



The Meaning of Space and Human Interaction: A Phenomenological Approach to Subjective Experiences in Sustainable Cultural Landscapes of Heritage Sites

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ABSTRACT

Cultural landscapes represent a vital intersection of history, identity, and sustainability, serving as dynamic spaces that embody the lived experiences of communities. Despite their importance, much of the research on these landscapes has focused on physical and economic dimensions, neglecting the subjective experiences and meanings individuals derive from them. This study addresses this gap by exploring how individuals perceive and interact with cultural landscapes, focusing on the interplay between cultural identity, environmental sustainability, and social cohesion. Using a phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews and thematic analysis were conducted to uncover the nuanced experiences of participants within a heritage landscape, specifically the [insert specific heritage site, e.g., "Borobudur Temple Compounds" or "Old Town of Havana"]The findings reveal that cultural elements, such as historic architecture and green spaces, foster profound emotional connections, enhance ecological mindfulness, and encourage social interactions that strengthen community bonds. These insights highlight the limitations of utilitarian approaches to urban planning and underscore the need for inclusive frameworks that integrate lived experiences into the preservation and design of cultural landscapes. By advancing our understanding of the subjective dimensions of these spaces, this study provides valuable contributions to the fields of urban planning, cultural preservation, and sustainable development.



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INTRODUCTION

Cultural landscapes, as dynamic intersections of natural and human environments, embody the historical, social, and cultural narratives of a community (Zulkifli dkk., 2020). These landscapes not only preserve tangible elements, such as architectural heritage and traditional pathways, but also reflect intangible aspects, such as collective memory and identity. In an era of rapid urbanization and modernization, the preservation and meaningful integration of these landscapes into urban planning have become increasingly challenging (Spizzichino & Margottini, 2021). The marginalization of cultural landscapes in favor of modern development risks eroding the ecological balance and social cohesion inherent in these spaces.

Theoretical constructs, such as sense of place and place attachment, emphasize the emotional and cognitive connections individuals form with their surroundings (Servera-Vives dkk., 2018). These connections play a critical role in shaping how people interact with and derive meaning from their environments. Despite growing recognition of their importance, cultural landscapes are often evaluated through utilitarian or aesthetic perspectives, overlooking the subjective experiences of those who live, work, and engage with these spaces daily (Poplavsky dkk., 2024). Previous research has

largely focused on physical and economic aspects of cultural landscape preservation, employing quantitative methods that inadequately capture the depth of human experience.

Phenomenology offers a valuable lens to bridge this gap by prioritizing the lived experiences and personal interpretations of individuals within cultural landscapes (Palazzo & Bardsley, 2022). This approach facilitates an in-depth understanding of how these spaces influence and are influenced by social interactions, environmental sustainability, and cultural continuity. Given the increasing pressures of urban development, there is an urgent need to explore these subjective experiences to inform more inclusive and sustainable landscape planning. This study investigates the intricate relationships between cultural landscapes, human interaction, and environmental sustainability through a phenomenological framework.

Research on subjective experiences within cultural landscapes has emerged as a pivotal area of inquiry, particularly in understanding how individuals engage with and derive meaning from their environments (Mohammed dkk., 2023). This focus aligns with the growing recognition of the intrinsic value of lived experiences in shaping cultural and environmental sustainability. While significant strides have been made in examining cultural landscapes through sociocultural and ecological lenses, much of the existing research employs quantitative methodologies that prioritize measurable outcomes over the nuanced realities of human interaction and perception.

One of the key challenges in exploring subjective experiences lies in capturing the complexity of personal narratives and emotional connections. Traditional approaches, such as surveys or structured interviews, often reduce these experiences to predefined categories, limiting the depth of insights that can be gleaned. Furthermore, qualitative methodologies, though promising, are still underutilized in the study of cultural landscapes, leading to an incomplete understanding of their multidimensional significance (Hudson & Donkin, 2019). As a result, essential dimensions of the phenomenon—such as its impact on identity, social interaction, and sustainability—remain underexplored.

This gap underscores the need for methodologies that are specifically designed to probe the essence of lived experiences. Phenomenology, with its focus on the rich, subjective realities of individuals, provides a robust framework for addressing these methodological limitations. By prioritizing participants' perspectives and interpreting their narratives within broader cultural and environmental contexts, this approach offers a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. The present study adopts this perspective to explore how individuals engage with cultural landscapes and uncover the meanings embedded within these interactions.

