

beyond preservation

*embracing change with
Caitlin DeSilvey*

CRa
College van
Rijksbouwmeester
& Rijksadviseurs

platform
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Chris Julien. Photo: Cem Altinöz





Before the event. Photo: Cem Altinöz

Introduction

On October 17, 2024, the Platform Climate and Heritage and the Board of Government Advisors hosted *Beyond Preservation: Embracing Change for Heritage* at the Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam.

In the face of the climate crisis heritage conservation might have to change. Do we need to consider alternatives to preserving our cultural heritage in perpetuity? Should we learn how to accept transformation and – in some cases – loss? Can we decide what cultural heritage to relinquish in the face of the climate crisis, instead of leaving the decision to the next flood or wildfire?

To reflect on these questions keynote speaker Caitlin DeSilvey, Professor of Cultural Geography at the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom, encouraged us to reconsider the relation between cultural heritage and natural processes and reflect on our fear of destruction.

Following her keynote, Caitlin DeSilvey engaged in a discussion with filmmaker Tom Tieman, Chief Government Architect Francesco Veenstra, and heritage professional Maartje van Bennekom.

This report gives an overview of the evening and encapsulates the main themes from the evening's discussions. To rewatch the event, please visit the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oBggZIAoQU>



Chris Julien gives an introduction. Photo: Cem Altinöz

Opening remarks

Chris Julien (a philosopher and activist focused on the intersections of culture, ecology, and climate, and moderator for this evening) opened with an enthusiastic welcome to a packed audience. Reflecting on the relevance of the discussion, Julien remarked, "If I wouldn't be standing here, I would probably be in the audience." He underscored the urgency of addressing how heritage and conservation adapt in these rapidly changing times.

Julien then invited Jelle Hettema, representing the Platform for Climate and Heritage and the Board of Government Advisors, to provide further context. Hettema welcomed attendees on behalf of both organizing bodies, emphasizing the urgency of adapting heritage strategies to climate challenges. The Board of Government Advisors, led by Chief Government Architect Francesco, looks as far as a century ahead to anticipate spatial needs in a changing environment. Meanwhile, the Platform Climate and Heritage, founded in 2022, brings together experts from various heritage sectors to explore the evolving responsibilities in heritage preservation.

Concluding, Jelle Hettema expressed excitement for Caitlin DeSilvey's insights into how letting go of certain heritage aspects can lead to new opportunities.



Jelle Hettema. Photo: Cem Altinöz

"We speak of vulnerable places and things needing protection, conservation, and preservation. Action is required to restore or maintain the physical integrity of the threatened object and ensure its survival. Intervention and treatment aim to protect things from outright destruction or neglect as well as more indirect processes of erosion, weathering, decay, and decomposition. But what happens if we choose not to intervene? Can we uncouple the work of memory from the burden of material stasis? What possibilities emerge when change is embraced rather than resisted?"



Nieuwe Instituut

Caitlin DeSilvey during her talk. Photo: Cem Altinöz

Beyond preservation?

Beyond Preservation: Rethinking Heritage and Decay

A Shift in Perspective

In a thought-provoking lecture titled “Beyond Preservation,” Caitlin DeSilvey questioned traditional approaches to heritage management, urging the audience to consider a new paradigm of “curated decay.” Opening with a nod to the flexibility of the title itself, DeSilvey set the stage for an open conversation on heritage, decay, and climate change. Through personal anecdotes and case studies from which she has direct experience; sites like Hurst Castle and Wellington’s decaying textile mills. She outlined the complex ethics and practicalities of embracing change in heritage preservation.

Curated Decay: Letting Heritage Evolve Naturally

DeSilvey began by discussing their 2017 book *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving*, where she introduced the idea that heritage preservation does not always necessitate material conservation. Rather than viewing decay negatively, she proposed that heritage sites can retain value through natural transformation. By “curating” rather than preserving, heritage practitioners can foster a new kind of engagement that respects both the site’s legacy and its evolving state. Examples included allowing plant growth within historic ruins, like a roofless mansion in northern England, illustrating how decay can coexist with nature, producing an ecological narrative intertwined with historical identity.

Heritage and Climate Change: A Difficult Conversation

Climate change was an ever-present theme throughout the lecture, with DeSilvey cautioning against using “curated decay” as a means to normalize destruction brought on by the climate crisis. She acknowledged that while decay is a natural process, it can be troubling to accept when accelerated by human-driven climate events. The example of coastal conservationist Phil Dyke from the National Trust highlighted this tension, describing the paradox of striving for stability in inherently dynamic coastal landscapes. As the impacts of climate change intensify, the speaker emphasized that choosing “not to save” should be a conscious and ethically weighed decision rather than a response to crisis-induced resource constraints.



