


Generative Repair and Graceful Decay: Interview with Caitlin DeSilvey

Interview conducted by
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via video call, on January 25, 2023

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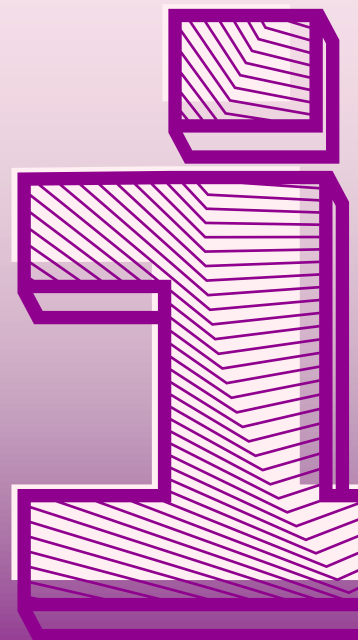
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Interview

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Professor Caitlin DeSilvey works as a cultural geographer and lecturer at the University of Exeter. Her work explores the ways in which built environments change through aging, including processes of repair, decay, and wasting. She collaborates with photographers, architects, designers, repairers, heritage practitioners, and with students in her teaching. DeSilvey fosters sensibilities of how to collaborate with the buildings and structures that ‘tell us what they need’, and with the living ecologies that contribute to the transformation of these decaying matters, ‘to allow them space in the future’ of these environments.

Caitlin DeSilvey is the author of *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017); a co-author of *Heritage Futures: Comparative Approaches to Natural and Cultural Heritage Practices* (UCL Press, 2020); and a co-editor of *After Discourse: Things, Affects, Ethics* (Routledge, 2020).

The intention for inviting Professor Caitlin DeSilvey to this Special Issue was to bring into the dialogue between repair and design a perspective on the complexity of the material and social unfolding of these relations as time passes and materials grow together in unplanned, and perhaps unwanted ways. Her work can inspire design practitioners to think with anticipation about possible future undoings of their designs, and also about the ethics and responsibilities involved in caring for the consequences of design processes, including repair.

As you will find, Caitlin offers a rich source of references from her collaborations, as well as delightful and provoking concepts to think with, including: ‘partial ruination’, generative and ‘ecological repair’, ‘adaptive release’, reuse and design, ‘palliative curation’, and many more that you will discover in every paragraph! These concepts are evocative in theoretical and practical ways to think about the limits of repair and decay, where social, material, affective, political, and ethical negotiations unfold to determine the best fit for each unique site and for the complex circumstances that surround it.

Her responses are underpinned by approaches to care for embedded things, ecologies, relations, and for the intentions that determine when things can be understood as broken, calling for repair, or at stages when they can be allowed to ‘gracefully decay’.

Blanca Callén (BC): Do you have an image, scene, a memory, or experience of repair to share, that you enjoyed? Or felt frustrated with?

Behind our house, there is a shed where you put the paddles for the boats, the bicycles, and the bits of material that don’t live in the house. The shed was leaking. So we put a new tar paper roof on and we were quite proud of ourselves. Then we realized, “Oh wait a minute, there’s a step we’ve missed”, the one where you put a seam of sticky black stuff along the edge where you are nailing this tar paper in. And the shed was okay, for a year. Then, this winter, we had some very, very heavy storms. So, there was quite a dramatic drip right in the center of the shed. The repair had been initially successful, but then eventually kind of catastrophic, because all it did was create little ingress points for the water. So, the most recent repair, if you can call it a repair, was me sourcing a tarpaulin, which was the size of the shed, going out on a Sunday afternoon in a rare patch of sunlight, and just attaching this tarp to the roof on top of the proper tar paper with bungee cords and cinching it in. It will now hold us through some months, perhaps, until we can repair it again.

And it is unlovely. It is actually quite ugly. But there is something about that, the way in which there is not much closure with repair, ever. And that is one of the things I quite love about it, that sense of everything is about making do and there is no master plan and things are never really finished. They are always ongoing. And so, you have these points of activity and then points of stasis. It feels like quite an honest engagement with materials rather than a sense of calling something done and walking away from it. So that is my recent repair story.

