

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	The Historic Walled Town of Cuenca
<i>Location</i>	Province of Cuenca, Region of Castilla-La Mancha
<i>State Party</i>	Spain
<i>Date</i>	2 October 1995

Justification by State Party

The historic centre of Cuenca, consisting of the upper town, the surrounding landscape of the valleys of the Júcar and the Huécar, and the transition zone with the lower town, is worthy of being inscribed on the World Heritage List for the following reasons:

- *Historical*

This is an ensemble, Islamic in origin, which reached its greatest splendour during the medieval and Renaissance centuries, when Cuenca had a leading place among the towns belonging to the Castilian crown. Transformations in subsequent centuries reflect its dynamic character and the efforts made to conserve it and adapt it to new historical circumstances.

- *Landscape*

Cuenca is a "fortress town" where the architecture conforms with the natural landscape, resulting in a cultural heritage of universal value. It may be considered a prototype of the "landscape town."

- *Town plan*

The special nature of the defensive site and the lack of space within the walls, along with the need to straddle the river valleys, has resulted in the evolution of an unusual development of the vernacular architecture, with exceptional groups like those on the cliffs overlooking the Huécar and the Júcar.

- *Architecture*

The special quality of Cuenca, unlike other historic ensembles, lies not in any wealth of monuments of universal value but rather in the way in which the architecture blends into the urban fabric. The town does, of course, contain some important architecture, such as the fortress and the remains of the walls, the cathedral and the episcopal palace, the convents of the Angélicas, La Merced, and the Carmelites, the San Julián seminary, the churches of San Miguel, San Pedro, San Antón, and San Felipe Neri, the chapel of Las Angustias, the Town Hall, the Santiago hospital, and the Mangana tower.

For these reasons it is considered that the historic centre of Cuenca has outstanding universal value as defined in the World Heritage Convention and that it qualifies for inscription on the World Heritage List on the basis of **criteria iii, iv, and v**. It is an urban ensemble that is special by virtue of its site and its antiquity and which provides cultural evidence of the evolution of medieval urban structures; it is also a typical example of an important traditional human settlement threatened by modern economic and socio-cultural changes.

Cuenca is one of the best examples in the world of a medieval fortress-town, resulting in the harmonious blending of the cultural and the natural landscape.

Category of property

In terms of the categories of property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, Cuenca is a *group of buildings*.

History and Description

History

When the Moors conquered Spain they took advantage of one of the best defensive sites on the Iberian peninsula, a limestone ridge between the Júcar and Huécar rivers, to build a fortress-town from which to control the vast area known as the Kura de Kunka (hispanicized into Cuenca), in the heart of the Caliphate of Córdoba. It developed between the castle and the Alcazar, adapting itself to the topography.

Alfonso VIII of Castille captured the town in 1177 and Cuenca entered a new phase of its history as a "Royal town" and an episcopal see. The Christian town was built over the Moorish one and began to spread down from the crest of the hill. It became a manufacturing town and one of the nuclei of the Castilian economy as well as an administrative centre. During the 16th century Cuenca experienced a large increase in population, which tripled to some sixteen thousand by 1594. The *intra muros* area was gradually taken over by religious institutions, the wealthier citizens moving to the lower parts of the town and the common people to new suburban areas. This was the period of Cuenca's flowering, with a large textile industry and flourishing trade. The urban fabric stabilized itself at this time, not to change significantly until the present century: the fortified upper town, dominated by the towers of churches and convents, a closed and densely settled medieval urban space, the lower town open and ordered.

However, the early 17th century saw the collapse of the textile industry and an economic crisis for the town, where the population had dropped dramatically to four thousand by 1646. Only the ecclesiastical element of the town survived relatively unscathed and continued to build: Cuenca became a monastic town and Baroque architecture began to appear in the townscape. There was a slow regeneration during the later 17th and 18th centuries, and a process of separation of function between different quarters of the town took place - ecclesiastical, administrative, artisanal, and mercantile. However, this regeneration had spent itself by the end of the 18th century and the town underwent a period of deterioration and dilapidation: ancient buildings either collapsed or were demolished because they were unsafe. The historic fortified enclosure was virtually abandoned by its wealthier residents and became a largely working class and monastic area. A rehabilitation plan of 1918 accomplished very little beyond the widening of some of the streets and restoration of some facades. It was not until around 1920 that the conscience of the citizens of Cuenca was awakened. Systematic conservation and rehabilitation planning was not to follow until the 1940s.