Caitlin DeSilvey. Photo: Cem Altınöz

Adaptive Release: Managing Inevitable Change

One of the central concepts introduced was “adaptive release,” a term rooted in ecological theory. Inspired by ecologist Buzz Holling’s adaptive cycles, the speaker described adaptive release as a conscious choice to let a heritage site evolve or decay naturally, recognizing the potential for new significance to emerge as the site transforms. For instance, in Wellington, England, local authorities and conservationists are experimenting with adaptive release by leaving parts of a historic mill to decay, integrating them into a “wild winter garden.” This practice allows

for partial preservation while embracing natural processes—a balance between protecting heritage and acknowledging the practical limits of conservation.

Political and Ethical Implications

While some hailed “curated decay” and “adaptive release” as refreshing alternatives to preservation, others raised concerns about the potential for neglect. The speaker underscored the ethical dimensions, posing difficult questions: Does adaptive release inadvertently justify neglect? How do heritage organizations ensure that decisions to let heritage sites decay are based on thoughtful reflection rather than financial convenience?

The lecture further explored these ideas in the context of Wellington’s Old Mill complex, a former industrial site. The adaptive release approach here could foster a new communal and ecological landscape, blending historical structures with modern human needs. However, the speaker acknowledged that such transformations require careful decision-making about which sites to preserve and which to let go.

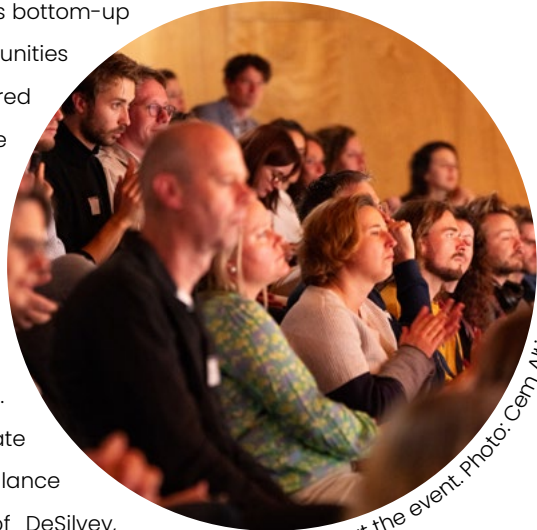
A New Vision for Heritage Management

In closing, Caitlin DeSilvey reflected on a recent visit to Fanghetto, a small village on the French-Italian border affected by storm damage. The residents responded by creating a shelter from storm debris, an act of resilience that, for the speaker, encapsulated a core idea: heritage

can be rebuilt and reimagined collaboratively. This bottom-up approach to heritage care reinforces that communities can become active agents in the renewal of shared spaces, preserving memory even as they embrace change.

A Call to Embrace Transformation

The lecture concluded on an inspiring note, urging attendees to think creatively about how heritage can reflect both the past and an uncertain future. As society faces the urgent demands of climate change, heritage practitioners are called to balance conservation with adaptability. In the words of DeSilvey, “embracing change can happen, but we may also need to learn how to let change embrace us.”



Public at the event. Photo: Cem Altınöz



Caitlin DeSilvey and Chris Julien. Photo: Cem Altinöz





Public at the event. Photo: Cem Altınöz

Q&A

Exploring the Edges of Legislation: Intentional Decay in Heritage

A prominent theme discussed during the Q&A was the legal complexities surrounding “intentional decay.” In both the Netherlands and the UK, heritage laws strictly enforce conservation measures, with no clear pathway for allowing a heritage site to deteriorate by choice. Caitlin DeSilvey highlighted ongoing projects, such as her collaboration with Natural England, to explore how policies might shift to accommodate more flexible approaches, although current legislation remains rigid.

Community Engagement and Shifting Perspectives

The conversation also touched on community perspectives, especially in cases where industrial heritage sites have become neglected by distant property owners. DeSilvey noted a gradual shift in community acceptance, with some now open to partial decay as a viable path forward. This openness, however, hinges on timing; communities often need years of evolving disinterest or frustration with stagnant redevelopment plans to consider alternative, ecologically integrated uses.

Applying Decay to Museum Collections and Material Objects

DeSilvey’s approach to decay extends beyond architecture and landscapes to museum collections and artifacts, though applying these ideas remains challenging. In collaborations with museums, she has explored creative disposal and “adaptive release,” yet practical concerns about managing decay in a controlled setting often lead

Public asking questions after DeSilvey's talk. Photo: Cem Altinöz



to hesitation and reevaluation. She sees potential in these concepts but acknowledges that the museum world is still adjusting to this shift.

