

Article

Revaluating CUNA Places (CULTural Place of High Relevance for NATure): Rome as a Multifaced Example of Outstanding Values and Potentials

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Abstract: The Global Frameworks for Enhancing Natural and Cultural Capital, as expressed in the Charter of Rome (2014), have relevant importance in the broader context of sustainable development goals (SDGs). The intricate connection between cultural and natural heritage emerges in various documents from UNESCO, IUCN, and ICOMOS; however, the categories and methods for their assessment are not completely defined. Evolving from the concept of “mixed properties” used in the UNESCO definitions, we introduce the concept of CUNA places: cultural places of high relevance for nature. It provides a methodological tool for identifying and typifying these places based on their values, attributes, and significance. Then, we propose definitions and categories for three different CUNA typologies, comprising 16 categories, considering both tangible and intangible heritage. We also provide a preliminary application to the city of Rome, where a rich historical heritage intersects with outstanding natural values. All the typologies and categories of CUNA places are present in Rome, and further analysis could show the multifaced aspects represented here. On a broader scale, such an application offers the opportunity to enhance the heritages that could be valorized, strengthening the territorial identity, promoting sustainable development, and generating income for conservation efforts.

Keywords: cultural heritage; natural heritage; immaterial heritage; cultural valorization; historic gardens; sacred groves; iconic places; cultural landscape

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1. Introduction

The intersection of culture and nature in heritage studies has gained significant attention in recent years, challenging the traditional dichotomy between the two domains [1–5]. UNESCO’s World Heritage Convention [6] is a primary international legal framework for protecting both natural and cultural sites of outstanding universal value. However, the distinct classifications of cultural and natural heritage have increasingly been recognized as a problematic concept [7–10] as they fail to provide unified criteria for sites where cultural and natural values are deeply interwoven [5,11–16].

In response to this challenge, the recognition of cultural landscapes within the context of the UNESCO Convention in 1999 marked the first step towards bridging the gap

between culture and nature [17]. This concept was further developed through the notion of “mixed properties” [18], which identify sites where cultural and natural attributes co-exist. Despite these advancements, the concept of cultural landscape or mixed properties remains as an umbrella term, and the integration of the two sets of criteria remains conceptually underdeveloped, leaving significant gaps in understanding and evaluation [1,2,5,11,14,19]. Other international frameworks, such as the Charter of Rome on Natural and Cultural Capital [20] and the European Habitats Directive (Council Directive 92/43/EEC) [21], underscore the importance of integrating cultural and natural capital to achieve long-term sustainability, aligning with the broader context of sustainable development Goals (SDGs) [22]. The European Landscape Convention [23], also focuses on the visual and perceptual dimensions of landscapes, emphasizing their role in public engagement, heritage recognition, and sustainable management by providing regionally tailored strategies.

The complexity deepens when considering the interplay between tangible and intangible heritage. Cultural heritage encompasses traditions, histories, and practices that often incorporate natural elements and ecological significance, connecting the natural environment with past societies’ customs, knowledge, and beliefs [24,25]. Examples such as ethnobotanical traditions, ancient groves, monumental trees, and lost gardens reflect how cultural and natural dimensions are interwoven into the fabric of heritage [25–29]. UNESCO’s 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage [30] further highlights the relevance of such memories and practices, emphasizing their contributions to preserving cultural diversity, fostering identity, and ensuring continuity within the community. Moreover, the ecological dimension of heritage is increasingly evident in the conservation of natural features like ancient ecosystems, landscapes, and biodiversity that coexist with cultural monuments [4,5,13,31–36]. The preservation and reevaluation of cultural heritage sites are, therefore, vital not only for safeguarding their historical and cultural significance [37–39] but also for maintaining the natural landscapes and biodiversity embedded within these sites.

This intricate connection between cultural and natural heritage leads us to introduce here the concept of CUNA places, i.e., CULTural places of high relevance for NATure. CUNA represents sites of cultural significance that also possess substantial natural value, integrating human history, architecture, art, and environmental richness into a single, interdependent entity. Therefore, this study aims to develop a methodological tool for identifying and categorizing CUNA places, accounting for their diverse attributes and values, and considering their broad spectrum of possibilities. We will highlight specific examples from the city of Rome, which is listed in the UNESCO World Heritage List (WHL) and features remarkable natural landscapes that exemplify the unique combination of cultural and natural heritage.

We will first discuss the main legal frameworks related to natural and cultural Heritage and then define and validate the assessment criteria for the resulting categories through statistical analysis. This will allow us to formulate a proposal on attributes, values, and significance that can support our methodological framework. The application of this framework to Rome will further enhance the significance of each category. An improved understanding of CUNA places and introducing them to the public can enhance cultural appreciation and establish a deeper bond between people and their heritage [40]. Ultimately, this approach contributes to more sustainable and inclusive heritage conservation strategies.

2. Methodological Proposal for Identifying Cuna Places

2.1. Criteria for Identifying and Categorizing CUNA Places

2.1.1. Data Collection on International Legal Frameworks

To develop a theoretical framework on what CUNA places may embrace, we checked the literature and archival documents to establish specific criteria for identifying and categorizing CUNA places respecting the significance and values considered for cultural and natural places in the international legal frameworks. For the legal framework, legalization, and definition, we considered the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO (<https://whc.unesco.org>/accessed on 12 September 2024), the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, ICCROM (<http://biblio.iccom.org/>), the International Council on Monuments and Sites, ICOMOS (<https://www.icomos.org>/accessed on 16 September 2024), and the International Union for Conservation of Nature, IUCN (<https://iucn.org>/accessed on 17 September 2024), as the main sources. From this collection, we filtered documents to retain only those pertinent to both cultural and natural interests. These include the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage [6], the Convention of World Heritage Cultural Landscape [17], the Burra Charter for Places of Cultural Significance [41], and the cultural and spiritual significance of nature IUCN guideline for protected and conserved area governance and management [16] (Figure 1). In this context, nature always refers to biodiversity at the genetic, species, and ecosystem levels, but also often refers to geodiversity, landforms, and broader natural values.

