

A Report on the Execution of the Garden of the Apostles at St. Joseph Catholic Chaplaincy, Imo State University, Owerri

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Abstract

The flourishing of Christian religion as it were had its roots in Rome, following its appropriation as a State religion by the Roman Emperor Theodosius in 391 AD. The new church therefore by consequence of necessity naturally adopted the good attributes of art in propagating the teachings and doctrines of the new religion. Ever since then, the Catholic Church has continued to insist on the edification and teaching of her faithful using the age long agency of symbolism as made explicit in art. However, the challenge of giving identity to spaces and environments goes beyond the architectural definitions that such places exude. Therefore, even within the church, there was a weighty need to delineate the environment as a place of prayer and spiritual retreat, a function that art and specifically sculpture performs. This paper examines one of the attributes of sculpture in defining a space; also emphasizing the ecological, psychological, social and spiritual importance of gardening. The paper records the changing of a once bushy part of the chaplaincy's space into an ambient environment suitable for solitude and spiritual retreat, giving the step by step stages undertaken towards the realization of the project using the art of sculpture and gardening.

Key Words: Garden, Chaplaincy, Imo State, Owerri, Appostles.

Introduction

The spatial identity of a place has been from time immemorial made more permanent by the art of sculpture and architecture. Sculpture as an art form permeates every ancient civilization; it is easy to opine that almost all ancient civilizations that engaged in the art of sculptural production had at least an abstract idea of the spatial organizing role of sculpture which creates a space that can be regarded as a garden in the contemporary parlance (sculpture garden). The earliest available literature on the subject shows that, the earliest manifestations of the art of garden could be traced to the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Persia, Greece and Rome. However in traditional Igbo society, the public square or village common, which houses the ancestral grove, could also be taken as a form of garden shared collectively by the community. In this village common, masquerades and other dance ceremonies and paraphilia which could also be regarded as living art are enacted periodically. This is also not far from the functions attributable to the Roman forum with its public statuary and votive images.

The Romans, did not exactly invent the idea of public sculpture and gardening as it flourished in the Roman Era of 30 B.C. to 330 A.D. Being the foremost admirers of Greek art and civilization the Romans where not only clever enough to copy their culture but also improved on it. The beauty of sculpture is most striking considering its ability to interact with space, sculpture can not only enclose space, it can project into space, and stand in space. Most significantly, the ability of sculpture to situate a particular place and

embody it with its uniqueness is incomparable. Sculpture does not only define the character of a space, it also reveals the taste and aesthetic aspirations of its occupants. This reveals why history is full of the stories of the romance between royalties, aristocrats, and emperors with gardens. Consequently, Firnigl (2011) postulated that “decorating the gardens with sculptures has a big past: the mythological themed statues had spatial organizing role from the ancient ages and they had surplus meanings beyond their original stories” this opinion is based on the ancient civilization of the Western world. However, Turner (2005) believes that in ancient times, the idea of gardening rested on the practices of ritual, mythological and doctrinal aspects of spiritual space.

The environmental challenges facing Nigeria today are quite enormous. The grooming and maintenance of serene and well-manicured gardens have continued to disappear from the to do list of developers and town planners. Concrete cement slabs, popularly known as German Floors have continued to take over the small patios and former green areas, especially in public places. This research work is an effort at bringing back serenity and natural ambience to the Church’s environment (St Joseph Catholic Chaplaincy, Imo State University, Owerri) using art and Gardening, thereby, encouraging the spiritual and psychological growth of the community.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The research is directed at taking a critical look at the possibilities derivable from the creation of a garden using sculpture as spatial delineations. The objectives includes among others:

1. To create above life-size statues of the twelve Apostles including Paul, in concrete.
2. To position this sculptures in such a manner that the space they created around them could be modeled to become a garden.
3. To erect, within this space the grotto of Christ crucified, using granite stones.
4. To highlight the important relationship between art and environment
5. To look at the practice of gardening in Nigeria especially as it concerns environmental management.

Review of Related Literature

Theoretical Framework

This research is based on the philosophical art theories of John Dewey; who extrapolated extensively on nature, aesthetics, art and experience. According to him, the highest form of the concepts of art, aesthetics and environment can best be grasped through the vehicle of experience. In his propositions, Dewey Theorized that the production process of art down to the consummation end-user stage, culminating in experience, is a perfect example of the way humans intelligently construct, shape and experience the world and the environment. In fact, the creation of the Garden of the Apostles and the Grotto of Christ Crucified is the most pragmatic approach that encapsulates the theoretical musings of Dewey. This is because, Dewey believes in the opening up of art for public consumption and experience, devoid of the restrictive walls of museum establishment.

