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HAS CLIMATE CHANGE TRANSFORMED CULTURAL POLICY? A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines how climate change has reshaped state cultural policies, analysing contemporary approaches and their environmental focus. While it recognises the increasing integration of sustainability goals into cultural agendas, it also highlights significant gaps in policy evaluation, equity and long-term impact assessment. Emphasising the need for both instrumental and transformative measures of effectiveness, the study explores the societal and cultural implications of environmentally informed policies. It discusses emerging trends such as cross-sectoral collaboration and cultural justice alongside critical shortcomings. The paper concludes by outlining future research and policy directions, advocating inclusive, reflexive and ecologically grounded cultural governance.

KEYWORDS: Climate change, cultural policy, policy effectiveness, sustainability, transformative change.

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Introduction

The climate crisis has emerged as one of the defining political and cultural challenges of the 21st century. As the environmental emergency deepens, its implications reach far beyond ecological degradation, affecting governance, economic systems, and the cultural foundations of contemporary societies. Within this context, the role of cultural policy – traditionally regarded as an apolitical domain focused on heritage and identity – is undergoing significant transformation (Durrer et al., 2018).

Governments are increasingly required to re-evaluate the frameworks, priorities, and instruments of cultural governance in light of the ecological transition. This paper explores whether, and to what extent, climate change has influenced state cultural policies, drawing on insights from political science and cultural policy studies to critically assess both the progress made and the challenges that persist.

Historically, state cultural policy has been shaped by centralised and often bureaucratic structures, primarily concerned with preserving national heritage, promoting artistic excellence, and fostering shared identities. Rooted in the welfare state traditions of post-war Europe and replicated in various global contexts, this model emphasised institutional support (such as museums, archives, and theatres) and elite cultural production. Cultural policy thus served as an instrument of nation-building, legitimacy, and soft power (Vargas, 2025; Bell & Oakley, 2015; Miller & Yúdice, 2002).

From a political science perspective, this reflects a top-down model of governance, marked by hierarchical decision-making, sectoral silos, and limited public engagement. Environmental concerns were largely absent from such frameworks, typically falling under the remit of environmental or scientific ministries. However, as climate change has evolved into a systemic issue requiring coordinated, cross-sectoral responses, the limitations of these siloed cultural policy models have become increasingly evident (Brechin & Lee, 2025; Martinez, 2021; Sokka et al, 2021; Thompson et al., 2006).

Over the past two decades, a gradual yet notable shift has occurred. Cultural policy is no longer confined to symbolic representation or institutional maintenance; it is now expected to engage with complex societal issues such as social cohesion, urban resilience, and ecological sustainability. This shift has led to a reconsideration of policy aims and mechanisms, giving rise to more decentralised, participatory, and interdisciplinary approaches – characteristics of what political scientists term “networked” or “adaptive”

governance (Valentine, 2018; Firmin, 2017; Young, 2008). Nonetheless, the extent to which sustainability has been meaningfully integrated into cultural policy remains uneven, revealing gaps in evaluation, coherence, and inclusivity (Saez, 2021; Rosenstein, 2018; Yúdice, 2003).

The intersection of culture (Vargas, 2024; Eagleton, 2018; Cuche, 2004; Bennett, 1998), climate, and sustainability is conceptually rich and politically contested. From a cultural policy studies perspective, culture encompasses not only heritage and the creative industries, but also the meanings, values, and practices through which societies understand and respond to change (O'Connor, 2024; Susca, 2021; Auclair et al., 2017). Climate change, similarly, is not only a scientific or technical problem; it is fundamentally cultural and political, engaging questions of justice (Trott, 2025), social vulnerability (Otto et al., 2017), identity, memory, and imagination (Milkoreit, 2017).

In response to the climate emergency, some governments have started embedding environmental criteria into cultural funding programmes, institutional mandates, and programme guidelines. These developments indicate a growing recognition of culture's potential to promote ecological awareness, support behavioural change, and contribute to sustainable futures (Ministère de la Culture, 2024; Intercommunalités de France, 2024; British Council, 2021). However, political science research highlights the critical importance of policy evaluation and institutional learning in complex problem-solving. In cultural policy, mechanisms for assessing environmental and societal impact remain underdeveloped, limiting policy effectiveness and accountability (March & Olsen, 2008).

Moreover, the proliferation of discourses such as "green culture" or "sustainable creativity" in policy rhetoric often lacks critical engagement with issues of power, inequality, and cultural diversity. Without attention to these dimensions, cultural policy risks adopting exclusionary or technocratic models of sustainability. This is particularly problematic in postcolonial and Indigenous contexts, where cultural expression is deeply intertwined with histories of ecological dispossession and resistance. A more reflexive and robust approach is therefore necessary – one that views sustainability as simultaneously environmental, social, cultural, and epistemic (John, 2025; Caniglia et al., 2021; Caradonna, 2018).

The current period may be understood as a "cultural turn" in climate governance – a growing recognition that regulatory and technological solutions are insufficient in isolation. Political science emphasises the normative and ideational underpinnings of

public policy. Other areas of knowledge do too. Likewise, cultural policy scholars highlight the transformative capacity of the cultural sphere to reshape narratives, challenge dominant paradigms, and foster the imagination required for long-term societal change (Krauss, 2020; Veland, 2018).

