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CUENCA RED. Network of dynamic spaces. Rehabilitation and improvement project for historic downtown of Cuenca in Ecuador.

Region	Latin America and the Caribbean
Award Scheme	Dubai International Award
Sustainable Development Goals	Goal 11 - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

Summary

CUENCA RED is a network of dynamic spaces. A project for the rehabilitation and improvement of public space in the historic downtown of Cuenca Ecuador. The historic downtown of Cuenca is recognized as a World Heritage site by the UNESCO and is now developing a new mobility system to reach a more livable center. The Inter American Development Bank launched in 2010 the ICES program which is now being carried out in Cuenca under the Revitalization Plan for the historic center.

Background and Objective

Situation Before the Initiative Began: Cuenca is the third biggest city in Ecuador with 459,057 inhabitants and part of the World Heritage sites by the UNESCO, for its valuable heritage and environmental character. Even with the high economic and touristic activities, the city's distribution is not uniform. Its downtown has low density and is emptying. It has a large number of vacant lots - more than 10% of total surface - and many underused public spaces, being an opportunity for urban regeneration. Currently, the city is facing a huge change generated by the "Mobility and Public Space Plan" that will influence the urban design, social and economic regulations. **Establishment of Priorities:** • Analysis of the urban, social and economic context. **Analysis of the current situation and goals setting.** Led by the design team. • Track and detection of potential agents involved in the design Plan, for its design phase and later implementation: government institutions, local authorities, neighborhood associations, technical experts, academic institutions and professionals. • Working sessions with local institutions to define the specific needs and guidelines. Led by the design team in collaborations with the representatives of the institutions and local authorities. • Technical design and development work of Cuenca RED, led by the design team. • Participatory and citizens empowerment process. Consulting activities, debates, divulgation and collection of data, led by the design team in collaboration with neighborhood associations, academic institutions and local authorities. **Formulation of Objectives And Strategies:** The goals are structured around the 6 themes found in Cuenca's public space. • **Activities:** increase the range of possible uses in public spaces and courtyards and improve public facilities to strengthen its usage and attract citizens. • **Mobility:** improve accessibility, allowing the coexistence of the different types transportation and prioritize pedestrians and soft mobility. • **Heritage:** considering the recognition of Cuenca as a World heritage site, we must search an equilibrium between the protections of historical-heritage value and new interventions. Incorporate new programs capable of sharing the site's history, strengthening the role of the city's center as a cultural agent and driving force. • **Culture:** offer a rich cultural program that can add value to public space, to make the city more attractive to its citizens and tourists, making Cuenca a heritage, cultural and identity reference. • **Economy:** integrate commerce and micro-economies such as markets, clothing stores, handcrafts workshops, tourism, rehabilitation, technology and informal economies in a common strategy that guides the potential of their economy and boost creative economy, tourism and cultural industry. • **Environment:** Recover and strengthen urban natural component by improving environment quality and biodiversity for the enjoyment of citizens and tourists. **Mobilisation of Resources:** • The Cuenca RED initiative was financed and promoted by the Inter-American Development bank (IDB), that since 2010 has implemented the program of "Initiative of emergent and sustainable cities" (IESC). • The wide network of collaborative partners has enabled a significant mobilization of human resources in terms of supporting the design team. • From GAD Cuenca Municipality, they provided political and technical support through the stages in the research, collection of data and selection of areas of intervention. • There have been numerous professionals involved in different departments of many institutions: The municipality related to housing, ETAPA, the Transportation department, etc... • As for the participatory process, many students from various academic institutions, joined the activities, workshops and urban mapping. • University of Azuay • The Catholic University of Cuenca • The Salesian Polytechnic University • Primary schools from Cuenca

Actions and Implementation



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Among the main problems the initiative had to face were:

- **Mobility:** the city deals since december 2015 with the “Mobility and Public Space Plan”, that integrates the Action Plan to improve mobility in all aspects: car traffic, public transport, not motorized transport, parking, etc. This Plan, generates serious changes in the urban structure, transport and usage of the historic center that is necessary to consolidate in planned manner.
- **Society and housing:** one of the greatest challenges that the city of Cuenca faces nowadays is trying to maintain the city center active and inhabited by avoiding gentrification that has occurred in many cities with similar circumstances.
- **Society and economy:** the new mobility model frees a large area in public parkings and roads. This limitation on vehicles will reduce the great demand of parkings that nowadays are misused and unfeasible. This, leads to consider and propose new economic opportunities that will make the municipality offer alternative solutions to the affected properties. To face these problems the plan Cuenca RED has developed the following strategic guidelines:

- In first place, a thorough analysis on the existing reality of vulnerabilities and opportunities was carried. An initial phase of previous studies mainly focused on the knowledge of public space, buildings and the social and cultural structure.
- Has been developed a design strategy that considers two ways.
 - o Urban Acupuncture: activate specific areas of the urban context to include the regeneration on the whole area.
 - o Network of active courtyards: actions done in courtyards that are currently unused, with special characteristics and with a great potential for the opportunities they have.
- This work has classified 119 opportunity spaces, identified by different criteria as accessibility and architecture potential, heritage and parkings. This first stage concludes with the selection of 6 priority spaces.
- Design project for the 6 spaces: considering the social, economic and management aspects, 3 phases are proposed:
 - o Phase 1 - Activation and opening
 - o Phase 2 - Rehabilitation and long-range interventions
 - o Phase 3 - Management and new construction

In parallel to the technical development of the Plan, there has been a participatory process that has involved various institutions, citizens and experts involved in the design. It has contributed to gather ideas and identify the main challenges establishing a hierarchy of necessary solutions. The results have been incorporated into the advanced designs of selected areas.