Once an employee of a museum at the Barnes Foundation, yet, Dewey in his writings did not hide his distaste for museums arguing that “Art would not amplify

experience if it withdrew the self into the self nor would the experience that results from such retirement be expressive” In conclusion, Dewey’s theories clearly identified the most important timeless role of art which according to him promotes conscious participation “and thereby exhibits, so that he who runs may read, the fact that consciousness is not a separate realm of being but is the manifest quality of existence when nature is most free and most pure”

Studies on Art and the Environment

Environmental consciousness is a topic that has become quite vague and elusive in Nigeria today. The extant presence of literatures dealing on the matter has proven that scholars have continuously made effort to raise awareness on the need for a serene and orderly environment as a panacea for societal growth and development. In the art arena, due to the visual nature of the discipline, artists, especially the conceptual ones amongst them have continued to produce tangible works of art that draws attention to environmental consciousness. In Nigeria, one of the notable artists that work and continue to work in this direction includes; El Anatsui who through his bottle cork installations, raise awareness on environmental management. There are also hundreds of contemporary Nigerian artists who have progressed to producing what could be termed environmental art. These are forms of artistic response to the challenges of environmental management. Therefore, the present workingviewas undertaken by the chaplaincy, is arguably an example of such efforts. These notwithstanding, the fact remains that the most extensive mechanism for environmental remodeling lies in the hands of the government who have the financial and logistical wherewithal to effect far reaching changes both in policy and social conduct.

General Planning and Design Considerations

The design of the garden and the statues is affected by certain basic factors ranging from materials, space, use, access, aesthetics and so on. This is so considering that the garden is located in a church within a university space. Concrete was chosen for the statues for its ability to withstand the elements, the space is effectively utilized to make room for multiple uses such as religious service or social event. Accessibility is made easy with the absence of barricades between the statues, and the garden has a clear approach directly facing the church gate.



Plate 1: Initial drawing for the Grotto section. Source: Moses Njoku.

The preliminary drawing plans made by the patron guided the locations of the sculptures within the space. Although these drawings could not be accessed as at the time of this publication, the sculptor made some preliminary sketches before embarking on different sections of the garden project that he worked directly on. However, the patron being particular about the stylistic approach he desired for the statues provided the photographs which served as references for the apostles. With these, the sculptor proceeded to make the armatures following the postures taken by each apostle.