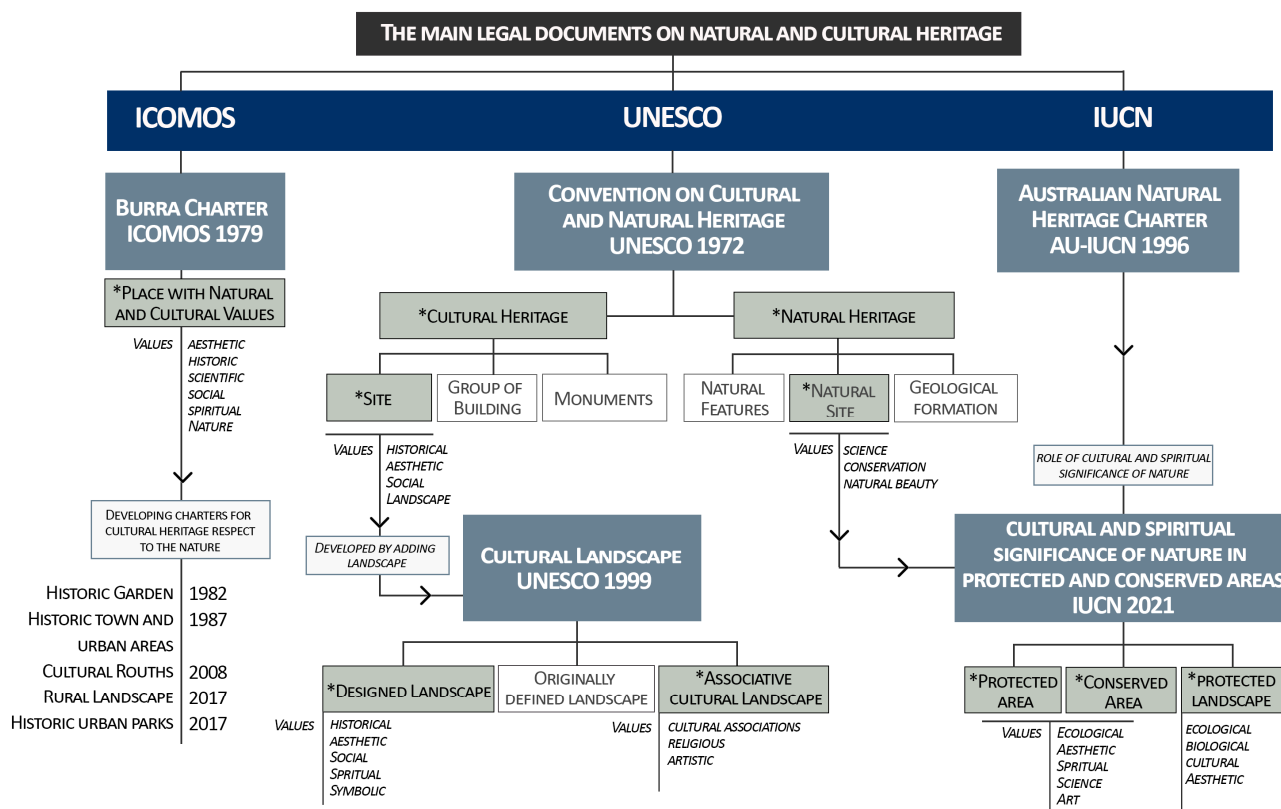


Figure 1. Main legal frameworks, and respective categories, for both cultural and natural heritage. * selected categories and their associated values for this study.

2.1.2. Typology Definition for Both Natural and Cultural Interesting Places

To identify and categorize CUNA places, first, we examined the typologies and definitions of cultural and natural heritage as outlined in international documents of UNESCO [6,17], ICOMOS [41], and IUCN [16] (Figure 2). We excluded mere natural heritage and cultural heritage and focused on the presence of a joined relationship. Then, we combined knowledge and key concepts from the general typologies mentioned in international documents to develop a new multi-faceted categorization of CUNA places. Drawing on knowledge from the heritage field, we incorporated an understanding of the interplay between tangible and intangible heritage.

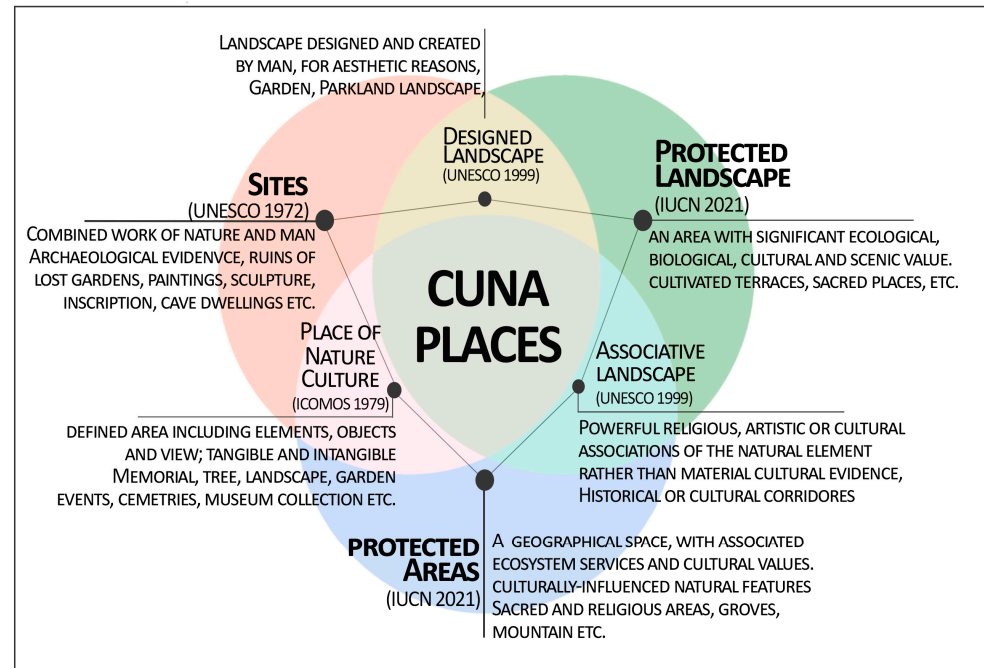


Figure 2. Categories of cultural places with a natural interest and vice versa (CUNA places) in the international framework; references: UNESCO 1972 [6], IUCN 2021 [16], UNESCO 1999 [17], and ICOMOS 1979 [41].

2.1.3. Criteria for Considering Both Natural and Cultural Interest

To ensure clarity and specificity in identifying CUNA places, we propose a structured approach focusing on three core aspects (Table 1):

- **Attribute:** tangible and intangible features and elements that are ascribed value by communities [34,42,43].
- **Value:** represents the social constructions emerging from cultural contexts [9,15,44], explaining why heritage is considered important and worthy of conservation [38,43,45]; value is inherently intangible [15,37].
- **Significance:** a combination of all the values assigned to a place or object [35,43,46]. It is embodied in the place itself, and its importance as rarity, representativeness, integrity, and transformative capacity [15].

We combined the values and attributes of typologies associated with cultural and natural heritage as outlined in selected conventions. This evaluation seeks to identify the correlation and similarities between values and attributes. The attribute assessment prioritizes understanding how specific “aspects” of attributes contribute to combined cultural and natural heritage values, creating significance. Based on this, we underlined the values and attributes that are fundamental for defining CUNA places. Key investigative

questions include which attributes generate integrated cultural and natural heritage value, what aspects of these attributes convey these values, and thus, to what extent aspects of attributes need to be valorized in defining CUNA place.

Table 1. Criteria in the evaluation of cultural and natural heritage according to the related international organizations.

Aspects	Culture *	Nature *
Attribute (What)	Form and design ^{1,2} , material ^{1,2,3} , traditions ^{1,2} , spiritual practices ^{2,4} , use ^{2,3} , age ^{1,2,3} , memory ^{1,2,3} , community identity ^{1,2} , setting ^{1,2,3} , beauty ^{1,2,4} (also related to nature)	landscape features ² , habitat conditions ^{1,4} , ecological system ^{1,3,4} , biological diversity ^{1,2,3,4} , geodiversity ^{1,2,3,4}
Value (Why)	Historic, aesthetic, artistic, science, social, spiritual, and symbolic values for past, present, or future generations ^{1,3}	Aesthetic, science, social, ecological, geo/biological, spiritual and sociocultural values for present or future generations ⁴
Significance (How)	Importance in forms (physical and tangible features), relationship (interpretation and intangible features), and practice (traditions and knowledge capacity) ^{1,5}	The importance of ecosystems, biodiversity, geodiversity ³ and environmental resilience ⁴ for their existence values

* References: ¹ UNESCO [6], ² UNESCO [17], ³ ICOMOS [41], ⁴ IUCN [16], ⁵ [15].

