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Case Report

Forgetting intangible values and community: The case of heritage conservation policies in Cuenca, Ecuador

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between heritage, conservation and tourism has determined countless actions on the historic centers of several cities in the world. In Latin America, governmental entities have set guidelines for urban heritage interventions through plans, programs and a variety of projects implemented in recent decades. The predominant emphasis of these actions has been on safeguarding tangible aspects of heritage, adhering to international conservation guidelines, and promoting tourism as a means to stimulate sustainable local development. However, a critical point of these efforts lies in the neglect of adverse social consequences imposed on local residents and communities. In this paper we consider a representative case: the heritage area of Cuenca in Ecuador, where an intervention took place starting with the UNESCO Declaration of the case study in 1999 until 2019. We characterize the process, analyze the incidence of planning instruments and identify the attributes that were enhanced as well as those that were suppressed through a historical review of current plans and executed projects. The results reveal the persistence of a conservationist and orthodox vision of heritage, which leads to the displacement of vulnerable groups. Hence, it is imperative to reevaluate intervention policies in the urban heritage context of Latin American cities like Cuenca.

1. Introduction

The definition of heritage is based on the idea of an exceptional value and the importance of preserving it for future generations. Entities such as UNESCO and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) have contributed to the theory and promotion of the conservation of national heritage. In this process, two types of heritage have been identified: natural and cultural; urban heritage is part of the latter (Alardín, 2016).

The origins of the modern notion of heritage, formulated in Europe after the French Revolution, aimed to protect monuments and buildings of historical or artistic value (Gosse, 1997). This was followed by the creation of entities to safeguard monuments, and buildings of architectural and artistic significance (UNESCO, 2014). Although these assets had a clear immaterial background, it did not appear as a value to be preserved. So, this approach to conservation sought to protect the tangible heritage as an immutable entity, with no possibility of modification despite the dynamic characteristic of social demands (Flores, 2003). Thus, heritage action arose from its understanding as unique but inert value, or as a valuable but static cultural component.

Already in the second half of the 20th century, Lefebvre (1969) highlighted the role of social relations, 'urban life' and the power of

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transformation exercised by citizens in urban space, above and beyond its physical characteristics, and proposed to overcome the understanding of urban space as a mere container of buildings, population, and productive activities. Lefebvre emphasized the dynamic and heterogeneous quality of urban space, where its inhabitants transform it, perceive it, and endow it with meaning, and thus separated it from the objective approach of Cartesian thinking.

The international entities in charge of promoting the conservation and enhancement of heritage have the objective of protecting a 'common heritage of humanity'. However, they also exert pressure on national and local governments by demanding the conservation of built heritage under international standards that barely consider its residents and public space users, and in Latin America, in particular, these are often population groups with low purchasing power (Delgadillo, 2008). Fortunately, in the last decade a tendency to reposition the importance of the community has arisen within these same institutions (Tweed & Sutherland, 2007), conceptualizing it as *intangible cultural heritage* and/or *modest heritage* (Duan et al., 2022). Notwithstanding, in practice these entities continue to play a fundamental role in legitimizing heritage from a logic that measures spaces in terms of their physical characteristics, of some static exceptional values, minimizing the intangible or modest heritage components.

Therefore, efforts directed at the preservation of cultural heritage frequently demonstrate undue emphasis on specific elements, namely the preservation of physical attributes, adherence to international guidelines related to the conservation of structures, or the revitalization of public spaces, and the formulation of tourism development strategies. This narrow focus derives mainly from a predominantly techno-scientific and economic point of view, often resulting in cultural heritage protection interventions that do not take into account the associated social dimensions. Consequently, these interventions fail to recognize the potential adverse social consequences that they may impose on local residents and communities, including effects on their perceptions, emotions, values, sense of belonging, and daily routines.

In this context, the main concern of this research refers to the evolution of the concept of heritage and its ramifications within the field of urban planning. Traditionally, urban planning has focused its efforts on the conservation of historical monuments and architectural buildings, relegating intangible facets and social dynamics. Despite the perceptible change towards a more socially oriented paradigm at the end of the 20th century, it is observed that both international organizations and municipal authorities persist in placing the same emphasis on the preservation of physical heritage and the promotion of tourism, frequently neglecting the critical dimensions of social heritage and community well-being.

2. Theory

2.1. Thematization of urban heritage

Urry (1990) argues that nostalgia for the past has become one of the values of contemporary society and that this condition has been exploited in tourist experiences associated with urban heritage. The conservation or reconstruction of patrimonial buildings has often derived in the substitution of a dynamic urban life by a static space, where inhabitants are expelled and the tourist becomes protagonist (Borja, 2013). This transformation of urban heritage into a tourist product involves the enhancement of certain attributes and the oblivion of others, through the construction of an image that complies with the canons of the tourist industry. This image highlights only certain heritage values, while omitting and expelling aspects that are less attractive to a culture with nostalgia for the past and lover of beauty, which is a consequence of the bulk creation of commercialized and neutralizing images, imagined on our behalf (Pallasma, 2014).

Thus, the urban heritage space is transformed. The *places of memory* (Waldenfels, 2009) mutate in their attempt to remain, to be remembered, and give way to the construction of an image that shows only a part of reality, those exceptional values that hide or omit the less attractive spaces for the tourist. This tension evidences the coexistence of two conflicting landscapes: the formal and the informal landscapes of the city, where the latter is the product of spontaneous cultural forces (Hough, 1995).

The thematization of heritage is linked to the urban phenomenon described by Diez (1998), where economic interests determine urban planning decisions, based on the desires of the consumer and not of the citizen. It consists of a premeditated operation, which in the case of urban heritage goes hand in hand with the notion of conservation. To this end, urban space acquires the characteristics of the postcard that can best be commercialized. In this exercise the real, every day and dynamic reality is replaced by a marketable product, the heritage thematization, through a mimesis of the values appreciated by tourism.

2.2. Critical perspectives on urban heritage conservation

The thematization of urban heritage corresponds to a validated vision of heritage conservation, aligned with internationally recognized conservation policies aimed at promoting tourism. Numerous studies emphasize the necessity of adopting critical approaches to challenge prevailing perspectives. For example, Harrison (2013) criticizes the dominant focus on tangible and monumental aspects of heritage and calls for a more holistic understanding that encompasses intangible elements, social practices, and diverse community experiences. He delves into the power dynamics involved in the creation, interpretation, and management of heritage, shedding light on the roles of institutions and governments. Similarly, Meskell (2018) examines the underlying ideologies and power dynamics within the dominant frameworks supported by the World Heritage system. The author highlights how this program, despite its mission to preserve cultural and natural heritage, becomes entangled in political agendas, tourism development, and economic interests. Consequently, World Heritage sites often serve as symbols of national pride but face challenges related to their conservation, commodification, and exploitation, which tend to overshadow concerns about social justice and inclusion.

