

ICOMOS
INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC SYMPOSIUM 2013
SAN JOSÉ, COSTA RICA

TANGIBLE RISKS, INTANGIBLE OPPORTUNITIES:
LONG-TERM RISK PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSES FOR
THREATS TO CULTURAL HERITAGE

2013 THEME:
REDUCING RISKS TO CULTURAL HERITAGE FROM
UNCONTROLLED DEVELOPMENT IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD



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ICOMOS: ADVISORY AND EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
MEETING & SCIENTIFIC SYMPOSIUM

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ISBN 978-2-918086-16-1
EAN 9782918086161

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**THEME 2:
MEASURES AND STRATEGIES FOR
MITIGATING RISKS FROM POPULATION
GROWTH, URBANIZATION AND
IMMIGRATION**

SPATIAL PLANNING AS A TOOL FOR HERITAGE PROTECTION: COSTA RICA MASTER PLANS

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ABSTRACT

Urban and regional planning in Costa Rica has been implemented through master plans, which are the main tool used by local governments for land management; however, these plans need to follow some national rules, and particularly tangible cultural heritage regulations.

These plans give opportunities for conservation; nevertheless, they require to be adjusted to current regulation on historical monuments. The Sustainable Urban Development Research Program (ProDUS) of the University of Costa Rica has been working for many years in approaching this topic since the territorial diagnosis, where it is necessary to make an inventory of the monuments officially registered and those with potential to be registered in the future.

The most significant contribution of ProDUS's work is the establishment of historical and architectural conservation areas into territorial legislation, which seek to protect the existing and potential assets, by implementing incentives to owners, as well as regulations relating to outdoor advertising, heights, etc. The proposal is the articulation of heritage with bikeways, pedestrianization and tourist attractions. These historical buildings could improve and provide identity to human settlements and its inhabitants.

In brief, this paper aims to show an overview of the elements needed for making a diagnosis of the situation in a particular heritage place, the strategies used to incorporate it inside the land use regulations and its relationship to other elements of the master plan.

1. Introduction

This paper presents how the planning process and regulations can help preserve buildings that are heritage assets. This can be possible, but the lengthy delays in the approval of new regulation have had a significant impact. Additionally, if the regulation allows very tall buildings and high density land use, the land values increase, and the possibilities of preserving those buildings becomes financially more difficult.

An essential part of the process is to identify groups of buildings which present outstanding technological, social or design value. These groups of buildings should reflect high quality of execution, but also capture the essence of their historical period.

The challenge of such an evaluation is to select the most outstanding buildings, but also to realistically identify the best examples among the stock of the historic built environment. The selection is absolute in some respects, but is also relative, because it helps to preserve the essence and the best of each culture. The uniqueness category is relative to a specific geographic area and culture.

2. Costa Rican Contexts

Costa Rica is a small country of Central America. Its territory was a frontier area during the Spanish Colonial period that ended in 1821. Trade was difficult and it was quite significantly isolated. It had very few inhabitants and economic activity. The lack of rich mines and few indigenous people were great obstacles to the formation of capital and economic growth. This explains the lack of physical remains from that period.

Even though there are some structures from pre-Hispanic past, they are not very significant compared with other Latin American countries.

Costa Rica, today, is a middle income country with very good social indicators, but with an overextended State that tries to do many things without sufficient resources to support all its aspirations in different fields such as the preservation of tangible heritage.

Another important point of consideration is that the legal system provides property owners with very significant rights and the state has difficulties restricting these or even using its influence to protect buildings and archaeological remains, even though, the legislation is very strong for protecting new archaeological discoveries.

3. Experience in conservation with special heritage areas in Montes de Oca

Montes de Oca is a municipality within the San José Metropolitan Area and adjacent to San José county. This urban area is very important because many universities have been established there—Universidad de Costa Rica being the biggest and most significant one. Montes de Oca also has faced tremendous urbanization pressure due to its strategic location. In addition, there is a high education level, many public institutions, heritage areas and historical sites.

According to the research featured in “Plan especial para la protección del patrimonio urbano e histórico arquitectónico” written by Ofelia Sanou (2001) for the Montes de Oca Master Plan, this area has been marked by four important historic periods which have influenced the current urban and architectural configuration:

1841-1890: This period marks the beginning of coffee cultivation in San Pedro del Mojón —current district of Montes de Oca. At the end of the XIXth century, it was possible for the farming families to have better means of transportation with the advent of the railroad.

