

RAISING THE IMAGEABILITY OF CITY SCAPE THROUGH PUBLIC ART

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Abstract

There have been some misconceptions of public art and cityscape in Nigeria, especially on aspects of identity and relevance. In view of this, the study examined the issue of urban space recognition and the role of public art and buildings play in raising the imageability of Urban Centres in Nigeria. The study employed a qualitative research method. There was a direct observation of some of the major urban centres in Nigeria by the researcher and the information gathered from the observation was supplemented by Oral interviews, Internet sources and written documents. The findings show that Nigerian town planners, Architects and Artists tried to create order in the Urban centres by allowing public art and buildings to form the Focal point of where they are located. The Nigerian Public Art and the entire city scape show strong evidence of traditional spirit in their Cultural quality and Social attractiveness.

Introduction

Nigerian cities are fast becoming lands of Sky Scrapers. Building of from eight to more than Twenty stories are rising and imparting new Skylines that form the visual tokens of the modern Nigerian cities. Against this background, Artists, Town planners and Architects find it difficult to reflect the Nigerian culture and identity in the City Scape. Some have tried to resolve this problem by allowing public art to form a visual focal point of the area which it is situated. Ann Janchta-Szostak (2010) posits that;

People in a modern city are like rats in maze. They need a tool of space recognition to get acquainted with the environment they have been forced to live in.

Some of the public art and architecture that defined ancient city Scapes include; The Colossus of Rhodes, The Great Pyramids of Giza, Christ the Redeemer Statue in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil the Roman Colosseum, Rome, The Taj Maral, Agra – India among many others.

In traditional African Cities, the idea of public art comes to mind when we consider places such as the Nsude Pyramid in Enugu State (Plate 1), Igbo ‘Mbari House, palaces and Religious centres writing on Mbari, John Okparaocha (1976) avers:

Mbari is actually Igbo religious mud Sculpture. The Community takes up solemn artistic project of creating an Mbari in order that the gods may be induced to be creative and not destructive.



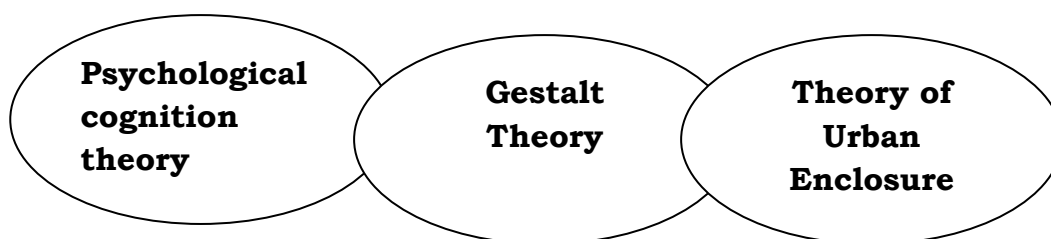
Plate 1: Ancient Igbo Pyramid at Nsude, Enugu State, Nigeria

With the advent of British Colonialism, Nigerian cities gradually towed the pattern of modernism, introducing globally unified architectural patterns and inhuman scale urban structure, rejecting traditional harmony. All these contributed to the sense of alienation experience in our Nigeria's big cities. Egonwa (2016) observes that "major cities in Africa imported styles according to the taste of those who colonized them or the architects that build in the region".

The post colonial era in Nigeria witnessed artistic/architectural revolution as the Spirit of independence, some Nigerian artists and architects started to research in social and political role of art in public spaces and the need for cultural identity in Nigerian cities. Oba's palace, Lagos is one of the striking examples that show a desire to provide a traditional building suitable for contemporary times. Oba's palace presently formed a visual focal point of the area in which it is situated and it will be proper that in future as rebuilding and modernization of Lagos continues, the palace will still be allowed to retain its architectural prominence. Egonwa (2016) observes that a new trend of adaptive form arose as Locally trained architects began adapting designs to local environment in the 80's. These experts believe is the beginning of vernacular architecture – a style we can call ours.

This study deals with urban space recognition of Public art in raising the imageability of urban centres as well as their cultural quality and social attraction, using Nigerian urban cities as example.

Theoretical Framework



Psychological Cognition Theory

This is a psychological cognition process consisting in mental copying of objects and events of the outer world in relation to the processes which take place in the human body. The process of perception was a subject of interest for researchers in a variety of fields especially behavioural and environmental psychologists such as, H.M. Pro Shansky, T.O. Hanlon, W.H. Ittelson and many others. Another group includes the visual perception of art and media in urban space.