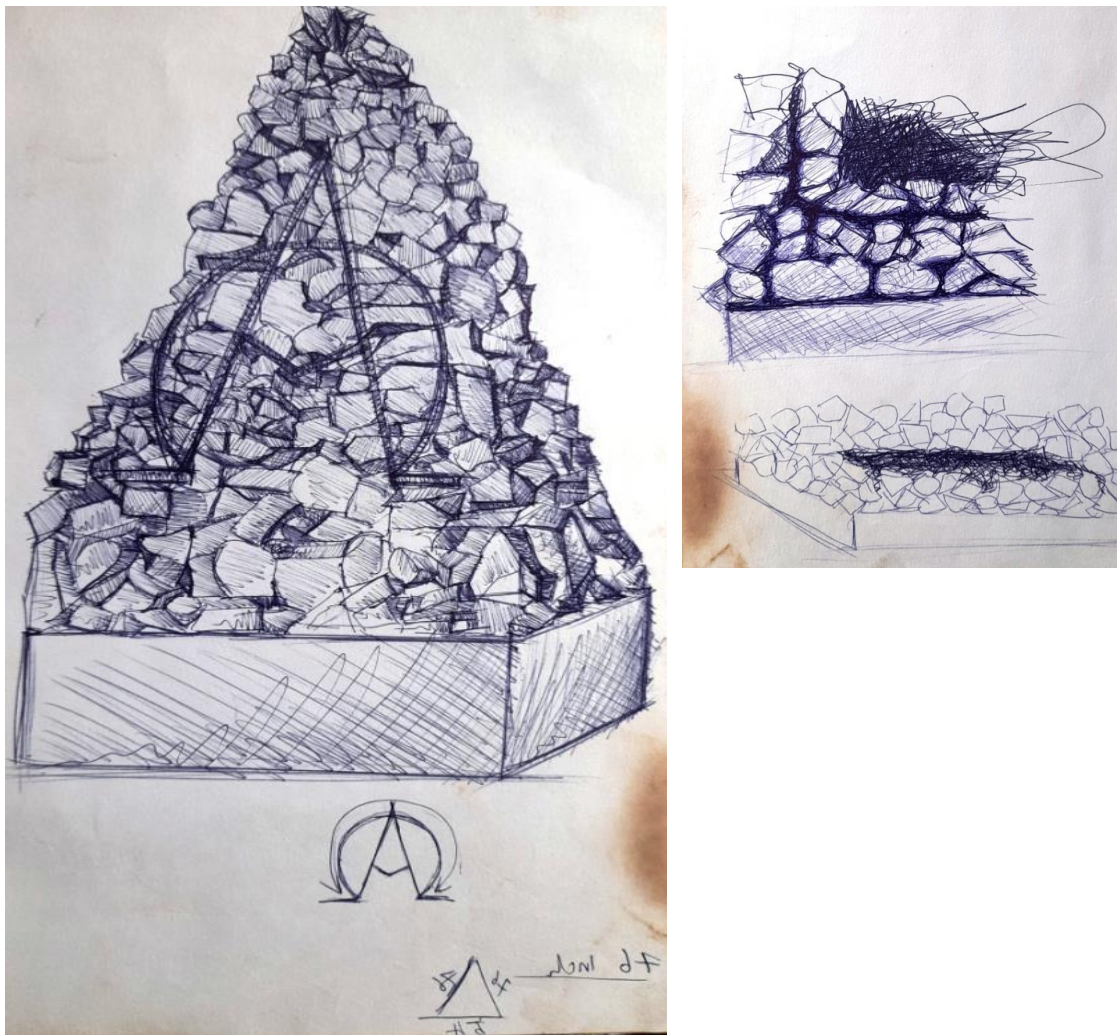


Plate 2 and 3: drawings for the Grotto section. Source: Moses Njoku.

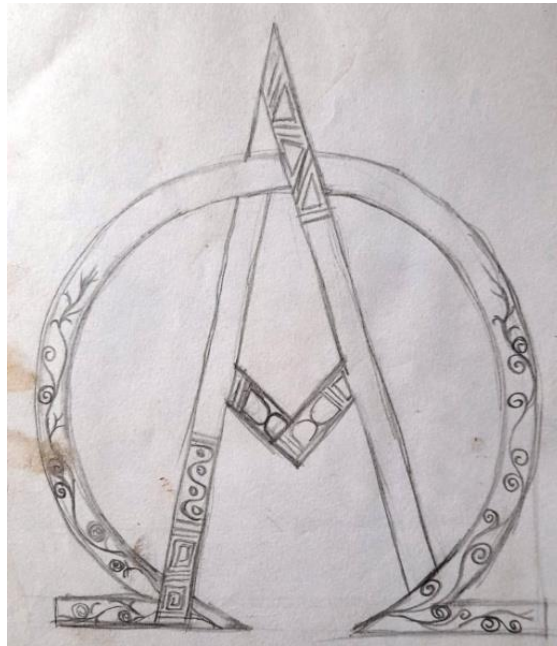


Plate 4: Drawings for the Grotto section. Source: Moses Njoku.

Land Preparation and Construction of Pedestals

The garden space is a piece of land of about a plot and half, situated opposite the rectory. The land is roughly triangular in shape. The first stage involved the preparation of the land. This was done manually, using spades to level up the sloppy area of the land, making it more tabular. Then the positions of the pedestals for the statues were marked and built, with a space of about 12feet in between. Each pedestal measured 4x4 feet in height and width. An extra one foot was added round the base to form a step for the base of the pedestal. At the four edges of the pedestal, metal frameworks made of 8mm rods were added and cast with concrete from ground to the top and round the square of the top, forming a chain. Then the hollow space at the centres were filled up with sand, compacted and cast with concrete. Meanwhile, the two pedestals for Peter and Paul which stood at each end of the entrance to the garden were increased to 5x6 in height and width due to the intended larger size of the statues.

Fabrication of Armatures

As the work on the pedestals was going on, the making of the armatures for the statues proceeded. Eleven of the statues of the Apostles measured 9feet each while those of Peter and Paul was far more monumental, towering 12 feet in height. (this measurement excludes the height of the pedestals) To make the armatures, 10mm and 12 mm rods were used. The 12mm rods were used to form the baskets for each work. Each basket measured 4inches in height by 3feet square for the 11 Apostles. The two methods of welding and tying with binding wire were employed in making the armatures. First the basic skeletal forms were welded after which the rest of the volumes were attached by

tying with binding wire. The tying with binding wire is most ideal since it prevents the breaking of the rods at the point of joining by giving room for expansion and compression forces over time.