2.1.4. The Methodological Proposal and Data Validation

By correlating the cultural–natural significance and the values within the specific attributes, we categorized CUNA places into the following three main typologies:

- Type 1. *Cultural places with Natural Value*: Sites where cultural heritage is dominant but natural elements enhance the overall value
- Type 2. *Natural Places with Cultural Value*: Sites where natural heritage is primary but enriched by cultural elements.
- Type 3. *Iconic Places for Nature*: Sites where natural features are integral to cultural expressions, memories, and identities, emphasizing material and immaterial cultural memory.

The methodological process to identify and evaluate CUNA places, considering attributes, values, and significance, such as the typologies, is shown in Figure 3.

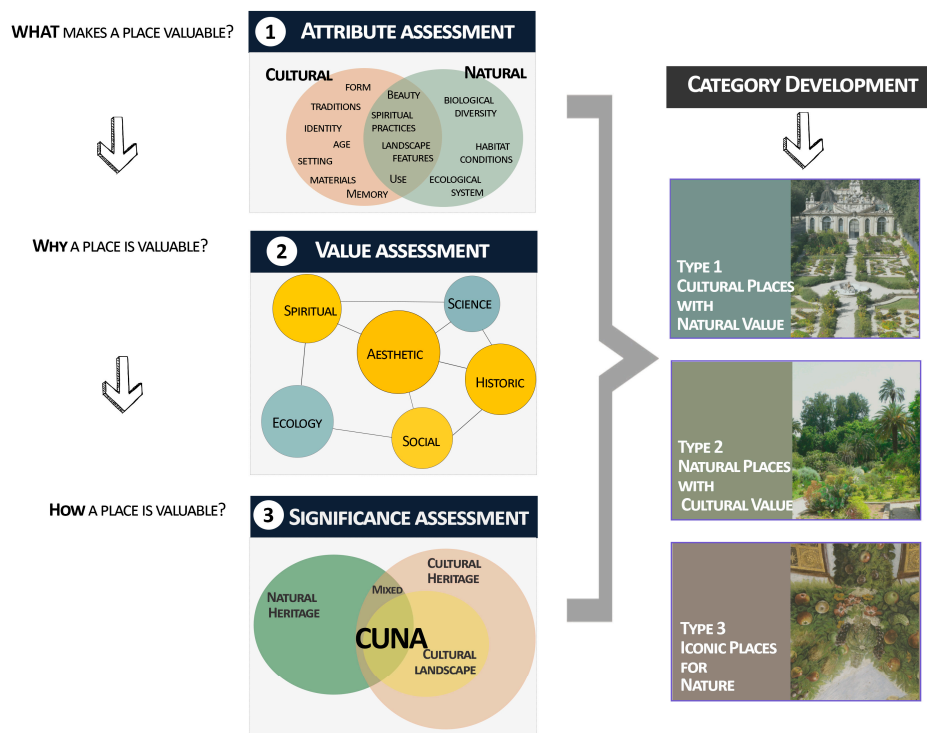


Figure 3. The resulting methodological process to identify and evaluate the CUNA places.

We carried out further elaborations to explore and visualize similarities between typologies and their associated attributes, values, and significance (Table 1). Initially, we examined these typologies in terms of their attributes and values, employing a binary approach (presence/absence) to highlight key relationships based on shared cultural and natural significance. We used a Network Plot with a Principal Coordinate algorithm and the Jaccard similarity index to further visualize these relationships using the Past 4 software [47]. Jaccard is a suitable index for analyzing binary data, enabling overlaps between typologies to be quantified and, thereby, clusters with similar values and attributes to be identified. We applied the same analysis to illustrate the similarities between CUNA sites based on their values and attributes, facilitating our final categorization of these sites. In the Network Plot [47], the presence of a line between two nodes suggests that there is a relevant relationship, and the thickness of the lines indicates the strength or weight of the association, with thicker lines often representing stronger relationships. If the node sizes vary, this can indicate the degree of the node, with larger nodes typically having more connections to other nodes, which could suggest a greater importance or a higher frequency of occurrence in the analyzed data.

2.2. Data Collection and Selection of Outstanding Examples for the City of Rome

The selection of examples for Rome was made to test the validity of the categories, and not for a systematic assessment of the total elements that can be attributed to the different categories, which will be developed in further studies. Then, to spotlight examples able to enhance some unique combinations of cultural and natural heritage, we used our studies on the city, e.g., [31–34,48–55], and we also gathered data from different sources, including literature, historical texts, archival materials, the scientific literature, and cartographic resources, e.g., [56–61]. For the moment, we only selected potential CUNA places that exhibit a clear integration of cultural significance (historic buildings, monuments, myths, and legends) and natural significance (unique landscapes, ecosystems, species), evaluating these places using the refined criteria of attributes, values, and significance.

3. Results

3.1. Identification of CUNA Places Based on International Conventions

Each of the selected convention frameworks contributes to assessing heritage significance from a different perspective. In these conventions, some aspects may seem more prominent than others, which often causes the recognition of only a partial aspect of place attributes, values, or significance. The intricate relationships between cultural and natural attributes of places are illustrated in the network plots in Figure 4a. This plot reveals three highly interconnected clusters, indicating the interdependence of cultural and natural dimensions in shaping the overall value of a place. Figure 4b further enhances the connections among the parameters that define the ecological/biological/geological values situated within the natural domain. It also shows the relations with the social, spiritual, historical, aesthetic, and artistic values, which are associated with cultural values. Figure 4c presents various aspects of significance related to the evaluation of cultural and natural heritage, which helps to identify and assess the attributes of a CUNA place. These significances can be cultural or natural, tangible or intangible, or valorize cultural, biological, or geological diversity, practices, and resilience. The level of significance for CUNA places can vary depending on the correlation with attributes and values, as well as the significance of individual values. When a place encompasses most of the identified values, it may be considered to have “considerable significance”, reflecting a comprehensive and multifaceted expression of cultural and natural elements. Conversely, some places may stand out solely due to the exceptional value of one specific aspect, representing unique or rare phenomena that hold exceptional significance.