This cultural turn entails more than thematic shifts (e.g., supporting climate-oriented art or sustainable design); it also involves structural innovations: inter-ministerial collaboration, cross-sector partnerships, and the mobilisation of cultural institutions as civic platforms. However, effective policy alignment with climate goals (Wiegant et al., 2024; Wiktor-Mach, 2018) demands more than strategic coordination. It requires institutional innovation, policy coherence, investment in capacity-building, and participatory mechanisms that enable artists, communities, and cultural actors to co-create policy and shape sustainable futures (UNESCO, 2022, 2021, 2016).

This paper argues that, although climate change has begun to influence cultural policy, this transformation is still only partial and inconsistent. From a political science perspective, cultural governance is entering a new phase characterised by complexity, interdependence and a shift in values. From the perspective of cultural policy studies, integrating sustainability into cultural agendas has the potential to drive innovation, but it also carries risks of instrumentalization and exclusion if not approached holistically. The following sections will examine contemporary policy developments, assess their effectiveness and explore their broader cultural implications. The aim is to identify emerging trends, persistent gaps and possible directions for future research and practice.

1. Cultural Policy Frameworks: From Centralized Heritage to Sustainable Governance

The evolution of cultural policy over the past century can be divided into three broad generational paradigms: The first generation is heritage- and state-focused, the second generation is democratising and participatory, and the third generation is governance-oriented and sustainability-driven. These paradigms reflect shifts in political ideology, institutional frameworks and societal priorities, tracing an arc from elite-oriented heritage custodianship to dynamic, integrated and socially responsive cultural governance (Vargas, 2022; Poirrier, 2010; Urfalino, 2004; Dubois, 1999).

1.1. First Generation Cultural Policy: Heritage in the Service of Nation-Building

The emergence of the first cultural policies coincided with the rise of the modern nation state in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Based on nationalist ideologies and the need for state building, these policies aimed to strengthen a shared identity by preserving and promoting “high culture”. Governments established institutions such as national museums, archives and heritage bodies to foster a shared historical consciousness and reinforce narratives of cultural continuity and civilisational legitimacy (Bennett, 1995).

First generation cultural policies operated in a centralised, custodial manner. National ministries of culture, monuments commissions and elite cultural institutions prioritised the conservation of tangible heritage – monuments, archaeological sites and classical art forms – under state-directed frameworks (Harrison, 2013; Choay, 2007; Smith, 2006). The public was seen as passive recipients of officially sanctioned culture, with little opportunity for participation or community-driven initiatives.

From a political science perspective, critical theorists have problematised the ideological function of these policies. Bourdieu's (1979) theory of cultural capital illustrates how cultural policy mechanisms often serve to reproduce social hierarchies by favouring elite tastes. Similarly, Bennett (1995) argues that such institutions were pedagogical tools of governmentality, producing culturally literate, compliant citizens according to dominant norms.

Despite their foundational role, these policies marginalised intangible heritage, plural cultural expressions and bottom-up forms of participation. Their legacy persists in contemporary heritage regimes, where hierarchical, preservationist logics continue to shape institutional practice, necessitating a critical reappraisal in light of more inclusive, sustainability-oriented policy paradigms (Vargas, 2025).

1.2. Second Generation Cultural Policy: Democratization, Access, and Cultural Equity

Emerging in the post-Second World War era, particularly from the 1960s onwards, second-generation cultural policy signalled a shift towards democratisation and cultural equity. Influenced by the ideals of the welfare state and aspirations for social equality, this new approach aimed to make cultural life more accessible and participatory for a wider range of people. Cultural democratisation became a key goal, emphasising not only access

to culture, but also active involvement in cultural production (Belfiore et al. 2023; Quinn at al., 2020; Gross & Wilson, 2018).

This phase of policy development introduced significant institutional changes. Governments began to support grassroots artistic initiatives, regional cultural centres, public broadcasting and arts education in schools. Minority cultures, community-based arts, local heritage and other non-dominant forms of expression were increasingly recognised as worthy of public support and legitimacy. These measures aimed to decentralise cultural authority and reflect the diversity of national identities and experiences.

From a political science standpoint, second-generation cultural policy reflected an evolving understanding of the relationship between citizens and the state. Policymakers viewed culture as a means of promoting civic inclusion and empowerment. However, critics argued that these well-intentioned programmes often reproduced existing power structures. Although access to the arts increased, dominant cultural forms – particularly the traditional "high arts" – continued to receive disproportionate attention and funding. As scholars such as Bourdieu and Bennett have pointed out, many initiatives labelled as democratising have actually reinforced elitist norms under a veneer of inclusivity (Benhabib, 1996).

Belfiore and Bennett (2008) further critique this period, noting that state-led democratisation strategies often failed to address deeper social inequalities. Marginalised communities remained underrepresented, and policy frameworks tended to overlook emergent and experimental cultural practices in favour of established traditions.