Industrial vs. Older Heritage: Different Thresholds for Decay

DeSilvey pointed out that industrial sites—often in limbo—are more adaptable to natural processes, allowing decay, plant growth, and ecological transformations. In contrast, older heritage objects that have been conserved tend to resist re-opening the preservation debate. This difference reveals varying societal thresholds for decay, influenced by the context, ecological potential, and societal values tied to each site.



Panel discussion with Chris Julien, Tom Tieman, Francesco Veenstra, Maartje van Bennekom and Caitlin DeSilvey. Photo: Cem Altinöz



Panel discussion

In an attempt to reflect on the informative and thought provoking talk of DeSilvey, a panel discussion brought together experts from architecture, cultural preservation, and media to explore the topics further. Moderated by Chris Julien, the panelists included Francesco Veenstra, Chief Government Architect of the Netherlands; Maartje van Bennekom from the heritage protection organization Bond Heemschut; documentary filmmaker Tom Tieman; and speaker of the evening Caitlin DeSilvey. They tackled the controversial idea of allowing heritage sites to decay, reflecting on the tensions between preservation, community engagement, and economic considerations.

The Debate Over "Curated Decay"

Of course 'decay', as discussed by Caitlin DeSilvey was front and center in this debate. Tom Tieman opened with a clip from his documentary *Huilende Bruiden* (Weeping Brides), which highlights the decaying manor farms of Groningen and the tension between preservation and natural decline. Tieman argued that there's a unique honesty in decay, which acknowledges that buildings, like humans, are not eternal. Yet, as Maartje van Bennekom pointed out, the majority of heritage volunteers and organizations still prioritize restoration over allowing heritage to "die naturally."



Tom Tieman during panel discussion. Photo: Cem Altinöz



Maartje van Bennekom during panel discussion. Photo: Cem Altinöz

Legal Constraints on Preservation Choices

The discussion turned to the legal frameworks that govern heritage conservation. Both the Netherlands and the UK have strict regulations requiring property owners to maintain heritage sites in a stable condition, often leaving no room for the idea of managed decay. Francesco Veenstra noted the difficulty of making policy shifts that would allow a selective approach to heritage preservation, especially as the inventory grows. "If we try to preserve every building with meaning, we risk not preserving anything effectively," he said, suggesting that decay could play a role in prioritizing which heritage sites to maintain.

Community Engagement and Local Empowerment

For Maartje van Bennekom, who works with local volunteers to prevent demolition, community involvement is vital. Heritage often galvanizes local action when people see sites at risk. However, she also acknowledged the challenges volunteers face navigating bureaucratic structures that can stifle their enthusiasm. Caitlin DeSilvey added that empowering communities to make their own decisions could lead to a more resilient, adaptable approach to heritage, one that respects the non-linear, unpredictable nature of how people value and engage with their surroundings.

Time, Ecology, and the Aesthetics of Decay

An intriguing philosophical angle was introduced with the idea that decaying spaces offer a unique experience of time and presence. DeSilvey spoke about how abandoned places evoke a “living clock,” where the growth of plants and the wear of materials reflect the passage of time. She argued that allowing heritage sites to decay offers a “different typology,” one that embraces ecological processes as part of the heritage itself. Francesco Veenstra compared this to works at the Verbeke Foundation in Belgium, where nature is allowed to reclaim artworks, inviting a new interaction with art and space.



Economic Considerations and New Paradigms

The economic dimension of heritage conservation emerged as a central question. Veenstra argued that in many cases, allowing sites to return to nature could offer a new kind of value—particularly in areas where ecological concerns are pressing. He cited examples of areas like Fort Crèvecœur in the Netherlands, where nature has reclaimed land, fostering biodiversity. “If we can let go more often,” he proposed, “we might shift our entire economic system and how we think about value.” This call for a reassessment of property value aligns with

broader discussions about sustainability and a possible reimagining of economic models.

A Paradigm Shift?

In closing, the panel probably left the audience with questions rather than conclusions, recognizing that heritage, like the climate, exists in a state of flux. “We’re reaching a point where we may need to let go more often,” Veenstra reflected, proposing that such a shift could redefine heritage preservation in ways that align more closely with the realities of a changing world. The discussion challenged traditional views on preservation, suggesting that perhaps allowing heritage to “breathe” and, at times, decay, might be a path forward for sustainable cultural stewardship.



Chris Julien and Tom Tieman. Photo: Cem Altinöz

