The Race to Resilience Culture (RTRC)

Advancing Heritage-Informed, Community-Centered Climate Resilience

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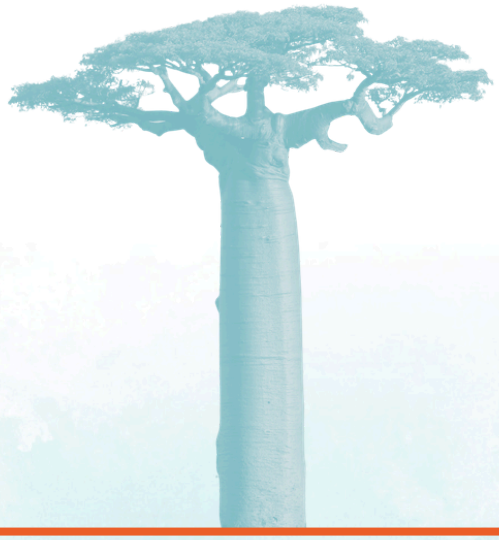
What if the missing ingredient in climate action wasn't more data, better policy, or newer technology — but culture?

This report marks a milestone in the Race to Resilience Culture (RTRC) initiative's work from December 2025 to January 2026, a period defined not by new arguments for culture's role in climate action, but by a growing body of evidence that it is already happening.

Across cities and communities, practitioners and local governments are doing the work: deconstructing buildings instead of demolishing them, cultivating urban nature with young people, rebuilding social trust as a governance strategy, and prescribing time in nature as a health intervention. RTRC's role is to surface these practices, draw out what they share, and make the case — with increasing confidence — that culture strengthens climate resilience at a global scale.

Each example featured in this period contributes to that case. Together, they reveal a consistent insight: culture is not adjacent to climate action. It is a delivery system for it that makes strategies durable, community-rooted, and implementable in ways that policy and technology alone cannot achieve.

What might otherwise remain a set of locally rooted, independently pursued practices is, through RTRC, brought into conversation. A deconstruction ordinance in San Antonio, community networks in Cape Coast, school nurseries in Dar es Salaam, and nature prescriptions in European cities are not, on their own, a field. RTRC makes them one — surfacing shared principles, revealing transferable approaches, and building the cumulative evidence base that positions culture-based resilience as credible and actionable within mainstream urban climate frameworks. RTRC is connecting the work it, and in doing so, helping to translate what has too often been treated as local exception into global practice.



HERITAGE-INFORMED DECARBONIZATION: REFRAMING THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Lori Ferriss, Co-Founder & Executive Director of Built Buildings Lab

The built environment accounts for approximately 42% of total annual global CO_2 emissions. Yet climate policy continues to focus disproportionately on new construction while the buildings that already exist, many of which carry deep cultural significance, are overlooked or demolished.

Lori Ferriss, Co-Founder & Executive Director of Built Buildings Lab, reframed this directly: heritage-informed decarbonization applies the wisdom, practices, and built places of the past to minimize greenhouse gas emissions in the present and future. Reuse, repair, and adaptive stewardship are emissions strategies, not nostalgic acts.

For cities, this reframing has immediate and practical implications across the levers of municipal governance. In policy and regulation, it calls for frameworks that prioritise adaptive reuse over demolition and integrate heritage considerations directly into building codes and climate action plans, so that cultural value and carbon value are addressed together rather than traded off against each other. In procurement, it means incentivising low-carbon refurbishment over new build, and creating pathways for heritage trades and salvaged materials to compete on equal terms with conventional construction. In investment strategy, it means recognising existing buildings as climate assets and infrastructure already embodying carbon, carrying community meaning, and worthy of long-term stewardship , rather than treating age as a liability.

The case for this shift is no longer theoretical. San Antonio's experience, detailed in the following section, demonstrates that heritage-informed decarbonization is administratively feasible, measurable, and replicable across municipal contexts.

MUNICIPAL LEADERSHIP IN ACTION: SAN ANTONIO’S CLIMATE HERITAGE MODEL

San Antonio, Texas offers a replicable practice pathway for how local governments can operationalize heritage within climate governance. Rachel Rettaliata (Heritage Programs Manager) and Jessica Anderson (Assistant Program Manager, Deconstruction & Circular Economy) from the City of San Antonio Office of Historic Preservation shared how their department has embedded cultural, economic, and environmental sustainability into a single

integrated mission — not as parallel workstreams, but as mutually reinforcing ones. The pathway is instructive not because San Antonio is exceptional, but because the mechanisms it has used, such as an ordinance, a trades academy, cross-departmental collaboration, are tools available to most municipalities.

The strategic lesson for other cities is this: heritage preservation and climate action do not need separate mandates, separate budgets, or separate departments. San Antonio demonstrates that when institutional design allows them to intersect, the result is policy that is more durable, more community-rooted, and more effective.