Description

The historic centre of Cuenca can be divided into three urban ensembles: the upper town, the historic working-class suburbs, and the transition zone between the upper and lower towns.

- The upper town

This is the archetype of the fortress-town, and the part that gives Cuenca its individual character. The Castillo quarter is a small suburb just outside the walls, with vernacular houses. From here the fortified town proper is reached by a bridge. Some remains of the Moorish fortress still survive, among the large aristocratic houses, monasteries, and churches along San Pedro and Trabuco streets. Within the upper town there is a wealth of historic religious buildings from the medieval, renaissance, and Baroque periods, notably the 12th century Cathedral, built on the site of the former Great Mosque and the first Gothic cathedral in Spain. Its Plateresque chapels date from the high point of the prosperity of the town in the 16th century. The Cathedral is located on the Plaza Mayor, the central open space of the town, which is also the site of the 18th century Town Hall and the 16th century Petras convent.

Its churches and monastic ensembles are notable artistic features of Cuenca. Most were founded early in the town's history and underwent many transformations and additions over the centuries that followed. Special mention should be made of the churches of San Miguel, San Pedro, and El Salvador and the convents of the Barefoot Friars (*Los Franciscanos Descalzos*), San José, La Merced, and San Pedro de las Justinianas.

No account of the upper town is complete without references to the so-called "Hanging Houses" (*Casas Colgadas*). These private houses near the Episcopal Palace were built in the later medieval period on the spectacular steep bluffs overlooking the bend of the Huécar river. Most of them were rebuilt in the 16th century in their present narrow, high form, with two or three rooms on each of three or more floors.

The importance of the upper town lies, however, not so much in its individual buildings, though many of these are of outstanding architectural and artistic quality, as in the townscape that they create when looked at as a group, on the fortified site dominating the river valleys. It is this which gives Cuenca its special character and quality.

- The working-class suburbs

The suburbs of San Antón and Los Tiradores are medieval in origin and complement the fortress that is the upper town. Once again, it is not the individual buildings that are of importance but their global effect; these are townscapes of narrow, twisting lanes that accommodate themselves to the steep topography and provide a fitting foreground to the upper town.

- The transition zone

This represents the first movement outside the walled town by the moneyed classes and the ecclesiastical institutions in the late 14th century to the lower town, which has lost almost all its historical elements during 20th century developments. The zone defined in the nomination has conserved its original street pattern, along with a number of important monuments, such as the 16th century convent of the Sisters of the Conception, the magnificent town house known as the Casa de las Rejas, and the Hospital of Santiago (whose origins go back to the 12th century but which has undergone many transformations since that time).

Management and Protection

Legal status

The historic zone of Cuenca, which was declared a "Picturesque Site" in 1963, is designated an Historic Ensemble (*Conjunto Histórico*) under the provisions of Law No 13/1985 on the Spanish Historic Heritage. No interventions of any kind within the designated area may take place without authorization by the competent authority.

Management

The owners of properties within the nominated area are variously the Spanish State, the Municipality of Cuenca, the Region (*Comunidad Autónoma*) of Castilla-La Mancha, different religious institutions, foundations, companies, cooperatives, and individuals.

Responsibility for ensuring that the provisions of the 1985 Law are adhered to rests with the Ayuntamiento de Cuenca, through its Planning Department (*Departamento de Urbanismo*). Also associated with the management of the historic town are the General Directorate of Culture of the Castilla-La Mancha Region and the General Directorate of Fine Arts, Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Properties of the Ministry of Culture.

