

Cuenca (Ecuador)

No 863

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	Historic Centre of Santa Ana de los Rios de Cuenca
<i>Location</i>	Province of Azuay
<i>State Party</i>	Ecuador
<i>Date</i>	30 June 1998

Justification by State Party

Cuenca is an outstanding example of an *entrotierra* city built on an open space in the rough terrain of the Andes, away from an Inca settlement. It is based on town-planning precepts laid down by Charles the Fifth in 1526.

Criterion ii

It is the embodiment of the ideal urban model of a colonial town "in the interior," built as an administrative centre for the large Indian communities and intended for agriculture.

Criterion iii

Its exceptional value is due not so much to the monumental concept of the constructions but to its capacity to absorb the different architectural styles of the past while retaining its basic character as a colonial town. The town has many adobe buildings, the result of adapting traditional European architecture to local conditions.

Criterion iv

The city, founded by the Spanish, has produced a synthesis in the layout of its space and in the social relations between the Indians and newly arrived Spaniards.

Criterion v

[**Note:** This text is an abbreviated version of that in the nomination dossier.]

Category of Property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, the historic centre of Santa Ana of the Rivers of Cuenca is a *group of buildings*.

History and Description

History

The town was founded in 1557, on the orders of the Viceroy Andrés Hurtado de Mendoza, on a site next to Pumpapungo. The purpose was to turn it into an

agricultural centre, since the conditions of the surrounding plains were favourable for farming and stock raising. The aim was also to establish an administrative centre for the numerous Indian populations in this Andean region.

The town of Cuenca developed slowly, because it was hampered for a long time by its initial layout, and remained a centre for agricultural production. It incorporated a succession of architectural contributions, in keeping with its urban fabric and character as a colonial town. This situation continued until political independence from the Spanish Crown in 1820. At the same time, the various populations and cultures intermingled.

During the second half of the 19th century, the town went through a manufacturing phase, particularly the production of quinine and straw hats. This development enabled it to become relatively richer, and it was accompanied by the construction of some more important buildings, including the University of Cuenca in 1867.

Owing to its geographical isolation, Cuenca had a coherent urban profile until 1950. However, this was followed by the threats of urban expansion and transformations resulting from pressure exerted by real-estate promotion and new social requirements. An *Urban Development Plan for the Metropolitan Area of Cuenca* was adopted in 1982 to safeguard the image of the town and to restore several buildings.

Description

The town of Cuenca is situated in a valley surrounded by Andean mountains chains, which have enabled it to maintain close contact with its natural environment over a long period.

The town is laid out on a strict grid of perpendicular streets stretching from the Main Square, the Abdón Calderón Park, to form a total of 200 blocks. The seat of the Town Council, the Office of the Governor, two cathedrals, and the Law Courts are ranged around the Main Square. The paved streets are wide and sunlit. The urban fabric is noteworthy for the presence of parks, squares, church cloisters, and other public areas.

Many of the simple colonial houses have been converted into more important residences, especially during the period of relative expansion due to the production of quinine and hats. The result is an unusual architecture incorporating various influences, both local and European.

A few important edifices are worthy of mention, such as the New Cathedral, begun in 1880, the Old Cathedral, the Carmelite Monastery, and the Church of Santo Domingo.

Management and Protection

Legal status

Most of the buildings are private property, although a few of the larger ones are in public or church ownership. At national level, the 1979 Law on Cultural Heritage and its application regulations of 1984, as well as the 1988 legislation on the creation

of an Emergency Fund for Cultural Heritage, are in force.

At regional level, there are several statutory measures:

- the 1982 Act on the Designation of the Historic Centre of the Town of Cuenca;
- the 1983 Edict on the Control and Administration of the Historic Centre;
- the 1989 Edict on the Establishment of a Directorate for the Historic Centre;
- the 1992 Edict on Signs and Publicity;
- the Edict on the Exemption from Property Tax for Owners of Property declared to be part of the National Cultural Heritage.

These statutory regulations apply to the perimeter of the historic centre but make no similar provisions for the buffer zone, which is very narrow.

Management

The Commission for the Historic Centre is responsible for its supervision and management. The Commission is assisted in technical matters by the General Secretariat for Town Planning, which comes under the Municipal Government of Cuenca.

The municipal authorities are also responsible for actions relating to the management of the historic centre, in particular the Town Council and the Mayor of Cuenca.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

Concern for conservation issues intensified in the 1970s, leading to effective protective measures starting in 1982.

Inventories have been drawn up and a study has been undertaken on the areas forming the historic centre.

The buildings in the historic centre are very fragile as they are not made of very durable materials, especially when built of mud brick. The authorities consider that regular maintenance by owners should be a priority protective measure, and they are encouraging this approach in different ways.

In 1995, the completion of the Master Plan for drinking water and sewers ensured the provision of an essential drainage system for the old dwelling houses.

A few blocks of houses in the historic centre have undergone major alterations which do not fit into the form and typology of the historic fabric.

Authenticity

The town of Cuenca has been able to retain its image as a colonial town and most of its original character. Its historic centre is inhabited and continues to have a traditional and active social life, although in living conditions which have sometimes deteriorated. Given this continuous occupation, the town has a high degree of authenticity.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited Cuenca in February 1999. It observed that the buffer zone needed to be reconsidered in terms of its regulations or its extension, for it permits building at a scale which could disrupt the perspectives of the historic centre. ICOMOS also consulted its International Scientific Committee on Historic Towns and Villages.

Qualities

The special value of Cuenca relates to the history, town planning, architecture, and landscape of the ensemble. Its historical evolution is reflected in the different phases of its urban development. Each phase is like a chapter in an open book which can be consulted to analyse, research, and acquire knowledge of the region's successive civilizations - the Cañari period, Inca rule, and the Spanish conquest and colonization.

Comparative analysis

In contrast with the many colonial harbour towns, Cuenca is a historic town of the interior. It also differs from Quito or Cusco in that it was established on a green-field site and not built on top of an existing settlement.

In a comparative study carried out by ICOMOS, Cuenca appears on the list of cultural property which should be given priority.

ICOMOS recommendations for future action

ICOMOS requested that the buffer zone should re-examined in relation to its extension and to town-planning regulations which should be applied to it, especially with respect to the scale of constructions.

To be able to exercise its control more effectively, the authorities should carry out a full inventory of the buildings of the historic centre, especially the more vulnerable areas, such as those engaged in distribution and commercial activities.

Additional documentation was provided to ICOMOS at the meeting of the Bureau in July 1999. This has been studied and is considered by ICOMOS to meet the requirements of the Committee.

Brief Description

The historic centre of Cuenca is typical of a colonial town of the interior, set in a valley surrounded by Andean chains. Dedicated to agriculture, it became a melting pot for local and immigrant populations.

Recommendation

That this property should be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria ii, iv, and v*:

Criterion ii Cuenca illustrates the successful implantation of the principles of Renaissance urban planning in the Americas.

Criterion iv The successful fusion of different societies and cultures in Latin America is vividly symbolized by the layout and townscape of Cuenca.

Criterion v Cuenca is an outstanding example of a planned inland Spanish colonial city.

ICOMOS, September 1999