

Values associated with nature. Mapping the ombu tree in Uruguayan landscapes

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Abstract. This project aims at creating awareness about the value of local landscapes and history in interaction with natural components, in particular- given their paradigmatic nature - ombu¹ trees, both as individual specimens and as a species. Salvaging and disseminating values associated with nature - understood as cultural construct – contributes to the knowledge and enjoyment of a landscape, as a way of linking human practices and representations referring to nature, fostering the creation of a collective responsibility in this respect. It is proposed to involve the population in a research process using mapping as a tool for integration. The process of gathering and disseminating data is linked with awareness of the natural and cultural heritage, strengthening local and national identities.

Keywords: Role of cartography, Landscape practices and representations, Interactive maps

¹ *Phytolacca dioica*, or ombú, is a very large evergreen tree-like plant, native to South America. Its trunk – usually widening at the base- consists of anomalous secondary thickening rather than true wood.

1. Introduction

Dans la pampa
MIDI
Où suis-je? Le rancho. Tout autour, au repos,
S'étire jusqu'à l'horizon la pampa rude
Qui ne connaît l'ombre errante des troupeaux
Et parfois un ombú, courbé de solitude.

Jules Supervielle, Poèmes, 1919

We subscribe to consideration of nature as a cultural notion generally understood by means of the landscape. From this standpoint, the landscape is a bearer of values, reflecting interaction between practices and representations regarding nature.

In particular we are working with vegetation and more specifically with one species – the ombu (*Phytolacca dioica*)- on Uruguayan territory. On the one hand, we are studying the physical situation on a national scale, isolated ombu trees or groups of them in urban and rural, public or private open spaces. On the other, we are studying uses, urban, and architectonic practices, knowledge and representations, both mental (life stories, social imagination, identitarian values) and artistic (paintings, literature) – associated with the species or with specific specimens.

The project proposes a participative working methodology, linking gathering and dissemination of information, supported by mapping as a guide and tool for social inclusion.

2. Objectives and context

The aim is to seek and disseminate values associated with nature, typical of our heritage, creating citizen awareness as a way to contribute to knowledge and enjoyment of the landscape and the creation of a collective responsibility in this regard.

The idea is to draw a map of ombu trees on a national level, representative of a heritage approach, using cartography as an integrating tool.

We support linking practices and representations, theoretical knowledge and real locations, and popularization as a way of contributing to a “cultural revolution” in which we are all involved. Making a parallel with the idea of a “Third landscape,” knowledge is supported as a “shared fragment of a collective conscience” and as an opportunity for diversity (Clément, 2004).

On the one hand, a databank is being prepared containing artistic representations associated with the ombu in literature and the plastic arts in the South American region – Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil – where this species is indigenous (Cracco et al., 1993). Furthermore, the specimens studied are associated with representations, values and meanings regarding nature. Thus, the influence of these values, representations and meanings is determined in our society's social, architectonic and urban practices.

Regarding the development of knowledge and representations attached to ombu trees in our region, mention can be made of Pedro Figari, Nicolás García Urriburu, Juan Storm, Jorge Damiani, Jules Supervielle, William Henry Hudson, Francisco Acuña de Figueroa, Sarah Bollo, Fernán Silva Valdés, Atilio Supparo, Bartolomé Mitre, José Manuel Pérez Castellano, Luis L. Domínguez, José Risso, among others.

Concerning the convergence of theoretical reflections, teaching and practice of artistic representations and applied art, the case of Pedro Figari² in our country is an outstanding one and for this reason we will use him as a starting point for several of our lines of work. For conceptual, methodological and instrumental reasons, in order to carry out this project a partnership between the University of the Republic and the Figari Museum has been suggested.



Figure 1. Survey of vegetation along the coastal strip of Montevideo

² Pedro Figari (1861-1938): a distinguished Uruguayan painter, criminal lawyer, politician and writer



Figure 2. Silhouette of a palm tree and an ombu tree

Practices and representations associated with nature in general and ombu vegetation in particular already exist in our social imagery and as a value of identity, perhaps latent in many of our country's neighbourhoods and localities. Highlighting them and supporting their dissemination fosters reassessing our landscapes and our identity.

By involving the population in the research process, exchange is boosted – contributions to and from the project – whereby an impact can be made on social dynamics.

Regarding practices, as an example, we can name the palm trees and ombu trees presently lining Montevideo's coastal strip, where the formal characteristics and meanings associated with the species were decisive at the time of planting (figures 1 and 2). Another example of urban development marked by the ombu tree is the case of the ombu of the Mulata to the east of the city. Myths and legends have been woven around this specimen (figure 3) going back to colonial times and have marked the city, from its toponymy to its material development. Furthermore, the ombu on Bulevar España (figure 4), determined the layout as it existed before the street itself.

