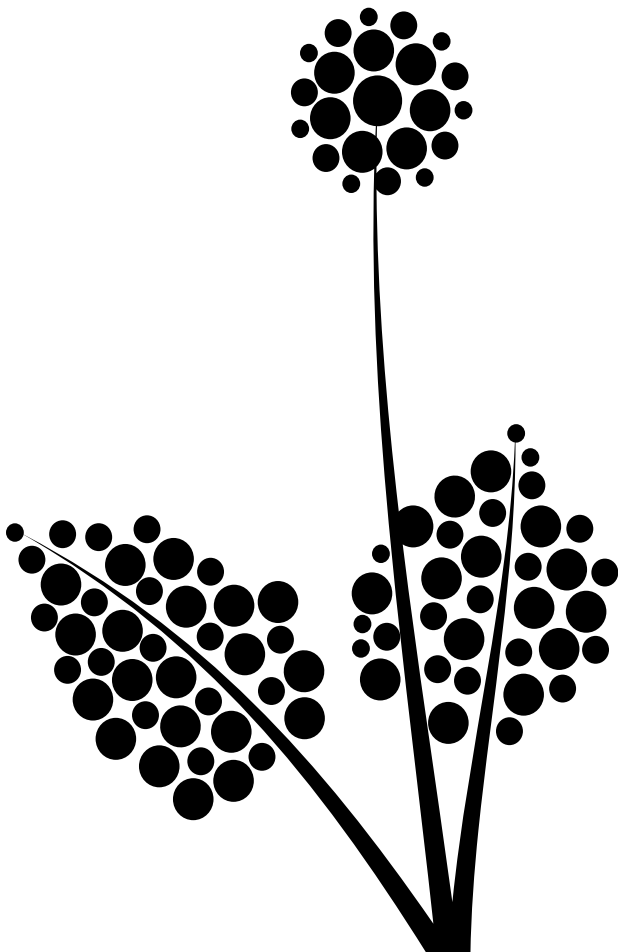


Heritage Futures Workshop Visby, Sweden, 28 April 2026

A documentation for OWHC.

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Executive summary

The Heritage Futures Workshop held in Visby (28 April 2026) brought together heritage professionals from several countries to explore how World Heritage can contribute to futures thinking and, in particular, to peacebuilding under conditions of global uncertainty. Using a “futures literacy” approach, participants reflected on societal challenges toward 2050, including climate change, inequality, migration, AI, and social polarization. Participants identified World Heritage as a key resource for addressing these challenges by fostering dialogue, inclusion, and shared identity across communities and borders. It was seen as a platform for resilience-building through education, intergenerational exchange, and the transmission of knowledge and values. Many also emphasized its role in supporting more sustainable and equitable governance, as well as in strengthening critical thinking and countering misinformation.

A central outcome of the workshop was the strong emphasis on peacebuilding as a practical, everyday task. Participants highlighted the importance of creating spaces for dialogue, strengthening human rights education, improving communication and storytelling, and engaging communities more actively in heritage processes. They also pointed to the need for inclusive urban policies, cross-border cooperation, and more participatory governance of heritage sites. Overall, the workshop concluded that World Heritage should be understood not only as conservation of the past, but as an active tool for shaping more peaceful, inclusive, and resilient futures through concrete, locally grounded action.

Keywords:

Peacebuilding; World Heritage; Futures thinking; Dialogue; Social cohesion

Introduction

During the Workshop of the Organization of World Heritage Cities (OWHC) and its Regional Secretariate for Northwest Europe and North America, held in Visby, Sweden, 27-29 April 2026, we were asked to run a follow-up Heritage Futures Workshop. An earlier workshop had been held during a similar event in Córdoba, Spain, on 24 September 2024.

