Cultural Significance: Linking Actors and Methods

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Abstract. Central to the entire discipline of architectural heritage conservation
is the concept of cultural significance. It refers to the collection of values
associated with a cultural property which act as a guide for decision making
process. However, recent evidence suggests that cultural values belong to a
dynamic and complex system which changes permanently. As result of that,
new values might be added to previous ones, while in other cases, irreparable
losses might be triggered. Thus, preservation of architectural properties is clearly
conditioned by the capacity to reveal the major range of values through the
implication of a variety of actors. The case study of two traditional neighbor-
hoods of Cuenca, Ecuador seeks to examine similarities and complementarities
on cultural values identification by two different actors: academic and civil
members. A holistic approach is utilised, integrating the most recent recom-
mendations from the cultural field referred to the cultural mapping and rec-
ommendations from the Socio-praxis discipline. This study makes a major
contribution to research on values-based management by proposing a method-
ology to link an interdisciplinary approach with an active community partici-
pation. The paper has been divided into four parts. The first part describes the
conceptual framework, the second presents a brief description of the territorial
context of analysis, while the third part presents the methodological process and
tools utilized to identify cultural values. Finally, the conclusion gives a brief
summary and critique of the findings concerning to the values identified as well
as to the utilized methods.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary research · Architectural heritage
Community involvement · Participatory assessment · Cultural values

1 Cultural Significance

The identification of cultural values gives sense the existence of conservation as a
discipline [1]. In the cultural field, the notion of value refers to moral principles, ideas,
or desires which guide individual and collective actions [2, 3]. Cultural values express
particularities which confer identity and diversity to a human group, in a specific time
and territory [4]. It means, their construction and recognition correspond to a dynamic
phenomenon which never ends [1, 5–7]. In these processes, some cultural values are
exalted and protected to be transmitted for future generations given arise the concept of

cultural heritage values, and consequently, the concept of cultural heritage products (tangible or intangible) on which convey the cultural heritage values. The set of heritage values is known as cultural significance [2, 8, 9] and in simple terms, it expresses the reason why a cultural product should be preserved. Among the diverse tangible cultural products, architectural heritage corresponds to one of the most studied. Currently, its conservation discourse presents remarkable advances, but its practical implementation is often ambitious and not easy to achieve.

In fact, the 21st century has brought in crisis the idea of univocal values to boost a wider respect to cultural diversity [10]. It expanded the study of outstanding cultural products, and it acknowledged the indissoluble relation between the material and immaterial dimension of cultural products, as well as their relationship with the territory on which are placed [2, 8, 9, 11, 12, 20]. Particularly, architectural heritage conservation has evolved from an object-oriented approach to a value-based oriented approach [6, 8] which calls to identify the multiple and dynamic set of heritage values - beyond qualities of fabric- to include environmental, economic and other values, recently called as contemporary values [2, 6]. However, identification of cultural heritage values is fraught with difficulties derived of their own nature (dynamic, varied and subjective). According to Mason [2], for the moment, there are no hard-and-fast rules to guide the choice of methods for identifying cultural heritage values, and no set recipe or methodology for matching values with tools have been identified. In this regards, it is very common to use general methodologies, not specific to any one arena but, rather, applied in anthropology, archaeology, geography, sociology, city planning/urbanism, and various hybrid fields, such as expert analysis (textual/iconographic/formal/semiology), ethnography (surveys and interviews), rapid ethnographic assessment behavioral mapping, transect walks, individual interviews, primary (archival) research and writing historical narratives, secondary literature search, descriptive statistics, economic values assessment through revealed-preference methods or stated preference methods.