Despite these limitations, the impact of second-generation cultural policy was significant. It broadened the definition of culture to encompass a variety of voices and experiences, redefining culture as a social good rather than merely an aesthetic pursuit. This era laid the groundwork for more inclusive and equitable cultural strategies in the future.

1.3. Third Generation Cultural Policy: Governance, Diversity, and Sustainability

Since the late 20th century, cultural policy has entered a new phase, often referred to as the third generation, which has been driven by globalisation, digital innovation, identity politics and concerns about sustainability. This era marks a significant ideological shift away from traditional, state-centred cultural delivery towards more dynamic, multi-

stakeholder and networked models of governance (Klijn et al., 2025; Rentscheler et al., 2025). This “third wave” of cultural policy is issue-driven and collaborative, aligning culture with broader socio-political and economic agendas.

Key features of this phase include a strong focus on the creative economy, where cultural industries, intellectual property, and creative entrepreneurship are seen as central to economic development (Essig, 2025; Näsholm & Eriksson, 2025; Noonan, 2025; Oliveira, 2024). Culture is no longer confined to the arts sector, but is integrated across policy fields such as urban planning, health, education, tourism and climate adaptation, demonstrating its cross-sectoral potential (García, 2004; Hawkes, 2001).

The rise of digital cultures also plays a major role. New cultural policies increasingly address digital media practices, algorithmic influence and participatory online platforms, recognising the transformative impact of technology on how culture is produced, shared and experienced (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2017; Jenkins, 2006).

Third Generation policies are shaped by polycentric governance. Rather than relying solely on state institutions, cultural initiatives are produced in collaboration with municipal authorities, private entities, non-profit organisations and local communities (Jordan & Lenschow, 2010; Ostrom, 1990). This makes governance less about direct control and more about enabling cultural ecosystems to flourish through coordination and shared responsibility.

Theories of network governance and collaborative public administration, among other political science perspectives, help to explain these shifts. Scholars such as O’Toole and Meier (2015) and Innes and Booher (2003) emphasise the importance of partnerships and outcome-based evaluations that prioritise social cohesion, resilience and long-term sustainability.

Crucially, third-generation cultural policy is aligned with climate and sustainability goals. Cultural heritage is reframed as a means of fostering community resilience and facilitating the acquisition of adaptive knowledge in the face of environmental challenges (Dryzek, 2021; Bulkeley & Betsill, 2013). Culture is now embedded within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and is supported by institutions such as UNESCO (2015).

Equity and inclusion remain central yet contested themes. There is a strong push for co-governance models that incorporate indigenous knowledge and local capacity

(Figueira & Fullman, 2025; Whyte, 2017). However, tensions persist regarding power imbalances, epistemic justice and the fair distribution of cultural resources within increasingly complex policy networks (Cummings et al., 2023; Samaržija & Cerovac, 2021; Fricker, 2007).

	First Generation Heritage and Nation-Building	**Second Generation** Democratization and Access	**Third Generation** Governance and Sustainability
Timeframe	Late 19th century – mid-20th century	1960s – 1990s	2000s – present
Core Focus	Preservation of national heritage and high culture	Cultural access, participation, and equity	Integration of culture into sustainability, diversity, and governance agendas
Key Drivers	Nationalism, state formation, identity building	Welfare state, democratization, cultural rights	Globalization, digital transition, SDGs, climate change
Cultural Assets Prioritized	Tangible heritage (monuments, museums, classical arts)	Intangible and local culture (folk/popular art, community media)	Hybrid forms (digital, ecological, creative industries)
Policy Mode	Centralized, custodial	Decentralized, participatory	Networked, multi-level governance
Political Science Lens	Cultural reproduction; top-down nation--building	Participatory democracy; welfare pluralism	Governance theory; policy integration
Institutional Instruments	National museums, heritage councils	Regional cultural programs, public broadcasting	Cultural governance networks, trans--sectoral plans, creative hubs
Role of Citizens	Cultural consumers; passive recipients of heritage	Cultural participants; users and creators	Co-producers and co-governors of culture; agents of resilience
Main Critiques	Elitism, exclusion, top-down narratives	Tokenism, uneven participation, cultural paternalism	Fragmentation, inequality in access to governance and resources
Contemporary Relevance	Heritage conservation, nationalism	Social cohesion, cultural inclusion	Sustainability, resilience, digital transformation, climate justice

TABLE 1. Generations of Cultural Policy
[Carlos Vargas, 2025.]

Cultural policy has evolved through three broad generational paradigms: heritage conservation, cultural democratisation and governance for sustainability. These paradigms do not occur sequentially; rather, they coexist and interact within contemporary policy frameworks. This overlap reflects continuity with the past as well as transformation in response to emerging social, political and environmental challenges.

The first generation of cultural policy, which focused on safeguarding national heritage, continues to influence conservation agendas today. However, alongside this custodial focus, second and third generation aims have emerged, such as expanding cultural access and participation, and digital innovation, sustainability, and inclusive governance. These evolving goals highlight the increasing complexity and multidimensional nature of the field.