Regarding heritage impact assessment, there are concerns about the limitations of the current guidelines. Authors such as Patiwaal

et al. (2019) argue that the existing model often fails to capture the multifaceted nature of the impacts of conservation interventions and lacks a robust assessment framework. They emphasize the need for a holistic approach that considers the social, economic, and cultural dimensions. Special emphasis is placed on inclusion and interdisciplinary collaboration, involving local communities in decision-making processes. This approach is proposed by several researchers, such as Skrede and Hølleland (2018), who explore the application of critical discourse analysis and critical realism to heritage studies. These analytical frameworks allow researchers to analyze the language, narratives, and power dynamics surrounding heritage. They stress the importance of considering multiple perspectives and voices, as different groups may have diverse interpretations and interests.

Additionally, a fundamental aspect of heritage is its relationship with communities (Smith & Waterton, 2012). Taking a collaborative and inclusive approach to heritage means actively engaging local communities and reducing excessive emphasis on physical attributes that reinforce existing hierarchies. Therefore, community participation in heritage projects could help address power imbalances. Furthermore, it is crucial to challenge established norms and assumptions about heritage and advocate for more democratic and inclusive practices (Lowenthal, 2015). This involves reassessing dominant approaches, including diverse voices, acknowledging power dynamics, and embracing a holistic understanding of heritage that encompasses intangible attributes, community engagement, and social justice considerations. By challenging established frameworks and promoting more inclusive practices, a deeper and more nuanced appreciation of our shared past can be fostered.

2.3. The role of public policies in Latin America

Local and national governments are key actors in heritage conservation due to their substantial urban planning competencies (Borja, 2013), and the possibility of generating public policies that promote social justice. However, within these bodies there are political interests, as well as pressures from heritage protection entities and economic powers.

Although the relationship between heritage, tourism and gentrification is part of a global process, in Latin America it has specific characteristics that have been increasingly studied. A review of these studies shows the cardinal role of public policies, which have implemented renovation strategies in heritage areas under arguments such as propitiating tax revenues, generating jobs, improving the quality of life, recovering urban functions, and achieving competitiveness (Leyva, 2015). Public policies have had a direct and fundamental influence in cases such as Mexico City, where a series of deregulatory measures were implemented, allowing the elimination of rent protection and facilitating the commercialization of land and the entry of real estate capital; or Buenos Aires, where policies were based on a type of urban entrepreneurship that favored public-private alliances, from which the real estate sector ended up winning (Díaz, 2015).

However, the policies with the greatest impact have been those that protect heritage under a conservationist discourse associated with the guidelines of supranational entities such as UNESCO, which have derived in protection regulations. In Bogota, these made investment in heritage areas less attractive, accelerating their deterioration and increasing the rent gap, boosting their gentrification nature, and encouraging a subsequent massive influx of capital. In Lima, the failure of conservationist policies gave way to an aggressive real estate market intervention. In Cartagena de Indias, the regulations impacted on the citizens' identity and imaginary and generated broad acceptance (Díaz, 2015), invisibilizing the displacement of previous inhabitants.

Another key aspect of the phenomenon in the region has been the *social cleansing* and criminalization of the informal economy promoted by the above public policies. This has been dramatically demonstrated in Bogota, since 1998, by the police persecution, confiscation and repression promoted under arguments such as the regeneration of public space and the elimination of crime. The social conflicts triggered by this type of policies have brought to discussion fundamental concepts such as the right to work versus the demand for public space (Leyva, 2015).

2.4. Cuenca's historic center as a case study

The heritage area of Cuenca, an intermediate city in Ecuador, is an emblematic case study, as given its scale, the conservation and pro-tourist policies designed for its historic center had a significant impact on the entire city. The case study shows several of the characteristics described in the literature review about the construction of an ideal image through various interventions in its built heritage, which have helped to position it in international rankings of urban tourism.

Within the network of intermediate Ecuadorian cities, Cuenca is the most important. Its historic center, located next to the Tomebamba River in the heart of the Andean valley, at 2550 m above sea level, corresponds to the urban limits by the middle of the last century, when Cuenca began a rapid urban expansion (Hermida et al., 2015). The Decentralized Autonomous Government (GAD) of the Municipality of Cuenca established the current boundaries of the historic center based on the area declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, and adding a border that is considered a transition zone, yielding a total of 482 ha (GAD Municipal de Cuenca, 2010) as depicted in Fig. 1.

Between 1950 and 2015, the urban area of Cuenca grew from 288 to 7248 ha, while the population density decreased from 139 to 46 inhabitants/hectare, going from a concentrated city to a rather dispersed one. In this period, with the transformation of the country's productive model, several factories were installed northwest of the historic city, peripheral neighborhoods emerged (Hermida et al., 2015), the urbanization of the territory accelerated, and the value of the land increased considerably.

The Urban Development Plan for the Metropolitan Area of Cuenca (PDUAMC) delimited the historic center in 1982, highlighting its colonial churches and convents and a civil architecture of the nineteenth century as a unit of heritage value. This resulted in its declaration as National Cultural Heritage that same year and the issuance of a special ordinance for the protection of heritage buildings. This plan incorporated the notion of heritage into the imaginary of Cuenca and raised, for the first time, the need to preserve it

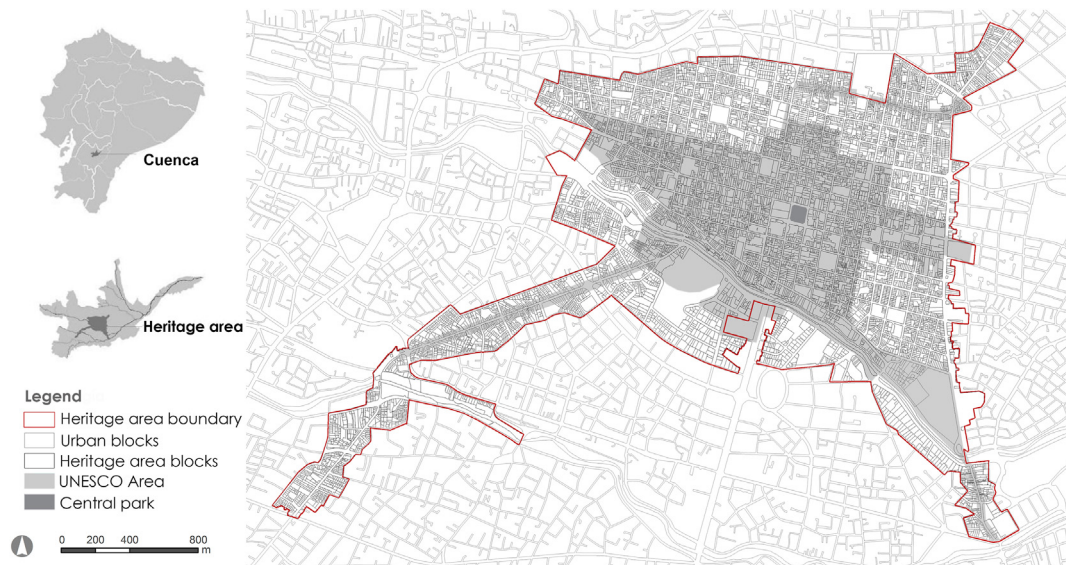


Fig. 1. Historic center of Cuenca.
Source: Own elaboration.



