

# Public spaces: Challenges of planning and cultural manifestation in Huancayo, Peru

## Espacios públicos: Desafíos de planificación y manifestación cultural en Huancayo, Perú

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Received: 09/03/2025

Accepted for publication: 23/05/2025

Published: 30/06/2025

### ABSTRACT

Public spaces in Huancayo, Peru, face planning, design, and maintenance challenges that restrict their social and cultural roles. This study aimed to analyze architects' and urban planners' perceptions of technical challenges and their connection to local cultural identity. A qualitative approach was used, interviewing four professionals selected for their urban management expertise, employing an open-ended question guide, and analyzing data through thematic coding. Results highlighted deficiencies such as a lack of green areas, inadequate infrastructure, underutilization of parks and plazas, and weak integration of cultural identity, reducing their ability to foster social cohesion. The study concludes that inclusive and sustainable planning, incorporating cultural heritage and addressing community demands, is needed, aligning with approaches like Place-Making. These findings suggest that optimizing public spaces could strengthen cultural identity and social interaction in Huancayo, promoting more functional and representative environments through proposals like zonal parks, pedestrian prioritization, and sustainable cultural events.

**Keywords:** Public spaces, urban planning, cultural identity, Huancayo, cultural manifestations.

### RESUMEN

Los espacios públicos en Huancayo, Perú, enfrentan problemas de planificación, diseño y mantenimiento que restringen su rol social y cultural. Este estudio buscó analizar las percepciones de arquitectos y urbanistas sobre los desafíos técnicos y su vínculo con la identidad cultural local. Se empleó un enfoque cualitativo, entrevistando a cuatro profesionales seleccionados por su experiencia en gestión urbana, utilizando una guía de preguntas abiertas y analizando los datos mediante codificación temática. Los resultados evidenciaron deficiencias como falta de áreas verdes, infraestructura inadecuada, subutilización de parques y plazas, y una débil integración de la identidad cultural, lo que reduce su capacidad de fomentar cohesión social. El estudio concluye que se requiere una planificación inclusiva y sostenible que incorpore el patrimonio cultural y atienda las demandas comunitarias, en línea con enfoques como el Place-Making. Estos hallazgos sugieren que optimizar los espacios públicos tienen el potencial de reforzar la identidad cultural y la interacción social en Huancayo, promoviendo entornos más funcionales y representativos mediante propuestas como parques zonales, prioridad al peatón y eventos culturales sostenibles.

**Palabras clave:** Espacios públicos, planificación urbana, identidad cultural, Huancayo, manifestaciones culturales.

## INTRODUCTION

Public spaces, understood as collectively owned areas intended for free public use, are fundamental in shaping urban life. They not only serve recreational and ecological purposes but also act as settings for social interaction, cultural expression, and the construction of collective identity (Gehl, 2013). In cosmopolitan cities, such as many in Latin America, these spaces face significant challenges related to urban planning, functional design, and maintenance, often resulting in areas that fail to adequately meet community needs or sustainability principles (Carrión & Dammert, 2019). In the case of Huancayo, Peru, public spaces like parks and plazas are perceived as key locations for socialization and the preservation of cultural traditions, yet they suffer from structural issues and a disconnect with local cultural identity. This study focuses on exploring how local architects and urban planners conceptualize these spaces, emphasizing their role in urban life and their relationship with cultural identity through a qualitative analysis based on interviews.

Despite their importance, public spaces face significant issues that limit their potential as hubs of social and cultural cohesion. Previous studies in Latin American contexts have identified recurring problems such as a lack of comprehensive urban planning, a shortage of green areas, and insufficient infrastructure in rapidly expanding cities (Carrión & Dammert, 2019; Segovia & Oviedo, 2000).