A General Urban Plan (*Plan General de Ordenación Urbana*) was approved in 1994 by the Ayuntamiento de Cuenca, which delineated the historic zone and delegated the preparation of measures for its protection, management, and improvement to the Special Plan for Planning, Improving, and Protecting the Ancient Centre and the Valleys of Cuenca (*Plan Especial de Ordenación, Mejora y Protección del Casco Antiguo y de las Hoces de Cuenca*). This plan, based on detailed studies (see "Conservation history" below), was approved provisionally by the Ayuntamiento in January 1994. A number of projects resulting from the Plan are already under way, under the overall supervision of the Technical Office for the Special Plan.

The area nominated for inscription on the World Heritage List is clearly defined and protected. It is surrounded by a viable and properly protected buffer zone. There is also a considerable measure of protection afforded to the landscape outside the buffer zone.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

During the 1920s the Association of Friends of Cuenca created a strong movement for the protection of the old town, in association with the Municipal Museum and Don Juan Jiménez de Aguilar. The first official act was the delimitation of the historic zone and plans for its protection in the *Proyecto de Ordenación de la Ciudad de Cuenca* in 1946. This was followed by the 1963 General Town Plan (*Plan General de Ordenación Urbana*) which laid down special regulations and procedures for the historic centre. The General Plan was extensively revised and updated in 1979. With the initiation of the national *Inventario del Patrimonio Arquitectónico Español de Interés Histórico Artístico* in 1978 the first systematic survey and inventory was carried out.

A pilot study took place in 1980 on the rehabilitation of the San Martín quarter; its proposals for a general rehabilitation programme were, however, never put into effect. The General Plan underwent a further revision in 1987; in this the buildings were classified into five categories relating to the level of conservation needed or considered appropriate. The Consejería de Educación y Cultura of Castilla-La Mancha launched its "Cuenca in the

Light of Day" (*Cuenca a Plena Luz*) campaign in 1989, orientated towards the integral rehabilitation of the historic centre on five main lines: restoration of monuments, rehabilitation of dwellings, improvement of the townscape, socio-cultural facilities, and drafting of a Special Plan.

In preparation for this plan (see above, "Management"), a detailed survey and inventory of the monuments of Cuenca (*Catálogo Monumental del Patrimonio Arquitectónico de Cuenca*) was started in 1990, with the object of identifying those properties worthy of designation as being of cultural interest.

As a result of the considerable efforts in the past decades, the state of conservation of the buildings and townscape of the historic centre of Cuenca has improved markedly. However, there are still certain areas where much remains to be done, especially in the residential areas.

Two projects received special commendation in the ICOMOS expert mission report. The *Taller-Escuela* provides training at different levels for young people in traditional crafts, such as wood working, stone masonry, marble working, gardening, restoration of building, stained glass, furniture, painting, etc. The courses are organized by the Provincial Government, the Junta de Comunidades de Castilla-La Mancha, or the Diocese using funds allocated for the purpose from, *inter alios*, the European Union. The Museum of Cuenca, currently being built, will make a significant contribution to the understanding of traditional buildings and decorative techniques.

Authenticity

In the light of the fact that the significance of Cuenca lies in its overall townscape as an historic ensemble, it may fairly be asserted that the authenticity is very high.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

ICOMOS consulted its International Scientific Committee on Historic Towns and Villages on the cultural significance of the site. An ICOMOS expert mission visited Cuenca in February 1996.

Qualities and comparative analysis

The historic centre of Cuenca is an outstanding example of the medieval fortress-town. Other examples exist in Spain (Toledo) and there are others in Italy (Urbino, Orvieto) and France (Carcassonne). The special qualities of Cuenca relate to the intact nature of its townscape, as a result of a long period of economic stagnation and social deprivation, and to its dramatic contribution to the natural landscape.

