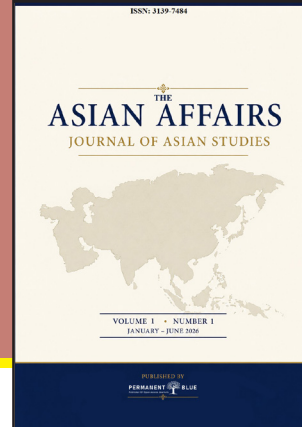




Adaptive Conservation and Heritage Relocation: The Relocation of Kiruna Church in Sweden

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Abstract: The relocation of Kiruna Church in 2025 represents a significant contemporary case of cultural heritage conservation under conditions of large-scale industrial and urban transformation. Constructed between 1909 and 1912 and designed by Gustaf Wickman, the church is one of Sweden's largest wooden buildings and an important landmark of Kiruna. Its architectural character reflects National Romanticism and incorporates references to Nordic timber traditions and Sámi cultural forms. The expansion of the Kiruna iron ore mine and the resulting ground deformation have required the progressive transformation of the historic town, making the long-term preservation of the church in its original location increasingly difficult. This study examines the relocation of Kiruna Church as a case of adaptive conservation, focusing on material authenticity, site integrity, engineering intervention, urban transformation, and community values. An interdisciplinary qualitative approach was adopted, combining historical and archival analysis with examination of conservation principles, technical documentation, official municipal and mining-company information, media reports, and publicly available community responses. The findings indicate that the relocation demonstrates how engineering intervention can be integrated with heritage conservation when structural integrity, material authenticity, cultural function, and community significance are considered together. The 672.4-ton timber structure was transported intact over a five-kilometer route during 19–20 August 2025 and installed at a new location between the cemetery and the new city Centre. The case further demonstrates that physical displacement does not necessarily result in the complete loss of heritage significance when cultural functions, social meanings, and material continuity are maintained. Kiruna therefore provides an important contemporary example of adaptive conservation in response to industrial and environmental transformation.

Keywords: Kiruna Church; heritage relocation; adaptive conservation; timber architecture; community resilience

Received: 08 May 2026

Revised: 10 June 2026

Accepted: 18 June 2026

Published: 30 September 2026

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

K.P.T.S. Pubudu Kumari & Ven. Mandaramnuwara Chandananda (2026). Adaptive Conservation and Heritage Relocation: The Relocation of Kuruna Church in Sweden. *The Asian Affairs: Journal of Asian Studies*, 1: 1, pp. 91-103.

Introduction

Cultural heritage conservation has traditionally placed considerable emphasis on the preservation of historic buildings in their original locations. The relationship between a building, its physical setting, historical associations, and social meanings is an important component of heritage significance. Nevertheless, rapid urban transformation, infrastructure development, environmental change, and extractive industries increasingly create circumstances in which the continued preservation of heritage buildings in situ becomes difficult or even impossible. Under such conditions, relocation may emerge as an exceptional conservation strategy. Although relocation can protect the physical fabric of a historic structure, it also raises fundamental questions concerning authenticity, site integrity, cultural meaning, and the relationship between heritage and place.

The relocation of Kiruna Church in northern Sweden provides an important contemporary case through which these issues can be examined. The church was designed by Gustaf Wickman and inaugurated in 1912. It became one of Kiruna's best-known buildings and an important religious and social gathering place. Kiruna Municipality identifies the church as a protected ecclesiastical cultural heritage property and records that it was voted in 2001 as "All-time best building, built before 1950," as well as the most popular building among the Swedish public. The municipality also confirms that the church stood on land affected by mining and that the entire building was therefore relocated in one piece to a new site between the cemetery and the new city Centre.

Architecturally, Kiruna Church represents an important expression of early twentieth-century Nordic timber architecture. Its monumental wooden construction and distinctive form contribute strongly to its cultural significance. Contemporary descriptions of the church also emphasize its inspiration from Norwegian stave churches and Sámi huts, demonstrating that its architectural identity cannot be understood exclusively through conventional European stylistic categories. The church therefore embodies a combination of architectural, regional, religious, and social values.