The **aim of the workshop** was to explore the challenges of advancing active peacebuilding in the spirit of UNESCO in a time of ongoing global uncertainty. The focus on World Heritage and Peace had been decided in agreement with the OWHC and the local organizers. Through discussion and exchange, it was to provide inspiration and new perspectives for site managers and heritage professionals from OWHC member cities, with particular attention to the challenges currently faced by the host city, Visby, on Gotland, Sweden.

The workshop was organised and led by Professor Cornelius Holtorf, Chairholder at the UNESCO Chair on Heritage Futures at Linnaeus University. The workshop took place between 9.30 and 16.00 comprising both plenary presentations and discussions as well as group work. For the group work, support was given by Monika Goettler and Louise Hoffman Borgö.

During the day, there were up to 34 participants from Belgium, Canada, Croatia, Germany, Korea (Rep.), Lithuania, Luxembourg, and Sweden.

Context

The **UNESCO Chair on Heritage Futures** at Linnaeus University, Kalmar, Sweden was established in 2017. As a UNESCO Chair, its role is that of a think tank and bridge-building between the academic world, civil society, local communities, research, and policy-making. Its aim is to build global capacity for futures thinking among heritage professionals.¹

There is considerable **momentum for futures thinking** in the global cultural and cultural heritage sectors, including the following:

- There is an increasing interest in what it means for cultural heritage to provide benefits for future generations, as e.g. in ICCROM's Heritage Foresight initiative launched in 2021.

¹ For more information see <https://www.lnu.se/en/unescochair>.

- The UN committed in 2024 to a Pact for the Future with ambitious goals in a wide arrange of topics, including culture and cultural heritage. The appointment of a UN Special Envoy for Future Generations has been proposed.
- Since the end of 2024, the EU Commission has a Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness (Glenn Micallef).
- The UN Agenda 2030 will soon have to be replaced with a new “Post-2030 Agenda”, and there are ongoing global preparations within UNESCO contexts (and elsewhere) for a desired stand-alone culture goal.

During the workshop, we were drawing on “**futures literacy**”, a concept introduced and advocated by UNESCO. Enhancing the capability of futures literacy means for workshop participants to

1. become aware of existing assumptions about the future,
2. learn to imagine alternative futures,
3. use the future for reframing management strategies and goals.

Only a small number of participants in Visby had participated in the first workshop in Córdoba. This follow-up workshop helped participants to acquire basic futures literacy but also went beyond the first workshop by focussing on a specific topic (World Heritage and Peace) and on practical take-aways.

The topic of **peace** is particularly relevant for **UNESCO and World Heritage**. The Preamble of the 1945 UNESCO Constitution famously claims that *since wars begin in the minds of humans, it is in the minds of humans that the defences of peace must be constructed*. Its Article 1 states that “The purpose of the Organization is to contribute to peace and security”.

Since the 1990s, UNESCO has been implementing an ambition Culture of Peace Programme. In 2015, it adopted the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, featuring Goal 16 about promoting peaceful and inclusive societies.

In 2019, Sweden adopted a national World Heritage Strategy with the vision: “World Heritage sites point the way toward a sustainable and peaceful world”.

Peacebuilding is of particular relevance for **Sweden and Gotland** right now. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Sweden has been joining NATO and is **preparing for a military conflict** with Russia. These preparations also mean enhancing civil defence including in the cultural sector. The island of Gotland in the middle of the Baltic Sea is widely seen to hold strategic significance, for example in case of any future military conflict between Russia and the Baltic countries.

The 2023-2026 Policy for Civil Preparedness of the Region Gotland includes among its goals the preparation, prevention, resilience to, and management of societal disruptions in case of war. Meit Fohlin, Chair of the Regional Executive Board for the Region Gotland, stated during the workshop that cultural heritage on Gotland is “in our heart” and “in our soul”.

The World Heritage property **Hanseatic Town of Visby** and the lives of its inhabitants were subjected to warfare, invasions and piracy during the 13th to 16th centuries. Still today, the city features impressive defensive walls.