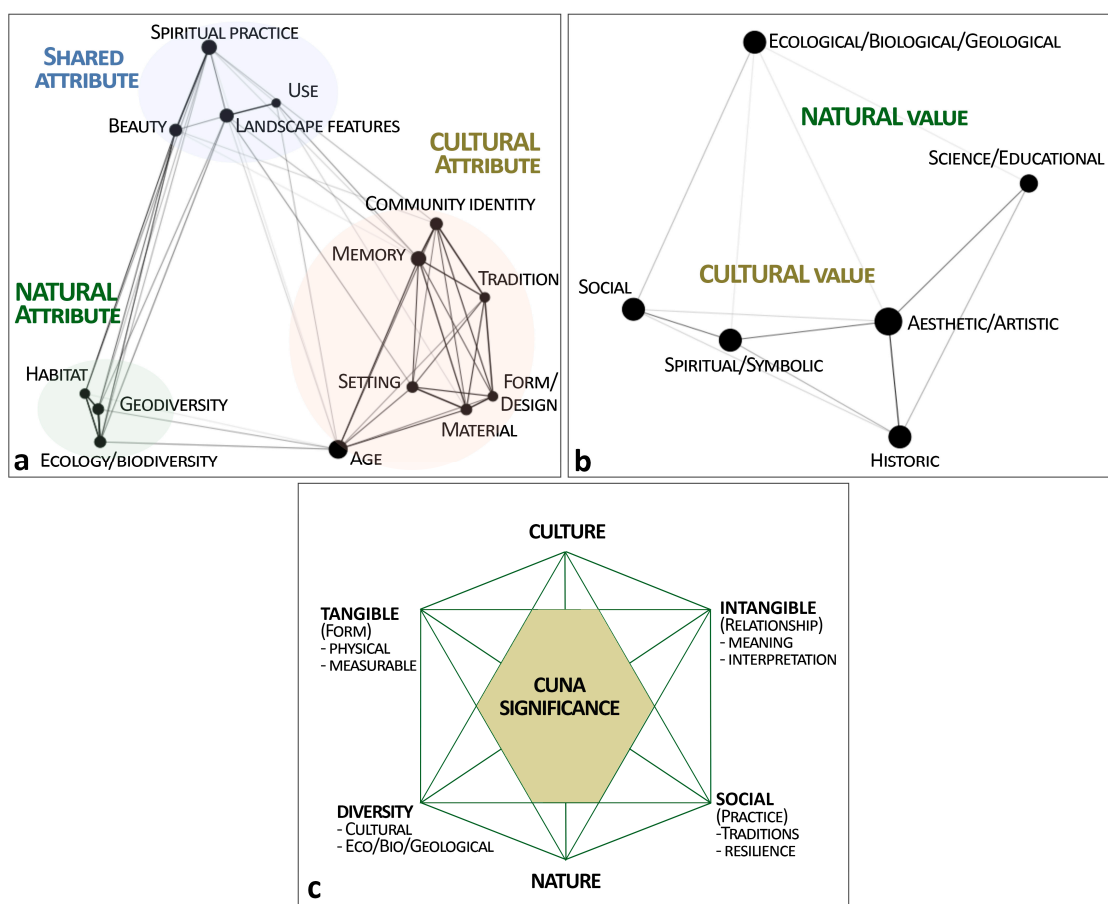


Figure 4. Network plots (principal coordinate algorithm and Jaccard similarity index) of the different aspects related to the evaluation of cultural and natural heritage according to definitions in

methods (Table 1), where the presence and size of a line between two nodes emphasize the strength of the relationship, and the size of the node indicates the relevance in terms of correlation of each node. (a) Attribute, (b) value, (c) significance.

Through a comprehensive analysis of the diverse attributes and values associated with the three typologies, we identified 16 categories of CUNA places, which are detailed in Table 2. These categories systematically integrate prevailing site values—encompassing both cultural and natural heritage domains—while exploring their tangible and intangible dimensions. The categorical stratification reveals nuanced differentiations: six categories emerge within the first typological framework, seven in the second one, and three in the case of iconic places.

Table 2. Definitions, attributes, and values of the different typologies and categories of CUNA places.

Typology	Category	Definition	Attribute (What)	Values (Why)
Type 1. Cultural places with Natural Value	1.1 Archaeological sites, which are related to natural values	Those archaeological sites which contain ancient gardens or their traces, or which have relevance as refugee sites for nature. Archaeological sites where protection of human settlements and monuments also significant and important biodiversity and/or geological features to be protected	Form/design, material, age, setting, landscape features, habitat conditions, ecological system biological diversity, geological diversity	Historic, scientific, educational, symbolic, ecological, biological
	1.2 Historical Gardens and Villas	Gardens where nature is relevance and create particular ecosystems, demonstrating architectural integration and design, aesthetic appeal, balance and harmony. Gardens which also enhance gardening techniques and also have symbolic significance and reflection of wealth, power and philosophical ideals	Form/design, material, traditions, spiritual practices, use, age, memory, community identity, setting, landscape features, biological diversity	Historic, aesthetic, artistic, scientific, social, symbolic, spiritual, ecological, biological
	1.3 Monastic and cloister gardens	Those sites which still show relevant traces of human-nature relationships, and which illustrate spiritual practices and teaching knowledge on cultivation of medicinal plants, and traditions on herbal medicine	Form/design, traditions, spiritual practices, use, age, memory, landscape features, biological diversity	Historic, spiritual, religious, scientific, educational, ecological
	1.4 Religious places, cemeteries or shrine, which are related to natural values	Religious places, such as rock churches, sanctuaries, cemeteries that contain memories, ancestral worships and spiritual practices, which also include natural elements, often associated with folklore and rituals	Material, traditions, spiritual practices, use, age, setting, memory, biological diversity, geological diversity	Historic, social, spiritual, geological, ecological, biological

	1.5 Libraries on natural history	Those libraries containing collection of books, incunabula, or other written sources, which on natural history	Age, memory, biological and geological diversity	Historic, scientific, educational, ecological, biological
	1.6 Industrial archaeological sites, which are related to natural values	Industrial sites, which can be considered as elements of archaeological industry and which are relevant for nature, due to the presence of new habitats or for the collections of natural elements	Age, memory, setting, habitat conditions, ecological system, biological and geological diversity	Historic, ecological, biological, geological, scientific, educational
Type 2. Natural Places with Cultural Value Prevailing material natural heritage and intangible cultural heritage	2.1 Botanical Gardens; bioparks; geoparks and geosites	Living inventories of biodiversity, designed for scientific research and education and conservation of plants, animals, fungi and other organisms. Geological elements preserving rare species, or lithotypes, and designed ecosystems	Form/design, material, use, setting, habitat condition, ecological system, beauty, biological or geological diversity	Aesthetic, social, scientific, ecological/biological/geological sometimes historic
	2.2 Historical landscapes related to human activities	Places which raised from historical natural activities, pastoralism or mining, and which mostly reflects agricultural knowledge, social organization, and adaptation to environmental conditions	Traditions, age, use, memory, community identity, setting, landscape features, habitat conditions, ecological system, biological diversity	Historic, aesthetic, scientific, ecological/geological, social
	2.3 Parks having great linkage with cultural values	In general, parks provide biodiversity and ecosystem services, such as social and educational and cultural service. In some cases, the traces of human activities having a cultural value can be relevant (e.g., prehistoric traces, ancient remains of settlements, traditional activities linked to pastoralism and agriculture)	Material, use, memory, habitat condition, community identity, habitatecological conditions, ecological system, beauty, biological diversity	Aesthetic, social, ecological, educational
	2.4 Literary parks and natural areas with iconic artistic values	Parks and places which represent the intersection of natural landscape and cultural heritage in literature and art. They contain tradition and memory associated with literary works with inspiration of nature and landscape. In some case natural place linked to artistic, e.g., cinema, photography, musical can be defined	Memory, setting, landscape features, biological and ecological system	Artistic, symbolic, social, science
	2.5 Natural monuments	Natural places where historical events and phenomena can be traced. Such as culturally influenced geological, and geomorphological features (e.g., cave dwellings and ancient tracks), or natural elements which contain traditions	Age, memory, landscape features, habitat conditions, ecological system, geological and biological diversity	Historic, social, scientific, geological, biological, ecological