Fig. 2. Aerial photo of historic center; Immaculate Conception Cathedral; Tomebamba River next to the Broken Bridge.
Source: IDB, 2013; Astudillo, 2020.

(Cabrera-Jara, 2019).

With this background and in consideration of the 1996 Regional Tourism Development Plan -which highlighted the landscape value of the historic center-international recognition of Cuenca's heritage values were sought. In 1998, in a joint effort with the University of Cuenca, a dossier for the nomination to the UNESCO World Heritage List was prepared (Cardoso, 2017).

The dossier highlighted as exceptional values of the Historic Center of Cuenca the following (Fig. 2): its capacity to offer a historical, urban, architectural and landscape ensemble unique in the Latin American context, one of the most reliable and concrete urban realizations of 'entroterra',¹ developed from the Spanish dispositions; its relationship with nature, constant throughout its history, the dialogue of the city with the mountain range that surrounds it, and *El Barranco del Tomebamba* kept in the collective memory, as a highly

¹ This term was used in the "Laws of the Indies" to refer to those cities founded in the interior of the continent, for which they lacked a port.

representative image of this city (I. [Municipalidad de Cuenca, 2017](#)).

The nomination was accepted on December 1, 1999 by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee and gave international recognition to the exceptional values of the Cuenca heritage area and the implementation of actions aimed at its protection and enhancement. [Cardoso \(2017\)](#) argues that the Cultural Heritage of Humanity brand, to which Cuenca was ascribed from that moment, fostered the development of local initiatives, the understanding of heritage as a resource and its acceptance as a historic urban landscape ([López et al., 2020](#)).

3. Methodology

Taking the historic center of Cuenca as the spatial framework of the study and focusing on the two decades after its declaration by UNESCO, a three-phase methodology has been designed. The objective is to examine the historical evolution of planning instruments in relation to the development of the concept of heritage, their role in urban transformations and their interaction with the tourism industry. The purpose of this analysis is to identify the main planning challenges faced by cities like Cuenca in relation to their heritage areas. First, we characterized the history of planning in Cuenca, then we analyzed the current planning instruments and third, concluded with a review of the impacts of the intervention projects executed within the time frame.

3.1. Phase 1. historical review

This corresponds to a brief characterization of the history of planning in the case study prior to the time frame of analysis, that is, from the Spanish foundation to 1999. This phase serves to understand the historical context. As a result, five instruments were identified and characterized, ([Table 1](#)).

The manuscripts found were examined to characterize their main contributions and to structure a brief history of planning in Cuenca. Finally, the notions and assumptions about heritage and tourism contained in each were established in order to understand and contextualize the current situation of planning in the case study.

3.2. Phase 2. analysis of planning instruments

During this stage we identified the planning instruments - government policies, plans and programs - related to heritage conservation and the implementation of tourism, approved and implemented from 1999 to 2019 in the study area. A template was designed to record the relevant aspects of each instrument: authors and managers, area of action and expected duration (horizon year), dates of preparation and approval, vision or approach to heritage and tourism, derived plans and projects, and observations.

All official documents of public access (four plans and two ordinances) were digitized and the content of the files was analyzed qualitatively through thematic coding, identifying, and conceptualizing the meanings contained in each text with respect to the policies and models used on heritage and tourism. We used the Atlas.ti software to elaborate conceptual maps and content trees for the comparative analysis of documents, according to five categories: tangible heritage, intangible heritage, tourism, derived projects, and prevention of negative effects such as displacement of uses and public space users.

3.3. Phase 3. incidence of the interventions

Finally, the interventions implemented in the heritage area during the two decades of study were mapped. A total of 55 projects were identified in public spaces and 40 in buildings for public use ([Fig. 3](#)).

These 95 projects were characterized through the review of the technical reports provided by the municipality and, if necessary, through informal interviews with the authors of the projects to obtain data about interventions. The effects of reconfiguration, whether positive or negative, were identified through press analysis and informal interviews with merchants and neighborhood leaders. The repositories of the Cuenca newspapers (El Mercurio, La Tarde and El Tiempo) were searched from 1999 to 2021. In order to find news about each of the projects, then relevant information was systematized. Informal interviews were conducted only when the information collected about effects was insufficient. All this data was recorded in specially designed data sheets that organized the information in the following sections: a) general: name, area, location, heritage categorization, historical overview and historical photographs; b) about the intervention: justification, design and construction dates, type of intervention on the heritage, authors, financing, program, architectural plans, photographs of the process, if it complies with the justification and with the ordinance; and c) about effects caused: current uses, direct beneficiaries, awards or recognitions, conflicts generated with their magnitude, and displaced uses and public space users.

4. Results

4.1. Beginnings of urban planning and the notion of heritage

The contents explained in this subtitle correspond to the main findings of the Methodological Phase 1. Historical Review ([Table 3](#)).

The concept of heritage, and therefore of its conservation, emerged in Cuenca gradually and the milestone that marked its beginning was 1947, with the drafting of the first Regulatory Plan of the city, by the Uruguayan architect Gilberto Gatto Sobral. This document delimited the government, banking and commercial zones that later became known as the Historic Center of Cuenca ([Fig. 4a](#)). The second urban plan came to light in 1971, under the direction of architect Hugo Castillo Marín, and was called the Urban Development

Table 1
Planning instruments identified in the historical review.

Code	Name of Planning Instrument	Scope	Year of approval
PLANS			
PH_001	City Regulatory Plan	Urban	1947
PH_002	Urban Development Master Plan	Urban	1971
PH_003	Urban Development Plan of the Metropolitan Area of Cuenca (PDUAMC)	Urban	1982
REGULATIONS			
PH_004	Temporary Regulatory Ordinance for Urban Development Control	Urban	1979
PH_005	Municipal Ordinance for the Control and Administration of Cuenca's Historic Center	Urban	1983

Source: Own elaboration.