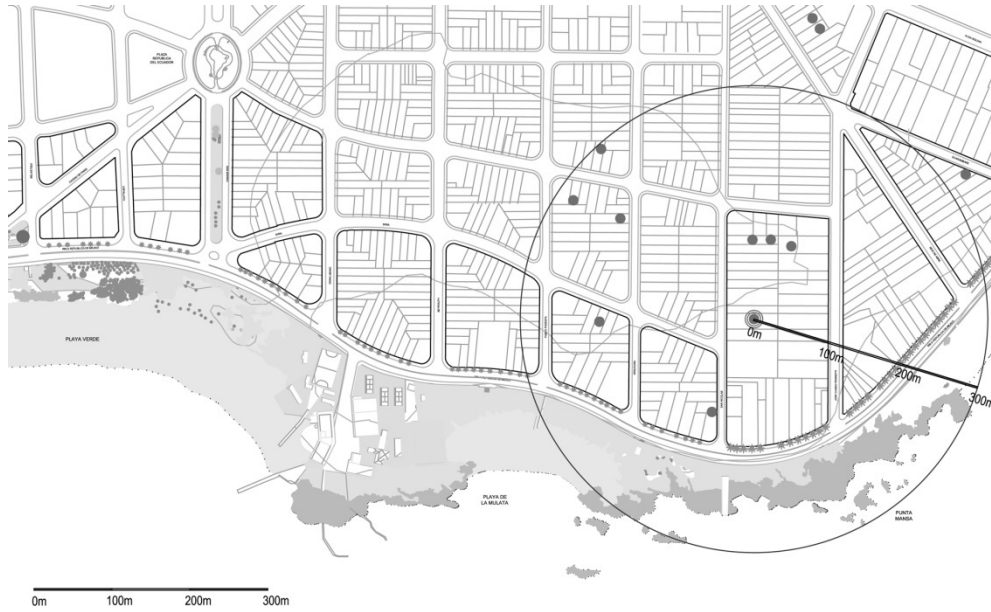


Figure 3. Geo-reference of ombus around the Mulata ombu

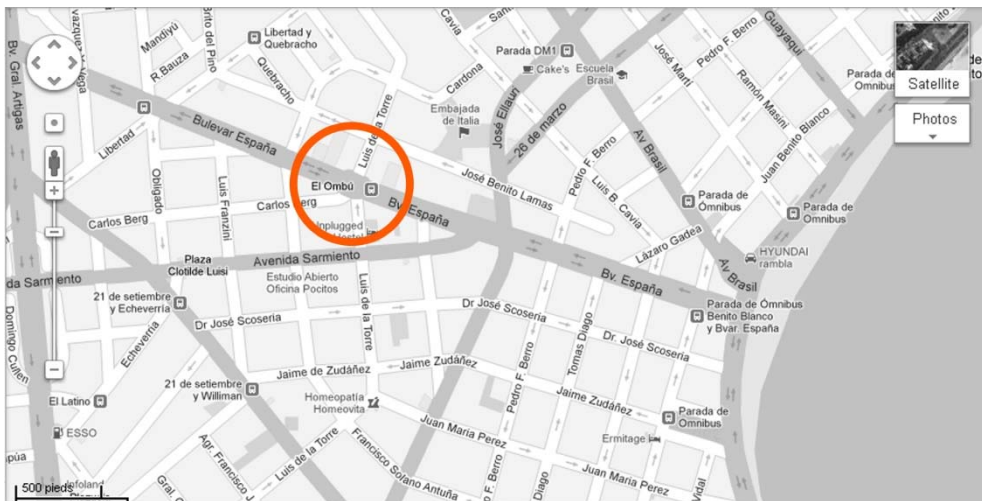


Figure 4. The ombu on Bulevar España, Montevideo

Regarding representations, the case of Pedro Figari is paradigmatic. In his reproductions of the Pampa (figure 5), he shared with Jules Supervielle “the possibility of introducing certain American codes in the ‘digestive system’ of European culture” and combined an eagerness for things that are native with an unconditional passion for playing with drawing and colour (Peluffo Linari, 1988). Finally, some spaces such as the ombu grove in Ro-

cha have given rise to urban legends, which affirm that in its special environment, those who visit it suddenly remember far off events which took place in their childhood.