In the literature, public spaces have been analyzed as reflections of a society's social and cultural dynamics, according to (Lefebvre, 1974) sociology of space, which argues that these places are both products of social relations and influencers of them. Similarly, the theory of place-making (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995) emphasizes the importance of designing public spaces that encourage community appropriation and reflect local cultural identity, transforming them from mere "spaces" into meaningful "places." In Latin America, authors like Low (2000) have highlighted plazas as spaces for negotiating cultural and political identities, while Ramírez (2015) stresses the need to integrate cultural heritage into urban planning to strengthen local identity. However, specific studies on Huancayo are scarce, with most research focusing on general urbanization issues,

leaving a gap in understanding how public spaces can be designed and managed to meet the social and cultural needs of the local population.

Previous studies in other cities have documented tensions between modernization and heritage preservation, where inadequate urban planning and private interests often overlook the historical and cultural dimensions of public spaces. Coupled with unplanned growth and conflicts between urban and rural areas (Rendón, 2024), as well as a lack of regulatory mechanisms, this leads to the transformation of traditional residential zones into commercial areas, undermining their historical character (Conto, 2025).

Based on these gaps, this study sought to analyze the perceptions of architects and urban planners in Huancayo regarding public spaces, focusing on two main aspects: first, identifying technical and physical challenges related to the planning, design, and maintenance of these spaces, including the shortage of green areas, lack of adequate infrastructure, and underutilization of existing areas; second, exploring how public spaces reflect and promote the city's cultural identity, considering their role as settings for artistic manifestations and local traditions, as well as the limitations in their design to fulfill this function. Through this analysis, the study aims to contribute to understanding the specific challenges Huancayo faces in managing its public spaces and propose guidelines for improvement, aligned with principles of sustainability, inclusion, and cultural valuation.

## METHODOLOGY

The study began in September 2023 and concluded in June 2024. It focused on analyzing the management of public spaces oriented toward sustainability and cultural valuation in Huancayo, from the perspective of urban planning professionals. The study was qualitative, with a purposive theoretical sampling limited to renowned architects from Huancayo. Selection criteria included: (a) professionals with experience in public territorial planning management, and (b) professionals with experience in public buildings. Ultimately, four professionals from Huancayo were selected and subjected to in-depth interviews. Data were collected using a self-designed, unstructured guide composed of open-ended questions addressing design characteristics,

cultural aspects, and local identity in Huancayo's public parks and plazas. The study adhered to ethical standards by obtaining verbally informed consent recorded in the interviews. Participants' identities were protected by using pseudonyms instead of real names in the presentation of results.

Data analysis involved emergent thematic coding techniques to identify shared meanings and categories in the participants' discourse. The software MaxQDA 2024 was used for data processing, while MS Word from Microsoft 365 was utilized for transcribing interviews and presenting results.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Participants and exploratory analysis

The interviewees were four architects and urban planners from Huancayo, aged between 50 and 67 years. All had professional experience in urban management and public building administration. The pseudonyms and profiles of the professionals were: (a) Carlos, male, 64 years old, former official and authority in the Huancayo Provincial Municipality and the Ministry of Housing, professor at the Faculty of Architecture at UNCP; (b) Gustavo, male, 67 years old, renowned architect, winner of several competitions, researcher, and professor at the Faculty of Architecture at UNCP; (c) Pedro, male, 62 years old, authority at the Junín Regional College of Architects; and (d) Roberto, male, 50 years old, renowned architect, entrepreneur, and authority at the Junín Regional College of Architects.

**Table 1. Frequency words**

Palabra	Frequency	Global (%)	Partial (%)
1. Public	109	3.26	13.5
2. Space	94	2.81	11.7
3. City	91	2.72	11.3
4. Have	62	1.85	7.7
5. Believe	54	1.61	6.7
6. Space	46	1.37	5.7
7. Cultural	45	1.34	5.6
8. Do / Make	41	1.22	5.1
9. Square	32	0.96	4.0
10. Count / Tell	30	0.90	3.7
11. Expression	26	0.78	3.2
12. People	25	0.75	3.1
13. Sew	24	0.72	3.0
14. Dance	20	0.60	2.5
15. Musician	20	0.60	2.5
16. Tradition	19	0.57	2.4
17. Practical	18	0.54	2.2
18. Area	17	0.51	2.1
19. Activity	16	0.48	2.0
20. Symbol	16	0.48	2.0
Total	805	24.04	100