Outcomes and Impacts

Cuenca RED integrates sustainability as a cross element, this being a constant in all subjects of study and action plan: activities, mobility, heritage, culture, economy, natural environment. Such sustainability is visible through the following tangible achievements of the Plan and related participation process:

- At financial level: • For more complex and ambitious interventions, such as the transformation of the current Febres School in an active public center, called "School Town", it is planned a public-private financing. This intervention is a particular public challenge (with its 3000 m2 of courtyard reconverted into one of the main public spaces in the city) and also for private, with a number of actors who will be involved in the process of realization (developers, businesses, institutions, university, etc) and the exciting opportunities that will arise from the conversion of the school building (housing, sports facilities, educational spaces, etc.).
- At the level of institutional management: • One of the main problems is the lack of institutional management and inefficient communication between different departments affecting urban quality. As part of Cuenca RED, a series of activities have been organized during the development of the Plan, that have proven to be necessary opportunities for meeting, debate and dialogue between different institutions. These activities have emerged synergies that have been transformed into interagency agreements that are reflected in the actions of the Plan.
- It has also been promoted the training of human teams with high skills and commitment, a fundamental step at strengthening institutions of Cuenca, especially those that deal with urban management.
- At social level: • Design of policies for reactivation of public space in relation to existing facilities and potential activities. Each strategic action, particularly in the 6 selected spaces, is strictly related to existing and planned social dynamics. In general, the revitalization of the historic center tends to include mixed uses and activities of different types (sports facilities, cultural venues, shopping, housing, green areas, etc.) for a comprehensive regeneration of the Historical Center, covering physical, environmental, social, cultural and economic issues.
- Development of a participatory process that has given voice to the community, and an active role in decision-making, considering individual citizens, groups, associations, etc.
- At the environmental level: • All actions of the Plan are designed to support the new mobility model that is being implemented in Cuenca, with the presence of the tram, the progressive closure to vehicular traffic, and implementation of a sustainable model focused on soft mobility and pedestrianization.
- At 6 interventions, the environmental component is evident; in each space nature has a central role. In addition, one of the 6 interventions in particular, "The tree house" is conceived as an environmental outdoor classroom for training and education on sustainability, with prototype systems of water harvesting, energy production using alternative systems, etc.
- At cultural level: In a city declared as Unesco World Heritage, culture has certainly a fundamental role, and it has been one of the thematic areas on which the Plan has focused during the socialization process and strategic actions. In particular, one of the interventions proposed for one of 6 spaces, the Municipal parking, is strictly related to the expansion of the Library of Cuenca, one of the most active institutions in the city under the cultural point of view. The space, currently used as a car park, will become a "Citizen Hall," an adapted space for outdoor reading, stage performances, film screenings and cultural events of all kinds.

Gender and Social Inclusivity

The Cuenca RED Plan is chronologically one of the last works of Ecosistema Urbano, which follows a defined methodology, using similar tools and establishing objectives similar to previous works. The first work that has started our recent series of projects of urban / regional scale has been the Master Plan for the Historic Center of Asunción (also known as Plan CHA), which represents a reference for ourselves and for other active agents related urban issue by its complexity, its approach and the proposed methodology. In addition, many of the methodological aspects present in the Plan CHA and Cuenca RED are also in the Plan Encarnación Más: Sustainable Development Plan and Land Use Plan, for the city of Encarnación, Paraguay. Besides having transferred our urban knowledge in the various projects we have developed over recent years, thus enhancing the experience gained in different contexts,



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when writing a complex project as Cuenca RED, we started our work with a phase of preliminary studies and research references and best practices both locally and globally. The global vision brings us knowledge, experience and creative inputs able to overcome some limitations of the context. The local allows for a closer point of view, directly connected to the needs of the city and its inhabitants, their initiatives and genuine impulses. The previous research on best practices, as well as Cuenca RED project itself, may prove very useful knowledge for future projects, academic research, and exchange of experiences. That is why all our projects are entirely and free available to consultation and online download (in Issuu) accessible through our website and various articles and publications that spread worldwide in the network. On the other hand, Ecosistema urbano has a huge international visibility being a reference in urban projects. Its founding members, Belinda Tato and José Luis Vallejo are regular lecturers, and the project Cuenca RED it is included to be exposed in many international forums, generating huge interest and great expectations. Similarly, the website ecosistemaurbano.org, is a reference site for sustainability professionals, receiving visits from more than 70 countries. Cuenca RED has been shared on the blog, making the project visible and transparent since its inception. At the same time, both Belinda Tato and José Luis Vallejo are common teachers and share this project with his students, as a case study in which urban projects come together with participation processes and local architectural solutions.