Futures

During the workshop, we used Wooclap to elicit relevant viewpoints from the participants. At the start of the workshop, 77% expressed that they were “a bit” (47%) or “very much” (30%) hopeful about the future, with 13% expressing their degree of hopefulness as “not so much” and 10% undecided.

Participants associated the following emotions with the word “future”:



For the workshop, we chose **the year 2050** as a reference point. This year lies about one generation in the future (24 years). That time period is both longer than we normally plan for and shorter for it to be deemed as completely speculative. The year 2050 lies as long ahead of us as the year 2002 lies behind us – many of us have concrete memories of that year. In 2050, a child of 10 will be 34, an adult of 40 will be 64, a senior of 70 will be 94.

When presented with a list of **possible challenges** for society in 2050, the most common challenges identified were

Climate change	81%
AI/technology	58%
Inequality/discrimination	39%
Environmental pollution	32%
Migration	29%
Poverty	23%

Regarding the likely global significance of the **World Heritage Convention** in 2050, 46% expressed the view that it will have decreased, with 36% expecting it to be unchanged, and 18% anticipating an increased significance.

When asked how many World Heritage properties may be inscribed in 2050 (compared with the current number of 1,248), participants gave the following responses:



After these “ice-breaker” questions, three groups as diverse as possible and of approximately equal size (one of which conducted in Swedish for the local participants), discussed the following **three topics** during approximately one hour each:

1. In 2050, what are the main challenges for society? Participants were expected to expand on the challenges they anticipated, going beyond the earlier introductory survey and making sure to consider peace and security.
2. What is the potential of World Heritage to address these challenges? Participants were encouraged to consider concrete benefits for future generations, including benefits relating to peace and security.
3. What specific actions should be taken now, especially to enhance peace and security? Participants were asked to consider what they could do themselves (or jointly with others) in order to affect “the minds of humans” as the UNESCO Constitution has it.

In response to question 1, participants in the three groups **described 2050** as a future shaped by interconnected environmental, social, technological, and geopolitical challenges. Climate change and resource scarcity—including water shortages, extreme weather, and impacts on heritage and infrastructure—were seen as major drivers of disruption, alongside continued migration linked to conflict and environmental change. Many responses also highlighted societal fragmentation, inequality, aging populations, weakening public finances, and pressures on democracy and social cohesion, while noting rising polarization, war, and threats such as terrorism. At the same time, participants expressed concern about rapid technological transformation, especially AI and digital information systems, which could both support and undermine trust, knowledge, and resilience in society.

Outcomes

The three groups were also asked to describe the **potential of World Heritage (WH)** sites to address the identified challenges. Participants saw WH as a powerful tool for fostering inclusion, intercultural dialogue, and shared identity, with the potential to bring people together across cultural and social divides, including refugees and diverse communities. Many emphasized WH as a source of resilience and learning, offering knowledge, traditions, and examples of adaptation that can support responses to climate change, resource scarcity, aging societies, and loss of knowledge. WH was also seen as a platform for education, critical thinking, and intergenerational exchange, helping to address societal polarization and strengthen awareness of shared responsibility. Additionally, participants highlighted its role in rethinking governance and sustainability, including housing, land use, financing, and the protection of rights, positioning WH as both a cultural resource and a practical framework for more inclusive and resilient futures.

A key issue discussed during this workshop was the third one, about **specific actions to be taken** by the participants themselves or jointly with others, especially addressing peace and security. Participants emphasized immediate, practical actions that use World Heritage as a platform for dialogue, inclusion, and peacebuilding, including creating meeting points, forums, and educational spaces that bring together different generations and communities. Many highlighted the importance of education and communication—especially on human rights, fact-checking, and positive storytelling—to counter polarization, misinformation, and “memory vs. hate” narratives. Several responses focused on sustainability and governance measures such as circular economy practices, waste reduction, better mobility, housing policies, and more inclusive urban planning to ensure fair and resilient heritage cities. Overall, participants called for stronger collaboration across sectors and borders, including youth and elderly engagement, interdisciplinary approaches, and the use of heritage as an active catalyst for social cohesion and peaceful coexistence.

