

# Essential reads:

## The value of culture in urban sustainability

by Beth Perry



**CENTRE** FOR  
**CULTURAL VALUE**

# Background

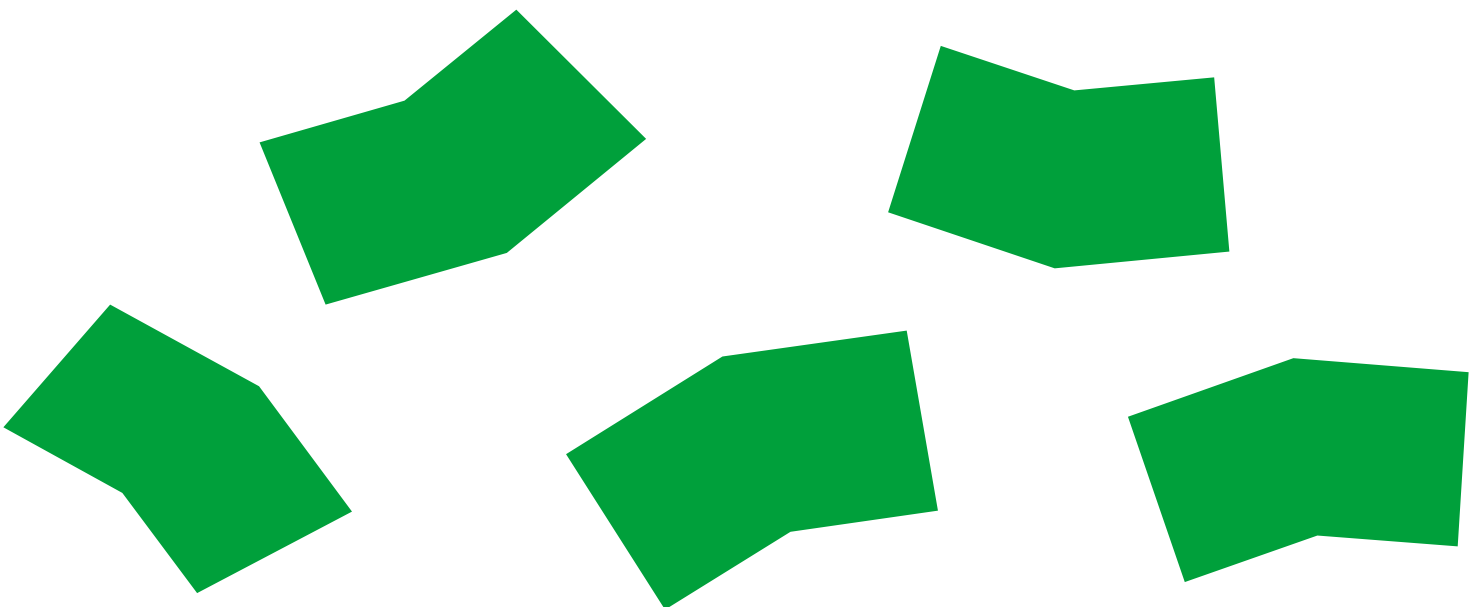
Traditionally, sustainable development has been seen as having three main pillars – environmental, social and economic. But what role does culture play in developing sustainable societies? In particular, it appears vital to consider the value of cultural heritage, as it relates to both the tangible and intangible legacy that we receive from the past and that we will pass on to future generations.

My essential reads aim to put culture into both theories and practices of sustainable development. I have chosen texts that open up questions around how to value and mobilise cultural heritage in the work of moving towards resource-efficient communities, which are safe, inclusive and equitable for all.

I became interested in these questions while working in an international centre called Mistra Urban Futures. With colleagues in Sweden, Kenya, South Africa, Brazil and India, we sought [to co-produce more just and sustainable urban transitions](#) with policymakers, community groups and citizens. Artists and cultural practitioners were also key partners, leading to strong collaborations around arts-based ecological action or heritage justice. One of our projects was called [Whose Heritage Matters](#) and looked at cultural heritage mobilisation for urban sustainability in Cape Town and Kisumu.

I identified the following essential reads in the course of this work and have selected texts which I found useful to engage with critical debates on cultural heritage.