1890-1930: San Pedro del Mojón communities wanted to expand from a small coffee village to a district. As a result, some important buildings were constructed such as the school and local government building. Some services were also introduced such as the police, the telegraph and the jailhouse. In addition, some critical events occurred. In 1901, an electric railroad branch was opened with important stops in the town. In 1910, an earthquake

destroyed and damaged many houses, as well as a church and the police office building. New houses were subsequently built of wood and brick.

1930-1950: With the global economic crisis of 1929, coffee prices collapsed. As part of a public strategy to help the unemployed and improve physical accessibility to the coffee farms, important investments were made mainly in building roads and public buildings such as the Franklin D. Roosevelt School, built in a “neocolonial” style, which was the first favourite construction of the San Pedro del Mojon communities. [FIGURE 1]

1950-1970: Economic activity was further boosted due to the global crisis. New land uses were introduced; industrial and educational activity began to pick up. In the 1940s, the Universidad de Costa Rica was created. From then on, San Pedro became slowly a university town. In the 1960s, modern architectural typologies appeared.



FIGURE 1. Building of Franklin D. Roosevelt School (Barrantes, 2013)

All these events have strongly influenced the urban development in Montes de Oca. Some of the existing buildings are witnesses to this transformation while entire neighbourhoods, such as La Granja and Roosevelt, are the results of these later trends.

According to Castillo & Silesky¹⁸, in order for a place —either a group of cultural assets, isolated buildings or natural landscapes— to be considered architectural heritage it should be:

- The result of a collective experience of a specific community or ethnic group
- An example that shows national, popular or collective identity
- A construction which symbolizes social structures
- A building constructed after the XVIth century, but with the minimum age legally required.

In addition, buildings should have at least the following characteristics:

- To have important historical or cultural associations with a community, region or country
- To represent a contribution to the technical and historical development of Costa Rica’s architecture
- To be associated with people’s lives or with social groups which have had an historical or cultural impact on a community or the country
- To have traditional features such as typology, aesthetics and urban design which have readily shaped their immediate context.

¹⁸ “The local government’s role in architectonic heritage conservation” ICOMOS, Costa Rica, quoted by Sanou (2001).

3.1. Measures taken in the Montes de Oca Master Plan to protect architectural heritage

The creation process of the Montes de Oca Master Plan started in 2000 with a territorial survey, which collected physical, social, economic, urban and environment data, as well as addressed natural hazards, quality of life and community participation.

Among the urban topics, architectural heritage was very important. According to the research quoted (Sanou, 2001), it was possible to identify the most representative buildings which required protection through territorial regulations.

ProDUS, through the Montes de Oca Master Plan, implemented some measures in order to protect this group of places with historical value. The following regulations were established:

- a. Creation of “special areas of historic value”: These areas ([FIGURE 2] represented sectors with architectural importance, where it was possible to ask for an official designation; however, at the moment of the proposal they did not have any protection. These special areas were a group of buildings which included one or more officially declared buildings as architectural heritage. The goals to be achieved through the creation of these areas were: to regulate the commercial signage; to reduce parking requirements given adequate public transportation in place; and, to give the local government guidance in prioritizing future designations. The main idea was to have the local government request the Cultural Ministry for an assessment of these areas, so that the Ministry could decide if the areas can be classified as official heritage assets.
- b. Incentives: Most of the official heritage buildings in Montes de Oca were located in important commercial areas where the urban pressure threatened these structures. That is why the concept of “Transfer of development rights” was created whereby the owners of heritage buildings had the opportunity to transfer a portion of the restricted surface area to a “receiving area”. Some sectors within Montes de Oca were designated as “Receiving areas”, which correspond to zones where building heights can increase by one floor to accommodate owners who have purchased a “Transfer of development right” from the owners of heritage buildings.

In Map 1, green lines represent the “Receiving areas”, where the owners can get one more floor. On the other hand, the green dots represent “Special areas of historic value.” (*Valor histórico* in the map) When the Regulatory Plan was created, the expectations were that these areas were of high importance for the local government so the measure of immediate official designation could be applied; however, this has not happened yet.



FIGURE 2. Avenue 0 in 2001(Sanou, 2001)



FIGURE 3. Avenue 0 in 2013 (Barrantes, 2013)



FIGURES 4-5. First Montes de Oca School building in 2001 (left) and in 2012 (right), after of the façade restoration. (Brenes, Barrantes)

4. Areas of Special Character in Corredores County

Buildings with Historic/Architectonic Heritage Value are tangible assets that represent the cultural identity of a community. They are a means to reproduce the history of a given time and to reflect the building technologies that allowed human groups to adapt to their environmental needs and to develop their day-to-day activities.