The circumstances that led to the relocation are directly connected with the development of the Kiruna iron ore mine operated by LKAB. Mining-induced ground deformation has progressively affected the historic settlement, requiring the transformation of the urban Centre. The relocation of the church was consequently part of a much larger process rather than an isolated conservation intervention. LKAB describes the church movement as part of the extensive urban transformation of Kiruna, while Kiruna Municipality identifies the mining-affected ground beneath the former church site as the reason for the building's relocation.

The research problem addressed in this study arises from the tension between the traditional principle of conserving heritage in its original setting and the practical necessity of responding to irreversible industrial transformation. The Kiruna case raises the question of whether physical relocation necessarily constitutes a loss of authenticity and cultural significance, or whether relocation can function as an appropriate form of adaptive conservation when the original site has become unsustainable. This question has wider relevance because similar pressures may arise from mining, large infrastructure projects, environmental instability, climate-related change, and urban expansion.

The principal aim of this study is to examine the relocation of Kiruna Church as a case of adaptive heritage conservation under industrial and urban pressure. The study focuses on the

preservation of material authenticity and structural integrity, the integration of engineering strategies with conservation requirements, the relationship between the church relocation and the wider urban transformation of Kiruna, and the preservation of cultural and community values following physical displacement. A further objective is to compare the Kiruna case with selected international and South Asian examples of heritage relocation in order to identify broader implications for conservation practice.

The significance of the study lies in its examination of relocation not merely as an engineering operation but as a heritage-management process involving material, spatial, social, and symbolic dimensions. Antrop (2005) emphasizes that landscapes are dynamic products of interactions between natural and cultural forces and that successive transformations can affect diversity, coherence, and identity. In Kiruna, the historic landscape has been fundamentally altered by mining, making it necessary for heritage management to operate within a transforming environment rather than attempting to preserve an unchanged landscape.

Mining-induced displacement also presents substantial social and cultural risks. Owen and Kemp (2015) demonstrate that mining-induced displacement and resettlement create complex social risks and require approaches that extend beyond the physical movement of people or structures. Their analysis is particularly relevant to Kiruna because the urban transformation involves not only buildings but also residents, memories, social relationships, and the identity of a historic mining community.

The conservation problem can also be understood through the concept of authenticity. The Nara Document on Authenticity, adopted in 1994, emphasizes that authenticity cannot be assessed through a single fixed criterion and must be considered within the cultural context of the heritage concerned. This principle is particularly relevant to relocation because the geographical position of a building is altered while other dimensions of significance may be retained.

The conservation of historic timber structures provides an additional conceptual basis. The ICOMOS Principles for the Preservation of Historic Timber Structures, adopted in 1999, recognize the particular conservation requirements associated with timber heritage and the importance of understanding structural and material characteristics before intervention. In the case of Kiruna Church, the decision to transport the building intact required the integration of structural engineering with heritage conservation.

The study adopts an interdisciplinary qualitative research design combining architectural history, heritage conservation, engineering, and urban transformation perspectives. Historical information was examined to establish the architectural and cultural significance of the church. Official municipal and LKAB documentation was used to reconstruct the relocation process and its relationship to the wider urban transformation. International conservation principles were used to interpret questions of authenticity, integrity, and intervention. Media reports and publicly available statements were considered in assessing public and community responses. The research is primarily based on documentary and secondary material and does not claim to provide a long-term sociological assessment because the relocation occurred only in August 2025. This temporal limitation is important when evaluating the continuing effects of the intervention on community identity and place attachment.

Discussion

Kiruna Church as a Heritage Resource

Kiruna Church is significant because its heritage value derives from the interaction of architectural, religious, social, and historical dimensions. Designed by Gustaf Wickman and inaugurated in 1912, the church became a landmark within the mining settlement and an important gathering place for the local community. Kiruna Municipality identifies it as one of the municipality's most well-known buildings and emphasizes its continuing importance as a gathering place for residents.

The architectural character of the church is particularly important in understanding the decision to preserve it. Its monumental timber construction reflects the importance of wood in Scandinavian building traditions, while its form draws upon Nordic historical and regional references. The church's relationship with Sámi architectural imagery also demonstrates that its cultural significance extends beyond a narrowly national architectural narrative. Contemporary descriptions identify inspiration from Norwegian stave churches and Sámi huts, illustrating the manner in which regional and indigenous references contributed to its architectural expression.