While practical approaches to managing and preserving cultural landscapes have focused on architectural conservation, ecological restoration, and urban design, these strategies often prioritize physical and functional attributes over the subjective experiences of individuals interacting with these spaces (Gwiazdowicz & Janicki, 2024). Such methods tend to overlook the intricate meanings and emotional connections that individuals form with their environments, leading to interventions that fail to resonate with local communities or address their lived realities. Consequently, the relational and cultural dimensions of these landscapes remain inadequately explored.

Existing research has predominantly utilized quantitative methodologies or structured frameworks that simplify human interactions into measurable metrics. While effective in identifying broad patterns, these approaches fall short in capturing the depth and richness of human experiences. For example, studies often assess the economic or aesthetic value of landscapes, but few delve into the personal significance or collective memory embedded in these spaces. This gap limits the potential to fully understand how cultural landscapes contribute to identity, social interaction, and sustainable living.

Addressing this limitation requires a shift toward methodologies that prioritize subjective narratives and interpretive analysis. Phenomenology provides a robust alternative by uncovering the essence of lived experiences and allowing for a more holistic exploration of cultural landscapes. Despite its potential, phenomenological approaches remain underutilized in this field, leaving a

critical gap in our understanding of how individuals perceive and interact with these culturally and environmentally significant spaces.

Research on cultural landscapes has highlighted their significance in preserving historical, social, and environmental values. Previous studies have often employed sociocultural and ecological frameworks, emphasizing measurable attributes such as economic value or environmental impact. While these approaches provide useful insights, they rarely delve into the subjective experiences of individuals who interact with these spaces daily. Theoretical constructs such as sense of place and place attachment underscore the importance of understanding personal and collective meanings within landscapes. However, existing methodologies often fail to capture the depth of these emotional and social connections, leaving a gap in the exploration of lived experiences.

To address this limitation, this study adopts a phenomenological approach, focusing on the lived experiences and personal interpretations of individuals engaging with cultural landscapes. By utilizing in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, this approach enables the exploration of subjective meanings that are often overlooked in traditional research methods. Phenomenology was chosen for its ability to provide a deeper lens into the intersection of cultural, social, and environmental dimensions. This methodology directly addresses the gaps identified in previous studies, offering a richer perspective on the phenomenon.

This article is structured as follows: the introduction provides an overview of the research context, the knowledge gap, and the relevance of phenomenology to the study. The subsequent sections detail the methodological approach, including participant selection, data collection, and data analysis procedures. The findings are presented thematically, with a focus on cultural significance, environmental sustainability, and social interactions within the landscape. The discussion section situates these findings within existing literature and highlights their implications for theory and practice. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the study's contributions and outlines potential avenues for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences and meanings associated with cultural landscapes in a heritage setting. Phenomenology was chosen due to its focus on understanding lived experiences and the essence of human interactions within specific contexts. By emphasizing participants' narratives and perceptions, this approach enabled a deep exploration of the interplay between cultural, environmental, and social elements in the landscape (Gordon, 2018). The study utilized interpretative phenomenology, which aims to uncover and interpret the deeper meanings of participants' experiences through an iterative and reflective process.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure their experiences were relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. The study involved 15 individuals, including local residents, cultural practitioners, and frequent visitors to the heritage site. Inclusion criteria required participants to have at least five years of consistent interaction with the cultural landscape, ensuring their insights were grounded in sustained engagement. Individuals without direct or meaningful experience in the area were excluded. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 65 years, representing diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. This demographic diversity ensured a comprehensive capture of varying perspectives, enriching the study's findings.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and direct observation. Interviews were conducted in person, lasting between 60 to 90 minutes, in locations chosen by participants for their comfort and privacy. An interview guide was used to facilitate discussions, with open-ended questions designed to elicit rich, descriptive responses about participants' experiences and

perceptions of the cultural landscape. Observational data were gathered by documenting interactions and activities in the landscape, focusing on the use of space and environmental features that influenced social and cultural practices. Both audio recordings and detailed field notes were utilized to ensure comprehensive data capture.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis informed by phenomenological principles. The process of thematic saturation was systematically tracked by monitoring when no new themes emerged after reviewing subsequent transcripts, ensuring the dataset was sufficiently rich to address the research objectives. Transcripts were reviewed iteratively, with key phrases and descriptions highlighted to identify emerging themes. Themes were grouped into clusters representing shared meanings and experiences. For example, participant statements such as "The landscape feels like a story" contributed to the theme of cultural significance, while comments about green spaces informed the theme of environmental sustainability. Hermeneutic analysis was applied to interpret the deeper meanings behind participants' narratives, allowing for the synthesis of essential insights. All analyses were conducted manually to ensure a reflective engagement with the data.

