

DEVELOPMENT THROUGH HERITAGE: COLOMBIA'S COFFEE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE AS A REFERENCE FOR A NEW VALLE DEL CAUCA LANDSCAPE INITIATIVE

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Abstract. One fascinating element that characterizes landscapes is the intricate relationship between human-made and natural systems, which, when integrated, can foster new ecological relationships or unique vernacular cultures adapted to their environment. It is this special relationship between nature and humanity that UNESCO defines as Cultural Landscapes. Due to their composition, these landscapes are subject to specific risks, conditions, and opportunities related to a variety of factors, such as environmental conditions, historical backgrounds, or socio-economic dynamics, which are often organized in large territories in complex systemic structures. Therefore, after the recognition of cultural landscape as a typology of heritage in 1994, many societies have worked to identify, conserve, and valorize cultural landscapes within their territories. One example is Colombia, which in 2011 achieved the UNESCO recognition of the Coffee Cultural Landscape (CCLC), consolidating one of the country's most successful heritage valorization initiatives. This effort has produced important benefits both locally, for communities and ecosystems, as well as nationally and even internationally. However, in 2024, just a few kilometers from the municipalities that form the core of the CCLC, the proposal for a new cultural landscape in the southwest of the Colombian region of Valle del Cauca sparked significant controversy. Despite complex contradictions, especially due to the way in which the initiative was presented, this scenario could potentially contribute to the solution of existing historical regional issues. For this reason, the research analyzes this new cultural landscape initiative through the experiences of the CCLC, in order to discover the way in which these difficulties can be transformed into opportunities to consolidate, valorize and promote heritage role as a development tool in the southwest of Valle del Cauca region in Colombia.

Introduction. One interesting aspects of any society is the relationship it establishes with its environment, particularly with the natural characteristics of the territory it inhabits. While these features can favor certain types of development, they may also represent limits that communities often face creatively. This reality inevitably leads to unique adaptations, both from society, which develops physical and cultural elements to facilitate its integration with its surroundings, and from the territory itself, which is progressively shaped to meet societal needs, resulting in distinctive characteristics. This intricate relationship is described as a landscape [1; 2], and formed the base used by UNESCO, during the 1990s, to establish a new heritage category: cultural landscapes [3]. This designation protects the authenticity and cultural significance of the relationship between the

natural system, comprising all environmental and ecological elements of a territory, and the anthropic system, which includes the physical adaptations to the land, such as buildings, infrastructure, and the cultural constructs of the society [4]. This heritage framework has fostered the development of new conservation and valorization methodologies, that not only incorporate an understanding of the environment and its characteristics into the already established human reality, but also addresses expanded territorial realities connected systematically by typological, cultural, historical, or social structures. Over time, various experiences around the world have consolidated significant results, primarily linking heritage preservation activities to crucial environmental and social improvements [5; 6]. These experiences serve as best practices references, capable of guiding new heritage protection projects worldwide. Such is the case in Colombia, where, since 2011, an important cultural landscape initiative consolidated, generating profound cultural and economic impacts nationwide, which can significantly contribute to future experiences relating cultural landscapes.

Coffee Cultural Landscape of Colombia. The Coffee Cultural Landscape of Colombia (CCLC), included in the World Heritage List in 2011, is the only cultural landscape in the country recognized by UNESCO. This designation marks one of Colombia's most notable experiences in heritage conservation and enhancement with profound effects at local and national scales. In fact, the CCLC, concentrates a rich network of both environmental and social realities, that started to develop since the end of the Spanish colonial rule, in 1819, throughout the phenomenon known as "Antioquian Colonization" [7], until today, across 4 regions; Caldas, Risaralda, Quindío and the north of Valle del Cauca. As a cultural landscape, the CCLC is composed by two major systems, which arise from the very definition [3]. The first, is natural system that characterizes by the Montane Cloud Forest ecosystem, native to South-America, containing unique animal and vegetal species adapted to the high altitude and humidity of the Andes Mountains. Moreover, the area is also determined by agricultural practices that have adapted the territory, after decades of occupation, to contain by coffee plantations along with banana or plantain palms (*Musa Paradisiaca L./ Musa Balbisiana*) that provide shade and protection to the coffee bushes. Additionally, surrounding the plantations relicts of native guadua forests (*Guadua Angustifolia*) are often found, preserved by a deliberate decision of the inhabitants of the area [7]. The anthropic system, on the other hand, is composed by human infrastructure, which distributes in two different realities, a rural one, characterized by small traditional dwellings called "fincas" that present unique architectural traits and configurations, and an urban one, composed by historical cities, founded in during the second half of XX century following similar urbanisms and characteristics visible today, reflecting the social and economic developments the area has gone through [8; 9]. Since the early 20th century, both systems have been progressively addressed by different national and local initiatives that have enormously contributed to the development of experiences that have significantly improved the living standards of the local population through the conservation and enhancement of the territory's heritage assets, in fact, the