This complexity is often characterised as policy layering, whereby cultural policy operates across multiple interdependent logics, such as heritage preservation, social inclusion, creative innovation, and ecological resilience. These overlapping aims require institutions that can adapt and coordinate diverse objectives rather than implement one-size-fits-all solutions. The need for such adaptive institutional architectures reflects a broader transformation in how culture is governed and understood.

The political science literature provides valuable insights into these developments. For example, scholars such as Meadowcroft (2009) and O'Toole and Meier (2015) have explained that policy evolution is often driven by changes in problem definition, actor networks and accountability mechanisms. In the cultural realm, this manifests as a shift from hierarchical models of policy implementation to a more networked and collaborative approach to governance. State agencies are increasingly sharing responsibility with local governments, civil society organisations, the private sector and communities, thereby creating a polycentric governance model (Maxwell, 2023).

However, this transformation also presents new challenges. Cultural policy today must navigate the tensions between economic objectives, such as the promotion of the creative industries, and social imperatives, such as cultural equity and inclusion. Furthermore, environmental concerns, particularly the integration of culture into sustainability and climate resilience efforts, further complicate the policy agenda. As scholars such as Belfiore and Bennett (2008) and Young (2000) have warned, without careful consideration, these competing priorities can result in trade-offs that marginalise

certain groups or values. Questions of democratic legitimacy, equitable participation and power imbalances remain pressing concerns within this policy landscape.

Understanding the interplay between these three paradigms provides scholars and practitioners with a valuable diagnostic tool. Recognising which policy logics – custodial, participatory, creative or ecological – are dominant in a given context enables the development of more coherent, context-sensitive strategies. Today, effective cultural policy requires balancing heritage preservation with active support for diversity, innovation and sustainability. This must be guided by flexible governance frameworks that can respond to the demands of an increasingly interconnected and dynamic world.

2. Culture, Climate, and Sustainability: Rethinking Policy Intersections

National and subnational cultural policies are at a pivotal juncture where the need to protect cultural heritage meets the growing demands of climate change mitigation and adaptation. This convergence reflects a broader shift in public policy, moving from sector-specific, siloed frameworks to an integrative, cross-sectoral approach to governance. This transformation has been well documented in political science as the rise of "joined-up" or networked governance (Jordan & Lenschow, 2010; Rhodes, 1997).

In the context of the climate crisis, such integration is urgent, not just desirable: the physical and intangible dimensions of cultural heritage are under threat from rising sea levels, heatwaves, extreme weather and biodiversity loss.

From a cultural policy perspective, these risks necessitate a rethink of policy objectives. Traditionally focused on preserving cultural assets and supporting the arts, cultural policy must now evolve towards resilience-building and adaptive governance. This shift aligns with broader political discourses that frame climate adaptation as a cultural and institutional transformation, not just infrastructural or technical work (Dryzek, 2021; Meadowcroft, 2009). In this model, heritage becomes a dynamic resource – simultaneously a vulnerable asset and a potential source of climate-relevant knowledge.

2.1. Cultural Heritage as Adaptive Capacity

Cultural heritage encompasses both tangible elements, such as monuments, buildings and landscapes, and intangible aspects, such as oral traditions, ritual practices and Indigenous knowledge systems. Scholars are increasingly recognising that these

forms of heritage contain embedded adaptive capacities, such as long-standing environmental stewardship practices, seasonal knowledge and social resilience strategies (Vargas, 2024a; Smith, 2006). The challenge for policymakers is to create institutional mechanisms that protect and utilise this knowledge for contemporary climate action.

Indigenous knowledge systems, for example, have traditionally been marginalised within national policy frameworks and are often dismissed as "traditional" or non-scientific. However, critiques of epistemic injustice and environmental governance in political science argue that excluding such knowledge reproduces power asymmetries and undermines policy effectiveness (Whyte, 2017). Recognising Indigenous and local communities as knowledge holders, rather than just stakeholders, means incorporating their perspectives into governance structures, from national adaptation plans to heritage impact assessments. This approach aligns with Elinor Ostrom's (1990) findings on the effectiveness of polycentric governance in managing common-pool resources through localised, participatory mechanisms.

Furthermore, the concept of cultural resilience is gaining traction as a policy objective. Cultural resilience refers to the ability of communities to draw on cultural practices, narratives and identities to withstand and adapt to external shocks (Forgeard, 2024; Bui et al., 2020; Holtorf, 2018).

Cultural policies engaging with climate change should support the physical conservation of heritage sites and the continuation of living cultural traditions, which may be disrupted by ecological change or forced displacement. This requires a dual focus on the material and immaterial dimensions of heritage, supported by interdisciplinary collaboration between cultural managers, environmental scientists, planners, and local actors.

2.2. Institutional Integration and Policy Innovation

Integrating cultural heritage into climate governance also requires institutional innovation. Ministries of culture, which have traditionally had limited involvement in climate policy or urban planning, must now collaborate across sectors. Jordan and Lenschow (2010) describe this process as "environmental policy integration", whereby environmental considerations are embedded in all areas of public policy. A similar concept, "cultural policy integration", can be proposed, in which culture becomes a transversal axis for sustainability and adaptation.