		and memory linked to specific culture or events, providing local ecosystem and sometimes even genetic rarity (e.g., monumental tree)			
	2.6 Natural and ethnographic museum collection	Ancient Herbaria, natural collections, which preserve historical knowledge of nature, documenting changes in land/plant/animal distributions over time	Age, ecological system, biological, geological diversity	Historic, scientific, ecological, geological, biological	
	2.7 Natural places related to symbolic and sacral values	Areas which are repositories of geo/biodiversity and symbols of spiritual or ancestral connections, such as groves, mountains, lakes, stone, trees, or forests associated with legends, folklore, and myths. Sometimes, they are biodiversity hotspot due to their untouched states	Material, traditions, spiritual practices, use, age, memory, community identity, landscape features, habitat conditions, ecological system, biological and ecological diversity	Historic, spiritual, ecological, biological, geological, scientific	
Type 3. Iconic Places for Nature	3.1 Places of history where nature had a relevant role, which is now lost (Lost sacred groves, lost gardens, lost ancient lakes and rivers)	Areas associated with significant cultural or historical events, where nature may have played a role in shaping events, represent important moments in history that shaped cultural identity	Spiritual practices, age, memory, setting, landscape features	Historic, artistic, aesthetic, symbolic, scientific, social, educational	
	Immaterial natural heritage + Tangible and intangible cultural heritage	3.2 Monuments, churches and artistic places containing iconic natural values	Monuments, churches and artistic collections, which have great relation with nature, such as nymphaea, and baths, or work of arts which contain evident representations of nature. These places are sometimes connected with mythological or spiritual traditions, and they also provide knowledge on ancient biodiversity, and on historical introduction of plants and animals from other countries	Age, memory, setting, setting, beauty, biological diversity	Historic, artistic, aesthetic, spiritual, symbolic, social, scientific
		3.3 Site of modern art installations that use natural elements or related to ideas of nature	Modern artistic installations, which directly use nature to express natural and spiritual values, or which use art to express values related to nature	Material, memory, community identity, setting, beauty	Artistic, symbolic, social, educational

The network plot in Figure 5a illustrates the relationships between the various categories of CUNA places and their associated attributes listed in Table 2. The graph highlights four clusters of places (Type 1, 2, and Type 3) which form densely connected nodes. These clusters share common attributes and demonstrate how certain attributes are prevalent among different types of CUNA places. In Type 2, sites appear in two distinct clusters, one (parks and botanical gardens) that is closely linked to natural attributes and the second cluster that includes sites with more cultural associations.

Moreover, assessing the values associated with CUNA places illustrates the complex interconnections between categories and the values they embody and demonstrates how the various categories of CUNA places contribute to a diverse range of heritage values (Figure 5b).

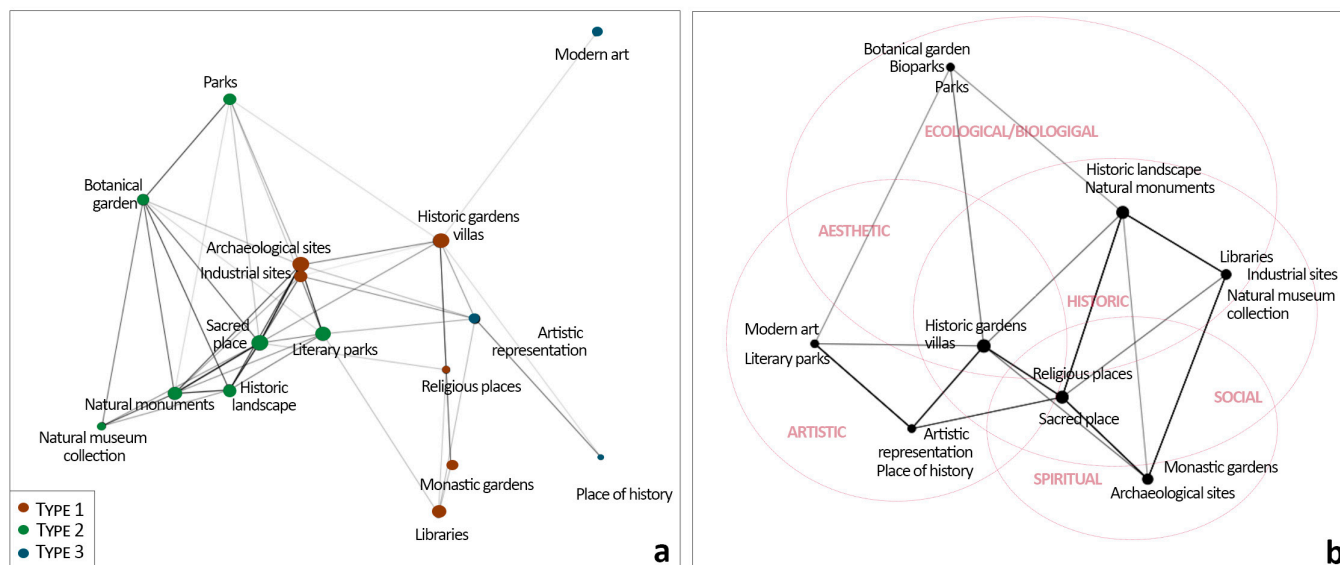


Figure 5. Network plots of attributes (a) and values (b) in the 16 categories of CUNA places following the lists given in Table 1.

3.2. Application and Examples of CUNA Places in Rome

The collected data from the literature and from our direct surveys emphasized the outstanding number of CUNA places in Rome, where all the identified categories can be recognized. In some cases, we observed that a site combines values to belong to more than one category.

3.2.1. Cultural Places with Natural Value

Many archaeological sites in Rome were found to be rich in natural values (cat. 1.1). According to Ceschin et al. [31], the flora of the main Roman archaeological sites comprises approximately 672 taxa, i.e., a value that corresponds to about 50% of Rome's spontaneous flora. Subsequent studies further supported these findings [62], providing a comparative assessment of the natural values presented at these sites. Many of the recorded species were particularly interesting, being either new to the city or rare within the Region. Several archaeological sites have demonstrated the presence of rich flora, including Palatine Hill [48], the villas of *Maxentius* and of *Quintili* [49], the Caffarella Valley [63], and the Bath of Caracalla [64]. These places serve as important refuge sites for floristic entities that have lost their habitat in other urban areas, and they are also cultural sites with significant natural values.

Historical gardens and villas (cat. 1.2) are sites of outstanding cultural value and are also significant for their natural elements. In Rome, many gardens fit this typology, preserving important botanical collections of relevant value, such as those found in Villa Doria Pamphili and Villa Borghese, the latter of which is also recognized as a Natura 2000 site of European interest under the EU Council Directive 92/43/EEC. Some of these gardens are now considered lost and could be classified under Cat 3.1 (places of history where nature played a relevant role but no longer exists). An outstanding example from antiquity is the *Horti Farnesiani*, located on Palatine Hill. The settlement of the gardens dates back to 1540 when Cardinal Alessandro Farnese acquired large agricultural lands

(vineyards, or “vigne”) on the abandoned ruin. This purchase was made for symbolic and auspicious reasons, as it was intended to reflect his aspirations to become the future Caesars [65]. During this time, various unknown plants began to arrive from explorations on other continents, leading to the creation of specific areas within parks and gardens, showcasing the pride of their owners [66]. The *Horti Farnesiani* were particularly notable for their collection of rare species, many of which were introduced by Jesuit missionaries from diverse regions of the world (e.g., *Helianthus tuberosus*, called at that time *Flos Solis Farnesianus*, *Agave americana*, and *Acacia farnesiana*). Today, visitors to the area can learn about these significant historical and botanical memories.

Furthermore, several monastic gardens (cat. 1.3) still contain important traces of natural history, reflecting the neglected relationship between history, religious beliefs, and nature. For this category too, Rome accounts for a very high number of outstanding sites. Giving a few examples, we can highlight the restored gardens of the old *Amphyteatrum castrense* near the Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, the restored Hortus *conclusus* at the Basilica of San Paolo fuori le Mura, the famous orange gardens close to the Church of Sant Alessio on the Aventine hill, and the Horti of St. Cecilia Monastery in Trastevere, which have been recently restored.