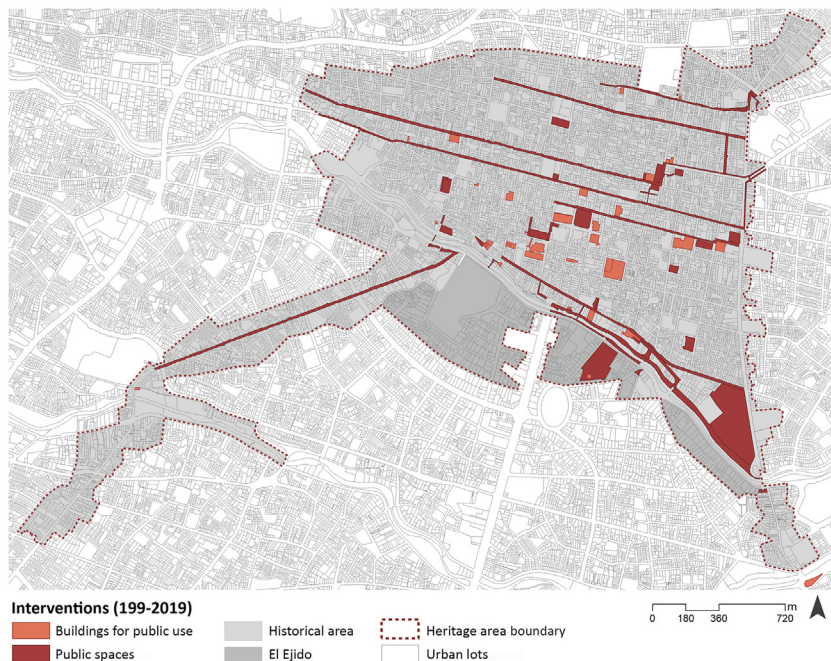


Fig. 3. Intervention projects identified in public space (55) and buildings for public use (40).
Source: Own elaboration.

Table 2
Planning instruments between 1999 and 2019.

Code	Name of Planning Instrument	Reach	Year of approval
PLANS			
PL_001	Development and Land Management Plan (PDOT) of Azuay Updated, 2015–2030	Provincial	2015
PL_002	Development and Land Management Plan (PDOT) of Cuenca Canton, 2011–2019	Cantonal	2011
PL_003	Strategic Tourism Development Plan for Cuenca and its Area of Influence.	Cantonal	2011
PL_004	Revitalization Plan for the Historic Center	Urban	Not approved
ORDINANCES			
OR_001	Reform, update, complementation and codification of the ordinance that sanctions the Land Management Plan of the Canton of Cuenca: Determinants for land use and occupation.	Cantonal	2003
OR_002	Ordinance for the Management and Conservation of Historical and Heritage Areas of Cuenca Canton.	Cantonal	2010

Source: Own elaboration.

Master Plan. This divided the historic center into an administrative and a residential area. Both documents contributed significantly to the delimitation and characterization of what was later identified as Cuenca's heritage area. However, neither document presented a notion or conceptualization of heritage, much less of tourism.

It was not until 1982, with the Urban Development Plan of the Metropolitan Area of Cuenca (PDUAMC), that a heritage value was recognized in the historic center, proposing its preservation and conservation, and institutionalizing the discourse about built heritage.

Table 3
Planning instruments identified in the historical review.

Methodological phase	Objective	Variables	Method	Sources	Expected results
Phase 1. Historical review	Contextualize the history of urban planning in Cuenca, from its Spanish foundation to the beginning of the study period 1999	Definitions, assumptions, proposed treatments and regulations on heritage and tourism	Systematic literature review Documentary analysis	Urban plans and urban regulations, applied from the Spanish foundation to 1999 (Table 1)	Brief history on the treatment of heritage and tourism in the planning of Cuenca.
Phase 2. Analysis of planning instruments	Analyze the relationship between heritage and tourism that arises from planning in Cuenca, in the time frame of study (1999–2019)	Treatment of tangible and intangible heritage, tourism policy, derived projects, prevention of negative effects	Index card method Discourse analysis	Urban plans and urban regulations, approved and implemented between 1999 and 2019 (Table 1)	Identification and description of the institutional position towards tourism, heritage and their relationships.
Phase 3. Incidence of the interventions	Identify the interventions in public space and public buildings, carried out in the study area between 1999 and 2019. Analyze their main effects.	Type of interventions, justification, financing, complies with justification and with regulations, current uses, direct beneficiaries, awards, conflicts generated, displaced public space users/ uses	Documentary analysis Informal interviews	Written press, technical reports of the projects Authors of the proposals Merchants and neighborhood leaders	Characterization of the implemented interventions and identification of their main effects, both positive and negative

Source: Own elaboration.

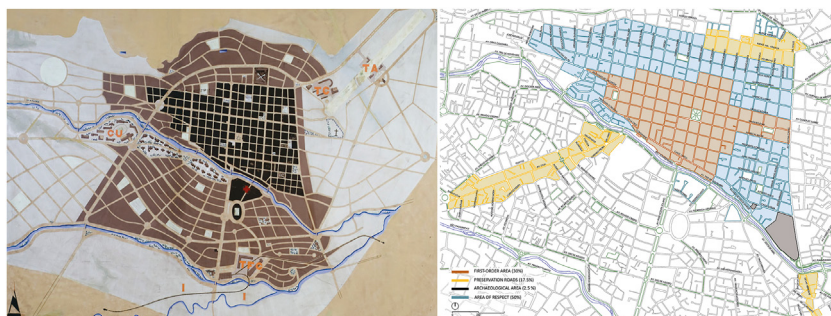


Fig. 4. Left. Cuenca Regulatory Plan of 1947 (the historic city is delimited in dark brown). Source: Vanegas et al., 2020, p. 55. Right. Historic Center of Cuenca in 1982, with its four delimited minor areas.

Source: Cabrera, 2008, p. 108.

This generated, on the one hand, the 1983 regulations which restricted uses, occupation, and heights on a city scale, hierarchized the heritage area by zones and delimited the archaeological area. On the other hand, it led to a series of projects of total and partial conservation and restructuring of the built heritage (Barrera et al., 2008). The Cuenca heritage area was defined with a total of 325 ha, divided into four smaller areas (Municipality of Municipiodes Cuenca, 1983), as shown in Fig. 4b.