UNESCO and ICOMOS have called for heritage to be incorporated into national climate strategies and disaster risk reduction plans, and several countries are beginning to pilot such models. Japan's Satoyama Initiative[4] (Lahoti et al., 2025) and New Zealand's Māori cultural governance[5] structures (Pudjono et al., 2024), for example, illustrate the successful blending of heritage, environmental stewardship, and adaptive governance. These cases demonstrate how integrated approaches can reinforce both ecological sustainability and cultural continuity (Pekkarinen, 2025; Soini & Birkeland, 2014; Pretty, 2011).

At the subnational level, cities are emerging as key laboratories for this policy innovation. As García (2004) and Evans and Shaw (2004) have argued, urban cultural policies have long served as tools for regeneration and social inclusion. Today, they are increasingly being reframed as instruments of climate resilience. In cities such as Rotterdam, Melbourne, and Barcelona, cultural policies now incorporate climate-sensitive programming, green cultural infrastructure, and heritage climate vulnerability mapping (Ruiz-Mallén et al., 2022; Aktas, 2021; Metaxas & Psarropoulou, 2021). These efforts signal a growing recognition that culture must be integrated into the urban sustainability agenda (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2013).

2.3. Participatory Governance and Epistemic Justice

The shift towards more integrative and adaptive cultural policies must also be rooted in the principles of participatory governance and epistemic justice. Historically, cultural policy has been criticised for being technocratic and top-down, often failing to meaningfully engage marginalised communities (Bennett, 1995; Belfiore, 2021). Political theorists such as Young (2000) and Dryzek (2021) advocate a "deliberative turn" in governance, whereby diverse voices, particularly those that have been historically excluded, are incorporated into the policy process through structured and meaningful engagement.

In the context of climate-cultural policy, this involves engaging with Indigenous peoples, displaced communities and young people as co-creators of policy, not just as

[4] The International Partnership for the Satoyama Initiative. https://satoyamainitiative.org/. Retrieved May 12, 2025.

[5] What is Governance. Ministry of Maori Development, New Zeland. https://www.tpk.govt.nz/en/nga-putea-me-nga-ratonga/governance/effective-governance/what-is-governance. Retrieved May 18, 2025.

consultees. Participatory mapping of vulnerable heritage, community-led resilience planning and heritage education initiatives all contribute to more democratic, context-sensitive policy outcomes. Furthermore, these practices foster trust and legitimacy, which are vital assets in an era where climate denialism and political fragmentation continue to impede collective action (Pulles, 2025; Fischer, 2020; Meadowcroft, 2009).

2.4. Education, Public Narratives, and Societal Transformation

Another critical dimension is the role of education and public engagement. As Hawkes (2001) argued in The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability, culture must be central to education and civic discourse if we are to meaningfully achieve sustainability. Incorporating heritage into climate education, whether through curricula, museum exhibitions or digital storytelling, can shift public narratives from static preservation to dynamic adaptation.

These cultural narratives can inspire action, foster empathy and give communities a sense of continuity and agency in the face of rapid change. From a political science perspective, they also help to build what Innes and Booher (2003) refer to as "collaborative capacity" – the social infrastructure necessary for effective and inclusive governance.

Furthermore, initiatives that link cultural heritage with climate activism, such as eco-museums, oral history projects on climate memory or traditional ecological restoration programmes, can galvanise local engagement while contributing to broader sustainability goals (Rollo, 2025; Silva et al., 2025).

2.5. Global Frameworks and Policy Alignment

Finally, aligning cultural policy with global frameworks such as the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is both a normative imperative and a strategic opportunity. While culture is not explicitly mentioned in the SDGs, it intersects with many of them, particularly SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 4 (Quality Education). The global cultural policy community has increasingly advocated recognising culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development alongside economic, social and environmental concerns (Sánchez-Naudín & Sanchez-Asin, 2025; Mickov, 2025).

Aligning national and local cultural policies with these goals strengthens their legitimacy, opens access to funding and creates shared metrics for monitoring progress.

This also enables states to demonstrate the distinctive contributions of culture to resilience, cohesion and innovation during ecological crises (Valera & Toccafondi, 2025).

	Cultural Policy Perspective	Climate Change Perspective	Sustainable Development Perspective
Policy Integration	Shift from siloed preservation to cross--sectoral planning	Need to embed heritage in adaptation, mitigation, and disaster risk reduction strategies	Supports SDG 11 (sustainable cities), SDG 13 (climate action)
Knowledge Systems and Adaptation	Recognition of Indigenous and traditional knowledge within policy frameworks	Traditional knowledge informs adaptive practices and ecosystem management	Advances environmental justice, SDG 15 (life on land), and local sustainability
Cultural Resilience	Cultural continuity as a key policy goal; living traditions require support	Climate impacts disrupt socio-cultural systems and practices	Strengthens social cohesion, identity, and post--disaster recovery
Institutional Innovation	Ministries of Culture collaborate with environment, planning, and education sectors	Governance must be polycentric and participatory for effectiveness	Enables integrated governance for sustainable transitions
Public Engagement and Education	Education reform, cultural literacy, and public narratives of heritage and climate	Builds awareness of vulnerability and resilience, fosters collective memory	SDG 4 (education), cultural engagement as foundation for climate literacy
Equity and Participation	Inclusion of marginalized voices (Indigenous, youth, displaced) in cultural policy making	Climate justice demands fair participation and equitable policy outcomes	Promotes participatory governance and epistemic justice
Global Policy Alignment	Alignment with SDGs and UNESCO frameworks for culture in sustainable development	Framing heritage within international climate and development agendas	Positions culture as a fourth pillar of sustainability

TABLE 2. Where Cultural Policy Meets Climate and Sustainable Development [Carlos Vargas, 2025.]