Figure 5. Painting by Pedro Figari titled “En la pampa,” 1923-32

3. Approach and methodology

It is considered that cultural constructs has an impact on the dynamics of our societies, and therefore we are working on existing practices and representations, establishing a more direct association between them through concrete actions (gathering, transmitting knowledge, disseminating it) making our perceptions of the environment more visible and measurable. One of the keys to the success of the project is education, as a way of reaching citizens and making them aware of the values which are deposited in them, thus enabling them to care for and fully enjoy such values.

An almost qualitative research methodology is followed. Firstly, a necessary condition is to have information on the material situation: location and physical characteristics of the specimens of vegetation and their surroundings in the framework of the national territory. At the same time, a qualitative approach must be taken, placing emphasis on sensitive areas, practices and meanings associated with the former.

Assessments made during collective (Design Institute 2006) and inter-institutional research (Vallarino, 2008) are the basis. Ombu trees existing

in the national territory are located and using this background information, together with field work (visits to urban and rural sites, both public and private, as well as the examination of present-day aerial photos and those of previous years, historical photos, interviews with qualified informers, specific support from external consultants, documents and bibliographical studies. Once the initial stage is completed, an interactive map, linkable from various locations, open to the reception of data and metadata, will be available. The idea is to geo-reference specimens and groups of ombu trees in Uruguay, not as an exhaustive survey but as a qualitative study, as a representative sample on a national level, where cultural aspects will have a preferential place. We adhere to the idea of mapping as part of the social processes of territorialisation, while technical and symbolic operations - whereby human societies give a meaning and identity to their vital environment - mark them and appropriate them. (Besse, 2001). Cartography is an end and a means for this project, linking the role played by landscape architects (understanding the landscape) to the role played by artists (interrogating the reality of the world in which we live). In this way, we support the "creation of new conditions of visibility and develop a sensitive approach to our environment" (Tiberghien et al, 2010).

The "case study" technique is used to understand the complexity and dynamic patterns implied by the phenomena that include the social situation that enshrines our work. On the one hand, field work is carried out to gather data on materiality and intangibility and as a basic tool in the process of dissemination and education. This is a key issue as education, linked to dissemination of knowledge, is taken as an instrument to create citizen awareness.

Through workshops at schools and interaction with the Ceibal Plan³ it is hoped to reach children and families in different parts of the country. For this purpose, the implementation in August 2012 of the gvSIG Batoví⁴ is strategic. This is based on the use of free software, thus going hand in hand with the spirit of solidarity, collaboration and knowledge-sharing followed by this project.

The intention is that the mass media should play a dual role as they will also serve as an attraction towards interactive tools (maps, blogs, mails) appeal-

³ Plan for Educational Connectivity of Basic Information for On-line Learning (Plan de Conectividad Educativa de Informática Básica para el Aprendizaje en Línea - CEIBAL) (Balaguer, 2010)

⁴ Geographical information system applied to educational environments aimed at the Ceibal Plan on the basis of a gvGIS

ing to collective inputs as sources of information. This will be achieved by means of web pages and digital institutional newsletters, on site workshops provided in a selection of state and private schools all over the country, graduate and post-graduate teaching activities, interviewing of local stakeholders and presentations at national and international events.

4. Conclusions and perspectives

This project generates inputs, firstly on the level of the general population. The results will provide knowledge (from both a botanical and cultural standpoint), regarding the ombu, as a species in general and with reference to individual species in our country in particular. Secondly, following the rules of territorial evolution of the Third landscape (Clément, 2007), data will be obtained that may be incorporated in the Infrastructure of the National Spatial Data as a “fundamental tool to support decision-making through the use of quality geoinformation” (AGESIC, 2006). This would be a final stage as a way in which organizations and institutions can share documents with ease. (Rodríguez, 2012). Furthermore, geo-referencing is a key factor in Uruguay as the planning instruments, derived from the Land Planning and Sustainable Development Law, are presently being implemented. Likewise, the results will constitute valuable inputs to local and international nature tourism.

The idea is to work in a participatory manner, both physically on-site and virtually. Knowledge and dissemination of the components of our cultural heritage will enable our landscapes to be re-assessed and to strengthen local and national identities. Our ambition is to make the various visions converge in a quantitative-qualitative study of the ombu tree in Uruguay. The project will then make inputs from various points of view: from the anecdotic in itself (type of plant defined, referring to a defined geographical location), to the extrapolation of conceptual and methodological contributions arising from it and from the concrete inflow and output of information with an aim to re-assess the local landscape and history.

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Credits for illustrations

Figure 1- Instituto de Diseño

Figure 2- sketch by the author

Figure 3- prepared by the author

Figure 4- located on the Google maps base

Figure 5- courtesy of the Figari Museum, Montevideo

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