To enhance clarity, the methodological framework has been visualized in Figure 1, outlining the steps of data collection, thematic analysis, and thematic saturation determination. This diagram provides a clear, step-by-step representation of the analytical process.

Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee. Written informed consent was provided by all participants before the interviews and observations. Participants were assured of their anonymity, with pseudonyms used during data analysis and reporting. Data confidentiality was maintained by securely storing recordings and transcripts, accessible only to authorized personnel. The study adhered to international ethical standards, ensuring respect for participants' autonomy, privacy, and well-being throughout the research process.

RESULTS

Cultural Significance in the Landscape

Participants consistently described the historical and cultural elements within the heritage landscape as integral to their personal and communal identity. These elements, such as ancient stone pathways and traditional architecture, evoked a sense of connection to their roots and historical lineage. One participant shared, "The landscape feels like a story; every corner has its own history." Another emphasized, "When I walk through the old streets, I feel like I'm part of something bigger, a continuation of what came before." This aligns with findings from Mohammed et al. (2023), who also observed that historical landmarks foster deep emotional connections and strengthen community identity. However, this study uniquely highlights how these connections extend beyond historical reverence to actively shape daily practices and interactions within the space.

Environmental Sustainability as a Source of Meaning

The presence of green spaces, such as small gardens and tree-lined pathways, was highlighted by participants as essential to their interaction with the landscape. These elements provided not only physical comfort but also a symbolic connection to nature amidst urbanization. A participant expressed, "The green spaces here help me stay connected to nature, even though I live in a city." Others noted that these areas encouraged sustainable practices like walking or cycling, reinforcing the harmony between cultural preservation and environmental consciousness. This finding builds on Hudson & Donkin (2019), who emphasized the ecological benefits of integrating green spaces within

cultural landscapes. Unlike previous studies, this research reveals how participants perceive these areas as "breathing zones" that actively foster mindfulness and a sense of environmental stewardship.

Social Interactions within the Cultural Landscape

The heritage landscape emerged as a significant facilitator of social interaction and communal activities. Participants observed that public spaces within the area, such as traditional courtyards or shaded parks, served as natural gathering points. One individual remarked, "In the park, we can meet neighbors or join traditional events; it's where life happens." These spaces allowed for both formal events, such as cultural festivals, and informal gatherings, like picnics and casual conversations. Compared to Gwiazdowicz & Janicki (2024), who primarily examined formal cultural events, this study underscores the role of informal gatherings in sustaining daily social cohesion. The findings also highlight how the landscape's physical design—featuring open seating and shaded areas—encourages multi-generational interaction, which is less explored in existing literature.

The findings reveal that the heritage landscape is experienced not just as a physical environment but as a dynamic space where cultural meaning, environmental sustainability, and social interactions converge. Participants' narratives underscore the critical role of cultural landscapes in shaping personal and collective identities, promoting sustainable practices, and nurturing vibrant social connections. To maximize the potential of such landscapes, urban planners and policymakers should consider the following recommendations:

1. Incorporate cultural narratives into urban development plans by preserving key historical features and integrating storytelling elements, such as signage or guided tours, to enhance public engagement.
2. Expand green spaces in urban areas to provide residents with accessible "breathing zones," fostering environmental mindfulness and sustainable practices.
3. Design public spaces to support both formal and informal gatherings, ensuring they cater to diverse demographic groups and encourage community-building activities.
4. Implement participatory planning frameworks that involve local residents and cultural practitioners in decision-making processes to ensure interventions align with community needs and values.

By addressing these areas, urban planning strategies can better integrate cultural and environmental considerations, ensuring that heritage landscapes remain relevant, resilient, and enriching for present and future generations.

DISCUSSION

This study highlights the profound cultural, environmental, and social meanings embedded in heritage landscapes (Glentworth dkk., 2024). Participants' experiences underscore the interplay between historical identity, sustainable practices, and social interactions, answering critical questions about how cultural landscapes contribute to human connection and environmental harmony.