Deconstruction & Circular Economy

San Antonio's Deconstruction Ordinance requires its oldest small-scale housing stock to be carefully dismantled and salvaged rather than torn down. Since October 2022:

- 145+ buildings deconstructed
- 500+ tons of materials diverted from landfills
- ~60% average diversion rate

For cities considering similar approaches, the municipal design implications are concrete. Procurement frameworks need to create viable markets for salvaged materials, which means updating specifications and supplier criteria so reclaimed materials can compete with new ones. Building regulations need to distinguish between demolition and deconstruction, creating the legal and procedural basis for salvage requirements. And investment priorities need to account for embodied carbon, recognizing that the carbon already locked into existing structures is a resource to be retained, not a problem to be cleared.

From left to right: Rachel Rettaliata, Heritage Programs Manager, and Jessica Anderson, Assistant Program Manager, Deconstruction & Circular Economy, from the City of San Antonio Office of Historic Preservation

Workforce & Skills as Climate Infrastructure

Through the Living Heritage Trades Academy, San Antonio has connected workforce development directly to climate strategy:

- 175+ apprentices enrolled since 2020
- 4,500+ individuals trained since 2010
- 370 houses repaired since 2010

This is where the municipal relevance extends beyond the environment into equity. Workforce development in heritage trades is simultaneously a climate mitigation strategy, an affordable housing intervention, and an economic inclusion programme. For cities, this points toward aligning skills and employment policy with climate goals — treating training pipelines not as a social service add-on but as climate infrastructure in their own right. It also points toward procurement: cities that preferentially contract trained local tradespeople for retrofits and repairs create the demand that sustains these pipelines over time.

San Antonio's experience is offered here not as inspiration but as a transferable model. The mechanisms are municipal-grade and adaptable: a deconstruction ordinance can be scoped to local housing stock; a trades academy can be built in partnership with existing vocational or community college infrastructure; cross-departmental collaboration can begin with a shared mandate rather than a restructure. The question for other cities is not whether this approach is feasible, but which of these levers they are best positioned to activate first — and what the San Antonio experience can tell them about sequencing.

RESILIENCE IS RELATIONAL: THE CASE OF CAPE COAST, GHANA

Physical infrastructure can withstand a storm. But what holds a community together after one — and what enables a local government to coordinate an effective response during one — is social capital: the networks, norms, and trust that enable collective action. In Cape Coast, Ghana, social capital isn't a soft concept. It is a governance strategy.

Kenneth Ketor, Metro Planning Officer in Cape Coast, Ghana

Kenneth Ketor, Metro Planning Officer in Cape Coast, Ghana, shared how the city embeds resilience-building across neighborhood networks, traditional authorities, religious institutions, local business associations, and academic partnerships. Its Eight-Year Development Plan was developed through broad stakeholder engagement and environmental review, demonstrating how participatory planning strengthens adaptive capacity, resource mobilization, and preparedness.

What Cape Coast makes visible is a dimension of resilience that is often undervalued in institutional frameworks: social capital as an asset for local government, not only for communities. When trust-based networks are strong, municipal systems can extend their reach beyond formal structures, mobilizing faster in a crisis, communicating more effectively across neighborhoods, and drawing on distributed knowledge that no single department holds. In this sense, the community relationships Cape Coast has cultivated are not parallel to its governance infrastructure. They are part of it.

For other cities, this points toward a concrete set of institutional implications. Participatory planning processes are not only engagement mechanisms, but they are investments in the relational infrastructure that local governments will depend on under stress. Formal recognition of traditional authorities and community institutions within emergency response frameworks can expand operational capacity without expanding budgets. And development plans that are co-produced with communities are more likely to be implemented by them, making cultural legitimacy a determinant of delivery, not a secondary consideration.

The takeaway for municipal practitioners is direct: social cohesion and institutional trust are core climate assets. Any resilience strategy or governance framework that treats them as peripheral is leaving capacity on the table.

Heidi Albert, Head of Cities Health Center at ICLEI Africa

URBAN NATURE IS A PUBLIC HEALTH ASSET WHEN DESIGNED FOR PEOPLE

Cities concentrate risk in ways that matter directly for resilience. Over 4.4 billion people now live in urban areas, where rates of non-communicable disease, poor air quality, and mental health challenges are significantly elevated. Urban heat islands can add up to 7°C above surrounding areas. These are not background statistics , they are the conditions that culture- and community-centered resilience strategies must be designed to address.

According to Heidi Albert, Head of Cities Health Center at ICLEI Africa, Urban nature can address many of these intersecting risks when it is designed as a social and cultural system, not only an ecological one. Green spaces reduce heat, improve air quality, increase physical activity, restore mental health, strengthen social connection, and support biodiversity. Urban heat islands can add up to 7°C , and well-placed green infrastructure cuts directly into that risk.

According to Heidi Albert, Head of Cities Health Center at ICLEI Africa, urban nature can respond to many of these intersecting risks, but only when it is designed as a social and

and cultural system, not only an ecological one. Green spaces reduce heat, improve air quality, restore mental health, and strengthen social connection. But their effectiveness depends entirely on how they are shaped, governed, and activated. A green space that is imposed rather than co-created, or culturally disconnected from the community it sits within, does not deliver these outcomes. One that is safe, meaningful, and stewarded by the people who use it does.