In the category of “Religious places, cemeteries or shrines, which are related to natural value” (cat. 1.4), the Cimitero Acattolico of Rome serves as a relevant example due to its cultural and natural importance, reflecting the concept of garden cemeteries [67,68]. Additionally, the old Cemetery of Campo Verano is not only a monumental site but also showcases important natural values, functioning as a historic garden with a rich diversity of wild flora [69].

In Rome, outstanding ancient libraries, such as the Casanatense, Alexandrine, Corsiniana, and Angelica libraries, contain precious and rare books that document various texts on natural knowledge (cat. 1.5) [70].

Finally, we can also highlight sites of industrial archaeology that are related to natural values (cat. 1.6), such as the abandoned mines in the Appia Antica Regional Park, and along the Aniene River (Latomie di Salone). There are also abandoned industrial settlements, like the Snia factory, which will be discussed later due to the recent designation of a newly formed lake and related ecosystem as a “Natural Monument”.

3.2.2. Natural Places with Cultural Value

Botanical Gardens and natural parks (cat. 2.1) in Rome have a complex history and have undergone various changes in their approach since their origin in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries [71]. Today, of the richness of plants and history, the Botanical Garden of Sapienza University, located in the former gardens of Corsini Palace [72], and the Municipal Rose Garden, now situated in the place of the ancient Jewish cemetery (Valle Murcia), exemplify sites that greatly combine natural heritage with monumental and historical elements. Additionally, regarding geological heritage, Rome boasts a diverse array of geological typologies and a high number of geosites [73].

In Rome, historical landscapes related to human activities (cat. 2.2) can be seen in places like the Appia Antica regional park, which today serves as a testimony of the landscape known as “Campagna Romana”. This area, which, in 2024, was recognized inside the WHS UNESCO sites, is characterized by an agricultural matrix with natural and semi-natural areas. The area is well representative of Mediterranean landscapes, hosting a high diversity of plant species (714 taxa) [74].

Parks that are linked with cultural values (Cat 2.3) are represented by the protected sites of Roma Natura (<https://romanatura.roma.it/> accessed on 20 October 2024), which were settled to protect nature in an integrated view of the historical territory and landscapes of Rome [75]. Additional sites with outstanding values due to their heterogeneity,

biogeographic peculiarity, and/or vulnerability of their vegetation complexes, always related to equally important cultural values, have also been recognized within the framework of the New Municipal Masterplan, and in the scientific literature [50,76,77]. These include (i) the San Vittorino gorges, in the easternmost part of the municipality, which preserve a vegetation complex of the volcanic gorges containing rare species (e.g., *Styrax officinalis* and *Pteris cretica*) as well as archaic engineering artifacts (i.e., cuniculi complex of the ditch of Ponte di Terra); (ii) the Gabii volcanic caldera, featuring heterogeneous grasslands rich of rare species and orchids, along with fragments of aquatic vegetation interposed with the ancient city ruins; and (iii) the Solforata di Pomezia, hosting the peculiar and very rare monophytic populations of *Agrostis canina* subsp. *monteluccii* on sulfur-rich soils in a site that was closely linked to ancient myths (also mentioned in the Aeneid of Virgil).

When discussing “Literary Parks and natural areas with iconic artistic values” (cat. 2.4), we can also mention the newly established Parco Pasolini at Ostia. Additionally, many other parts of the city have an iconic linkage to art, particularly in relation to cinema and music [78]. However, many of these areas are still not as completely explored and valorized as they could be.

According to the Italian legislation, natural monuments (Cat. 2.5) are defined as “areas characterized by a ‘natural’ feature, such as a rich biodiversity, that is particularly emphasized due to its specific aesthetic quality that grants them a high ‘cultural’ and symbolic significance (Legge quadro 394—6 December 1991)”. One notable example is Lago Bullicante, which emerged after the abandonment of industrial sites (Ex-SNIA factory) and now hosts a variety of interesting floristic and faunistic species. This includes around 300 plant species, 11 plant communities, 3 EU priority habitats, and 62 bird species, some of which are of special conservation interest [79,80]. Additionally, monumental trees can also be considered natural monuments. For Rome, Lanzara and Rivosecchi [81] provide some data on several centenarian trees, including oaks (overall *Quercus cerris*, *Q. suber*, and *Q. ilex*), oriental planes (*Platanus orientalis*), cypresses (*Cupressus sempervirens*), hackberries (*Celtis australis*), and palms (overall *Washingtonia filifera*), but also of some cedars (*Cedrus atlantica*, *C. libanotica*, *C. deodara*) and pines (*Pinus pinea*, *P. halepensis*) found in ancient gardens or along city streets (Figure 6). The case of St. Dominic’s Orange Tree at the Convent of St. Sabina is controversial, but the monumental *Cupressus sempervirens* in the cloister of Michelangelo (from the 16th century), and the *Magnolia grandiflora* along the Lungara street, as a relic of the memory of the Queen Cristina of Sweden (17th century), are among the more ancient multi centenary trees of Rome.



Figure 6. Some examples of monumental trees of Rome (a) *Cupressus sempervirens* (16th century) in the cloister of Michelangelo; (b) *Magnolia grandiflora* (17th century) on Lungara Street; (c) *Cedrus libanotica* in the gardens of Villa Farnesina (19th century) (photos by the authors).

In the typology of CUNA sites with prevailing natural values, an outstanding example in the category of Natural Museum collections (cat. 2.6) is the botanical collection of the Herbarium of Gherardo Cybo at the Biblioteca Angelica, which is the topic of interesting historical discussion, e.g., Stefanaki et al. [82]. Additionally, we cannot neglect the importance of the scientific collections of the Roman College that were settled in the seventeenth century by the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher, which founded the most famous Italian museum, fulfilling its claim to be a microcosm of the world [83]. More recently, the ethnographic collections at the Pigorini Museum also represent a scientific treasure with great historical value.

Finally, in category 2.7, “Natural places related to symbolic and sacral values”, we can highlight the numerous natural springs that are located within the city. These springs were dedicated to different goddesses, such as the sanctuary of the Nymph Egeria at Caffarella Park. The iconic cultural and natural value of these places reflects their intertwined natural and cultural significance.

3.2.3. Iconic Places for Nature

Rome is also very rich in outstanding examples for this typology, which considers the intangible natural heritage, and where the cultural heritage can be both historic and iconic as well as tangible and intangible.

Lost gardens and sacred groves (3.1), where natural features are integral to cultural expressions, memories, and identities, are among the most neglected heritage types in the city. Despite their potential significance in transferring cultural memory, these areas have often been overlooked. Historical information on the botanical features in this category can be traced back to ancient records by Virgil, Ovid, Varro, Livy, and Propertius, who described the sacred woods presented in the urban and peri-urban territory of Rome, corresponding to 22 sites [84]. As di Béranger (1859–1863) noted, “Rome itself in the early times was cluttered with woods inside, and surrounded by woods outside, populated by gigantic plants, mostly leafy, the conservation of which was linked to the religious ideas of the people” [85]. A rich and variable forest landscape is influenced by the topography, edaphic characteristics, and exposition of the place and by the resulting microclimatic condition of the sites [86].

