientific positivism, utilitarianism and human rights. This would be dualistic! So it is also essential to understand the value of old buildings on these terms as well, in particular their

- Energy/carbon/ resource/whole life efficiency
- Adaptability, durability and usability
- Technical and behavioural lessons from an energy scarce world

As with the other lessons for the future from old buildings, these characteristics apply more to some types of buildings than others. Old cathedrals are on the whole not very energy efficient (and don't need to be), whereas cob cottages can be efficient, if maintained well and altered or adapted in some ways in accord with modern understandings of building efficiency and modern ways of living. However we are not able to use either cathedrals or cob cottages as they were used in the 17<sup>th</sup> century or at any other time. We should not pretend that most of us can live today as in the distant past.

What is required is paradigm change. We cannot conclude otherwise. We need new relationships between people, buildings and nature. This is not just a new way of thinking, but new ways of acting, living, working, relating, being. Paradigm change can be explored as well through craft activity and repairing old buildings as through the study of how traditional societies lived within bio-regional constraints. We need to engage people at many different levels and in different ways. How we move towards this change is the primary responsibility and task of heritage for the future.

The first step in this process is for heritage thinking to fully grasp the value of the past to the future and be confident in the intangible values and assumptions which were present at different times and which are manifested in different buildings and settlements. This means looking at the past through

the perspective of past societies not only from our own perspective. It also means allowing our own private values and feelings to be expressed and challenged in this understanding of the past. Ultimately it means that those who care about the past and the future need to look inside themselves for how the values of beauty, wholeness, connection and spirit inform their own lives and alongside those more positivist and rationalist understandings. This new confidence needs to show itself in how our building heritage is exhibited, explained and used in engagement with public and policy makers.

The creation of space in public discourse for different understandings based upon different assumptions is the next necessary step. This is extremely challenging for the dominant paradigm, particularly in some areas of science, humanities and politics. Heritage needs to make partnerships with people working in heterodox and alternative economics, science and medicine in particular, who are able to articulate different notions of knowledge and causality, notions which correspond more closely to our own private experience of the world and which will allow different views of the past also to emerge and be valued.

Many people will not agree with much that is written in this paper, and no doubt dismiss it as unscientific and delusional. The conclusions have surprised me too: when I started this project two years ago, I had expected to make more pragmatic recommendations. Instead, my research has led me to conclude that we cannot start to address issues of sustainability and heritage without considering the assumptions on which they are based, and confronting these openly and fully. It is not sufficient to note, as UNESCO do, that cultural diversity is excluded from sustainability charters and then to fill their website and programmes with activities which undermine cultural diversity. It is not sensible for heritage bodies to shy away from the threats which sustainability poses to heritage, sheltering in a heritage corner somewhere, hoping for better policies in the future. It is not responsible for any of us working in this field to ignore the destruction of our planet and our diverse cultures as well as the increasing inequality, ugliness and desperation of much modern life and to hide the gifts of the past from the peoples of this world, gifts which not only provide beauty and meaning, but practical lessons and hope for the future.

The future of the past is not about the past. It is about the future of the future.