The church's recognition in 2001 further demonstrates its symbolic status. Rather than describing it simply as Sweden's "most beautiful public building," as the original draft did, the verified municipal description is more precise: it was voted "All-time best building, built before 1950" and the most popular building among the Swedish public. This distinction is important in academic writing because the exact nature of the recognition should not be overstated.

The significance of the building is therefore multidimensional. Its timber fabric provides material and architectural value; its religious function provides spiritual significance; its long association with the town contributes social and historical value; and its symbolic position within Kiruna connects it with collective memory. Consequently, the success of its relocation cannot be evaluated solely according to whether its physical structure survived.



Figure 1: Kiruna Church, Sweden.

Source: Sweden Herald (2025)



Figure 2: Kiruna Church during its relocation to the new city Centre, Sweden, August 2025.

Source: Sweden Herald (2025).

Authenticity and the Problem of Relocation

Relocation creates an apparent contradiction within conventional conservation theory. On one hand, preserving a historic structure in its original location is generally desirable because place contributes to authenticity and historical meaning. On the other hand, retaining a building in an increasingly unsafe location may eventually result in its physical loss. The central conservation question is therefore not simply whether relocation is acceptable but under what circumstances relocation can preserve the most significant heritage values.

The Nara Document on Authenticity is particularly useful in this regard because it rejects a rigid and universal definition of authenticity. It recognizes that judgements concerning authenticity may vary according to cultural context and that multiple information sources and dimensions of heritage significance must be considered. From this perspective, the movement of Kiruna Church does not automatically eliminate its authenticity. Instead, it requires an assessment of which values are retained, altered, or lost through relocation.

The UNESCO experience at the Nubian monuments provides an important precedent. The UNESCO International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia relocated major monuments threatened by flooding associated with the Aswan High Dam. UNESCO records that the campaign moved several monuments between 1960 and 1980 and that the Abu Simbel temples were dismantled, transported, and reconstructed at a higher location. Significantly, UNESCO's current assessment of the Nubian Monuments recognizes that although the moved temples are no longer in their original positions, their form, design, and spirit can retain authenticity through careful conservation.

This precedent demonstrates that geographical displacement does not necessarily result in the complete destruction of heritage value. However, the circumstances of Abu Simbel differ considerably from Kiruna. Abu Simbel was threatened by water associated with a major dam project, whereas Kiruna Church was affected by the progressive consequences of underground mining and urban transformation. The comparison is therefore useful not because the two cases are

identical but because both demonstrate circumstances in which in-situ preservation was rendered problematic by large-scale development.

Engineering as an Instrument of Conservation

The physical relocation of Kiruna Church was an exceptional engineering operation. LKAB records that the 672.4-ton church, measuring approximately 40 meters in width, was transported intact over a specially adapted five-kilometer route during 19–20 August 2025. The movement was completed over two days and the church was placed at a new location between the cemetery and the new city Centre.

Contemporary reporting further records that the building was transported on a trailer with 224 wheels and that the operation was controlled remotely. The engineering arrangement was designed to distribute the building's substantial weight and allow slow, carefully controlled movement through the urban environment.

The engineering operation should therefore be understood as part of the conservation process rather than as a separate technical activity. Moving a large timber structure intact requires an understanding of load distribution, structural behavior, connections, vibration, movement, and the condition of the historic fabric. The ICOMOS principles for historic timber structures reinforce the importance of understanding the material and structural characteristics of timber buildings when conservation interventions are undertaken.

The Kiruna case is particularly significant because the building was moved as a whole rather than dismantled and reconstructed. This approach allowed the original structural configuration and a substantial amount of historic fabric to remain physically connected during the move. Such a strategy has considerable conservation value because dismantling introduces additional risks associated with disassembly, storage, reassembly, replacement, and the potential loss of original relationships between components.

The successful completion of the two-day movement without major complications demonstrates the importance of detailed preparation and coordination between heritage professionals, engineers, contractors, municipal authorities, and the mining company. The project illustrates how advanced engineering can serve heritage conservation when technical decisions are guided by the significance of the building.

Heritage Management within Urban Transformation

The relocation of Kiruna Church cannot be separated from the wider transformation of Kiruna. The mine and the town have developed in a mutually dependent relationship, but the continuation and expansion of mining has also generated physical pressures on the urban environment. The result is an unusual situation in which the preservation of the town's heritage must be negotiated within the continued operation of the economic activity that originally contributed to the town's development.