The transformation of Trafalgar Park in Mitchell's Plain, Cape Town demonstrates this distinction in practice. A previously neglected space was revitalised through volunteer labour, recycled materials, youth engagement, and cultural expression. The intervention worked not because green infrastructure was added, but because the community was centred in designing and owning it. This is the model RTRC is documenting: urban nature as a vehicle for community agency, not a technical fix applied to it.

Youth engagement is especially critical to this model. Where young people are positioned as present-day stewards and cultural actors rather than future beneficiaries, urban nature strategies gain both energy and legitimacy. Excluding them is not only a planning gap. It is a missed opportunity for the kind of community ownership that makes resilience durable.

URBAN HEAT, COMMUNITY ASSETS, AND CULTURAL STORYTELLING

Urban heat is a major public health concern, but telling people the temperature isn't enough to change behavior or build collective will.

Dr Ernita van Wyk, Senior Professional Officer: Biodiversity at ICLEI Africa

Dr Ernita van Wyk, Senior Professional Officer: Biodiversity at ICLEI Africa shared how Dar es Salaam recognized this early. The city's urban greening work moved beyond planting trees to embedding nature stewardship into school curricula, on-site nurseries, and youth-led tree cultivation programs. Tools like photovoice and school thermometers put climate data in the hands of community members, centering local experience and agency.

The broader principle is this: climate communication must move beyond data. Stories, art, and heritage translate abstract metrics into lived experience. Cultural storytelling shifts climate communication from information transfer to genuine connection, inviting participation, strengthening belonging, and building the kind of public will that sustains long-term action.

NATURE PRESCRIPTIONS: WHERE HEALTH, CULTURE, AND CLIMATE CONVERGE

Loneliness is both a public health crisis and a resilience crisis. When people are isolated, they are less prepared for and less able to recover from climate impacts.

Research from the RECETAS consortium and Dr. Jill Litt (Senior Researcher, ISGlobal and Professor, Environmental Studies & Public Health, CU Boulder) on nature-based social prescribing (NBSP) offers a powerful response. The Friends in Nature (FiN) model integrates outdoor physical activity, nature observation, arts and cultural engagement, and group facilitation into structured programming designed to address loneliness and improve health outcomes.

Policy recommendations from this work include:

- Recognizing nature-based social prescribing as best practice in health and climate systems
- Integrating nature access into urban planning and land-use policy
- Preparing professionals across health and climate sectors to implement nature-based interventions

Dr. Jill Litt, Senior Researcher, ISGlobal and Professor, Environmental Studies & Public Health, CU Boulder

This reinforces a core RTRC principle: resilience is strongest where health systems, cultural systems, and environmental systems intersect. Nature-based participation fosters belonging. Belonging fosters collective capacity. Collective capacity sustains climate implementation.

BURNOUT AS A CLIMATE PROBLEM

Climate implementation depends on people. And right now, the people doing that work are under sustained, structural pressure that many resilience frameworks fail to account for.

According to Sarah Mayerhofer, Board Member of The Resilient Activist, burnout is not an individual failing. It is what happens when demand consistently exceeds support

Sarah Mayerhofer, Board Member of The Resilient Activist

— and in climate work, where the stakes are high, the timelines are urgent, and the emotional weight is significant, that gap is wide. The consequences are not only personal. When climate practitioners disengage, slow down, or leave, institutions lose continuity, programs lose momentum, and the communities depending on that work lose capacity. Burnout, in this framing, is a delivery risk for climate institutions and networks and as consequential as underfunding or policy gaps, and considerably less visible.

This is why it belongs in a resilience report. Resilience frameworks that account for infrastructure, governance, and finance but not for the sustained capacity of the people implementing them are incomplete. The same logic that makes social capital a governance asset — that relational infrastructure determines what institutions can actually deliver under stress — applies here. When climate professionals lack belonging, psychological safety, and peer support, implementation erodes. When those conditions are present, delivery is more durable.

For cities and climate networks, the implication is practical: fostering relational support, community rituals, and psychological safety within teams and coalitions is not a peripheral HR concern. It is a condition for sustained climate delivery. Culture-based approaches are uniquely positioned to strengthen this layer by building the internal resilience of institutions alongside the external resilience of the communities they serve.

CONCLUSION: CULTURE BUILDS THE CAPACITY THAT SUSTAINS EVERYTHING ELSE

As this milestone period demonstrates, culture is not an accessory to climate action. It is the connective tissue that makes climate strategies durable, inclusive, and implementable.From heritage-informed decarbonization and circular economy leadership in San Antonio, to community-led urban greening in Cape Town, to social capital-centered resilience planning in Cape Coast, the Race to Resilience Culture continues to show that resilience grows where identity, trust, and stewardship are cultivated together.

When communities are empowered to preserve what they value, shape the spaces they inhabit, and tell their own climate stories, mitigation and adaptation accelerate.

Culture builds belonging. Belonging builds capacity. Capacity sustains climate action for the long term.