declaration of cultural landscape by UNESCO, demonstrates the articulated efforts of multiple organizations that have been able to position Colombian coffee as an excellence symbol, while promoting sustainable development strategies that involve environmental conditions and local traditional practices, while consolidating innovative management strategies that have assured not only the CCLC integrity but the development of its environmental, economic, social and cultural aspects. Some of the most relevant practices could be the National Coffee Fund, that has assured a common economical support, or the Federation of Coffee Growers association that has involved local communities in development programs. All these characteristics, have turned the CCLC into an exemplary case of heritage conservation and enhancement in Colombia, in which contemporary and future complexities and problems are tackled by a well-organized structure that provide significant contributions to the future while preserving the historic legacy of the region.

Valle del Cauca Cultural Landscape Initiative. Despite the presence of some CCLC protected areas at the north of Valle del Cauca territory, around the towns of Anserma Nuevo, Caicedonia, Sevilla and Trujillo, Valle del Cauca presents a different context, situation that was clear, in 2024, when an old initiative came out again to the public debate, promoted by some southern municipalities; Cali, Candelaria, Pradera and Florida, who declared their will to work for the declaration of the sugar cane agricultural area (*Saccharum officinarum*) as a new cultural landscape, to be eventually submitted to UNESCO under the name of “Sugar Cane Cultural Landscape”. The initiative was quickly and vehemently rejected by various sectors of society, including the national government, which led to its quick abandonment. Despite some clear issues, which will be addressed in detail below, the initiative is indeed promising, if treated properly, as it could not only represent an opportunity for the territory development, but also a chance to start serious debates regarding existing and historic complexities present today which initially justified the opposition to the declaration. In this regard, the CCLC could provide valuable experiences that could inspire innovative methodologies that contribute to the resolution of these difficulties while contributing to the conservation and enhancement of the existing heritage assets and the environmental biodiversity that characterizes region.

In order to better discuss the issues, the declaration of this landscape might entail, it's necessary to first understand the systems that could characterize this case as a landscape, so as mentioned before, the natural and anthropic systems. In first place, Valle del Cauca natural system is mainly shaped by the Cauca River geographical basin that extends from the Colombian Massif in the Andes Mountain Range towards the north, creating a mostly plane, flood-prone valley, contained both to the west and east by the peaks of the Andes, that extend from south to north following the river's flow. These characteristics have permitted the growth of a Dry Forest ecosystem, which present singular native flora and fauna structures [10] due to the warm temperatures and stable weather cycles [11]. These nurturing conditions, historically fostered the settlement of human societies throughout the Cauca River that have historically modified the environment according to their needs, leaving behind physical and archeo-