In 1982, the INPC also declared the Historic Center of Cuenca as Cultural Heritage of the Nation and delegated its protection to the “*Ilustre Municipalidad de Cuenca*” (today Autonomous Decentralized Municipal Government of Cuenca), an institution that created the Historic Center Commission (Cardoso, 2017). Note that this declaration arose from the efforts that the Civic Action Committee, formed in the 1970s in response to the demolition of churches, convents, and other historic buildings, carried out at the local and national level (Mancero, 2012).

From 1982 until today, the Historical Center Commission acts within the framework of the Urban Development Plan of the City, controls the territory delimited by the Ordinance approved by the Illustrious Municipal Council and authorizes all interventions on heritage buildings (I. Municipality of Municipiodes Cuenca, 2017). In 1983, this body replaced the Temporary Regulatory Ordinance for the Control of Urban Development approved in 1979 -which among other measures prohibited the demolition of historic buildings-with the Municipal Ordinance for the Control and Administration of the historic center of Cuenca, a norm that established criteria for intervention and permitted uses (I. Municipality of Municipiodes Cuenca, 1983). This regulatory body was in force until 2010 and had a significant influence on the interventions implemented in the heritage area of Cuenca since its approval.

Based on the first planning instruments and on the national declaration, the local government and entities related to cultural heritage began a campaign for the revaluation and conservation of heritage assets in the Historic Center of Cuenca. These efforts focused on the built heritage, giving priority to the tangible and particularly monumental aspects of the heritage.

4.1.1. UNESCO declaration

The period following the national declaration did not present modifications in terms of regulations or planning until 1999, the year in which the Historic Center of Cuenca was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. This fact implied a series of modifications on a local scale, both in the prescriptive, physical, and symbolic aspects. To understand the scope of this declaration and its implications, it is necessary to review some of its antecedents. Until 1999, Ecuador had inscribed three sites on the World Heritage List: in 1978, the City of Quito and the Galapagos Islands, and in 1983, Sangay National Park; the first as Cultural Heritage and the latter two as Natural Heritage. Between 1992 and 1994, ICOMOS had highlighted the value of two more sites within the country with the potential to be incorporated into the World Heritage List: Zaruma and Cuenca. However, it was in 1996, during the first mayoralty of the architect Fernando Cordero, that the negotiations with UNESCO began. At first, it was proposed to manage the patrimonialization of the El Barranco sector, south of the historic center, through the creation of the El Barranco Foundation, which after the UNESCO declaration oversaw a series of intervention projects in the heritage area (Mancero, 2012).

In this context, in 1998 the Municipality of Cuenca decided to present the dossier for the inclusion of the heritage area of the city in the Heritage List. The Municipality and the University of Cuenca participated in the elaboration of this text (Cobos, 2012), under unfavorable conditions since there was no updated inventory of heritage assets and there was no management plan (Mancero, 2012).

In the first instance, the dossier proposed a total of 224 ha as the area to be declared, distributed as follows: Historic Center (178 ha), Special Areas (30 ha) and Archaeological Area (16 ha). This delimitation did not include the Area of Respect contemplated in the 1983 ordinance but did define a Special Protection Area with 1837 ha (I. *Municipalidad de Cuenca*, 2017) (Fig. 1). This document collected in detail the different historical, urban, landscape and cultural values, which made the heritage area of Cuenca an exceptional site (Fig. 2). However, at the time of its declaration as a Cultural Heritage of Humanity, UNESCO only highlighted exceptional values in three of its seven evaluation criteria:

“Criterion (ii): Cuenca illustrates the perfect implantation of the principles of urban planning of the Renaissance in the Americas.

Criterion (iv): The successful fusion of the different societies and cultures of Latin America is symbolized in a striking manner by the layout and townscape of Cuenca.

Criterion (v): *Cuenca is an outstanding example of a planned in land Spanish colonial town.*” (UNESCO, 2020, p. 1).

Although the file was submitted in June 1998, UNESCO issued some recommendations to the document, referring to the need to expand and regulate the protection zone and update the total inventory of the historic center, which delayed the process for a year (Mancero, 2012). Finally, in December 1999 the declaration was obtained, undoubtedly a transcendental moment for the city, which also demanded the updating of planning instruments and regulatory bodies. Immediately, complementary norms arose, such as the Regulations for the use of color and materials in the buildings of the historic center in 2000 and gave way to the Ordinance for the management and conservation of the historic and heritage areas of the canton of Cuenca in 2010, and the updating of the Categorization of the heritage value of buildings and public spaces in 2015, which replaced the documents prepared in 1983, in force until then.

Compliance with these municipal regulations has been controlled by the Citizen Guard -since its creation in 2011- with full functions to exercise surveillance and control in public spaces, mainly in the heritage area of Cuenca. Since its creation, this agency has expelled those popular practices or those linked to the informal economy, considered uncivic and recognized as “pre-criminal acts”. This means, it has not pursued illegal acts but those considered illegitimate, generally related to the popular classes (García, 2015).

The UNESCO declaration not only had repercussions on those planning instruments with a direct bearing on the heritage area, but also on the rest of the plans at different scales and on the way of understanding urban heritage and its relationship with the tourism industry, as can be seen in the dossier itself. This text highlights the importance of tourism by pointing to Cuenca as its main axis in the region and referring in its sections 3d, 4i and 4j to policies, programs, and projects not only for the valorization of the property, but also for tourism promotion (I. *Municipalidad de Cuenca*, 2017).

4.2. Relationship between heritage, conservation, and tourism

The contents explained in this subtitle correspond to the main findings of the Methodological Phase 2. Analysis of planning instruments (Table 3). In this phase, five planning instruments were identified that meet the forementioned characteristics, which - with the exception of the reform of the cantonal ordinance - entered into force in 2010. To these we added a text not yet approved, but directly related to the scope of the study (Table 2). Thus, six planning instruments were analyzed. Of these, four are plans -one provincial, two cantonal and one urban-, and two correspond to ordinances -both of cantonal scope-. On the other hand, most of them were managed by the corresponding governmental entities: Provincial Government of Azuay and Municipal Government of Cuenca, except for the last two plans, which were managed in the first case by the Ministry of Tourism and in the second with the help of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB).

The documents collected and systematized were analyzed in Atlas.ti. This analysis showed that there are two approaches to cultural heritage in the territorial planning of Cuenca. On the one hand, the plans define heritage within their theoretical background, from a broad and inclusive vision, as those material and non-material works resulting from artists, architects, musicians, writers, and scholars, as well as those anonymous, arising from the popular soul (*Gobierno Provincial del Gobierno Provincial del Azuay*, 2015, p. 118). We speak of tangible and intangible heritage (*GAD Municipal de Cuenca*, 2011, p. 94), understanding the tangible as the set of archaeological remains, to which the heritage buildings are added (p. 22–23), while the intangible comprises the ancestral knowledge, customs, heritage festivals, rituals, knowledge of medicinal plants, gastronomy, children's games, craft knowledge present throughout the territory (p. 22).