In the subsequent plenary discussion, participants were asked (using Wooclap) about **new questions** they had discussed in their groups. They could also express support for (“like”) answers given by others. The most popular “new questions” include

- How to connect the World Heritage narrative to peacebuilding? (7 likes)
- Elderly people as a resource in the World Heritage work (6 likes)
- How is World Heritage relevant for social cohesion (4 likes)

Participants raised questions about how World Heritage can contribute to peace, social cohesion, human rights, and dialogue while remaining relevant in a rapidly changing world. Many responses focused on future challenges, including climate change, AI,

demographic change, intergenerational fairness, and the need to think beyond present-day concerns. Others emphasized strengthening heritage narratives, engaging communities through education and social media, and rethinking how World Heritage can address contemporary societal issues. The full results are presented in Appendix 1.

When asked about the **most important insight (or skill)** the participants take home with them from today, they could again “like” each others’ responses. The most popular “take-aways” include

- Heritage influencers (3 likes)
- Peace work is the global base for a common ground for making heritage relevant (3 likes)

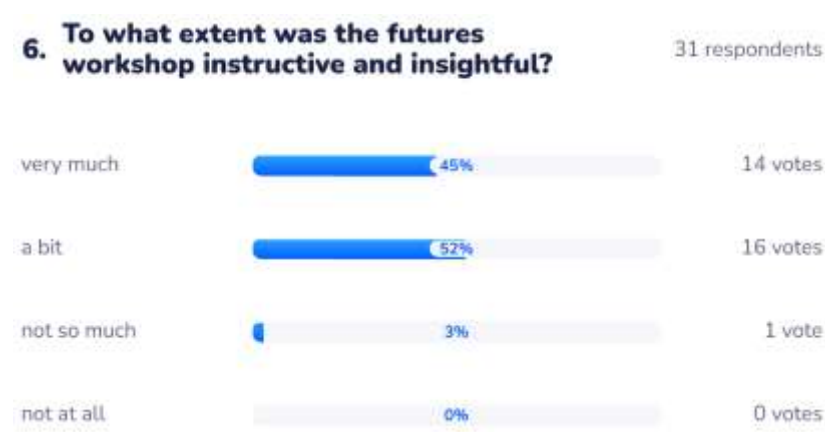
Participants highlighted the value of exchanging perspectives, listening, and collaborative reflection, noting that these processes generated new ideas and broadened their understanding of World Heritage. Many emphasized the importance of future-oriented thinking, connecting heritage to peace, societal challenges, and people-centred narratives while balancing preservation with changing needs. Overall, participants left with a stronger sense that World Heritage can play a meaningful role in shaping more inclusive, cooperative, and resilient futures. The full results are presented in Appendix 2.

Participants were also asked **which action today would most contribute to peace** in Visby (or elsewhere) tomorrow. There were many different responses. Participants emphasized dialogue, mutual understanding, and people-to-people exchange as the most important actions for building peace, with many highlighting World Heritage as a platform for storytelling, communication, and shared identity. Several responses stressed the need for inclusive and balanced heritage management, ensuring fair access, diverse narratives, and greater community ownership of heritage. Others pointed to the importance of countering misinformation, supporting human rights, and fostering international cooperation to strengthen peace locally and beyond. The full results are presented in Appendix 3.

When asked again at the end of the workshop how hopeful participants were about the future, there were more very hopeful participants but also more undecided ones. More expressed that they were hopeful “very much” (now 43%, up 13%) with fewer stating they were “a bit” hopeful (now 25%, down 22%). At the same time, the number of those undecided had gone up to 21% (up 11%), with those “not so much” hopeful staying at about the same level as as before (11%, down 2%).