Plates 5 and 6: Armature construction. Source: the sculptor



Plates 7: Armature construction. Source: the sculptor

Figure Modeling in Cement

It must be noted at this point that the writer who was the chief sculptor during this project; was assisted by two of his colleagues (OtikpaChisom and Asiegbu Collins) all through the course of the project. At this stage, after the completion of all the armatures, the sculptors proceeded to the modeling stage, with each sculptor engaging a statue. It should be noted that, for the modeling with cement to be effective, there must be the presence of chicken mesh which is used to cover every part of the armature. Usually for direct cement sculpting, the best sand has been discovered to be sharp sand, due to its structural strength and ability to set with lesser chances of cracking. The ratio of the cement to sand mixture is one and half wheelbarrow of sand to one bag of Portland cement. This mixture continues for the first layer of the modeling and as the second layer approaches, during which detailing ensues, the mixture is further pruned to a barrow of sand per bag of cement. The sculpting of the twelve Apostle's statue, including Paul, took over four months to be completed, taking an average of about a week and three days to complete each. It is only appropriate to acknowledge the visit of Sir Tony Otikpa, an experienced sculptor and critic, who's kind suggestions and criticisms, ensured that the work was successfully executed to standard.



Plates 8 and 9: Cement modeling stage. Source: the sculptor.

Painting of the Statues

The last two statues to be sculpted were allowed to stay for an extra two weeks for proper curing before patination. For this stage, brown auto-base car paints were used while; the gilding was done using the gold variety of the paint. Also at this stage, a tiller was brought in, who subsequently tiled the pedestals with carefully selected choice of tiles.

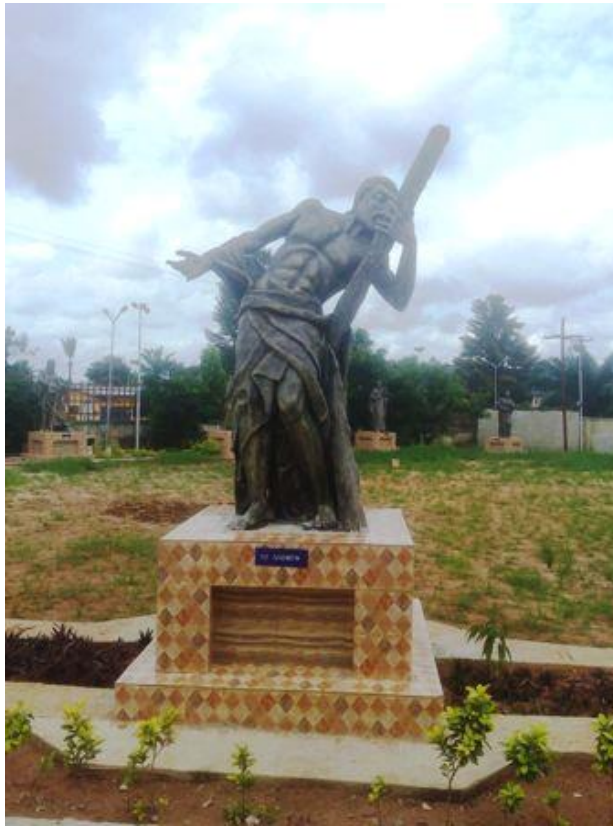


Plates 10 : Painted statue of the Appostles Mathew. Source: the sculptor



Plates 11: Painted statue of the Luke. Source: the sculptor

Planting of Grasses and Flowers in the Garden



Following the completion of work on the statues the Chaplaincy proceeded to plant grasses within the garden space. Also different species of exotic flowers were planted along the centre of the concrete patios created along the line of the Apostles statues.

Plates 12: showing the finished sculpture of Bartholomew. Notice the freshly planted grasses and flowers within the patios. Source; the sculptor



Plates 13: showing the finished sculpture of James the Great in the garden. Notice the freshly planted grasses and flowers within the patios. Source; the sculptor

Creation of the Grotto of Christ Crucified

At one end of the garden; towards the rectory the sculptor was directed by the chaplain to come up with a design for a grotto that will have the Crucifix. To do this the sculptor (writer) chose to create a natural imitation of a pyramidal rock, atop which the crucifix will stand. Subsequently, large lumps of granite stones were procured and work commenced. First a space of about 10x12feet was set out at the centre. Then the foundation was dug out to raise a rectangular block work of about 4 coaches, and then this is further chained with concrete pillars at the four edges and a beam on top. At the centre of this rectangular form-work, a concrete column is made to rise all the way to the projected height of the pyramid, ensuring that some rods are left sticking out. Then comes the stage where the stones are assembled. To do this, the sculptor worked from within the pyramid as it rises, installing the stones on each other like when building with blocks and mortar. At every 3feet height the sculptor checks for every opening within the stones and tries to seal such from inside with mortar. After this, the floor is compacted and further cemented with a concrete mixture, filled up to the brim with red earth and then the process is repeated again till the tip is reached. At this tip, the crucifix, which was free standing; that is stood without a cross (this creative suggestion came from the chaplain) was now attached to the last rod that emanates from the central column. The sculptor at the completion of the stone work proceeded to create the logo of Alpha and Omega in sheet metal which was attached in a central position on the stone pyramid.