Additionally, there is a second approach to the notion of cultural heritage evidenced in the ordinances and the more operative statements of the plans. It focuses its attention on the material, particularly on the architectural and monumental, relegating the

intangible heritage and more modest aspects of the tangible heritage itself. This is demonstrated by the two ordinances analyzed, which seek to regulate actions on architecture and public space. They begin by marking the limits of the heritage area and its zones, and then define the permitted uses, the heritage categorization of its properties and, based on this, the compatible interventions (I. Municipality of [Municipalidadde Cuenca, 2003](#); [GAD Municipal de Cuenca, 2010](#)). Both ordinances establish norms exclusively for interventions on built heritage.

The theoretical statement of the planning instruments reviewed appeals to more contemporary definitions of cultural heritage, which highlight the importance of the tangible and the intangible, the monumental and the everyday. However, when this statement is translated into strategies and norms, it is pigeonholed in the traditional vision of heritage centered on the built and monumental, so that in practice it is the latter that has defined the specific actions of planning.

A second relevant finding is related to the lines of action with respect to heritage. In this sense, all the instruments analyzed coincide and conform to the principle of conservation and non-alteration. Thus, the plans define objectives such as preserving the diversity of cultural heritage ([Gobierno Provincial del GobiernoProvincial del Azuay, 2015](#), p. 210), conserving the historical-cultural heritage (Tourism Municipal Foundation for [FundaciónMunicipalTurismopara Cuenca, 2011](#), p. 18), or seeking a balance between the protection of historical-heritage value and new interventions ([GAD Municipal de Cuenca, 2015](#), p. 12). Under these premises, the ordinances focus on restricting uses and characteristics of occupation in the historic center to preserve the architectural heritage as unaltered as possible (I. Municipality of [Municipalidadde Cuenca, 2003](#); [GAD Municipal de Cuenca, 2010](#)).

A second line of action present in all plans stresses the importance of knowing and valuing tangible and intangible heritage ([GAD Municipal de Cuenca, 2011](#), p. 94). Thus, the 2011 cantonal PDOT proposed a Cultural Information System (SIC), while the 2015 provincial PDOT referred to a series of local inventories on heritage assets ([Gobierno Provincial del GobiernoProvincial del Azuay, 2015](#), p. 119). Despite the initial attempts to include intangible heritage, these documents have prioritized from their beginnings the registration of the built, such as that of 1975, which included only intangible assets, until the most recent of 2009, which did consider intangible representations, but ended up becoming a diagnosis of buildings that highlighted the need for funding from the city of Cuenca for the preservation of its tangible heritage ([Cobos, 2012](#), p. 40). This last inventory determined the intervention of the INPC in a set of actions for the conservation and maintenance of religious buildings in the historic center of the city, in the last decade.

A third finding shows that, as an attitude towards heritage, the plans point out the importance on the one hand of its conservation and on the other of its dissemination, and then relate both to tourism. This, given that the conservation of heritage values is necessary for adequate competitiveness, particularly in the sphere of cultural tourism to which Cuenca has pointed ([Green Consulting, 2011](#), p. 52), while the enhancement of heritage and its dissemination are precisely maneuvers that the marketing and commercialization of tourist destinations manage (p. 65).

It is observed that the heritage-conservation-tourism link is recurrent in the analyzed documents, which assume this relationship as a local development strategy ([Gobierno Provincial del GobiernoProvincial del Azuay, 2015](#), p. 196), or endogenous, where exploiting heritage as a tourist resource would also provide the necessary funds for its conservation ([GAD Cuenca Municipal, 2011](#)). The tourism industry is then enunciated as a sustainable development alternative that uses heritage as a resource, but would in turn be able to contribute in the financing of its conservation (Provincial Government of [GAD Provincial del Azuay, 2015](#); [GAD Cuenca Municipal, 2011](#); [Green Consulting, 2011](#)).

Along these lines, the four plans analyzed seek to promote tourism and present strategies focused mainly on positioning the destination nationally and internationally. The provincial PDOT, for example, formulates a public policy for a model of internationalization of tourism in the province in order to determine what are the competitive advantages of tourism in Azuay, and generate tourist routes (Provincial Government of [GAD Provincial del Azuay, 2015](#), p. 266), points out the need to undertake activities that promote and intensify tourism activity in the province (p. 88), and defines as one of its strategic development priorities the promotion and development of tourism (p. 267). Finally, it promotes actions with the objective of promoting the execution of projects for the provision of infrastructure, basic social and complementary services for the development of the tourism sector and to take advantage of the tourism potential around the Network of Heritage Cities (p. 208–209); and proposes the elaboration of a Provincial Tourism Plan as part of a broader program for the promotion of tourism (p. 243).

The cantonal PDOT, within its first objective: to promote the endogenous, sustainable, solidarity-based economy ([GAD Municipal de Cuenca, 2011](#), p. 48), proposes nine strategies to develop heritage, cultural and historical tourism (p. 118), which are based on the positioning of the Historic Center of Cuenca as a tourist destination. This PDOT also proposes a Cantonal Tourism Plan from which three programs and four projects focused on cultural tourism are derived, the latter with an execution period of 1–3 years (p. 176–177).

The Strategic Tourism Development Plan for Cuenca and its Area of Influence, also of cantonal scope, seeks to identify areas for tourism investment in Cuenca, establish a plan based on competitiveness as a tourist destination, and generate marketing recommendations ([Green Consulting, 2011](#), p. 7–8). Nine strategies and 32 activities are proposed with an investment of US\$1,257,000 over a three-year horizon (p. 66), in order to ensure the competitive improvement of the destination (p. 65) and position it in foreign and domestic markets.

The last three instruments analyzed do not delve into the tourism field as such, but rather into the manner of intervening on Cuenca's built heritage. However, although the Revitalization Plan for the Historic Center, not yet approved, is based on the proposal of punctual architectural interventions on certain buildings, it also devises a series of activities that seek to promote tourist activity (s. a., 2016, p. 9, 103). This does not occur with the two ordinances analyzed whose norms aim to determine and control actions on the built heritage, without alluding to the tourism field in a direct way (I. Municipality of [Municipalidadde Cuenca, 2003](#); [GAD Municipal de Cuenca, 2010](#)).