The exploratory analysis through word frequencies (Table 1) revealed that "public" was the most recurrent concept, with a frequency of 13.5% among the top 20 words, indicating that interviewees emphasized the importance of the collective and shared nature of these spaces. This term suggests that public spaces are seen as common goods belonging to the community, to be preserved for everyone's use and enjoyment. The notion of the public is intrinsically tied to belonging and social responsibility, reflecting awareness of the need to care for and value these places. The word "space" (11.7%) emerged as a central concept in the discourse, suggesting that interviewees recognize these areas not just as physical locations but as settings where social, cultural, and community life unfolds. Its frequent mention underscores the perception of public spaces as vital environments for human interaction and cultural expression.

Another relevant aspect is the presence of terms like “cultural” (5.6%), “expression” (3.2%), “dance” (2.5%), “musician” (2.5%), and “tradition” (2.4%). These words indicate that interviewees associate public spaces with cultural and artistic demonstrations. Parks and plazas are not merely recreational areas but also venues where local traditions, such as music and dance, are preserved and promoted. This suggests that public spaces are viewed as custodians of Huancayo’s living culture, where ancestral and contemporary practices coexist.

Additionally, terms like “symbol” (2.0%) and “tradition” (2.4%) suggest that public spaces are perceived as representations of Huancayo’s cultural identity. Beyond physical areas, they are emblems of local history and customs, indicating that interviewees recognize their symbolic value, which transcends their practical function.

#### State and characteristics of public spaces

Public spaces in Huancayo are described as publicly owned areas intended for free use by the population. However, according to the interviewees, these spaces lack proper planning and fail to meet expectations of what a functional and appealing public space should be. Gustavo, a renowned architect, noted that “the concept of a park is misused in our city,” referring to the fact that spaces labeled as parks in Huancayo are actually small plazas that do not meet the characteristics of a proper park. He further stated that “there isn’t a single park” in the city, as the available green spaces are insufficient and not designed to meet the population’s needs.

Pedro, an architect, agreed that Huancayo has a significant deficit of green areas and zonal parks. He stated, “what should be green areas don’t have much greenery; there’s more concrete than green space,” reflecting a lack of balance between built and natural spaces. He also noted that existing parks, such as Parque Constitución (Figure 2) and Parque Tupac Amaru, have limited green areas, restricting their capacity to serve as true recreational and social spaces.

Carlos, a former public official, also highlighted the lack of adequate infrastructure in public spaces. While he mentioned that some parks, like Parque Tupac Amaru, have some infrastructure, most lack

basic elements such as signage, proper lighting, and trash bins. He pointed out that many spaces are underutilized or abandoned, such as Parque de la Madre and “Parque del Ajedrez”, which have lost their original purpose due to neglect.

These findings reflect a complex issue surrounding the city’s parks and plazas, characterized by poor planning, a shortage of green areas, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient maintenance. A central emerging point is the lack of conceptual and functional clarity in the use of public spaces in Huancayo. This observation aligns with urban theory, which defines parks as large-scale green spaces designed for recreation, socialization, and environmental conservation, with significant green areas and elements promoting population well-being (Gehl, 2013). In this sense, Huancayo’s public spaces do not meet international urban design standards, limiting their ability to fulfill social, ecological, and recreational functions. Previous studies in Latin American cities, such as Carrión & Dammert (2019), have identified similar issues, noting that a lack of comprehensive urban planning in rapidly growing cities leads to public spaces that fail to meet population needs or sustainability principles.

#### Cultural identity and its reflection in public spaces

Huancayo’s cultural identity is strongly tied to its traditions, customs, and artistic expressions, which manifest in the city’s public spaces. However, interviewees agreed that these manifestations are not always adequately valued or promoted. Gustavo stated, “cultural expression is what you represent or express as your cultural heritage,” but noted that cultural events in public spaces are scarce, and most artistic manifestations, such as murals, are ephemeral, deteriorating quickly due to lack of maintenance.