The interplay between culture, climate and sustainability highlights the strengths and weaknesses of current cultural policies. While cultural sectors are increasingly addressing environmental issues, policy responses often remain fragmented, failing to adequately consider matters of power, equity and long-term impact. Meaningful climate action through culture requires more than just symbolic initiatives; structural and normative changes to the design and implementation of policies are also necessary. This suggests the need for a broader cultural shift in climate governance, in which cultural policy actively contributes to sustainability objectives rather than being merely reactive. By fostering imaginative engagement and supporting systemic change, culture can play a vital role in shaping fairer and more resilient futures (Serpa & Sá, 2025). This idea will be explored further in the next chapter.

3. A Cultural Turn: Aligning Policies for Sustainable Futures

In recent years, the accelerating climate crisis has forced governments to reconsider how they conceive and implement public policy. Against this backdrop, cultural policies have undergone significant transformation, becoming more closely aligned with sustainable development and climate resilience agendas. This chapter examines this emerging shift through three interrelated analytical levels: Collaboration and Integration, Urgency and Innovation, and Change and Transition. As we will discuss, these levels help to frame the complex dynamics of policy reform while offering insight into potential areas of convergence and tension (Suprayitno et al., 2024; Scarascia-Mugnozza et al., 2023; Gaziulusoy & Öztekin, 2019).

3.1. Collaboration and Integration

One of the most visible aspects of this cultural shift is the increasing focus on collaboration across sectors and the integration of policies. Historically, cultural policy has tended to operate within a relatively isolated framework, focusing on heritage conservation, arts funding and the promotion of national identity. However, the realisation that culture plays a vital part in shaping the relationship between humans and the environment has led to its incorporation into climate action strategies and sustainable development planning.

This trend is particularly evident in international frameworks such as the UN's Agenda 2030, in which culture is explicitly and implicitly linked to several Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs), notably SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 4 (Quality Education). National and subnational governments are increasingly incorporating cultural heritage considerations into urban resilience planning, disaster risk reduction (DRR) and environmental education campaigns. For instance, cities such as Barcelona (Rius-Ulldemolins & Roig-Badia, 2023) and Cape Town (Robins & Baumgardt, 2024) have developed cultural strategies that explicitly link community arts to climate awareness and sustainability.

This level of integration requires new institutional mechanisms for collaboration across ministries, including culture, the environment, education, and urban planning. It also demands participatory governance models that include indigenous communities, civil society actors and knowledge holders who can contribute alternative epistemologies to policy design. However, while the discourse of collaboration is widely embraced, its implementation often stumbles due to institutional inertia, fragmented budgets, and competing policy priorities (Vaverková et al., 2025).

3.2. Urgency and Innovation

A second driver of the cultural policy shift is the growing sense of urgency surrounding climate change. Extreme weather events, biodiversity loss and rising sea levels have made the need for rapid, innovative policy responses increasingly clear. In this context, cultural policy is being redefined as not only a custodian of the past, but also an agent of innovation, resilience and forward-looking change.

New approaches emphasise the role of culture in envisioning alternative futures and fostering adaptive capacities. For example, traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and local narratives are being incorporated into climate adaptation strategies, particularly in areas susceptible to environmental degradation. Arts-based methods such as climate storytelling, participatory mapping and speculative design are also being used to communicate risks and encourage diverse groups of people to think in transformative ways.

Moreover, the sense of urgency has catalysed experimentation in funding and institutional design. Some states and cities have launched “green culture” funds to support environmentally oriented cultural initiatives, while others have introduced climate impact assessments for cultural infrastructure projects. These innovations suggest a revaluation of culture as a dynamic system capable of driving behavioural change and social learning.

However, the innovation agenda is not without its contradictions. Although creative sectors frequently adopt progressive narratives, they remain embedded within broader systems that can resist change. Additionally, the prioritisation of urgency can sometimes marginalise slow, deliberative or traditional cultural practices that are equally vital for long-term sustainability (Pyykkönen & Beukelaer, 2025).

3.3. Change and Transition

The third analytical level considers broader structural transitions in cultural governance. Beyond individual policies or programmes, many governments are beginning to reassess the fundamental objectives and principles of cultural policy in the Anthropocene era. This involves shifting away from anthropocentric, growth-oriented models of cultural development towards ecocentric and relational paradigms that emphasise interdependence, care and sustainability.