After this analysis, it is clear that tourism, in the case study, appears as an economic alternative aligned with heritage conservation and diffusion policies, whose field of action is concentrated in the built heritage, particularly in the Historic Center of Cuenca. This is

indicated by the provincial PDOT when it states that tangible heritage is distributed throughout the province with greater relevance in the city of Cuenca (Provincial Government of [GAD Provincial del Azuay, 2015](#), p. 118); or the cantonal PDOT when it states that among the tangible cultural heritage in the canton, the Historic Center of the city of Cuenca stands out ([GAD Municipal de Cuenca, 2011](#), p. 23). Therefore, it is obvious that the two ordinances analyzed, as well as countless regulations and documents of a normative nature, refer specifically to the Historic Center of Cuenca. Likewise, the proposals for tourism dissemination and competitiveness have focused on this territory, achieving that the heritage area of this city is positioned in multiple rankings and obtain international recognition that enhance its tourism value, such as: healthy city (PAHO, 2007), city number 49 among 109 historic destinations (National Geographic Traveler, 2008), option No. 1 for visit and stay in America (National Geographic Traveler, 2008), option No. 1 for visit and stay in the Americas (National Geographic Traveler, 2008), and the city of Cuenca (National Geographic Traveler, 2008), and the city of Cuenca (National Geographic Traveler, 2008). 1 option to visit and stay in Latin America (Stern Magazine, 2008), one of the ten cities to know worldwide (Lonely Planet, United Kingdom, 2010), best place for North American retirees, best place for retirees in the world for the third consecutive year (International Living Magazine, United States, 2009; 2010; 2011), Jean Paul L'Allier Award for heritage cities (World Organization of Heritage Cities, 2013), Best Outdoor Flower Market worldwide, "Plaza de las Flores" (National Geographic, 2014), Best International Adventure Destination 2014 (Outside Adventure Tourism Magazine) (Provincial Government of [GAD Provincial del Azuay, 2015](#)).

A fourth finding makes mention of an incipient questioning of the effectiveness of tourism as an economic activity. The provincial PDOT argues that, although the tourism industry is one of the major generators of employment (Provincial Government of [GAD Provincial del Azuay, 2015](#), p. 89), this is mostly underemployment, due to the use of labor contracting systems such as outsourcing and hourly work (p. 196).

4.3. Regenerated image and displacement of popular sectors

The contents explained in this subtitle correspond to the main findings of the Methodological Phase 3. Incidence of the interventions ([Table 3](#)). This phase made it possible to determine that the intervention projects generate an improved image that has been publicized, winning awards, and positioning the heritage area of Cuenca in important cultural tourism rankings ([Fig. 5](#)).

This regenerated image of the Cuenca heritage area fits within the postcard aesthetics, highly appreciated by the international tourism industry. In this line, the contemporary intervention projects show great quality of urban and architectural design, recognized in multiple national and international awards and rankings. Thus, 25 awards were identified for different intervention projects, which are concentrated next to the "Mercado 9 de Octubre" (11 awards) ([Fig. 6](#)) and El Rollo Monument (6 awards).

On the other hand, the displacement of uses and users of public space was evident, particularly those associated with popular practices concentrated around markets. We found no documentary record of physical movements at any time. However, informal interviews and historical photographs taken from project reports demonstrate the elimination of uses and users in 27 public spaces intended for long-term use. These spaces include relevant plazas such as: *Cívica, Rotary, Hermano Miguel, Nueve de Octubre, Santo Domingo, Las Monjas* and *San Francisco* ([Fig. 7](#)), as well as *Otorongo, Farol, El Carbón* and *El Vergel*. Likewise, this trend is noticeable in parks such as: *María Auxiliadora, San Blas* and *San Sebastián*.

In other words, the construction of this ideal image in the heritage area of Cuenca has resulted in a significant process of displacement of vulnerable groups such as merchants -especially informal ones- in the public space and low-income families in the case

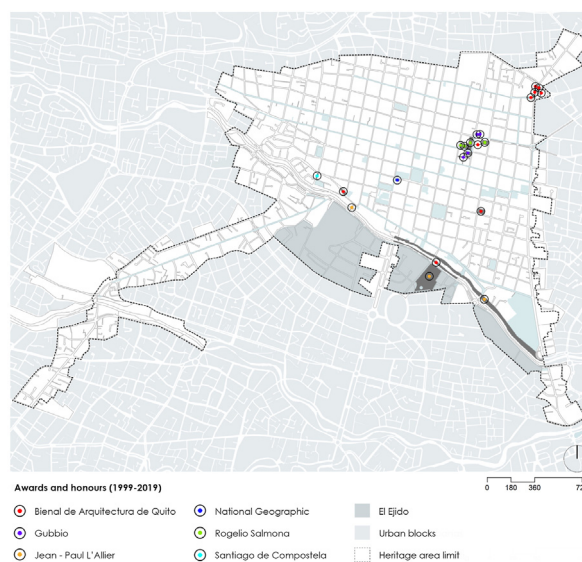


Fig. 5. Awards and recognitions obtained by the interventions analyzed.

Source: Own elaboration.



Fig. 6. Awarded interventions, concentrated in the “Mercado 9 de Octubre” (October 9th Market) area.
Source: Alborno, 2020.



Fig. 7. Uses and users of the Plaza San Francisco in the mid-20th century, before and after the intervention.
Source: Archives of the Municipal Government of Cuenca.

of buildings, which has not been properly studied or made visible, since there are no data or records of the former public space users. Despite the lack of available data, the study of the 95 projects reveals that 73% of them have resulted in some form of displacement due

to changes in land use. Additionally, an analysis of the written press has consistently highlighted the ongoing struggle of the displaced public space users as they strive to reclaim their access and utilization rights (Cabrera-Jara, 2019).

In summary, the results of this research allow us to distinguish three great moments in the history of planning in Cuenca (Fig. 8). The first one covers the period since the Spanish foundation in 1557 to the First Urban Plan of 1947, when urban growth was incipient and regulations were based on the Laws of the Indies. The second moment begins in 1947, when the history of the urbanism of Cuenca and the considerations on the historical value of the city officially started, delimiting the historic city. In this period the first notions of urban heritage were developed, the historic center was declared Cultural Heritage of the Nation (1982) and Cultural Heritage of Humanity (1999). It is precisely with this last nomination by UNESCO, that this period ends to start the third identified moment. During this latter, the touristification process was developed in the heritage area of Cuenca.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The main results show that urban heritage policies in Cuenca in the last two decades have prioritized the conservation of tangible heritage and, within this, of immovable commodities, despite the theoretical recognition of the importance of the intangible and the everyday. Two main lines of action are also differentiated in relation to intervention on heritage: the principle of conservation and non-alteration, and that of enhancement and dissemination, which again end up prioritizing the built heritage, although in the discourse they recognize the value of intangible assets.