Pedro emphasized that cultural expression in Huancayo is evident through music, dance, and traditional festivities like Huaylas and Santiago. However, he pointed out the absence of a clear cultural symbol representing the city. He proposed creating a symbol reflecting Huanca culture, such as Huallallo Carhuancho—currently the symbol of the National University of Central Peru (UNCP)—which could be adopted as a broader cultural emblem. He also noted that public spaces are not

designed to adequately host these cultural manifestations, limiting their impact and visibility.

**Figure 1. Concentration of folk musicians**



Note: Image taken at Plaza Constitución, sometimes the center of concentration of folkloric groups.

Carlos, a former Huancayo official, underscored the importance of cultural traditions like Santiago parades and school band performances. However, he criticized the lack of suitable infrastructure to host these events, forcing them into unprepared public spaces. He also mentioned that some traditions, such as the Pagapu Huanca at Huaytapallana snow peak, are being lost due to inadequate promotion and conservation.

These findings align with Low's (2000) studies, which argue that plazas in Latin America are spaces for negotiating cultural and political identities, though their potential is limited by a lack of inclusive design and maintenance. In Huancayo, the absence of adequate infrastructure for cultural events, as Carlos noted, echoes (Segovia & Oviedo, 2000), who highlight that public spaces in Latin American cities are often fragmented and fail to meet community needs. (Ramírez, 2015) also emphasizes that preserving cultural heritage in public spaces is essential to strengthen local identity—an aspect seemingly absent in Huancayo, according to the interviewees.

From the perspective of place-making theory (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995), public spaces

should be designed and managed to foster community appropriation and reflect local cultural identity. In Huancayo, the lack of functional plaza design, as Pedro mentioned, prevents these spaces from becoming meaningful “places” for the community. Gustavo's critique of cultural “mediocrity” can be interpreted through Lefebvre's (1974) sociology of public space, which posits that urban spaces reflect a society's social and cultural relations. The perception of “dirtiness and mediocrity” may indicate a disconnect between public spaces and the population's cultural needs.

Although rich in traditions, Huancayo's cultural identity is not adequately reflected in its public spaces due to a lack of functional design and maintenance. This limits plazas' capacity to serve as settings for social cohesion and cultural expression, as Low (2000) suggests. Place-making theory indicates the need to redesign these spaces to be inclusive and responsive to local cultural dynamics, while studies by Ramírez (2015) and Segovia & Oviedo (2000) stress integrating cultural heritage into urban planning to bolster local identity.

### Identified problems

The interview analysis revealed two problem groups: the first related to tangible technical and physical aspects of parks, and the second to issues of identity and cultural representation. Among technical problems, the lack of proper planning, design, and territorial organization of public parks was recurrent in participants' discourse. Statements like “their dimensions are practically minuscule” (Carlos) and their failure to meet park standards reflect, in the participants' view, improvisations or designs lacking a comprehensive architectural conceptualization of the city and its public spaces.

Additionally, the shortage of green areas and the need for larger zonal parks, as Pedro stated — “Huancayo needs parks of a different nature, we need zonal parks, large parks with vast green areas”—revealed limited park coverage, insufficient to meet the subjective and objective needs of all social groups, including artists, various age groups, cultural communities, and others characteristic of Huancayo. This highlights the limited capacity of parks and plazas to serve as true socialization and recreational spaces.



**Figure 2. Constitution square**



Carlos noted that many public spaces are in poor condition or abandoned, stating, “some parks, like Parque de la Madre and “Parque del Ajedrez”, are completely abandoned,” reflecting a lack of interest from authorities in maintaining and preserving these spaces. He also criticized the lack of signage and poor-quality trash bins that fail to keep space clean.