The first reads develop an understanding of how the cultural dimensions of sustainability have been incorporated into policy frameworks and with what implications. I have then selected a number of case studies of a community-based approach to heritage. I end with a more theoretical read, which engages with the complex and critical relations between heritage and climate change in the context of human-induced climate and environmental devastation.



## **1. Culture Urban Future: Global report on culture for sustainable urban development**

Unesco (2016, Paris)

This report is a central policy statement on the importance of culture in sustainable development. It builds on and documents international collaborative processes to insert culture into global debates, such as by developing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Standing at 304 pages long, it constitutes a resource that can be mined for case studies, organised by geographic study areas, as well as thematic overviews of key issues. Perspectives from international and national actors have been included. These provide insights into debates on culture and sustainable urban development and the importance of localised knowledge and heritage practices.

## **2. Introduction: cultural policies for sustainable development**

Kangas, A., Duxbury, N. and De Beukelaer, C., *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 23:2, 129-132. (2017)

This article provides the introduction to a special issue and is an entry point to a wide set of insights into cultural policies and sustainable development. An important contribution is the tension between seeing culture as a tool to achieve other goals (for instance, in promoting economic progress or social inclusion) and culture as a legitimate end in itself.

The special issue as a whole makes three contributions. First, it introduces greater clarity about terms such as “cultural sustainability” or “culturally sustainable development” and examines the effectiveness of international policy frameworks. Second, it challenges cultural organisations to operate as “environmental participants” and play their role in addressing climate change. Third, it examines ideas around “cultural rights” via approaches that can challenge “monocultural perspectives”, which are a legacy of colonialism. The special issue concludes by identifying four roles culture can play in sustainable development.

### 3. **Rethinking Heritage for Sustainable Development**

Labadi, S. (2022) London: UCL Press.

This recent open-access book starts with the low value accorded to heritage within the SDGs as a springboard to look at how heritage contributes to poverty reduction, gender equality and environmental sustainability. Drawing on work in sub-Saharan Africa, the book questions the origin of the “culture for development” narrative that has largely been imported from the West. It also emphasises the importance of local communities forging their own futures based on their understandings of heritage, history and culture.

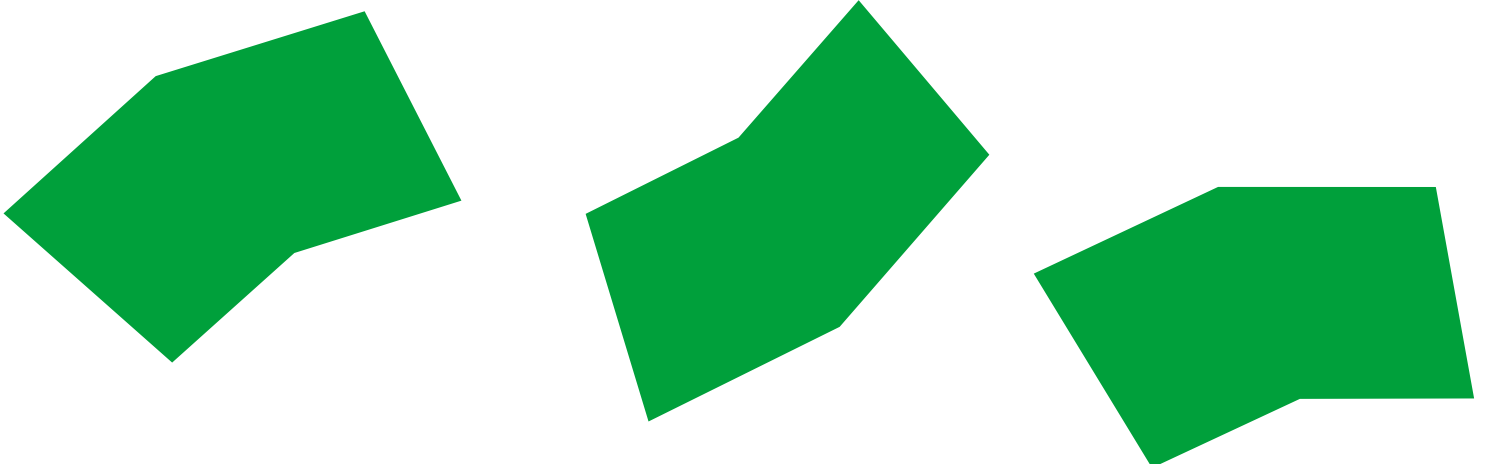
I have selected this book because its implications are much wider than the geography of Africa. In particular, there is a focus on the politics of heritage, and the extent to which concepts themselves (for instance “culture” and “heritage”) perpetuate negative stereotypes and can exclude people and ideas, including local considerations and uses of heritage.