These buildings are very important to understand the socio-cultural changes that have arisen through time. They allow us to visualize transformations in the societies that precede ours, and that are the basis for our contemporary customs and ways of life. Within the urban configuration of a city, these cultural assets play a transcendental role because they render identity and a sense of singularity to the milieu where they are located. They may also serve as tourist attractions, and contribute to local development.

Corredores County has a socioeconomic history linked to banana production, and this resulted in a reproduction of the building typology that is typical of the ways of life and the power relations in the place. However, none of the county's buildings have been designated as Historic/Architectonic Heritage. There are no incentives for restoration or purchase of buildings with potential heritage value nor for the opening of study files at the Center for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage, an entity that is part of the Costa Rican Culture and Youth Minister (MCJ, as per the Spanish acronym).

Nonetheless, an analysis carried out for the Diagnosis of the Corredores Regulatory Plan identified some buildings in the Laurel and Corredor districts as having great heritage potential, and as requiring urgent interventions, provided that some of them be modified regardless of their architectonic/historical value, while others are in an advanced state of deterioration and abandonment.

The buildings studied for the Diagnosis of the Corredores Master Plan, located in the districts of Laurel¹⁹ and Corredor, are named "Buildings with Heritage Potential", and they are in need of being classified as Areas of Special Character within the urban complexes, with a careful effort to create proposals for development planning, as well as other proposals related to the current and future cultural uses of the buildings.

This is provided under the consideration that it is urgent, regardless of an eventual designation as Cultural Heritage Sites, to take all measures possible (including state measures) to safeguard buildings with historical, cultural and social value for different communities.

Resources were classified as buildings or complexes, depending on whether they were analyzed individually or in groups. In Laurel district, a set of houses around the soccer field were identified because they retained much of the banana enclave typology, despite some partial modifications. In addition, the Commissariat building (*Comisariato*) as well as the Police Office, the Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad (ICE) office and a private home were also identified. [FIGURES 6 and 7]

In the Corredor district several housing complexes located around soccer fields and in the renowned "American Zone" were identified. These were the most exclusive places where high officials of the United Fruit Company (UFCO) lived during the banana cultivation period in the south of Costa Rica.

¹⁹ For further details on the results of this analysis, please refer to: Programa de Investigación en Desarrollo Urbano Sostenible (2009). Patrimonio Histórico-Arquitectónico. In: Plan Regulador Cantonal de Corredores, Diagnóstico, Tomo I, Capítulo 3, Universidad de Costa Rica. San José, Costa Rica.



FIGURES 6-7. Buildings in Laurel district, 2010. (ProDUS)

4.1. Historic Value

The historic value of the buildings that were analyzed may be evidenced by the fact that their construction, as well as their location and use by workers and administrative personnel, were a direct response to a given historic period, characterized by political and economic interests in the region, which led to the arrival and establishment of UFCO and the Chiriquí Land Company, as well as to the transformation of the landscape.

The continuous use of these buildings has granted their permanence through time, and hence a proof of their prominence as living representations of an important historic period which, according to some inhabitants, not only defined the economic development of the place but also influenced the configuration of identities, power relations and a sense of belonging to this land.

4.2. Architectonic Value

The architectural value of the buildings lies in their efficient response to their physical and environmental context and the creation of a more comfortable living environment in the middle of extreme climate conditions.

The particular architectonic features, planned at the headquarters of the Company, follow pattern present in other areas of the enclave, such as in Limón, Quepos or the surroundings of the Panama Canal. The typology was introduced as a response to the rainy, humid and warm weather in a place where the differences between one building and another were based on the established working relations (Center for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage, 2000). For example the buildings for the officers of the Company were more spacious than the buildings for the workers.

In the housing complexes that were analyzed in farms in the district of Laurel, most of the houses were transformed mainly along the first floor, where wood was replaced with concrete. This has altered the buildings' integrity. With regards to the second floor, there are cases in which the original design and material were kept, whereas there are others where these were altered, and materials such as fibre-cement cladding were introduced. The houses that comprise the housing complex of Laurel district's central park have been greatly transformed: in addition to the substitution of the original materials, their design has been almost completely altered, and thus their value in the urban space is rather one of historical reference.

Furthermore, the analysis revealed that other buildings such as the *Comisariato* and the Training Center (*Centro de Capacitación*) have been transformed to a lesser degree: although despite several interventions in external and internal walls, floors, windows, etc., the overall cultural heritage value of the buildings has not been compromised

Thus, these buildings not only hold great historic value and a fundamental role in the urban landscape, but also important architectural value that must be preserved and maintained in a proper manner.

Finally, other buildings in the area, such as the Laurel Police Station and the housing complexes around the plaza and the Stadium in Coto 47 [FIGURES 8, 9 and 10], as well as housing units in the “American Zone”, were untouched during the period of 2009-2010, which indicates the permanence of these buildings’ historic network and architectural language.