Feedback

At the end of the day, participants were asked whether the workshop was instructive and insightful. They responded nearly unanimously that the futures workshop was somewhat or very relevant:



With specific reference to the work of the OWHC, almost all participants expressed the view that training sessions like the present workshop were somewhat or very relevant for site manages and other experts:



Summarising conclusion

The Heritage Futures Workshop held in Visby on 28 April 2026 brought together around 30 heritage professionals and site managers from several countries to explore futures thinking and practical actions for the present, with a particular focus on World Heritage and peace. The workshop used a futures literacy approach to help participants think beyond current concerns and imagine conditions in 2050. Through plenary input, group discussions, and interactive exercises, participants reflected on major future challenges such as climate change, inequality, AI, migration, and polarization, while also considering the role of World Heritage in fostering resilience, inclusion, and shared responsibility. The follow-up format built on an earlier workshop in Córdoba but moved further by concentrating on the timely question of peace and on concrete take-aways identified by the participants. The topic peacebuilding is in line with stated aims of the UN, UNESCO, the EU, and Swedish World Heritage.

The workshop in Visby demonstrated a strong and consistent view among participants that World Heritage can play a meaningful and practical role in peacebuilding, particularly by fostering dialogue, inclusion, and shared understanding in contexts of growing global uncertainty. Across all discussions, peace was not treated as an abstract ideal but as something that must be actively created through everyday practices, institutional choices, and communication strategies rooted in heritage work.

Participants repeatedly emphasized dialogue as the central mechanism for peace. World Heritage sites were seen as natural meeting places where people of different backgrounds, generations, and perspectives can come together. Creating forums, storytelling spaces, and inclusive heritage environments was viewed as a concrete way to reduce polarization, build trust, and strengthen social cohesion. A major theme was the role of heritage in shaping narratives that support peace rather than division. Participants stressed the need to move away from “memory vs. hate” dynamics and instead use heritage to promote shared identity, empathy, and human rights awareness. Education emerged as a key practical tool in this regard, including school-based heritage education, human rights learning, and targeted communication strategies. Several responses also highlighted the importance of fact-checking and countering misinformation, including through training, expert networks, and more active communication from heritage professionals. Participants called for stronger communication strategies, including storytelling, digital media engagement, and the use of “heritage influencers” to reach broader and younger audiences.

Beyond dialogue and education, participants identified a broad set of practical governance and policy actions that link peacebuilding with wider societal challenges. These included promoting circular economy approaches, improving waste management, and adopting more sustainable mobility and housing policies to reduce inequality and tension in heritage cities. Inclusive urban planning—such as ensuring affordable housing, preventing gentrification, and maintaining functional diversity—was seen as directly

connected to social stability and therefore to peace. Cross-border cooperation, particularly around the Baltic region, was also highlighted as an important avenue for strengthening mutual understanding and resilience. Importantly, World Heritage was consistently framed not only as a site of conservation but as an active societal actor: a catalyst for exchange, a platform for critical reflection, and a tool for addressing contemporary challenges such as polarization, climate change, and insecurity.

In sum, the workshop highlighted a shared conviction that the timely and pertinent task of peacebuilding through World Heritage requires moving from passive preservation to active engagement. The most immediate and actionable contributions identified by participants involve creating spaces for dialogue, strengthening education and communication on shared values, and embedding heritage more firmly in inclusive, interdisciplinary, and socially responsive governance. In this sense, World Heritage was consistently envisioned not only as a legacy of the past, but as a practical framework for building more peaceful, connected, and resilient societies in the future.

Acknowledgments

Several sections in this report were written with the help of generative AI. The ideas and opinions expressed in this documentation are those of the author; they are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not imply any commitment by the Organization.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Which important new question did you discuss in your group?

What can we do today?

Social polarization / How to connect the World Heritage narrative to peacebuilding

How Human Right are important and related to World Heritage and peace

Aging population / AI

What should we do today to change tomorrow

Importance of projecting ourselves in the future. Not just think of the present.