To deal with these challenging issues, the present study does not focus on choosing different methods for gathering and analyzing information in values-based approach (which is not new), but on improving current processes of values assessment, considering that behind this selection, there is a political gesture [2] on which some voices (actors) have been traditionally ignored. This proposal aims involving people in the cultural significance definition, through a participatory process, instead a traditional consultative. It implies a very active listening and boosting face-to-face-based deliberation and negotiation between stakeholders who would not normally be directly involved in the process. Contrary to the current linear process of cultural significance assessment process [2, 9], a spiral process to achieve a proper understanding of cultural significance, is proposed (see Fig. 1). Here becomes crucial to develop active listening. Listening stage has been emphasized by authors such as Gantois and Schoonjans [13] who states that "The (future) architect as a stranger has to develop the ability to take time to 'listen' to and to observe both the natives and the newcomers. He shouldn't take up a central role as preceptor, but always position himself slightly to one side. This is a respectful but not necessarily subservient attitude, nor is it related with a demagogic tendency of Populism". Thus, participation is understood not as an end in itself but as a mean to facilitate processes of deliberation between different stakeholders [14]. Being

aware that it is impossible for one interpretation -in a specific society and period of historical time- to capture the complete significance of the heritage [15], this process does not seek to be exhaustive, but inclusive. An extensive participatory process for cultural significance assessment was designed and launched on two traditional neighborhoods of the Historic City Centre of Cuenca (HC) -listed as World Heritage Site by UNESCO 1999-. "El Vado" and "San Roque", selected as areas of study.
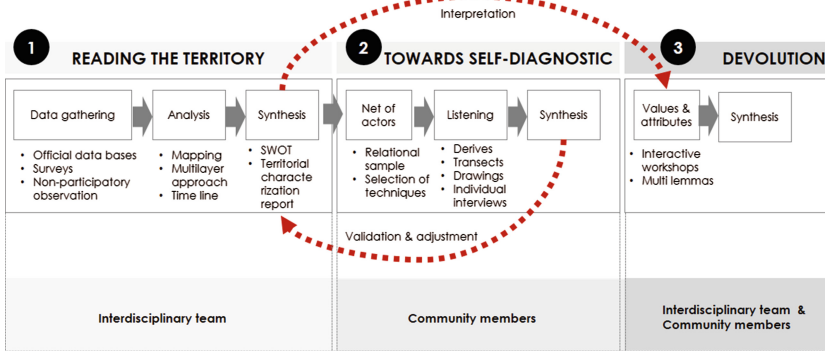

Fig. 1. Methodology to assess cultural significance, linking methods and actors

2   Methodology: Actors, Methods and Tools

The experience developed in those neighborhoods for identifying cultural significance, includes simultaneous multi-scale, multi-dimensional and multi-stakeholder analysis. Multi-scale analysis, refers to the study of cultural heritage values at different spatial scales, where the macro scale refers to the HC as a whole; the meso scale refers to the neighborhood as unit of intermediate analysis, and the micro scale refers to tangible or intangible heritage properties, which underlies the two previous levels. The multi-dimensional analysis refers to the study of the territory on which architecture ensembles are placed, under four dimensions economic, social, cultural and environmental which interact in constant flow between them to arise a better quality of life or well-being [6, 16, 17]. Finally, the multi-stakeholder analysis aims to articulate different types of knowledge, in this case derived from the academic actor represented by an interdisciplinary team, and derived from community members considered "vivencial" experts. According to this proposal, cultural significance is identified combining quantitative, qualitative and participatory methods, but applied in a systemic and rigorous mode which compromises three stages: First, reading the territory by the interdisciplinary team, to define a technical diagnostic; second, transiting from the technical territorial diagnostic to the self-diagnostic lead by community members insights, and third devolution on which one version of academic and community inputs are consolidated (see Fig. 1).

2.1   Reading the Territory

The proposed reading the territory consisted on a systemic process of data gathering, analysis, interpretation and synthesis. Contrary to traditional practices, it goes beyond listing and quantifying heritage elements, to identify patterns, positive and negative relationships, based on the integrated analysis mainly lead by the interdisciplinary team (economist, architect and anthropologist). At macro level, due the difficulties to implement and sustain a participatory process, efforts were put on include voices previously ignored such as the opinion of common citizens conformed by local and foreign inhabitants of "Cuenca". In this regards, an empirical data collection process was carried out to identify their perceptions about the heritage values of the Historic City of Cuenca. The data gathering consisted of 144 surveys conducted at different traditional neighborhoods within the HC of Cuenca (including "San Roque" y "El Vado") on which equal number of local and foreign respondents were consulted. These results enriched previous understanding of cultural significance of this area UNESCO [18] mainly liked to physical attributes. Both groups of respondents, high-lighted the balanced relationship between urban and architectural attributes with environmental attributes such as the presence of the mountains and rivers, and with social attributes which confers a vibrant character of the historic area, mainly supported by activities considered part of 'daily life' instead touristic activities. In fact, the important valorisation of common activities and attitudes as part of the cultural significance of the site, beyond the exceptional ones, might be considered the most interesting finding as result of these consultation at macro level.