### 4. **Action heritage: research, communities, social justice**

Johnston, R. and Marwood, K. (2017) *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 23:9, 816-831.

Johnston and Marwood offer a powerful example of what they call “action heritage” in South Yorkshire, UK. As well as providing three case studies of a school in Rotherham and two community heritage projects in Sheffield, the authors define action heritage as privileging process over outcomes and achieving parity of participation in cultural heritage projects.

This article mobilises an understanding of cultural heritage and sustainable development which is grounded in local meanings, histories and forms of participation.



## **5. A cultural justice approach to popular music heritage in deindustrialising cities**

Cantillon, Z., Baker, S. and Nowak, R. (2021) *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 27:1, 73-89.

Alongside case studies in the cities of Wollongong (Australia), Detroit (USA) and Birmingham (UK), this paper introduces the idea of cultural justice. I became interested in this topic due to its relevance to my work on “just cities”. The article extends ideas of cultural democracy ([covered by David Stevenson here](#)) and draws on Nancy Fraser’s work on cultural injustice - including cultural domination, non-recognition and disrespect - and provides a useful summary of scholars’ work to define what cultural justice is and how it differs from social justice.

I find the identification of three creative justice tools a particularly useful contribution to analyse and mobilise cultural heritage in relation to a much broader concept of “sustainability” than the one promoted in international policy frameworks.

## **6. Deterritorializing the Future. Heritage in, of and after the Anthropocene**

Harrison, R. and Sterling, C. (eds) (2020), London: Open Humanities Press.

My final read is an open-access edited book, bringing together the perspectives of many different writers at the intersections of heritage and ecology.

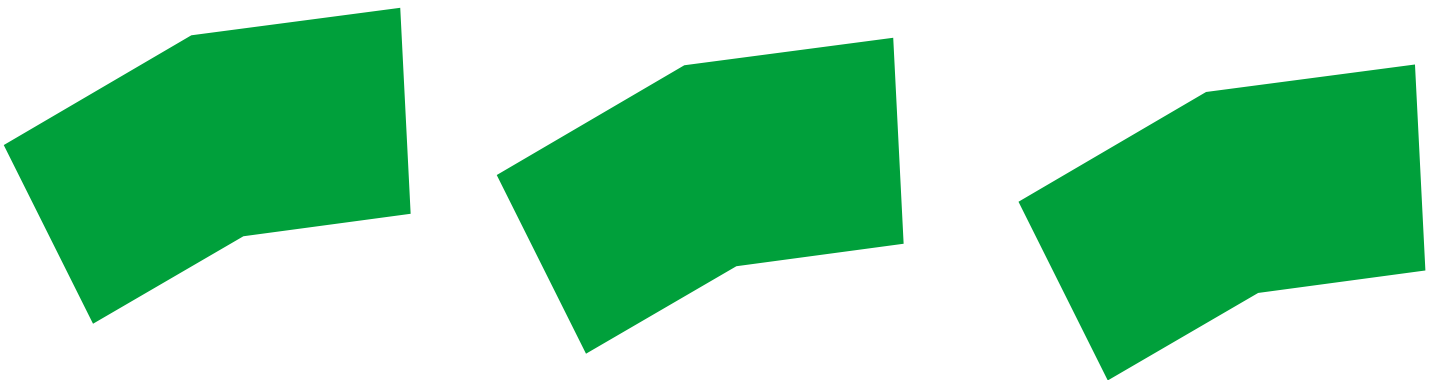
I was keen to include writing from Rodney Harrison, who has made many other essential contributions to critical heritage studies, which helps us understand and interrogate the relationships between cultural heritage and sustainability. In this book, a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives are offered to engage with and potentially transform how we think about heritage in an age of human-induced climate change and environmental devastation. Topics include care, vulnerability, time, extinction, loss and inheritance. Importantly, chapters centre the relations between culture, nature and ecology – including between humans and non-humans.