ICOMOS observations

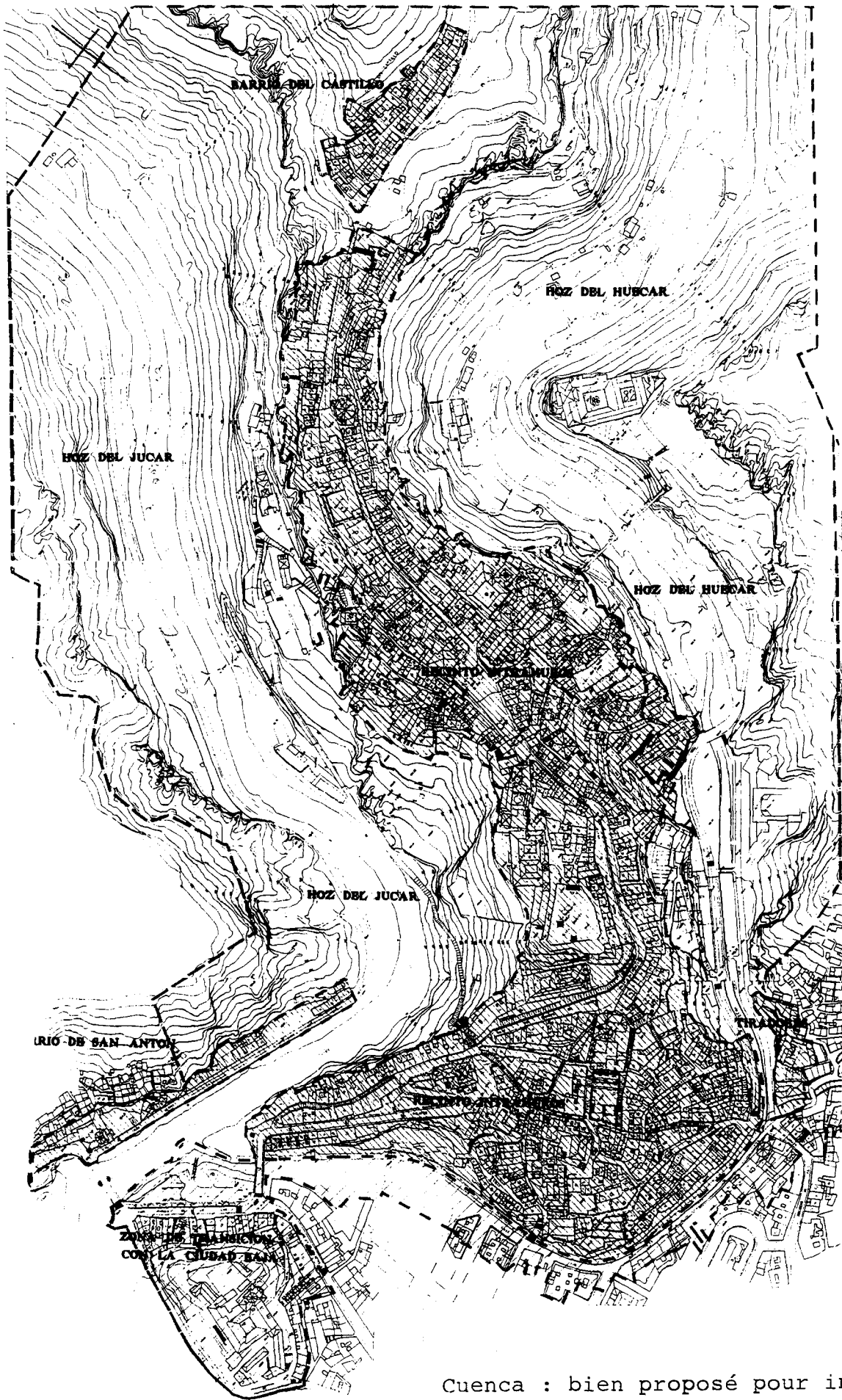
Following detailed discussions with the municipal authorities during the expert mission, ICOMOS proposals for an extension of the protection zone were accepted and revised plans have been sent to the World Heritage Secretariat.

Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria ii and v*.

The Old Town of Cuenca is an outstanding example of the medieval fortress town that has preserved its original townscape remarkably intact along with many excellent examples of religious and secular architecture from the 12th to 18th centuries. It is also exceptional because the walled town blends into and enhances the fine rural and natural landscape within which it is situated.

ICOMOS, October 1996



Cuenca : bien proposé pour inscription
Cuenca : nominated property