Kiruna Municipality identifies the church as one of the buildings affected by the urban transformation and records that it was moved because the land beneath its former location was affected by mining. LKAB likewise places the church movement within the broader urban

transformation programme. The relocation should therefore be interpreted as an element of urban heritage management rather than as an isolated building-conservation project.



Figure 3. Location and relocation route of Kiruna Church, Kiruna, Sweden.

Source: Sweden Herald (2025).

The selection of the new location is also important. The church was moved to an area between the cemetery and the new city Centre, allowing it to retain a visible and functional role within the transformed town. This demonstrates that relocation is most meaningful when the new location is considered as part of the heritage-management strategy. A building moved to an arbitrary site could survive materially while losing much of its social and cultural significance.

The Kiruna case therefore suggests that heritage conservation should be incorporated into urban planning from the earliest stages of transformation. The preservation of heritage buildings should not be treated as a final technical problem after development decisions have already been made. Instead, heritage significance, community values, spatial relationships, and possible relocation strategies should be incorporated into long-term planning.

Community Meaning and Cultural Continuity

The relocation of a significant community building inevitably generates emotional responses. Kiruna Church had been associated with generations of residents, religious ceremonies, public gatherings, and personal memories. Consequently, the removal of the church from its historic site could not be understood simply as a technical operation.

Public responses to the 2025 movement demonstrate the emotional dimension of the project. Sweden Herald reported that thousands of people gathered along the route and that residents described the event as historic while also expressing relief that the church would continue to survive. One resident explicitly characterized the experience as not simply sad but as positive

because the church was being retained. Such responses illustrate the coexistence of nostalgia for the historic town and optimism concerning the future of the church.

The scale of public attention also transformed the relocation into a shared cultural event. LKAB reported that thousands of visitors followed the church's movement and described the relocation as a shared experience for the people of Kiruna. Sweden Herald similarly reported extensive national and international media interest in the event.

This public dimension is significant because cultural heritage is not sustained solely by material preservation. A heritage building remains meaningful when communities continue to recognize, use, interpret, and identify with it. The continued religious and community role of Kiruna Church therefore provides an important basis for maintaining cultural continuity after relocation.

At the same time, community continuity should not be romanticized. The movement of the church forms only one part of a much larger transformation involving displacement of residents and changes to the historic urban environment. Owen and Kemp's discussion of mining-induced displacement demonstrates the broader social risks associated with mining-related relocation. The preservation of a landmark building cannot by itself compensate for every social and cultural consequence of urban transformation. The church relocation should therefore be regarded as one component of a much wider heritage and community-management process.

International Comparative Perspective

Heritage relocation has been employed in a variety of circumstances where monuments have faced irreversible threats. The Abu Simbel campaign remains one of the most influential examples. UNESCO's documentation records that the two temples were cut into large blocks, numbered, moved, and reconstructed within a specially created setting above the original site. The new Abu Simbel was inaugurated in September 1968.

The UNESCO case is particularly important for the present study because it demonstrates that relocation can be recognized as a legitimate heritage-preservation response under extreme circumstances. It also demonstrates that careful documentation, technical expertise, international cooperation, and reconstruction planning are essential when physical movement is unavoidable.

The Temple of Dendur provides another relevant comparison. The original draft referred to the "Temple of Dundurn," which was incorrect. The correct name is the Temple of Dendur. The Metropolitan Museum of Art records that the temple was dismantled in 1963 as part of the campaign to save Nubian monuments threatened by the rising waters associated with the Aswan High Dam. The temple was subsequently given to the United States and transported to New York, where it was reconstructed at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Dendur illustrates an important distinction between material preservation and contextual preservation. The physical temple survives, but its original Nile landscape and cultural setting have been fundamentally altered. The Met nevertheless designed its installation to evoke aspects of the temple's original environment, demonstrating an attempt to compensate for contextual displacement through interpretation and spatial design.

Kiruna differs from both Abu Simbel and Dendur because the church has remained within its original town and continues to function as a religious and community building. Its movement is

therefore not an international transfer of ownership or a museum relocation. Instead, it represents the internal movement of a living heritage building within a transforming urban landscape. This distinction is important because the continuity of use may help maintain social and cultural associations that are more difficult to preserve when a monument is transferred into a completely different cultural environment.