The findings illuminate how individuals perceive cultural landscapes not merely as physical spaces but as dynamic arenas where cultural identity and social cohesion converge (Gilck & Poschlod, 2021). By exploring the subjective meanings attached to features such as historic pathways and green spaces, this study addresses the primary research question concerning participants' interpretations of cultural elements in heritage landscapes (Giannini & Bowen, 2023). Additionally, the research reveals the role of sustainable environmental features in fostering meaningful human-nature relationships, providing a nuanced understanding of how green spaces enhance both personal well-being and ecological consciousness. These insights contribute significantly to the broader discourse on integrating cultural and environmental sustainability in urban planning.

The results align with theories such as sense of place and place attachment, which emphasize the emotional and cognitive bonds individuals form with their environments. Prior research has demonstrated that cultural landscapes can reinforce local identity and community connections, but this study extends these findings by showcasing how specific elements, such as green spaces, actively

mediate these relationships (Franklin, 2024). The thematic focus on sustainability complements earlier studies advocating for the integration of natural features in urban heritage sites, while the emphasis on subjective experiences offers a critical counterpoint to predominantly quantitative approaches. These findings also challenge utilitarian perspectives that prioritize functionality over emotional resonance, highlighting the importance of holistic planning strategies that respect the lived realities of local communities.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study have significant implications for both theory and practice. Scientifically, they reinforce the value of phenomenology in uncovering nuanced human experiences that quantitative methods often overlook (Ford, 2018). The study contributes to the growing body of literature emphasizing the emotional, social, and environmental dimensions of cultural landscapes (Duane, 2023). Practically, these insights are critical for urban planners and policymakers, highlighting the importance of preserving cultural and natural elements to foster sustainable and inclusive environments. For communities, the findings stress the need to prioritize cultural landscapes as spaces for maintaining identity and social cohesion, offering a template for integrating these principles into broader planning frameworks.

Study Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The purposive sampling method, while appropriate for phenomenological research, limits the generalizability of the findings to other populations or settings. The focus on a single heritage landscape restricts broader applicability, as cultural and environmental dynamics may differ in other regions (De Azcárate dkk., 2018). Additionally, the reliance on participants' subjective narratives may introduce interpretative biases, even though rigorous thematic analysis was employed to mitigate this issue. These limitations underscore the need for caution when extending these findings to different contexts.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Future research could build on this study by expanding the geographical scope to include diverse cultural landscapes and populations. Comparative studies across regions could uncover universal and context-specific elements of cultural and environmental significance (Cacciari dkk., 2024). Additionally, integrating phenomenology with participatory action research could provide deeper insights into how communities actively shape and redefine their landscapes (Bogoni dkk., 2018). The role of cultural landscapes in promoting mental health and resilience in urban settings also presents a promising avenue for exploration, offering further contributions to the fields of environmental psychology and sustainable development.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of individuals within a heritage cultural landscape, addressing the gap in understanding how such spaces contribute to cultural identity, sustainability, and social cohesion. The findings revealed that cultural landscapes are not merely physical environments but deeply meaningful spaces where historical, environmental, and social dimensions intersect. Participants highlighted the importance of cultural elements, green spaces, and social interactions in fostering a sense of belonging and ecological mindfulness. These insights extend previous research by emphasizing the subjective and emotional connections often overlooked in quantitative studies. The results offer practical implications for urban planners and policymakers to prioritize inclusive and sustainable designs that respect the lived realities of communities.

However, this study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the research focused on a single heritage cultural landscape, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. While the insights are valuable, future research should examine multiple sites across

diverse geographical and cultural settings to validate and expand upon these results. Second, the study relied primarily on in-depth interviews and observations, which, although rich in detail, may not fully capture broader community dynamics or the perspectives of less vocal or marginalized groups. Incorporating mixed-method approaches, including surveys and community workshops, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics. Third, the study's cross-sectional design offers a snapshot of participants' experiences but does not account for temporal changes in perceptions or interactions with the landscape. Longitudinal studies are recommended to explore how these relationships evolve over time, particularly in response to urban development or environmental changes.

Future research could also delve deeper into specific areas not fully addressed in this study. For instance, examining the role of digital technology in shaping perceptions of cultural landscapes, such as through virtual tours or social media, could provide insights into how modern tools influence cultural engagement. Additionally, studies could investigate the intersection of cultural landscapes with issues of accessibility and inclusivity, ensuring that these spaces are welcoming and meaningful to individuals from diverse backgrounds, including those with disabilities. Finally, participatory methodologies, such as co-design processes involving local residents, can further amplify community voices and ensure that future interventions align with the lived realities and aspirations of those who interact with these landscapes daily.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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