Over the three-millennium history of Rome, the abundance of groves and gardens has fluctuated significantly, with a continued reduction observed into the present day. The most significant transformation of ancient urban landscapes took place in the second half of the 19th century, following the unification of Italy. In fact, the famous Nolli’s map for Rome, created in 1748, documents the relevant role of green areas within the urban structure of the city. This map indicates the presence of vineyards (*vigne*) (about 119 inside and 127 outside the perimeter of the Aurelian walls), villas and gardens (99 inside and 28 outside), as well as orchards (38 inside and 30 outside) (Figure 7) [87].

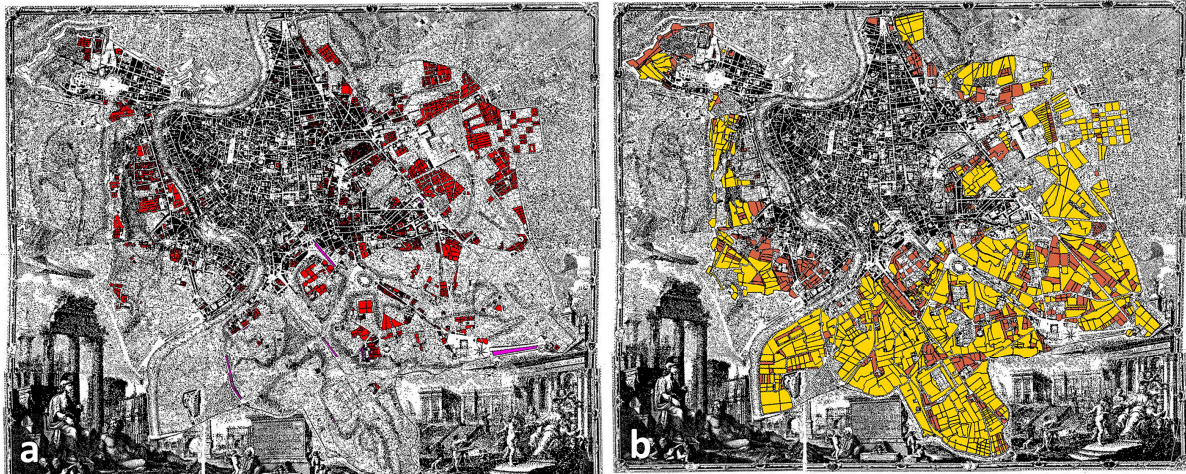


Figure 7. Gardens, Horti, and other green areas in Rome in the XVIII Century; most of them have now disappeared (cat. 3.1) (a) Gardens with flowerbeds and trees; (b) vegetable gardens and vineyards (87).

The heavy urbanization associated with the development projects for the new capital has led to the disappearance of many monumental gardens, such as Villa Astalli, Ludovisi, Palombara, Giustiniani, and Peretti Montalto. These gardens were once well-known for their significance in the urban landscape of Rome [56]. The existing documentation concerning Villa Peretti Montalto, which was owned by Cardinal Peretti (later Pope Sixtus V), has enabled researchers to reconstruct the floristic patterns and the natural values of such lost gardens [29].

Finally, one unexpected place that can be considered an iconic place for nature is the Colosseum itself, which is also the most famous and iconic monument in the city. Following the fall of the Roman Empire and the devastating effects of earthquakes, the amphitheater fell into abandonment, allowing for a rich plant colonization. Due to its iconic status, both in the imagination of the Romans and of other European scholars, different floristic studies have been conducted over the past four centuries (from 1643 to 2001) [51–53]. We can interpret the observed floristic richness, with 684 species identified across different studies, as a result of the great variety of habitats in the monument and its state of abandonment. This is also evident in the drawings created by artists who visited the city during the Grand Tour period (Figure 8) [88].



Figure 8. The relevant plant colonization in the Colosseum at the end of the XVIII Century, from A.L. Ducròs, showing its iconic value for nature (cat. 3.1) [52].

CUNA places can be identified through pictorial representations of nature, painted landscapes, architecture decoration, and carved sculptures [89–94]. When looking at the artistic creations where nature holds a great iconic value (cat. 3.2), we found and directly analyzed several outstanding examples, from antiquity to the modern era. One of the most surprising carved representations with outstanding natural values is found in the scrolls in the external fence of Ara Pacis (I century BC). This monument was built to celebrate Augustus’s return from military campaigns in Gaul and Spain, symbolizing a desire for a new peaceful era [95,96]. In fact, the analysis of the botanical composition reveals an exceptionally rich diversity of plant species (about 90), represented with small significant details. These plants, particularly *Acanthus mollis*, are presented in a continuous metamorphic process that enhances the cosmic theme of rebirth for Rome following the civil wars, after Caesar’s murder [96]. This monument demonstrates the ancient people’s deep knowledge of plants and their use of natural imagery to convey allusive messages and speak to analphabetic society [93]. The continuous metamorphic flowers symbolize the absence of an endpoint and underscore the importance of unity within diversity, guiding the Romans toward a new Golden Age referred to as Augustus’s *aurea aetas*.

Another example from antiquity is the garden paintings of the Villa di Livia at Prima Porta, which are often described for their illusionistic qualities, or as a simple representation of Augustus’ promised Golden Age [89,97]. However, these gardens likely convey a more complex symbolic and philosophical purpose, influenced by the selection and arrangement of natural elements. Each plant refers to different gods and myths, while various birds symbolize the soul. As previously analyzed [53,94], this garden appears as an ‘ideal place’, aiming to communicate a philosophical and religious representation of human life. The driving forces that govern all natural events, such as life and death, are depicted through specific trees. Prosperity and good fortune are also constant repetitive elements, illustrating the transitory nature of life and emphasizing its capacity for renewal and regeneration within the cosmic cycle of nature.

As a further example of an Iconic place for nature, we can mention Psyche’s Lodge in the residence of the Agostino Chigi (later named Villa Farnesina), which was built at the beginning of the Modern Era. The owner commissioned Raphael to design the paintings, and Giovanni da Udine created, in the Psyche Lodge at the entrance of his villa, an extraordinary harbor adorned with hanging garlands extraordinarily rich in plant species (170 species and about 1200 groups of elements) [53]. The sense of wonder evoked by the garlands displays nature’s offerings, particularly the rare and American plants that were completely unknown to European observers (Figure 9). The visitor’s admiration for the splendor of the villa reinforced the powerful consideration for its ‘Magnificent’ owner. Finally, a significant thematic element of the Lodge is love, as shown by the numerous references of the plants to the goddess Venus. Overall, the frescoes hold two world primacies: they constitute the richest botanical chamber and feature the earliest depictions of plants introduced to Europe from the Americas [53].



Figure 9. The Psyche Lodge painted by Giovanni da Udine (Raphael school) in the Villa Farnesina, and evidence of the first representations of American plants in Europe less than 20 years after Columbus' return; (a) *Zea mays*; (b) *Cucurbita moschata*; (c) *Cucurbita pepo*. These extraordinary paintings, that also represent the richest botanical paintings in the world, are great icons of nature and culture (cat. 3.2) (photos by the authors).

The final category (cat. 3.3) represents the “Site of modern art installations that use natural elements or related to ideas of nature”. This category is the least represented in Rome. However, there are some notable examples, such as the exhibition “Back to Nature” held in Villa Borghese and the sculpture “Foglie di pietra” of Giuseppe Penone, where archaeology and ruins, history, and biology are grafted onto each other to form an evident union between nature and culture. Additionally, murals like “treedom” in Parco del santa Maria della Pietà, and other works in the Garbatella areas, further contribute to this category.