The interdisciplinary analysis, integrated all collected data from different sources, using a unique platform of information, through mapping software programs (Q'GIS) on which the multiple dimensions became in a layer of information facilitating the inter-relational analysis through a multi-layering approach. It allowed to identify heritage values inherited from the macro scale to the meso-scale. For instance, "San Roque" y "El Vado", were acknowledged as the major repositories of tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the Historic Area. In regards, to tangible heritage, they are dominantly constituted by modest examples of earthen architecture which contain one exceptional type of hanging architecture near the ravine of the river Tomebamba, and the two dominant architectural typologies most useful to understand the evolution of whole HC: (1) nuclear structures and (2) linear settlements. These typologies express the contrasted ways of living in urban and rural areas respectively, consolidated until XX century. Concerning to the immaterial heritage, although city changes' are evident, those territories still preserves socio-economic dynamics inherited from the past. Exceptionally, on those territories converge the five categories of intangible cultural heritage domains, according to the UNESCO [19]. In fact, a total of 189 manifestations were identified (Table 1), mainly located on el "El Vado".

Concerning to the relational analysis, the multi-dimensional study revealed some aspects which has favored conservation of the tangible and intangible heritage attributes, and in consequence values, on these territories, for instance, the presence of social groups which consider themselves as 'original' inhabitants, it means their ancestors born on those areas who preserves their traditions and feel a great bond especially by their intangible cultural manifestations. Moreover, the medium incomes

Table 1. Number of intangible cultural heritage domains identified on the area-of-study

Intangible cultural heritage domains	"El Vado"	"San Roque"
1. Oral traditions and expressions	29	20
2. Performing arts	1	1
3. Social practices, rituals and festive events	37	2
4. Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe	62	12
5. Traditional craftsmanship	23	1

of their current and historical population, which has facilitated minimum actions of maintenance on built heritage, but limited physical interventions. The persistence of traditional crafts has been mainly influenced by the proximity to one of the most important family supply markets and the public transportation system, which facilitates accessibility from the periphery where the consumers of these products come.

2.2   From the Diagnostic to the Self-diagnostic

Considering, the importance of interdisciplinary studies and its potential of being more rigorous and objective, has been very well acknowledged [8, 20] but, at the same time, observing the need to go beyond the view of professionals to include the people that use and visit and construct their own meanings [8, 9, 19], participation process gained prominence, at this stage. In this regards, Worthing and Bond [8] stated challenges for participatory implementation, such the difficulty to identify what constitutes the appropriate community/stakeholders and how to deal with powerful groups who may distort or dominate the process. To face these and other relevant issues, a low-tech method but strategic was used. It was the map of actors or stakeholders map, but beyond to be used to identify what actors are involved, how they are linked, how influential they are, and what their interests are, it was used as a guide to design the participatory process (see Fig. 2). Indeed, this strategy derived from the socio-praxis recommendations [21], guarantees listening to the major diversity of actors and groups, and identifying the proper techniques and methods to access to their information. On this case-of-study, were prioritized techniques easy to apply by professionals non-related to the social sciences such as drawings, transects and derives which contributed to go beyond the descriptive and static understanding of the territory towards an enriched and dynamic vision [22].