Theory of Urban Enclosure

This theory related to the space perception such Enclosure Urban and Landscape interior, outdoor space. Specifically it refers to a limited landscape unit, built walls, floor, ceiling (usually Sky) and elements of Landscape furniture.

The idea of enclosure is derived from landscape design and it appears to be fundamental for visual perception in the context of a particular place.

Morphological Image of a City results from the relationship between positive space of the determined space and the negative space – formless emptiness. The spatial relations between a form and surrounding was explained by motlock (1991) and S Bell (1993), who pointed out that a city structure is based on cells determining its space identity of streets and squares from human kinesthetic abilities. Yi Fu Tuan (1977) persists that;

Being in a place is connected with the need of identification, while experiencing the space requires movement from one place to another.

Gestalt Theory

The Gestalt theory which has given rise to the holistic perception of the space concept which consists in perceiving visual components as organized patterns or wholes, instead of different parts.

These Theories help in mental articulation of our habitat and mental identification. Mental identification is the link between space perception and constructing spatial knowledge. The main achievement has been the discovery of the cognition scheme which controls the processes of perception and memorization of physical space. As a result of these processes a human mind creates an image of space called a cognitive map, making it possible to transform and interpret the data Rapport (1977) is of the view that, “the interpretation of information is performed by cultural and personal filters and referred to established cultural patterns.

It also worthy to mention Revin Lynch (1960) who in his book “The Image of the City” tried to prove that users perceive and organize spatial information in consistent and predictable ways, creating their own mental, creating their own mental maps with five elements, *Paths, edges, districts, nodes* and *Landmarks*. These five elements determine urban space organization. The elements also contribute significantly to the development of theories and methods of composing elements of urban structure in a way which is compatible with human psyche needs.

Public Art/Visual Art in Public Place The term public art refers to works of art in any media that have been designed and performed with specific intention of being sited or staged in physical public domain, usually external and assessable to all.

The idea of public art in modern Nigeria started with the advent of colonialism, and the coming of Christian missionaries. Most such early public art were produced in Britain and shipped down to Nigeria. Most of them were intended to serve as memorials and Christian figures rather than revitalization of urban spaces. Gradually after Nigeria's independence in 1960 public art grew in Nigerian Urban cities as they become an opportunity to honour foremost Nationalists and to express cultural issues and to communicate with its recipients. Some of the centres constructed in Lagos (Then capitals of Nigeria) prove that both permanent temporary art works and even street theatres contribute to the place identity creation. Street artists attempts to have their works communicate with common people about relevant themes without being imprisoned by aesthetic values.

Public art as Spatial Land Marks

Public art and Architecture are tied together. It is often difficult to discuss one while ignoring the other. The postcolonial era. Nigeria, witnessed a unification of Mass building and cultural patterns. Art in public domain took on a very responsible role of creating the important spatial tags and building identity of the place. The inimitable form of public art situated in the context of unified architecture, constitutes a focal point of view. Again, this view point brings us to a pertinent question, is architecture not art?

However, in the City Scale, the Sculpture takes a deserved top position in creating dominant landmarks in city scapes, regardless of the urban context. The role of public visual arts in urban spaces recognition was illustrated by Janchta-Szostak (2010) take using Tolman's experiment on the behavior of rats in a maze. Both man and animal create a tentative map of Land guides to recognize and leach environmental relationship.

Site Specific art and community engagement

The site was special significance for urban space recognition and spatial arrangement of public places as it deals with urban context. The art of architecture is always site-specific, hence, most of contemporary architects, landscape architects, and urban designers attach a lot of importance to architectural context mapping, while the artists emphasize the individual expression, autonomy and universality of art (Effendy, 2018). In the 1970's and 1980's site – specific approaches to public art were promoted and registered within the guideline of national and state organizations in the United States. The design team directive in the United states encouraged artists to share responsibility with architects and urban planners in deciding about spatial arrangement of public space – similar action have be undertaken in Benin-city Nigeria in the 1980, and 1990 and recently in Lagos State and Enugu State. There is also a noticeable ecological trend within the site – Specific art. It involves creating sculpture out of waste/recycled materials.

Community Engagement

Community Engagement underscores the new public art. This new approach broke with previous models of Site-Specificity and has been described as “Community Specific, Issue Specific and audience Specific art. It has moved the definition of Site Specific art to Public art focused on freedom of expression and active participation of Citizens in the work creation (Casanovas, 2005). An intersection of art and cultural activism one of Nigerian performance artists under this Category Jellilu Atiku has developed new form of creative dialogue with

diverse media for these new genre public art Aesthetical, form consideration was only a medium of socially and political relevant content.