This shift is evident in the language of recent cultural policy documents, which increasingly depict culture as an interconnected living system integral to ecological and social well-being. For instance, the New European Bauhaus initiative champions cultural and aesthetic innovation to support environmental transition (Siatitsa, 2025; Hu et al., 2023; Rosado-García et al., 2021), and the Canadian Council for the Arts has started to incorporate climate metrics into its programs.[6]

Such transitions often involve difficult negotiations. Shifting from preservation to adaptation challenges long-standing institutional identities and professional practices. They also require new competencies in systems thinking, environmental ethics, and policy evaluation. However, adopting a transition lens can open up possibilities for structural realignment, where culture is not merely an additional consideration in sustainability, but rather a core dimension in how we envision and govern the future.

It is at this level that the possibility for long-term convergence emerges most clearly. By aligning cultural values, governance structures and sustainability goals, states can develop more coherent and inclusive policy ecosystems. However, the scale of this transformation should not be underestimated. Without political commitment, institutional

[6] Canada Council for the Arts. https://canadacouncil.ca/research/research-library/2022/09/research-in-residence-arts-civic-impact/living-climate-impact-video. Retrieved May 21, 2025.

reform and public engagement, transitions may remain aspirational rather than operational (Kagan, 2022; Kennedy et al, 2020).

Analytical Level	Core Focus	Opportunities	Challenges	Examples
Collaboration and Integration	Cross-sectoral governance and policy alignment	Holistic policy approaches Inter-ministerial coordination	Institutional silos Budgetary fragmentation Uneven participation	SDG-linked cultural planning (e.g., SDG 11, 13) City-level cultural strategies (e.g., Barcelona, Cape Town)
Urgency and Innovation	Responsive, experimental, and adaptive cultural policy frameworks	Climate storytelling & arts-based engagement TEK inclusion New funding models	Short-termism Marginalization of slow/ vernacular practices Resistance to change	Green culture funds Climate-sensitive cultural impact assessments
Change and Transition	Structural reorientation toward sustainability and ecocentric governance models	Shift to relational cultural paradigms Long-term policy vision Institutional reform	Value conflicts Capacity gaps Path dependency	New European Bauhaus Climate metrics in national arts councils (e.g., Canada Council for the Arts)

TABLE 3. Cultural Policy Responses to Climate and Sustainability [Carlos Vargas, 2025.]

These three levels – collaboration and integration, urgency and innovation, and change and transition – are analytically distinct yet interdependent. Ideally, they would converge. Indeed, collaborative governance can facilitate innovation, which can then support systemic transition. However, divergence is equally possible. For example, a sense of urgency may lead to technocratic quick fixes that bypass inclusive collaboration or undermine deeper structural change.

Policy fragmentation, uneven capacity across levels of government, and differing cultural values can exacerbate this further. While some urban governments are at the forefront of integrating culture and climate action, for example, national policies may lag behind. Conversely, top-down mandates for sustainability may conflict with local cultural priorities.

Recognising these tensions is crucial. A successful cultural policy shift requires striking a careful balance between rapid innovation and long-term transformation, as well as between institutional integration and respect for cultural diversity. Only by exploring and negotiating these dynamics can cultural policy evolve to address the challenges of the climate crisis and contribute to a sustainable future.

Building on these dynamics, the concept of cultural ecosystem services (CES) provides a compelling lens through which the role of culture in sustainability transitions can be understood and leveraged. CES refers to the non-material benefits people obtain from ecosystems, such as spiritual enrichment, cognitive development, recreation, and aesthetic experiences. Unlike provisioning or regulating services, CES is deeply tied to place, identity, heritage, and collective memory. It offers not only a rationale for preserving ecosystems but also a framework for embedding cultural values into policy and practice.

However, as Gould and Satterfield (2025) argue, the conceptualisation of CES has not been without critique. One major concern is the challenge of translating intangible, context-specific cultural values into policy-relevant metrics. Standard valuation approaches often risk oversimplifying or commodifying cultural relationships with nature, potentially undermining the very values they aim to protect. Furthermore, CES can reinforce dominant narratives, privileging certain groups' relationships with nature over others. This can marginalise Indigenous knowledge systems and local cultural practices that do not align neatly with mainstream frameworks. Gould and Satterfield suggest a way forward by advocating for pluralistic approaches that embrace multiple forms of knowledge and valuation. This includes participatory methods that elevate lived experience and storytelling, allowing communities to define and express what cultural benefits ecosystems provide in their own terms.

This is particularly relevant when considering policy integration and inclusive governance. As Panaro, Delabre, and Marshall (2025) highlight, CES can act as a bridge between environmental objectives and social justice. By recognizing the cultural

dimensions of nature-based solutions, such as the role of community gardens, sacred groves, or traditional agricultural practices, policymakers can design interventions that are both ecologically effective and socially legitimate. The authors emphasise the importance of inclusive CES assessments that engage marginalised groups, whose voices are often excluded from mainstream environmental planning. Such inclusivity not only enhances the relevance and acceptance of sustainability initiatives but also contributes to equity by addressing historical and structural injustices.