Moreover, these techniques engaged people to talk about their daily routines, common spaces and conflicts, and to obtain information which only leaves on the memory of some actors. For instance, the use of the time line put in light the most important events and changes that had happened on these particular territorial contexts and their links to major events on the city. Contrary to validate previous findings (as part of the technical diagnostic) or to focus on identify coincidences, these techniques sought to reveal the major diversity of opinions about cultural values of the site, even though their opinions did not agree with the majority or with the most representative voices. In fact, in some cases, the variety of sources consulted worked as triangulation

Fig. 2. Choosing techniques and methods based on the net of actors

method and evidenced consistency across data obtained by the interdisciplinary team, but in other cases inconsistencies were observed. Those inconsistencies opened the opportunity to uncover deeper meanings in the data and particularities of each context [23]. At the end of these process, a more accurate understanding of cultural significance was built, allowing to make 'visible' the multiple heritage values embodied on the same attribute (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3. Map of values and different types of values identified by inhabitants, "San Roque". DIUC 2016.

2.3   Integration and Devolution

As was mentioned above listening actors, including the minorities, non-organized actors and controversial actors, was considered a key step on transiting from the technical diagnostic to the self-diagnostic. It served to contrast, to validate and to adjust the diversity of values identified in the previous stages. However, the identification of cultural values should not be a result of individual interpretation of data or the addition of multiple opinions, it should be revealed based on a collective construction of knowledge. It might be considered the most important difference between consultative techniques versus participatory techniques. Participatory techniques boost a double fold learning process, sustained in a process of discussion and reflection, sharing individual knowledge and building knowledge in a transparent manner. In this regard, the last stage corresponds to return the information, what according to socio-praxis is called devolution. As part of the devolution, a series of interactive workshops on which face-to-face reflections and mutual learning process were carried out in public spaces of each neighborhood. Contrary to traditional practices, it does not necessarily aim consensus about "the real" values of a specific attribute (micro scale), but disseminating its diversity of meanings. For instance, even though community members did not recognize a technological value identified by architects, community noticed its relevance and in some cases incorporated this value to their own set of heritage values. What became crucial on that process, was to build a lingua franca to avoid more than one interpretation and to facilitate a horizontal dialog between diverse types of knowledge (professional and community). At the end of this methodology implementation, on these neighborhoods, six main different cultural heritage values (aesthetic, historic, environmental, economic, social and technological) which defines its cultural significance, as well as the different attributes and relationships on which support it, were identified.

3   Conclusions

The proposed methodology boosts an iterative and collective process of identification of cultural heritage values. It emphasizes the need for transiting from cumulative data towards revealing the web of meanings on which collection of data and analysis process, go beyond listing and quantifying architectural heritage elements, to identify patterns, positive and negative relationships with other heritage attributes, based on the integrated analysis mainly lead by the interdisciplinary team. But at the same time, it calls to leave the possibility to improve technical understanding through the integration of different types of knowledge, which evidence is saved in the mind of inhabitants, and allows us to identify other meanings and their relevance.

This proposal does not centered on recommending methods, but process. The crucial link between the net of actors and choosing methods provides an opportunity for being inclusive, involving children, new residents, old residents, visitors, and government institutions in the analytical process, and for scrutinizing interpretations in the light of participants' views. Furthermore, it calls to do not focus the analysis only in co-incidences or develop hierarchical analysis between the varieties of values

identified. The methodology invites to consider the majorities and consensus, as well as, the minorities and controversial opinions, to construct a holistic but integrated lecture, on which all values are considered equal important. In fact, it remarks that heritage products are valued differently by individuals and groups, and it must be equally respected. It means to develop a real mutual learning process on which the interdisciplinary team and community members enriched their previous understanding about cultural significance on each discussion.

In practical actions this process allows to build a great repository of information, expressed in maps which allows to detected patterns as well as clusters, which can be permanently updated and monitored for example in this case-of-study the presence of residential functions and the link of these territories located within the urban area with the peripheral or rural area should be considered aspects which support part of their cultural values. Although, it requires to invest a very considerable amount of time and resources, it is plenty justified in the measure it facilitates to strength relationships between diverse actors and it increases the possibilities to design accurate polices and strategies for heritage management on the private and public sector for present and future generations, based on a proper understanding of the particularities of each territorial context.

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