A direct relationship is evident between these two lines of action with tourism, translated into its recognition as an authentic historic center (conservation) and in its promotion as a tourist destination (diffusion), which is sought to be positioned nationally and internationally, and validated through international rankings and awards. All this with the intention of promoting local and sustainable development through the tourism industry.

These findings show that the planning of the Cuenca's heritage area, despite initial efforts, is based on a conservationist and orthodox vision of heritage. With a clear and traditional supremacy of the tangible architectural values which are those which are later strengthened, and which are intervened in order to obtain a regenerated and competitive historic center in the international circuit of cultural tourism. This vision - based on the traditional position of heritage - is broken in the theoretical statements of the plans, however, it reappears in the formulation of the inventories, the ordinances, and the strategies, clearly focused on the rescue, conservation, control, and enhancement of the built heritage.

Although there is a timid criticism of the provincial PDOT on the effectiveness of tourism as an economic activity and it is linked to underemployment, this questioning has not been positioned in public opinion. However, the multiple awards and the rise in urban rankings, both nationally and internationally, have been widely publicized. On the other hand, these recognitions validate the construction of a regenerated image of the heritage area aligned with the postcard aesthetics.

On the other hand, it is imperative to highlight that none of the six instruments reviewed warns about the risks that this vision could harbor, and although the canton's PDOT admits that despite the great cultural wealth, both tangible and intangible, distributed throughout the canton, the attention has focused on the heritage of the area, attention has been focused on the tangible heritage precisely in the Historic Center of the Cuenca (GAD Municipal de Cuenca, 2011), the risks and conflicts that this position entails for the community and the intangible and more modest heritage values have been omitted or minimized (Tweed & Sutherland, 2007). This situation is common in Latin America, which as mentioned by Checa-Artasu (2011) constitutes a region where public policies and urban planning have determined the material reconfiguration of its historic centers and have contributed to the insertion of tourism as the best way of local development.

Another element to discuss in the results is the displacement of vulnerable groups from public space and of low-income families in the case of buildings, caused by intervention projects. As can be seen in the case of Cuenca, plans and ordinances have led to the execution of several concentrated actions in its historic center, carried out in intervention projects on the built heritage -buildings and public space-, which has implied heavy investments, the omission of the intangible and the expulsion of the modest. All of which contradicts the evident need to generate heritage conservation policies in accordance with the character of each city and its population (Chandam & Kumar, 2019).

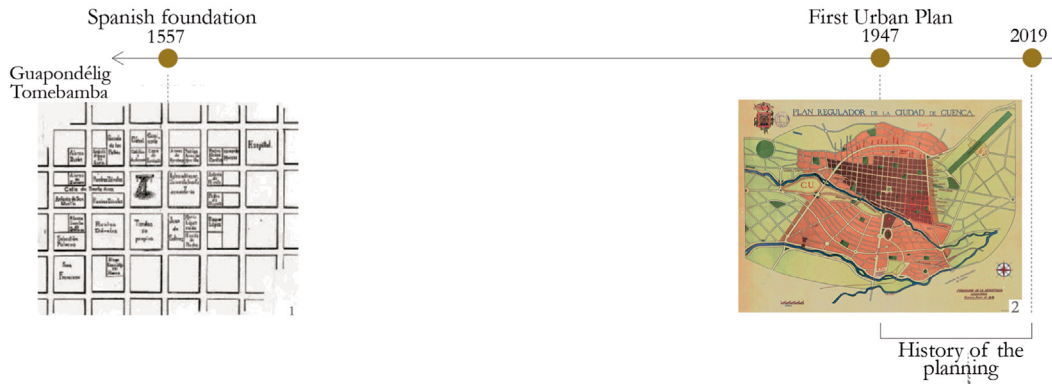
The analysis of the case of Cuenca shows that it is a representative example of the phenomenon described by other authors on the role that local governments and planning have in the processes of touristification of Latin American heritage areas, both in material and symbolic terms. We are facing a commodified and neutralized image (Pallasma, 2014), which shows only a part of reality (Waldenfels, 2009), themed for entertainment, and worked around logics of urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 2005).

The preponderant role of local government and planning instruments is also corroborated, both focused on preserving heritage through interventions in the built environment and control strategies on the use of public space. At this point it is worth raising a hypothesis, because although the heritage conservation policy justifies the interventions from the outset, the program, and the aesthetics with which they are executed could respond beyond the tourist demand to a city ideal promoted by the elites, who in the Latin American case seek to differentiate themselves markedly from the indigenous and the popular.

At this juncture, it is crucial to consider the challenges related to the planning and management of heritage spaces in Cuenca, with the potential for extending this reflection to a national and Latin American scale. Consequently, three key challenges can be identified:

1. Reassessing the values associated with conventional urban heritage and incorporating intangible attributes, modest practices, and community participation into conservation and enhancement processes. Achieving this objective necessitates modifying regulations and transforming the perspectives of the administrative and regulatory bodies responsible for managing the heritage area in Cuenca.

Timeline since the Spanish foundation (1557-2019)



Timeline of planning (1947-2019)



Timeline of the touristification process (1999-2019)



Fig. 8. Synthesis Chronology.

Source: 1. I. Municipalidad de Cuenca, 2008, p.74; 2. I. Municipalidad de Cuenca, 2008, p. 157; 3. Cabrera, 2008, p. 108; 4-7. GAD Municipal de Cuenca.

2. Integrating ethical considerations into theoretical frameworks and public policies to mitigate, rather than exacerbate, the existing regional inequalities. Therefore, it is essential to conduct further studies, similar to this one, that assess the social impacts of interventions in Cuenca to highlight the inequalities they have inadvertently perpetuated.
3. Diversifying the heritage conservation model, which currently emphasizes tourism and often leads to the selective recreation of specific city attributes while disregarding more modest aspects. To address this concern, it is necessary to critically evaluate the tourism implementation model, as proposed by Skrede and Hølleland (2018), and explore alternative approaches that prioritize democracy and inclusivity in Cuenca.

Finally, as several authors point out, it is imperative to rethink public policies and planning instruments (plans, programs, and projects), considering the following suggestions: incorporate policies that value intangible heritage and the community (Harrison, 2013; Meskell, 2018), propose effective actions that avoid the displacement of uses and users of public space (Lowenthal, 2015; Patiwael et al., 2019), evaluate the real contribution of tourism to the region and analyze other possibilities for local development (Cabrera-Jara, 2019).

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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