The importance of a strong narrative & heritage conservation as a part of it.

Wars and AI, the future impact

What can er as Heritage Professionals do to enhance peace? / Using Social Media -

Heritage influencers

Waste management

Intergenerational fairness

WH as forum for connection and dialogue

Peace and how to make this concrete in working with WH / AI and heritage? Thread or chance? / Coffee

How is WH relevant for social cohesion? / 2050 is very near - will it be anything like today?

Aging society

How climate changing influence the live in the historic city?

Universal for whom?

25 years in advance

That the aging population might have things to offer

Education for new generation on cultural heritage.

Heritage impact in the future

peace

"How can WH address the Russian threat?"

how heritage could bring ppl together

Elderly people as a resource in the world Heritage work / More cross Baltic cooperation

The AI engagement in reconsideration of heritage preservation/ ProMotion concept.

And advancement of management

Reframing world heritage for present concerns

Appendix 2

What is the most important insight (or skill) you take home from today?

I never discussed the role of WH in future before.

Brainstorming together works so much better ♥ / More thing than i thought are relevant for World Heritage / Listening is an important and underestimated skill

How we preserve and in what time/perspective is a discussion

So many different perspectives.

integrate our work in a bigger narrative: World Heritage is about evolving all kinds of people. Not necessarily a paradigm shift but a pragmatic one.

Great that we had time to reflect on the really important questions (Peace!)

We must work actively for peace today if we want to keep it for tomorrow.

Try to think more longtime future in WH

That we could use the WH as arenas for addressing societal problems that we all need to find solutions to.

Investment in the narrative to connect more with the people-centred ambition

When the current political "plague" of violence and threat is gone (the sooner the better), our co-operative skills really can make a difference.

Peace work is the global base for a common ground for making heritage relevant / Listening is a skill we lack sometimes

Redefining the meaning of OUV for future generations and all human beings / Heritage as a consensus making process, not as a purpose

Don't worry about the future, at least try to change it.

Heritage influencer

future scenario thinking

Exchange ideas or solutions among same problems

That people of all ages have to work together

Reasonable solutions of other cities that can be adapted.

Insight... Wherever we come from, whatever city or heritage site, same issues are brought up om heritage preservation, bringing inhabitants back, social and traffic issues... Interesting and inspiring to go on with our aims...

The importance of balancing preservation and modern use

it seems difficult to not repeat the same words even when talking futures thinking that the solutions for the challenges the world is facing is something that can be solved(hopefully) together as a world, nonetheless the cultural differences and backgrounds.

How the brainstorming created new perspective on the own world heritage engagement

The question of how /if can the WH benefit for peace keeping/war prevention

Look. Think. Reframe. Don't just conduct business as usual.

Appendix 3

What action today would most contribute to peace in Visby (or elsewhere) tomorrow?

Reappraisal of Heritage

Use Heritage for Human rights communication

Fact check of historical narratives by using WH

sadly - more military cooperation

Balance. Balance citizen and tourism. Rebalance the narrative.

Support Ukraine

Keep on the dialogue.

Use heritage to change people perspective on past, but also to form better future

Common heritage, common Identity: all inhabitants of Gotland should ,own' a part of Visby / Identify themselves with the WH Site

Continuing to have a dialogue on all levels in WH to get an understanding for each other and our situations, both to east and west.

Talk and listen carefully to unknown people

Use WH for dialogue

Heritage as a topic in story-telling that can be the 'red-carpet' for open dialogue.

Tear down the wall in the minds : outside and inside the wall?

Today's meeting with many experts sharing same thoughts.

Speak with the others

City history as a mark for prevention

Fairer access to living in and using the WH site.

Dialogue

in Visby : everybody learn Russian ? / in Visby: invite Russian to discover Visby ... ?

The need of external dialogue and people to people exchange