This situation contrasts with urban ecology principles, which underscore the importance of green spaces in mitigating climate change effects, improving air quality, and promoting residents’ physical and mental health (Chiesura, 2004). Studies in similar urban contexts, such as Reyes & Figueroa (2010) in Santiago, Chile, show that a lack of green areas not only affects quality of life but also perpetuates socio-spatial inequalities, as areas with less access to green spaces tend to be lower-income. In Huancayo, this deficit may be linked to rapid urbanization and the prioritization of built infrastructure over natural space preservation—a common pattern in many intermediate Latin American cities.

The second group of problems concerned the lack of a clear cultural symbol representing Huancayo. Pedro noted, “we don’t have a symbol that categorically says it’s a symbol,” complicating the promotion of a cohesive cultural identity. He criticized attempts to create symbols, such as the Cacho cornet monument in some parks, as unsuccessful, failing to reflect Huanca culture’s essence.

Gustavo criticized the lack of sustainability in cultural manifestations, noting that murals and other artistic expressions in public spaces are ephemeral and lack lasting impact. He also mentioned that cultural events, like school festivals,

have become “a headache” due to poor organization and negative city impacts.

Carlos and Roberto also highlighted the lack of adequate infrastructure for cultural events. Carlos stated, “we don’t have a dedicated space for these [cultural manifestations], like a Huaylas palace,” limiting the city’s ability to promote and preserve its traditions. He also criticized that some monuments and public spaces, like “Plaza Huamanmarca”, have lost historical value due to inappropriate transformations.

These infrastructure limitations reduce Huancayo’s capacity to promote and preserve its traditions. Carlos’s mention of the absence of a “dedicated space” like a “Huaylas palace” reveals a gap in urban planning to provide cultural representation. Harvey (2012) argues that public spaces should be designed as “urban commons” facilitating social interaction and cultural expression. Thus, the lack of adequate infrastructure in Huancayo, as noted by interviewees, not only restricts cultural manifestations but also contributes to the loss of historical value in emblematic spaces like “Plaza Huamanmarca”, whose criticized remodeling reflects tensions seen in other Andean cities like Cusco, where modernizing interventions often ignore historical and cultural dimensions (Rendón, 2024; Steel, 2013).

### Proposals and needs

Interviewees agreed on the need for significant changes in the planning and design of Huancayo’s public spaces. Gustavo and Pedro proposed creating larger, functional parks meeting international standards. This need for significant change is a recurring theme in the literature, emphasizing the importance of designing public spaces that prioritize functionality and accessibility, promoting social interaction and citizen well-being (Gehl, 2013). Studies note that well-designed public spaces with ample, functional green areas not only improve users’ physical and mental health but also foster social cohesion (Carmona, 2021).

They also specified the need to preserve riverbanks, such as the Mantaro River, transforming them into large-scale public spaces, and designing spaces meeting the needs of all age groups, including playgrounds for children, rest areas for seniors, and recreational spaces for youth. Carlos

proposed prioritizing pedestrians in public space design. These proposals are supported by the literature (Jacobs, 1998), noting that public spaces linked to water bodies, like rivers and lakes, have high potential to become recreational and conservation areas if designed sustainably (Benedict et al., 2012).

Regarding ornamental aspects, interviewees suggested improving urban signage and lighting in public spaces. Studies show that efficient lighting not only reduces perceptions of insecurity but also increases public space use, especially by women and seniors (Painter, 1996). These improvements could be particularly relevant given Huancayo's growing urbanization and the need for safe, appealing spaces for a diverse population.

Participants' discourse also highlighted coverage issues and the need to design public spaces satisfying all age groups—playgrounds for children, rest areas for seniors, and recreational spaces for youth—aligning with inclusive design concepts. According to Whyte (1980), successful public spaces promote diverse uses and users, fostering intergenerational interaction. This approach is especially relevant in contexts like Huancayo, with a broad range of age and cultural groups. Carlos's proposal to prioritize pedestrians aligns with global trends toward sustainable mobility and urban humanization. Authors like Speck (2012) argue that pedestrian design not only enhances urban quality of life but also reduces car dependency, a critical issue in medium-sized cities like Huancayo, where traffic is increasingly problematic.