BC: Which roles have repairing (and its family of practices) played in your work? How are these everyday experiences of repair seen with your lenses as a repairer?

The most intense concentration of academic work around repair was a project that we did over ten years ago, which was comprised by the ‘Small is Beautiful’ project.¹ I worked with Steven Bond, a photographer, and James Ryan, another geographer, and we traveled around the Southwest. There are projects in our lives, that sort of come into our lives as gifts, and you have just the chemistry of a collaboration. It was very special.

Steve, James, and I, set off to find places where people were repairing and mending things; many of them were small family businesses. Then, towards the end of that project, we connected with people who were working with repair more from a design lens, with artists and makers. But those were fairly early days for that kind of repair practice in an intentional way. I think repair cafes were around, and interest from a few people, but not as present as it is now.

My engagement with repair extended academically through a collaboration with Teresa Dillon in the ‘Repair Acts Project’,² which explored repair cross-culturally with practitioners and activists from India, considering geopolitics and ethics.

One other project that I was invited to contribute to recently was *Everyday Matters*,³ published by an architecture collective looking at contemporary approaches to architecture, edited by Vanessa Grossman and Ciro Miguel. I am mentioning it because it also engaged with repair in the mode that designers and other ‘hybrid’ practitioners are doing so. In this case, it is about architects working with repair and the everyday. It is quite a lovely book, published by Ruby Press in 2021.

I suppose, when it comes to my practice, repair features prominently in my teaching (in the University of Exeter’s Department of Earth and Environmental Science, which offers a combined Bachelor of Arts and Science in Geography), where I teach a module titled “Waste

¹ <http://projects.exeter.ac.uk/celebrationofrepair/>

² <https://repairacts.net/>

³ <https://ruby-press.com/shop/everyday-matters-contemporary-approaches-to-architecture/>

and Society". I try to make students think about the big, bulky immovable systems that produce a world in which some things are wasted. I encourage them to envision a world where repair is central and where closed loops reduce the need for repair. There is a real appetite from students, at least the ones I teach at the moment, to understand where they can intervene, whether with policy or with design interventions. And I guess because I am a geographer, we also think quite a lot about repair and rehabilitation of places, so it is not just about objects, it is also about landscapes and other contexts where repair sensibility is needed.

BC: A built environment and also landscapes, you mean?

Yes, so it would be combinations, I suppose. There is a body of work that I do, which is around not repairing, but making the decision to allow places to carry on through processes of decay and disintegration, and then working with those processes. So, in teaching, we look at the spectrum of how you decide what it is called for.

I have been doing some really interesting work with architects who have been tasked with deciding how to care for an abandoned industrial site on a river, where the building was designed for the river to flow in and provide a water source for people as they were dying fabric. As a result, in its state of abandonment, the water is still there. So, they are trying to decide how to cope with the persistent wetness of this infrastructure. There are parts of this building that are partially collapsed, where the roof is falling in, and there is vegetation that has grown up. So they are trying to figure out a future for that structure, which allows for continued partial ruination and also reoccupation of elements of that site. And one of the things that they talk about is that the building tells us what it needs. It is a process of reading the structure and being attentive to the different ecologies that are there to find how to allow them space in the future of that building. Similarly, I have been approached to advise on the management of a semi-ruined castle on a Scottish Island. Some people would like to see that gracefully decay and others would like to repair and restore it. And obviously, there are politics associated with both those pathways.

BC: Considering that maybe repair copes with the aftermath of design somehow, what kinds of relations develop between repair and design practices?

I am thinking of a couple of things here. When we talked about repair with the repair shops project, very few of them self-identified

as repairers, they were like, “No, no, no, we are inventors, what we do is generative. It’s not reparative, because we can never put things back the way they were.” So that was a real resistance to people adopting the title of, “Oh, that’s just a repair,” right? Because it was always something else as well. And it always involved a set of skills that I think they felt were not acknowledged.