South Asian and Sri Lankan Comparison

The relocation of heritage structures in South Asia presents additional complexities because archaeological and religious significance is often strongly associated with place. The original draft identified the relocation of Nalanda Gedige in Sri Lanka during the Mahaweli Development Scheme as a comparative case. The example is conceptually relevant because it demonstrates the tension between physical survival and contextual integrity when development projects threaten heritage resources.

However, the source supplied in the original draft for this case, Bandaranayake (2006), could not be independently verified to the level required for a final scholarly reference through the available authoritative online sources. For that reason, the present version does not attribute specific technical details of the Nalanda Gedige relocation to that source. The case is retained only as a comparative analytical example rather than as a fully documented factual case study.

The broader comparison remains useful. In Sri Lanka, archaeological monuments may possess significance that is inseparable from their archaeological setting, religious associations, landscape relationships, and historical narratives. Moving such a monument can therefore result in a greater contextual loss than moving a functioning urban church whose social role can continue at a new location.

The comparison demonstrates that relocation should never be treated as a universally transferable conservation technique. The acceptability of relocation depends on the character of the heritage resource, the nature of its significance, the severity of the threat, the possibility of in-situ conservation, the quality of documentation, and the ability to maintain cultural functions after movement.

Relocation as Adaptive Conservation

The Kiruna case demonstrates that relocation can be interpreted as adaptive conservation when it responds to a changing environmental and urban context while attempting to preserve significant heritage values. This interpretation does not imply that relocation is inherently desirable. Rather, it recognizes that conservation practice sometimes has to respond to circumstances in which the original setting can no longer be maintained.

The concept of adaptive conservation is particularly relevant in the context of contemporary environmental and industrial pressures. Landscapes are continuously transformed by economic activities, infrastructure, environmental processes, and social demands (Antrop, 2005). Heritage management therefore needs strategies capable of responding to change while protecting the values that communities and societies consider significant.

Kiruna demonstrates one such strategy. The church's material fabric was retained; the building was transported intact; its religious role could continue; and its new location was incorporated into the transformed town. The intervention therefore attempted to preserve several dimensions of heritage significance simultaneously.

Nevertheless, the case also reveals the limits of relocation. The original relationship between the church and the historic town Centre has changed. Memories associated with the original setting cannot be physically transported in the same manner as timber, stone, or architectural elements. Relocation therefore involves both preservation and loss. A responsible conservation assessment must acknowledge both dimensions rather than presenting relocation solely as a technological success.

The strongest lesson from Kiruna is therefore not that heritage buildings should be moved whenever development threatens them. Instead, it is that heritage management must be capable of making carefully reasoned decisions when change is unavoidable. Relocation may become defensible when the original site faces irreversible threats, when alternatives for in-situ preservation are inadequate, when the intervention preserves substantial original fabric, and when the social and cultural functions of the heritage resource can continue.

Findings

The study demonstrates that the relocation of Kiruna Church can be understood as a contemporary example of adaptive conservation in which physical displacement was used to safeguard a significant heritage building within a transforming industrial landscape.

The first major finding is that material authenticity remained central to the relocation strategy. The church was moved as a complete structure rather than dismantled into separate components. LKAB confirms that the 672.4-ton building was transported in its entirety over a five-kilometer route during 19–20 August 2025. The retention of the historic structure as a whole reduced the degree of physical fragmentation associated with conventional dismantling and reconstruction and allowed the original architectural configuration to remain substantially intact.

The second finding concerns the importance of engineering integration. The movement required specialized transportation equipment, careful route preparation, controlled speed, and coordinated management of the building's substantial weight. Contemporary reports describe the use of a 224-wheel transport system and remote control during the movement. The case therefore demonstrates that engineering expertise can function as an essential component of heritage conservation when the intervention is designed around the structural and material requirements of the historic building.

The third finding is that the relocation formed part of a wider urban transformation. The church was not moved independently of Kiruna's redevelopment but because the former site was affected by mining-related transformation. Its new position between the cemetery and the new city Centre allowed it to remain integrated into the urban community. Heritage conservation was consequently incorporated into urban planning rather than treated as a separate architectural intervention.