logical legacies that compose the anthropic system of the area. However, in terms of nature, Valle del Cauca original territory configuration presents a clear break at the beginning of the sixteenth century, with the arrival of Spanish colonial rule, which imposed a territorial organization and exploitation through function-drive towns as seats of power, agricultural villages, such as Cali and Buga, mining villages, like Cartago, or the so-called “Indian villages” which were settlements dedicated exclusively to the residence, often forced, of the indigenous population, such as Jamundí, Candelaria and Yumbo [12], all existing towns today. The gentle geography of the territory and the abundance of rivers promoted agriculture as a main economic activity during colonial rule, which was structured into large estates under the control of certain families of Spanish origin, who used to locate a central residence from where they controlled the activities and the labor force of the property. This building typology receives the name of “Hacienda”, and is one of the first constructive typologies widely spread throughout the territory. In fact, Colombian regulations recognizes 20 haciendas in Valle del Cauca as national assets of cultural interest. The productive dimension of the haciendas, configures a specific landscape unit that is composed of both residential and productive buildings of colonial style, born from the syncretism between indigenous and Spanish building traditions, remnants of the native dry forest, and large agricultural areas, or to a lesser extent, cattle raising areas. It's in this early context that the sugarcane crop consolidated as one of the main regional products, a prominence that is maintained even after the independence wars (1810-1819) and that gradually increased until the end of the 19th century when the hacienda model began to evolve into a more technified and broader agro-industrial system, involving new technologies, territory exploitation models, and social dynamics, that fully consolidated at the beginning of the 20th century, represented by a new industrial typology called Ingenios or Sugar mills. This new system, no longer formed by family orders, but rather by capital associations, experienced a remarkable expansion partly due to the increase in the demand for sugar during the war conflicts of the first half of the 20th century [12], conforming a new reality shaped by an industrial character architecture that arose in a systemic way along the production areas, and the routes that connected them to the distribution points in the interior of the country and to the Pacific Ocean, in the port of Buenaventura. One special building typology, that reflects this change is the railroad station, that was part of a whole national infrastructural project. Although the construction of the railroad in Valle del Cauca began in the first half of the 19th century, it was not until 1915 that the system fully consolidated in a decisive way, unifying the region under the Pacific Railroad system. Thus, railroad stations were built at strategic points, fostering the urbanization of previously rural areas or, at some cases, the emergence of new urban settlements. The railroad stations presented local architectural styles, such as the eclectic movement during the 19th century, due to the reinterpretation of European architectural styles that characterized Colombian architecture in the first hundred years of the republic, or the first modern styles trends during the 20th century [13]. This characteristic consolidates railroad stations as symbols of Colombian history and territorial development, adding new layers of cultural significance to the territorial reality. In fact, as with the Haciendas system, the Colombian

government has declared all 50 railroad stations in the region as national assets of cultural interest, all of them no longer in use after the closure of the railroad system during 1990. Their abandonment, and the eventual neglect has fostered a wide spread decay in both haciendas and railroad station, promoting its destruction, and in some cases their disappearance. These two architectural typologies represent the heritage dimension of the anthropic system of Valle del Cauca, containing high cultural and historical importance and significance, despite their precarious state. However, there's another and more complex, side of history around these places which configure new heritage conditions whose comprehension is fundamental for the discussion of heritage management in the region, specially in a cultural landscape scenario. One recurring element, around these buildings is the strong presence of contrasting narratives that do not view these sites as positive symbols of Valle del Cauca's history, but as legacies of difficult events that have characterized Colombian history, such as the slave trade economy in the case of colonial buildings, haciendas, or the violent land appropriation practices, implemented during the conflicts known as La Violencia (1948-1958) and the Colombian Armed Conflict (1960- today), during the industrial expansion of ingenios and railroad stations. These conflictive memories, especially those related to contemporary conflicts, are highly problematic as they are rooted in the intricate political violence and ideological struggle that characterized these events, and which resulted in heavy affectations in every aspect of the Colombian social life, and which are still highly sensible topics, as the country has tried, mostly unsuccessfully, in various ways to scape the viscous cycle of trauma and war. In Valle del Cauca, the relation between the atrocity of the conflicts and the patterns in which the territory was used, inhabited and modified, has been studied by different authors and organizations, [14; 15; 16] who have highlighted the role some of these dynamics had in the extension of the conflicts. Under this perspective, the existing heritage systems assets along with their systems, possess another layer of cultural significance, that it's inherently complex, and which has been conceptualized under the term of dissonance, specially linked to places of atrocity and war [17]. This dissonance is evident in Valle del Cauca's case, as any activity related to the conservation or enhancement of the already mentioned heritage is, and has been, interpreted as a deliberate attempt to erase the memory of the victims, and to hide the painful past under the cultural heritage denomination, which is believed to obliterate the responsibility of those who contributed to the developments of the conflicts. The complexity of this dissonance in transversal to all the elements of this case, in fact, the proposed name "sugar cane cultural landscape" was rejected, in part, as this plant also represents the difficult legacy the development of this industry had, in many cases at expense of local communities [18]. This situation, explains why this name hasn't been used to describe Valle del Cauca's reality in this research as it's considered to be problematic by its own.