So, what is repair? I guess that is my question. In relation to the work that I do with conservation architects and heritage practitioners, I think one of the things I have started to think about is how, if you take a certain lens, a sensibility, even the act of not repairing physically can be seen as an act of repair. So ecological repair may be facilitating that abandonment allowing a structure to become a habitat and allowing other things to occupy that space of unfinished projects. This may relate to some of the thinking from the 1960s and the 1970s, of designing with nature and Ian McHarg. Thinking about whether that kind of design with nature could extend to actually relinquishing control, and just saying, “Okay fine, let nature design this building, because we are not going to hold it anymore. We want to see what your plans are.” So that kind of extended agency, where you accept that you are collaborating around design, and what a future may look like for an object or a structure is quite interesting to me.

That idea of generative repair was, actually, the skill that is applied to withhold intervention and allow the repair process to happen. That relates to the work that I do more often, where adaptive reuse architecturally sits in relation to sort of adaptive design where you would work with that kind of process of ongoing change and reimagining use, and redesign, and renewal.

Melisa Duque: You mentioned before that you work with not repairing and with examples of letting go. It made me think about the limits of repair, to open up space for new versions, as you said, and also because sometimes repair could be complicit with systems that we might even want to transform.

Yes. And so, assuming that repair is always good, sometimes I think repair can detract, or it can be maybe more inclusive and easier to achieve balanced relationships if you choose not to repair. I mean, this is a question that comes up often in relation to *Curated Decay* (2017), people ask me about the ethics of allowing decay to happen in an urban setting. For example, where there was more at stake, and people

were inhabiting that place, and actually, the sort of social good was going to come from reuse and repair. I never would have intended the argument to be used to justify the decay of places that have a function that could contribute to society. That was not what I set out to do. But I guess thinking about how the argument got used that way, helped me think about the limits to decay, and there are limits to repair too. They are going to be appropriate in certain contexts and not in others, and being able to sit with a place or an object and try and understand what is appropriate, and then bring others in on that. I suppose it is partly the skill that is involved there.

MD: It makes me think about the impulse to repair as an impulse to care. But that sits alongside the nature of decay that as much as we want to contain, is maintained in the liveliness of things.

That is something that we have thought about, yes. I recently finished a project here with the National Trust and Historic England. The latter is responsible for heritage regulation and policy in the UK, and the National Trust manages a lot of historic countryside, assets, and structures. During the project, we were sometimes puzzled about how to engage people with processes of change, transformation, and decay, while still allowing them to have that experience of care. We are particularly talking about things like coastal heritage structures, which are threatened by erosion and sea level rise. So, one option is to “let go.” And what we have been trying to figure out is not how to let go of these places, but how to hold on to them very lightly so that you are still caring for them as they go through that transformation.

We have developed a speculative concept that we are calling ‘adaptive release’, as an alternative to adaptive reuse. You intentionally will release this structure or this landscape to those pathways that are unpredictable, and to a certain extent unmanageable, relinquishing a certain amount of control. But the way that you stay close to those places, and still care for them is through trying to monitor and learn with that change while understanding it. So perhaps, as the structure falls into the sea, we can see, you know, its internal structure in a way that tells us about the histories of the materials that were used to build it. But then, as those materials are released, they are providing a habitat that animals and plants are taking advantage of in this marine edge. Really insisting that the story doesn’t stop because you let go—you can continue to hold it. And that is also recognizing that sometimes partial

repair and stabilization will be necessary. So, it is not this sort of purist all-or-nothing approach, release or not release, but a much more negotiated process where you try and involve people in understanding when it is appropriate to hold on to something a little bit longer so that you can maybe document it or recover information from it. And then you have a moment of release, where you acknowledge that.

BC: I suppose that as you explain it, it also implies a kind of quite eco-systemic vision of decay. Or maybe the end of life is the beginning of a new life, from a systemic perspective.