Moreover, valuing CES challenges the urgency-innovation dynamic discussed earlier. As Hirons, Comberti, and Dunford (2016) note, integrating CES into environmental management often requires slowing down processes to allow for deliberation, reflection, and dialogue. This contrasts with technocratic or efficiency-driven models that prioritise speed over inclusion. Yet, this deliberative pace can generate more resilient outcomes by fostering deeper community engagement and long-term stewardship. For instance, managing a landscape for its aesthetic, spiritual, and recreational values demands an ongoing relationship with local stakeholders, rather than one-off interventions. In this sense, CES invites a temporal shift – from short-term solutions to sustained cultural transitions.

Linking back to the tensions between institutional levels, CES also provides a means to align top-down and bottom-up sustainability efforts. National frameworks can incorporate cultural dimensions by supporting local initiatives that reflect community identities and values. Conversely, local actors can leverage CES frameworks to articulate the significance of their environmental practices within broader policy discourses. This interplay between scales is essential for negotiating the balance between cultural specificity and systemic change.

Cultural ecosystem services offer a pathway to more holistic, inclusive, and culturally grounded sustainability transitions. They highlight the importance of cultural narratives and attachments in shaping environmental action and provide a counterweight to purely instrumental or technocratic approaches. As climate challenges intensify, acknowledging and integrating CES can help ensure that sustainability is not only ecological and economic but also deeply human and cultural.

Conclusion

The central concern of this paper has been whether climate change has transformed cultural policies. Drawing on a review of contemporary approaches, the answer is clearly affirmative, though nuanced by notable inconsistencies and asymmetries. Climate change has not only shaped the thematic content and strategic orientations of cultural policy but has also prompted a broader reconceptualization of culture's role in addressing planetary crises. Increasingly, culture is recognised not as a peripheral concern but as central to ecological transitions. Yet, as cultural policies evolve, there is a pressing need for systematic evaluation of their effectiveness and a deeper interrogation of their social and cultural consequences.

One of the key findings is the proliferation of climate-oriented cultural initiatives globally, often without the parallel development of adequate evaluative frameworks. While embedding sustainability within cultural funding and programming reflects welcome progress, a lack of mechanisms for assessing long-term and transformative impacts limits their effectiveness. Policies may appear progressive in rhetoric, yet fall short in substance. This raises critical questions about how success is defined in the context of climate-responsive cultural policy. To move forward, evaluations must look beyond short-term, quantifiable outputs and embrace more qualitative and transformative dimensions of change.

To address this, the paper proposes a dual framework for assessing cultural policy effectiveness: instrumental and transformative. Instrumental effectiveness concerns whether policies achieve environmental goals – such as emissions reductions or resource efficiency – within the cultural sector. In contrast, transformative effectiveness relates to deeper cultural shifts: the extent to which initiatives reframe public discourse, influence values, and encourage new understandings of sustainability. This requires cultural institutions to not only respond to environmental targets, but also to engage in ethical reflection, foster collective agency, and enhance social resilience. Such an approach demands interdisciplinary methods and inclusive participation, enabling communities to help define policy goals and outcomes.

As environmental themes gain traction within cultural agendas, their intersection with issues of justice, identity, and knowledge becomes increasingly apparent. Climate impacts are not evenly distributed; they intersect with race, class, geography, and colonial histories. Yet many national cultural policies continue to prioritise Eurocentric

frameworks and institutional forms of culture, which marginalises Indigenous and rural cultural expressions – despite the ecological insights they offer. Without confronting these power imbalances, cultural policy risks reproducing structural inequalities under a green guise. On the other hand, inclusive, place-based and justice-oriented cultural policies can support heritage protection, amplify marginalised voices and encourage a fairer ecological transition.

The policy landscape itself is shifting. Cultural policy is becoming more integrated with other sectors, such as urban planning, health, education, and environmental governance, in a process known as intersectoral collaboration. While this cross-sectoral alignment creates new opportunities, it is often hindered by bureaucratic silos, conflicting institutional priorities and incompatible timescales. Another notable shift is the redefinition of cultural infrastructure. Cultural spaces are no longer viewed solely as physical venues, but as dynamic commons – places for community dialogue, ecological imagination and experimentation with sustainable living. This expanded view transforms cultural policy from a funding mechanism into a driver of social innovation and transition.

Meanwhile, the growth of the creative green economy presents new opportunities but also risks. Cultural and creative industries are increasingly recognised as contributors to sustainable development through their green products and services. However, if cultural work becomes too closely linked to economic agendas, sustainability could become commodified and non-commercial artistic practices could be marginalised. Therefore, policymakers must avoid instrumentalising culture, preserving its autonomy and critical capacities while encouraging innovation.

Persistent research gaps hinder policy advancement. There is limited empirical data on long-term outcomes, particularly from the Global South and grassroots initiatives. Emerging areas – such as digital cultural sustainability, intergenerational engagement, and climate's effect on cultural memory – require further exploration. Future research should embrace interdisciplinary methods, comparative approaches and equity-driven perspectives. Ultimately, cultural policy must contribute meaningfully to a just ecological transition – rooted in local realities, driven by inclusive values, and supported by systemic reform.

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