4. Discussion

The concept of CUNA represents a significant evolution of the “mixed properties” [18], redefining heritage by emphasizing the natural environment as an integral and dynamic component of cultural heritage. Unlike traditional approaches where nature is treated as a passive backdrop, this perspective encourages innovative strategies that integrate the protection of cultural, natural, and landscape diversity. This approach aligns with the strategy of UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) programs, which “combine the natural and social sciences to improve human livelihoods while safeguarding natural and managed ecosystems”. As outlined in these documents, the program aims to “promote innovative approaches to economic development that are socially and culturally appropriate and environmentally sustainable”. Achieving this goal requires administrative cooperation among institutions to protect a combined value. The European Landscape Convention [23] complements this vision by emphasizing landscapes' perceptual and community dimensions. Its focus on public participation and sustainable management highlights the value of local perspectives in conservation. Fernández Salinas [98] also emphasizes recognizing cultural landscapes as pivotal for territorial identity and sustainable development. These insights from the cultural landscapes underline the necessity of integrating cultural and natural heritage in management strategies.

The first step, however, is the attribution of the value. One of the primary obstacles in recognizing CUNA places is the difficulty of identifying their significance and associated value. Criteria for assessing the significance of a place have evolved over time, expanding beyond aesthetic and historical values to include broader cultural considerations [38]. The concept of significance itself has philosophical roots in empiricist–positivist thought, which has been critiqued for potential logical flaws, leading to a focus on material preservation at the expense of experiential and intangible values [99,100]. Improving significance assessment strategies is crucial for effective cultural resource management [101]. For instance, assessments by landscape architects are strongly influenced by design and picturesque principles, although ecological or ‘natural’ values are also increasingly considered [102]. Additionally, archaeologists are becoming more involved in assessing historic character [103,104]. Studies conducted by landscape ecologists may seek to protect species diversity in both urban and rural areas [15,105,106].

Furthermore, while the criteria for assessing the significance of heritage have evolved, there is still a strong bias toward either cultural or natural aspects in most cases. Very often, cultural values overshadow natural values; conversely, in natural heritage sites, ecological significance can eclipse cultural considerations. This imbalance reflects deeper philosophical questions about how we define and value heritage, which are

important points for the CUNA framework. Finally, a recurring theme in the literature is the concept of “hidden heritage”, referring to elements that are not immediately visible or easily recognized but are nonetheless essential to the integrity of a site [1].

In historical cities, such as Rome, CUNA places may not only embrace notable landmarks, from ancient sacred *sylvae* to urban gardens, but they also can represent natural diversity [54,107–111], providing excellent examples of what we can refer to as CUNA places. This paper confirms the multifaced structure of this urban area, which possesses both cultural and natural features that shape its identity and development [42,50,112,113]. In fact, cities offer untapped potential for CUNA sites, where modern developments can coexist with heritage preservation. Rome, in particular, with its rich history and abundant natural features, exemplifies the CUNA concept, where rich historical significance intersects with inherent natural values. Indeed, whereas the historical, artistic, and cultural relevance of Rome has been extensively documented and recognized in UNESCO Heritage, being included in the World Heritage list since 1980, the city’s natural value has been stressed in various contributions about its natural capital [54,114]. However, this value is not sufficiently recognized. The biodiversity of the Roman landscape is attributed to several factors, including differential geological and geomorphological features, climatic influences, and anthropic factors. In particular, its location along the Tyrrhenian coast, where a transitional climate regime between Mediterranean and temperate conditions occurs, has led to the development of diversified vegetation patterns, rich in resources and particularly suitable for urban settlement [50,54,114–116]. This character is further confirmed by the analysis of the variation in the epiphytic lichen component, which highlighted a gradient of increasing suboceanic characteristics from the eastern sectors toward the western areas of the city [117,118]. More recently, this has been supported by direct climatic investigations [119].

Analyzing the values of natural places for ancient civilizations allows us to better understand their cultural values and often our own cultural roots. For instance, the reverence for the sacred wood, as well as for the large, isolated trees, is a hallmark of archaic Rome. This devotion has sometimes persisted for centuries, becoming an integral part of the Roman popular tradition [84,85,120]. However, even in the past, the woods of the ancient tradition were gradually dismantled, assuming, in addition to a mythical–religious meaning, an overall aesthetic role. A new appreciation for nature emerged among the Romans as early as the period of the first emperors, which increasingly manifested itself in the art of gardens and public parks [121].

Moreover, it has been observed that nature, whether in the forms of gardens, forests, or literary depictions, served as a means of expressing political and religious ideas. The power of imagery in ancient societies has been demonstrated [122], and this concept can be extended to natural images, as seen in the *Ara pacis* and *Villa di Livia* [95,96], within a broader context. For example, the historian Pollard [123] argued that Pliny wrote his *Natural History* as “a dedicatory offering to the completion of the *Templum Pacis*, categorizing the botanical gardens therein or at the least the flora and fauna that Rome was encountering due to the Flavian peace”. Even later, the powerful role of gardens and natural elements was stressed by Bentz [55], who noted that “Examining the Cesi Garden over time allows us to better understand how urban gardens served as strategic tools for families in early modern Rome attempting to build and legitimize a noble and Roman identity”.

Indeed, monumental trees, lost gardens, and sacred groves are elements where natural features are integral to cultural expressions, memories, and identities. These elements need more attention, protection, and enhancement, as they could play a significant role in transmitting both tangible and intangible cultural memory. Many iconic CUNA places have been lost or neglected over time, often with little common recognition of their significance today. However, rediscovering these places can be important for the valorization

of our heritage [1,12,28,50]. This process can strengthen territorial identity, promote sustainable development, and generate income for conservation efforts [7,15,124,125]. By revitalizing and showcasing CUNA places within cities, local governments can foster both cultural appreciation and environmental stewardship. This valorization requires a multifaceted approach to enhance cultural, historical, artistic, ecological, and symbolic values. As noted by Lorusso et al. [126], valorization strategies should aim to increase the readability, authenticity, and identity of a site, ensuring that both cultural and natural attributes are preserved and appreciated in context. By fostering a network of CUNA places, the rich cultural and natural heritage can be made more accessible to the public, supporting sustainable tourism and education initiatives.

5. Conclusions

Following the international directives of UNESCO and IUCN for identifying and enhancing natural and cultural heritage, the suggested methodological approach allowed defining the concept of CUNA places. These places can be categorized based on different characters, but they share a common denominator: a combined natural and cultural value. By deepening the concept of shared value, as already expressed by the UNESCO directives for the “mixed properties”, here we have defined a rich complexity of categories that can apply to the different typologies, considering both tangible and intangible heritage.

From a methodological perspective, the proposed approach introduces a systematic process for assessing heritage significance, integrating diverse disciplinary perspectives, including ecological, archaeological, and sociocultural dimensions. This methodological rigor ensures that CUNA places are identified based on comprehensive criteria, making the framework adaptable to different contexts and scales. By uncovering overlooked or underappreciated sites, this framework has the potential to strengthen territorial identity, promote sustainable development, and inform more nuanced policymaking.

The preliminary application of this approach to the city of Rome has confirmed the values of these suggested typologies, highlighting their prevalence in the city, thanks to its extraordinary richness of historical heritage with natural values. Further systematic analysis of Rome, along with an extension to other places, will help to uncover hidden heritages that could be valorized. This process aims to strengthen territorial identity and better evaluate the policy of development.

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