Plate 14: Initial concrete structural base for the Grotto. Source; the sculptor



Plate 15: Filling the spaces from inside. Source; the sculptor.



Plates 16-17: Showing different stages in the building of the stone pyramid for the Grotto of Christ Crucified. Source; the sculptor.



Plate 18: Making of the Alpha and Omega symbol. Source; the sculptor



Plate 19: The Grotto of Christ Crucified, when completed. Source; the sculptor

Analysis and Evaluation

Considering the study objectives listed at the beginning of the article, the project could be taken to have achieved the set down objectives. The statues were successfully executed, as well as the Grotto. It is however pertinent to note that the garden project was not holistically left in the hands of the sculptor and his team, since the patron had enormous control over the choice of design and art direction. This could be seen reflected by the choice of using real granite stones in the building of the pyramid grotto as against the use of faux stone method as initially suggested by the sculptor (see plate 1). The use of granite stones which were naturally of irregular shapes posed a great challenge which was skillfully manipulated by the sculptor using a unique technique of building by laying the stones in rows and sealing the centre core with concrete at intervals as the pyramid rises. It is quite satisfying to state the creative thinking of the patron which manifested in the various suggestions he gave while the work lasted. One of such being the suggestion that the crucified Christ should be mounted without a cross, an innovation that is not readily found among conservative priests. In all, the design and execution of the garden of the apostles reminds one of the numerous Roman Neoclassical gardens, forums and villas that are found in art history books, a good example being that of Hadrian's villa.

Conclusion

These few descriptions are only a vague effort in trying to capture the multiple stages that the making of the Garden of the Apostles and Grotto of Christ Crucified underwent to become a reality. There were quite a number of works done in the garden that the report may not be able to cover for want of space. Nevertheless, it must be stated that, this humble project was a collective product of many gifted hands working in

different capacities, from the Chaplain (Rev. Fr. Dr. Njoku, A.P.C) who's brainchild the project is, to the disciplined sculptors, the skilled craftsmen, and even the chaplaincy community, included the students, all were instrumental to the success of the establishment of this beautiful place of solitude and prayer. This further validates John Dewey's theory which argued that the production process of art down to the consummation end-user stage, culminating in experience, is a perfect example of the way humans intelligently construct, shape and experience the world and the environment. Now, there couldn't have being any better visual way of delineating this little space as a place of spiritual meditation than as it has been expressed using the spatial organizing potentials of sculpture. In this regard, anyone who pays a visit to the garden will be in no doubt as to agree to the fact that it has been able to proffer answers to the research problem as made explicit at the beginning of this report. This is even more pronounced taking into cognizance the manner at which the chaplain encourage the students to nurture the garden, keeping it clean always and watering the flowers regularly. This garden project is only an effort that could generate ripple effect, if only the society will look inward and allow nature to make her indelible and ever soothing impression on a world of increasing chaos and anxiety. Every visitor to the chaplaincy's garden will affirm that indeed nature offers the best route to spiritual ecstasy.

Furthermore, the benefits of nurturing and maintaining gardens and natural environments especially within the cities are quite enormous. Writers such as Danjuma (2014), and Okoye (2014), have shown that green areas help in reducing the ozone layer effect, absorb noise, as well as climatic change mitigation. Danjuma summed it up by saying that the benefits of green areas cuts across and include social, psychological/physiological, and ecological benefits. Indeed this project has become a living testimony to and a practical example of what Edgar Degas meant when he argued that "art is not what you see but what you make others see"; For there is no one who experiences this garden, without going home with an enhanced ability to appreciate the work of nature, which is art in perfection. It becomes apt to end with Mullis Eric's (2006) submission that;

If an environmental aesthetic is cultivated that stresses both creating and extracting meaning from the environment whether home, city, countryside, or national forest then a connection can be established that will support the preservation effort. Indeed, individuals who generally care about the aesthetic value of their environment will be more likely to appreciate the value of complex biotic communities even if they lie in distant places such as the Alaskan wilderness.

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