Interviewees also emphasized strengthening Huancayo's cultural identity by promoting its traditions, values, and artistic expressions. Pedro's idea of creating a cultural symbol, like Huallallo Carhuanchu, and holding a contest to design it exemplifies how public spaces can become canvases for cultural expression. Studies like Low (2000) show that cultural symbols in public spaces, such as statues, murals, or plaza names, can reinforce local identity and attract residents and tourists.

The proposal to create public spaces designed specifically for cultural events, like music and dance festivals, not only promotes cultural identity but also has positive economic impacts by attracting tourism and boosting the local economy (Richards

& Palmer, 2010). In Huancayo, promoting expressions like Huaylas, as Roberto suggested, could position the city as a regional and national cultural reference. However, these initiatives must be planned sustainably to avoid overburdening public spaces and ensure long-term maintenance, as warned by (Smith, 2017) regarding cultural event management in urban spaces.

Gustavo and Roberto's suggestion to promote culture more sustainably through lasting murals and artistic expressions is noteworthy. Murals, for instance, have been used in many Latin American cities to beautify public spaces and convey cultural or social messages. Valparaíso, Chile, is an iconic example, where murals have become a tourist attraction and community expression medium (Palmer, 2008). In Huancayo, this strategy could effectively promote local gastronomy, like pachamanca and Chupaca pork, integrating visual elements that educate visitors and reinforce local identity.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings revealed critical challenges in the planning, design, and management of public spaces, as well as their capacity to reflect and promote Huancayo's cultural identity. It was identified that Huancayo's parks and plazas face significant structural issues limiting their functionality as spaces for recreation, socialization, and environmental conservation. Key problems include a lack of comprehensive urban planning, resulting in small-scale spaces with a notable deficit of green areas and a predominance of concrete over natural elements. This situation, worsened by insufficient basic infrastructure like signage, adequate lighting, and maintenance, has led to many public spaces, such as Parque de la Madre and Parque del Ajedrez, being underutilized or abandoned, far from international standards defining parks as vital for population well-being.

The study also highlights a disconnect between public spaces and Huancayo's rich cultural identity, characterized by traditions like Huaylas, Santiago, and artistic expressions like music and dance. Though perceived as potential cultural venues, interviewees noted that a lack of functional design and adequate infrastructure restricts their ability to effectively and sustainably host cultural events. The absence of a clear cultural symbol representing the

city, the ephemerality of artistic expressions like murals, and the loss of traditions like Pagapu Huanca reflect management that does not prioritize heritage preservation or local identity promotion. This aligns with tensions observed in other Latin American cities, where modernization and unplanned urban growth often compromise public spaces' historical and cultural value.

From a technical perspective, interviewed professionals agreed on the need to redesign public spaces with a focus on sustainability and inclusion, proposing larger-scale zonal parks, riverbank preservation like the Mantaro, and pedestrian prioritization in urban design. Culturally, they suggested strengthening Huancayo's identity by integrating representative symbols, like Huallallo Carhuach, and promoting lasting artistic events to position the city as a cultural reference. These proposals aim not only to improve residents' quality of life but also to address a diverse population's social and cultural dynamics, aligning with inclusive design and place-making principles that transform public spaces into meaningful community places.

In summary, Huancayo's public spaces do not fully fulfill their role as hubs of social cohesion, recreation, and cultural expression due to deficiencies in planning, infrastructure, and maintenance, as well as weak cultural heritage integration in their design and management. However, the architects' perceptions and proposals provide a foundation for reimagining these spaces, suggesting a path toward revitalization through interventions balancing functionality, sustainability, and cultural valuation. This analysis contributes to understanding Huancayo's specific challenges and underscores the urgency of urban policies addressing population needs and reinforcing cultural identity, offering guidelines for more effective management aligned with principles of a livable, culturally rich city.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We sincerely thank all interviewees for their valuable contributions. We also extend our gratitude to the research team for their dedication and effort, and to everyone who significantly contributed to this project.

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