Conclusion, Opportunities within Complexities. In conclusion, this possible new cultural landscape faces a multiplicity of complexities that prevent a generalized recognition of the value of the exiting natural and cultural assets, and eventually, its declaration as a cultural landscape. However, the definition, as understood by UNESCO, could represent an

opportunity to propose solutions through the implementation of innovative heritage conservation and enhancement strategies, many of which have successfully worked in similar scenarios not far, such as the case of the CCLC. In this regard, two key main complexities have been identified, the first one is the environmental impact the Sugar Cane production has over local ecosystems due to the high-water consumption, the usage of damaging agricultural practices and the continuous reduction of the size of the native dry forests [10; 19]. However, it's important to remember that the natural system makes a fundamental part of any landscape, and it's the sustainable relation between nature and humanity, that backups landscape as a heritage asset, which at the same time, makes the natural structures susceptible to restoration and enhancement strategies, as its optimal state contributes to the well-being of the whole landscape. In fact, some of these practices have already been implemented within the CCLC, which have fostered different activities to increase the knowledge of local ecosystems, create awareness in local communities and strengthen their presence and vitality. Some of these were, for example, arboreal censuses, studies on native fauna, or the implementation of integral ecological restoration projects that have united national parks and remnants of native forest through ecological belts, while creating sustainable tourism models related to environmental appreciation and conservation. The declaration of a cultural landscape in Valle del Cauca, as in the CCLC could also mean the possibility to start new research programs for the development of new sustainable agricultural practices that reduce its impact on local ecosystem and promote the consolidation of new or better agricultural products. The second complexity is the dissonant historical interpretation that links the sites to painful memories. Although the legacy of the conflict in the area is unquestionable and still has profound effects on local communities, the heritage declaration could be understood, instead, as an opportunity to preserve the memory and complex history of the area, opening spaces for discussion and contextualization within the same territory that was once scenario of conflict [20; 21; 22]. This could lead to the involvement of different sectors of society through different methodologies, which could promote the creation of a collective memory of the historic events that conform the past of these sites. These opportunities eventually, could solidified into a single proposal of creating a territorial historical consciousness by integrating important past memory exercises, such as the studies made, by the Historical Memory Center (CNMH) or The Colombian Truth Commission, after the peace treaty in 2016. These new and integral narratives, wouldn't act in detriment of the cultural value of the area, but would rather add new layers of cultural significance, while grating the area an active role both in the symbolic reparation of the victims, as ordered in the 2011 victims' law in Colombia, but also in the construction of peace in the territory [23; 24]. Although the CCLC doesn't have the same historical complexity linked to conflict, it's a perfect example of the involvement models of broad sectors of society through programs that integrate the population in cultural, agricultural and economic projects under the direction of public-private organizations. This same methodology could contribute enormously to Valle del Cauca's case as it would foster the creation of strong social structures that would actively work for the preservation of the existing heritage not only as a symbol of the past, but especially, as a motor for the

future promoting new a more innovative enhancement models for the sites, as has been done for the CCLC.

Thus, the consolidation of a new cultural landscape in Valle del Cauca can be seen as a unique opportunity to initiate new discussions and dynamics that promote actions addressing existing complexities, not only on environmental and interpretation levels, as previously mentioned, but also on economic, social, cultural, and infrastructural levels throughout the region. In this sense, heritage shouldn't be understood as a designation that seeks to anchor the region to its current state but, on the contrary, as a tool to identify the elements of greatest collective cultural significance and, through them, generate meaningful changes in its context. Even so, the new cultural landscape, before any official declaration must undergo extensive participation, research, and socialization processes to reach common agreements among all those who live in and are connected to it. However, while this process unfolds, it is essential, from a heritage perspective, to begin new and deeper analyses of the territorial built realities from a singular or systemic perspective. This would expand the available information, identifying new risks and threats but, above all, opportunities.

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Figures.

FIGURE 1 – Coffee Production Regions in Colombia, Containing CCLC Territorial Units

FIGURE 2 – CCLC View in Quindío Region, Displaying Coffee Plantations and pockets of Montane Cloud Forest. (Courtesy of Ana Lucía Ordóñez López)

FIGURE 3- Valle del Cauca Region, marking CCLC protected areas declared by UNESCO, Sugar Cane Agricultural Areas & National Natural Parks.

FIGURE 4- Valle del Cauca Region, marking The Haciendas and Railroads stations systems declared as National Heritage Assets