Innovative Initiative

- **Large scale - small budget:** is not an impossible mission When urban intervention deals with a large area, it is very difficult that the budget available is sufficient to achieve the objectives in the Plan. Our methodology follows the principle of urban acupuncture and consists, on one hand, of establishing priorities in the areas of intervention according to various criteria of feasibility and potential; and secondly, it proposes a flexible process intervention at priority spaces that defines different phases (each requiring different economic resources) leading to a progressive transformation space. This allows the possibility to act at an early stage and with limited financial resources (a temporary phase, low cost and short-term), and gradually develop the proceedings until its final phase, which coincides with the final configuration of space as a result of the sum of the above actions.
- **Working with local collective intelligence** When you start an urban project of great impact as Cuenca RED, we find essential to integrate in our urban strategies a series of initiatives that arise directly from active citizenship. Taking into account the bottom-up initiatives that already occur in the center of Cuenca, has allowed us to design more authentic and successful strategic actions. Our participatory approach has helped to include the so-called local collective intelligence in the strategy at urban scale, as well as in architectural projects for the 6 selected spaces of high priority. We have learned (again) to enrich our work thanks to the direct input from users of the city.
- **Attribute a "glocal" dimension to the Plan** In the age of real time information in which we live, communicate best practices and successful experiences is a right and almost an obligation. Although some issues from Cuenca RED are strictly linked to the local context, many of the aspects that characterize the Plan, such as the methodology, the tools used and the concept of urban acupuncture have a transversal value, which can also be applied in very different contexts. To contribute to the dissemination of the project, and thus, support its global dimension is necessary to use communication tools that, conventionally, are not used in urban processes, but which gets a greater diffusion, beyond the professional context. For example, multimedia production, publishing a story of the project or dissemination through social networks, allows proposals go beyond the limits of diffusion, and take the urban message to a sector of society that, otherwise, would not receive the message. Through this strategy, the Cuenca RED Plan, which initially has fed on good local and international practices, transforms itself into a reference and global good practice.

Resources devoted to delivery

No.	Title	Source	Author	Publication	Title	Volume	Number	Date	Page	Number 1	Blog
1		http://ecosistemaurbano.org/ecosistema-urbano/cuenca-red-3-espacios-de-prioridad-alta-i-acupuntura-urbana/						28 Julio 2016	Edit 2	Blog	http://ecosistemaurbano.org/
2		http://ecosistemaurbano.org/								Blog	http://ecosistemaurbano.org/
3		http://ecosistemaurbano.org/ecosistema-urbano/cuenca-red-presentamos-el-nuevo-plan-de-revitalizacion-del-centro-historico/						26 Julio 2016	Edit 3	Plataforma	http://www.plataformaarquitectura.cl/
4		http://www.plataformaarquitectura.cl/cl/791697/entrevista-a-la-arquitecta-belinda-tato-no-podemos-hacer-ciudad-sin-contar-con-los-ciudadanos						21 Julio 2016	Edit 4	14 Julio 2016	Blog
5		http://ecosistemaurbano.org/ecosistema-urbano/cuenca-red-del-proceso-de-socializacion-al-diseno-urbano/							Edit 5	Periódico	http://www.eltiempo.com/ec/
6		http://www.eltiempo.com/ec/noticias-cuenca/163402-ta-cnicos-hacen-estudio-en-el-centro-hista-rico/						13 Junio 2016	Edit 6	Periódico	http://www.elmercurio.com/ec/
7		http://www.elmercurio.com/ec/533421-plan-para-reactivar-el-centro-historico-de-cuenca/#.V5s-h7iLSUI						11 Junio 2016			

Conclusion

The Cuenca RED Plan is part of the "Initiative Emerging and Sustainable Cities" (ICES) promoted by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), which seeks to take advantage of new growth patterns at emerging Latin American cities through processes analysis, diagnosis and improvement proposals that solve provision of basic services, social and urban inequality, environmental and quality of life problems Besides this, Cuenca RED Plan it has been implemented as a policy of sustainable urban transformation that the city of Cuenca has been developing in recent years. In recent months, the Municipality of Cuenca has worked in the draft of the Plan of Mobility and Public Spaces, launching the document last December 2015. The Plan addresses mobility in the entire municipality of Cuenca, analyzing current situation and developing an action plan to improve mobility in all its aspects: traffic, public transport, non-motorized transport, parking, etc. The objectives of the plan fit perfectly with the objectives of Cuenca RED project, promoting a city model that redistributes the public space, returning to the citizen a leading role, making this as the trigger for greater economic and social



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activity in the public space. Cuenca RED suggests a creative reuse of public spaces and private spaces used as parking lots today. The study will determine the policy of reuse of spaces in the city that will be implemented over the next 3 years.