The fourth finding concerns the relationship between authenticity and place. The case indicates that geographical continuity and material authenticity are related but not identical concepts. The

church no longer occupies its original location, and therefore one dimension of its historical context has changed. Nevertheless, its original material, architectural form, religious function, and community significance remain important components of its continuing heritage value. This interpretation is consistent with the broader understanding of authenticity developed through the Nara Document, which emphasizes cultural context and multiple dimensions of heritage value.

The fifth finding concerns community participation and emotional response. The relocation attracted large numbers of residents and visitors and generated extensive media attention. Public responses combined nostalgia for the historic town with positive feelings concerning the survival of the church. This demonstrates that heritage relocation is simultaneously a technical and emotional process.

The sixth finding is that relocation has different implications depending on the type of heritage resource. Abu Simbel demonstrates the preservation of monumental archaeological heritage under threat from flooding, while Dendur illustrates the movement of an archaeological monument into a new institutional and national context. Kiruna is different because the church remains within the same town, continues its religious function, and forms part of a continuing urban community.

The final finding is that relocation should remain an exceptional conservation measure. The Kiruna case provides evidence that relocation can preserve significant heritage values under severe industrial pressure, but it does not demonstrate that relocation eliminates the loss associated with displacement. The change in the relationship between building and historic setting remains a significant heritage consequence. Adaptive relocation should therefore be considered only within a broader conservation framework involving documentation, significance assessment, technical analysis, community engagement, and long-term monitoring.

Conclusion

The relocation of Kiruna Church demonstrates how heritage conservation can respond to large-scale industrial and urban transformation when preservation in the original location becomes increasingly unsustainable. The case challenges a strictly site-bound understanding of conservation by demonstrating that material authenticity, architectural character, cultural function, and social meaning may continue after physical displacement, provided that relocation is carefully planned and implemented.

The relocation was not simply an engineering achievement. It was the outcome of a wider process involving heritage management, urban planning, structural engineering, mining-related transformation, and community participation. The 672.4-ton church was transported intact over a specially prepared five-kilometer route during 19–20 August 2025 and placed at a new location within the transformed urban Centre. The fact that the building was moved as a whole rather than dismantled and reconstructed was particularly important for retaining its material and architectural continuity.

The case also demonstrates that authenticity should be approached as a multidimensional concept. The relocation inevitably changed the church's geographical context, and this represents a genuine heritage loss that should not be overlooked. At the same time, the continued survival of original fabric, architectural form, religious use, and community associations indicates that

physical displacement does not automatically result in the complete destruction of cultural significance. The Nara Document's contextual approach to authenticity provides an appropriate conceptual basis for understanding this complexity.

The comparison with Abu Simbel and the Temple of Dendur further demonstrates that heritage relocation can take different forms and serve different purposes. UNESCO's Nubian campaign established an important precedent for relocating monuments threatened by large-scale development, while Dendur demonstrates the more complex consequences that arise when a monument is moved into a completely different cultural and institutional context. Kiruna provides a distinct contemporary model because the church remains within its historic community and continues to function as a living religious and social building.

The study therefore concludes that adaptive relocation can be considered a legitimate conservation strategy under exceptional circumstances, particularly when an original site is threatened by irreversible industrial or environmental transformation. However, relocation should never be treated as a simple substitute for in-situ conservation. The potential loss of historical context, landscape relationships, memory, and place attachment must be explicitly evaluated before a decision is made.

For future conservation planning in urban-industrial environments, the Kiruna experience emphasizes the importance of early heritage assessment, comprehensive documentation, interdisciplinary collaboration, structural analysis, transparent communication, community participation, and integration of heritage considerations into urban planning. It also demonstrates the importance of distinguishing between the preservation of physical fabric and the preservation of cultural meaning. The long-term success of the Kiruna relocation will ultimately depend not only on the structural performance of the relocated building but also on its continued use, community recognition, and integration into the evolving identity of the new Kiruna.

Kiruna therefore provides a valuable contemporary example of heritage resilience. Its significance lies not in demonstrating that heritage can simply be moved without consequence, but in showing that, when change is unavoidable, conservation can seek to retain essential heritage values through carefully managed adaptation. The project offers an important lesson for heritage managers confronting mining, infrastructure development, environmental instability, and other forms of large-scale landscape transformation: sustainable conservation may sometimes require accepting physical change while ensuring that the cultural values carried by heritage places remain meaningful to future generations.

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