Yes, that is what we are hoping to foster. But I think it is very challenging. It involves trying to figure out how to bring different niche expertise together (e.g., ecologists, conservation architects) so that they can stand next to each other and explain what they see. You can theorize about this and say, “what if,” but, having individuals making decisions about specific places, and being able to share that sensibility, is really essential.

MD: Besides concepts, materiality, and sites, repair is also helpful to engage in conversations about people’s affective and sensible worlds. The material becomes the point where those affective worlds can be negotiated. There is something about repair that catalyzes that.

Yes, that is true. People’s attachments to things in places are incredibly profound and often very contradictory. You know, it is not something you can map neatly.

MD: This is why I found so helpful your proposal about ‘holding while releasing’, as a conceptual and practical negotiation, instead of abruptly ‘letting go’, facilitating transitions without complete detachment.

BC: Like accompanying to die. I don’t know if in certain religions or certain spaces, accompanying the sick to die is a work.

MD: Palliative?

In one of the chapters of *Curated Decay*, I wrote about my grandmother’s death in relation to the story of the sort of last days of a

lighthouse. So we started talking about palliative curation in relation to the use of built structures. And I think what was interesting about that story was the tensions around how to hold my grandmother's last days. There was disagreement in the family about what was appropriate. And it was uncannily similar to the disagreement that was going on about this lighthouse structure on the Suffolk coast.

But when I wrote that, it was interesting, because it made some people very uncomfortable. It is not an easy discussion to have, assuming ideas about palliative care can be extended to things and buildings. Years after I wrote that chapter, I met a guy who was a palliative care nurse who was working with extending some of his practice as a nurse into other fields. So, this discussion is happening, but in a careful and limited way only, because it can be quite difficult for people to think about those attachments to people extending to attachments to things.

MD: So that is one of the wonders of repair and how it allows us to have these conversations about death and life and transformation across disciplines. Bringing in now the questions that we asked eight practitioners from other disciplines in the postcards section, how do you think damage, brokenness, and repair could be defined?

Whether something is damaged or broken, has meaning only in relation to whether someone has intention in relation to that thing, right? There are beautiful broken things in the world. And if you don't need to use them, if it is a broken cup, and it doesn't need to hold water, then its brokenness is not broken. So, there is something about intentionality concerning that question that feels relevant to me only because I think it is not absolute. It is always about a relation. So, it is damaged in relation to this intention that I have for it. Therefore, it needs fixing. But there will always be another path for that thing, in the state that it is in, in which it would be defined as not damaged. Equally with repair, if you have made that designation, that something is damaged, or broken, then the reactive repair is the act of repairing the relation, not the thing. So, making it functional, again, for such a purpose, but not necessarily having the repair focus on some sort of physical state that the thing returns to, but repairing your relation to it, so it can function in your life the way that you need it to. That is why it might mean different things to different people. So, repair may be defined in very different ways by different people, in relation to the same object.

MD: What could be some of the methods of repair?

The methods are just being willing to sit with the problem that you have defined, as you have defined something as worthy of repair. This is where the work with the small repair shop folks was illuminating because they had lots of different methods and processes, and they loved the discernment that was involved in figuring out what was going to be most appropriate for that particular thing, and that particular problem. It was absolutely about the relationship with the materials, and then with its future intended use. You had to sense what that object was asking of you. So, the skills are more about flexibility and material literacy, knowing how the properties of things would respond in the process, to recognize and create the repair pathways. That would be my sentiment.

BC: As a geographer who has been working on repair, what would you ask a designer?

I would be curious to ask a designer, whether when faced with a designed object, they could unmake it. Whether it is possible to rewind the clock and bring that made thing back to its pre-made state, by perhaps separating it into its constituent parts. Getting away from the fetishization of the design object and trying to think about materials, processes, and how it arrived at the state that it is at and where it might be going next. Or whether you could tell a story about where all the materials that have been assembled in that object came from and what their histories are. □