This book successfully aims to open up collective imaginations, positioning heritage not as a tool or resource, but as one element in dialogue with efforts to understand what it means to be human.

## Summary

As an urban researcher, these readings helped me engage with new debates beyond traditional understandings of sustainable development. They particularly highlight the tensions that underpin much work on cultural value – how to mobilise culture, art and heritage, without undermining them, to achieve wider societal goals.

These essential reads pick up critical issues that scholars and practitioners need to continue to engage with – especially in relation to cultural justice and its intersections with climate, social or economic justice in increasingly unequal times.



## Tell us what you thought

What's the most useful reading you've done in this topic area? What did you learn?

If you'd like to share your reflections and learning with us get in touch at [ccv@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:ccv@leeds.ac.uk) and we'll feed this into a future resource. Or let us know if you'd like to submit a case study or contribute to a podcast or webinar on this theme.

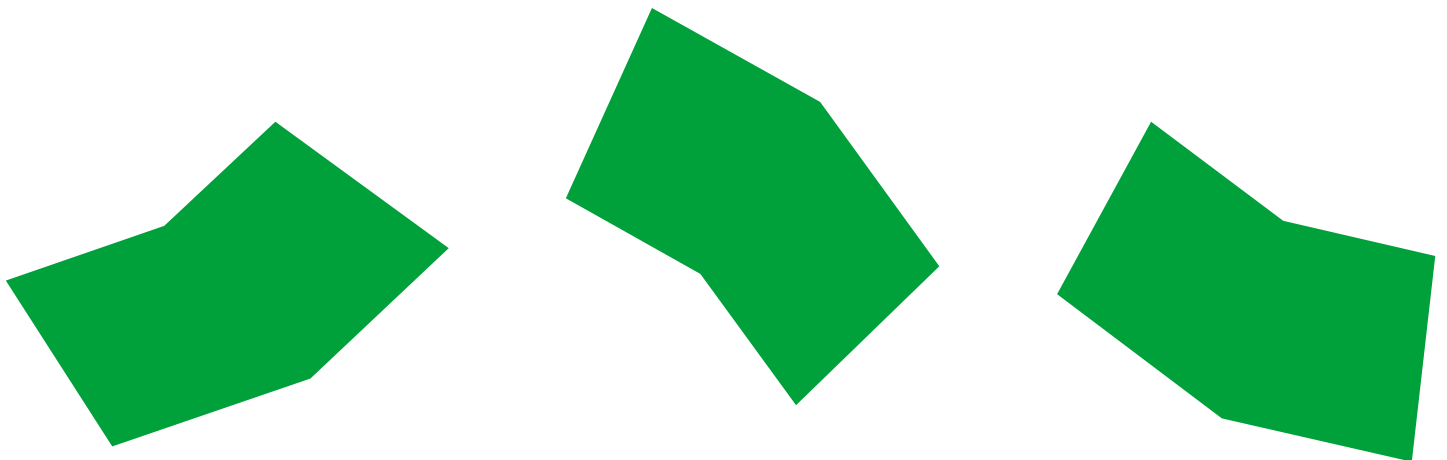
## About the author

Beth Perry is Director of the Urban Institute and Professor of Urban Knowledge Governance at the University of Sheffield. Her research focuses on the theory and practice of co-production in urban governance and research, with a focus on addressing urban epistemic inequalities. This has included work on [cultural heritage and the just city](#).

She publishes widely on these topics in monographs, journals and the popular press, and produces creative output for different audiences. Recent publications include [Co-production as epistemic praxis](#), [Is co-production a good concept?](#) and [Co-producing city-regional intelligence](#). She has also recently published the 5th edition of [Social Research: Issues, methods and process](#) with Open University Press.



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