Multimedia and New Media

These aspects also belong to the New genre public art. They serve as perfect tools of Communication with general public. These art include; Large – Size billboards and videos installations. Some convey same content regardless of the location almost pushing them off the domain of art.

Public Art in Nigeria

In Nigeria, people have realized that an art gallery can be more than a building. There are attempts by many state governments to produce art in public places. In Lagos some of the outstanding public art include Ben Enweonwu's sculpture entitled; "Sango", the Yourba god of thunder, located in front of the headquarters of the then National Electric Power Authority. The sculpture is vigorous with an outstanding masculinity to symbolize the power of the deity. The male figure was depicted wielding a double-headed axe. Other public art by Ben Enweonwu include; a bronze statue, entitled 'Anyanwu' located National Museum, Lagos and a Stylized Drummer mounted at Nigeria Telecommunication Limited [NITEL] building also in Lagos. Major roundabouts in Lagos are adorned with sculptures notably, they include the statue of the drummer, located at Murtala Mohammed Airport, Lagos. The statue of the foremost Nigerian Nationalist, Chief. Obafemi Awolowo. A memorial for the Late Kudirat Abiola, a pro democracy activist and the statue of Late democracy icon Chief M.K.O. Abiola



**Plate 2: *Sango*
By Ben Enweonwu**



**Plate 3: *Anyanwu*
By Ben Enweonwu**

The works of Demas Nwoko in his New Culture Studio, Ibadan are quite remarkable. In-fact his studio is a melting point of ideas from various art genres- music, sculpture, painting, architecture and poetry. (Bassey, 2000)



Plate 4: *New Culture Studio* by Demas Nwoko at Ibadan

Nwoko's studio stands as a public visual art on its merit. Apart from sculpture, there are numerous arts such as outdoor murals, graffiti and posters.

In Benin city, The University of Benin campus at Ugbowo stands as a city within a city, The location of the Oba's palace, the Bini traditional seat of government is also conspicuous in terms of scale and function. The palace enters into a relationship the entire Benin city, just as the state house of Assembly complex and Ring Road Square also do. The House of Assembly complex has a lot of strength and character, the setting, scale, as well as the approach make it very visible, prominent and very easy to access the building.

The visibility and prominence of Ring Road Square is a function of its location and scale as well as its approach, such that pedestrians and motorists have no difficulty in locating it. The square is adorned with a monumental statue of Oba of Benin in his full regalia, there is also a statue that commemorates the 1897 British punitive expedition on Benin kingdom and statues of Benin heroes and cultural images.

Owerri, the capital of Imo state stands out for its presence of public art. The Assumpta Cathedral clearly provides the identification and orientation one needs to know as he/she arrives at Owerri. Almost every roundabout and street in Owerri adorns public art. There are daily street performances along Douglas road and Wethedral road.

Enugu stands out as one of the cities largely known for its public art and remarkable city scape. As one arrives at Enugu from Ngwo, he/she is welcomed by a remarkable sculpture, entitled 'The Coal Miners Riot' This work which dealt on the colonial history of Nigeria was produced by Obi Ekwewchi. It consists a group of figures in a riot situation. The colonial masters were depicted giving orders to the police to gun down the innocent miners who simply demanded for an increase in their wages and better working condition (Nwanna, 2000). The figures have a pronounced realism and expressiveness, is well as a greater experimentation with drapery and pose, which show considerable twisting. Most remarkable as the figure of a dying miner, being assisted by his colleague, although his agony seems much more realistic in comparison, it still has a great deal of pathos and dignity.

Next is the bronze statue of the Late African political legend and Nigeria's Statesman, Rt. Hon. Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe located at the Old Legislative Building in Enugu, produced by Ben Enweonwu. At Independence layout/Ogui road stands the monumental statue of the Drummer (Otigba) produced by Chris Afuba. This stylized figure of a drummer though rendered in a comical style is redolent with meaning.



Plate 5: *The Drummer* by Chris Afuba, Located at Enugu

There is also “the Statue of Freedom”, by Cyril Nwokoli and several other public sculptures.

A critical analysis of works of Nigerian artists committed to public art could not be exhaustively discussed in this study due to limitation of space. The street performances, graffiti, murals, city squares and other landmarks all join together to give a proper socio-cultural identity to Nigerian cities.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the important role which the public plays in giving character, identity and distinctiveness to a city-scape. The work underscores the need to discover what kind of

attention people pay to particular places and what role art works play in recognition and identification of Urban space using the mental mapping method. Most Nigerian cities reflect a circulative series of experiences with much consideration on the overall planning, function, visual and emotional impact.

This limited surveys is to buttresses the fact that the design of most Nigerian Urban centers are authentic, and reflect traditional cultural quality and social attractiveness.

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