FIGURES 8-9-10. Buildings and housing complexes in Coto 47, Corredor district, 2010. (ProDUS)

4.3. Areas of Special Character in Corredores

In order to guarantee the conservation and management of assets with historic/architectural heritage value, it is necessary to have proper a legal framework and customary practices in places. The application of these mechanisms is done by means of strategies for conservation that is: effective measures to protect and maintain a cultural asset, which can in turn create a clear communication system that defines the value, importance and positive qualities of the asset.

Identifying the specific characteristics that render heritage value to an asset is not enough to make decisions on its conservation, protection and maintenance; thus it is important to guide the urban development of a complex or its context, given the case, for the benefit of the site’s urban landscape.

It is important to note that the selected buildings have a close relationship with their physical environment; therefore, any architectural intervention in neighbourhoods or their surrounding areas will profoundly affect the cultural and social values of the cultural landscape. The implementation of any particular conservation strategy in the territory ought to be supported by thorough analysis including the strengths, opportunities, threats and weaknesses of the area.

The buildings analyzed were grouped in Areas of Special Character (ZCE, as per the Spanish acronym), for which a series of recommendations are defined and proposed, in order to improve their state of conservation, protection, use by inhabitants of the country and district, and contribution to the urban landscape and the vernacular architectural language.

The areas defined are:

Area of Special Character with Heritage Value Type 1 (ZVP 1, as per the Spanish acronym) which include buildings that are in a good state of repair and maintain a harmonious relationship with the context. Specific conditions for heights, surface coverage and withdrawals permitted for new buildings to be built around were defined. [FIGURES 11, 12 and 13]



FIGURES 11-12-13. Buildings in a good state of conservation in Coto 47, Corredor district, 2010.

Area of Special Character with Heritage Value Type 2 (ZVP 2, as per the Spanish acronym) which include housing complexes located in Laurel district whose buildings have suffered almost irreparable interventions that have slowly compromised their cultural heritage values, historic fabric and architectural language. These areas are important for their setting and because of their adjacency to landscaping or to ZVP 1 areas. The proposed uses for ZVP 2 areas are looking to strengthen their capacity to support other buildings without forgetting that it is appropriate to encourage the maintenance and refurbishment of adjacent sectors to improve the quality of the urban image and enhance the cultural landscape. [FIGURES 14, 15, and 16]



FIGURES 14-15-16. Buildings and housing complexes in Laurel district, 2010 (ProDUS)

5. Some common elements in heritage territory regulation

While various contexts exist in Costa Rica, some common measures can be taken, such as:

- The creation of Special Areas with historic value: Both rural and urban areas have important sites which should be preserved. It is crucial to define and establish some rules to guide development in these areas.
- The control of building heights: in urban areas, building heights should be

- defined carefully around historic buildings to respect the current urban settings.
- Commercial signage: With the creation of special areas of historic value, it is possible to control advertisement by providing guidelines for the shape, dimension, and other features of commercial signage.
 - Incentives: Some special incentives can be applied to heritage buildings, such as fewer parking lots, transfer of development rights, tax credits, etc.
 - Possibility of commercial and touristic use: One of the most important motivations for an owner is the possibility of commercial activity.

6. Final Thoughts

Various international organizations responsible for protecting the cultural and natural heritage of the world recommend that heritage resources be considered as active factors in the local strategic development and integration of societies. This is why heritage conservation should contribute to sustainable development to solve people's basic needs: economic, social and cultural rights without jeopardizing their own cultural value.

The process of evaluating cultural heritage is based on the active involvement of the community. A tool to achieve this is through tourism, as this is an important factor for development of national and local economies, as well as a means for cultural exchange.

Through tourism, communities are able to grasp the economics of heritage and harness these for conservation by generating funding, raising awareness and influencing policy.

Territorial regulations must consider historic and architectural resources as an element of great value in promoting sustainability and quality of life of local residents. As explained above, these resources are not an obstacle to development, but can rather be a boost to social development. The local government's task is arduous and should incorporate education strategies that allow residents to meet and learn about their history to strengthen the importance of preserving a heritage asset within a community.

In Costa Rica, the institutional approval process of regulatory plans takes a long time. Territory regulations are crucial to protect vulnerable areas in the natural and built environment. As a consequence, many property owners take advantage of the delays in the process and several significant historic buildings have been demolished.

The Costa Rican government does not have sufficient resources to compensate owners of historical buildings; however, this situation is not an excuse to avoid their protection. The use of regulatory incentives such as "Transfer of development rights" could improve the support given to architectural heritage owners.

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