Indigenous Urban Open Spaces as Public Infrastructures for Sustainable Cultural System in Ilawe-Ekiti, Nigeria

[1]Joseph Akinlabi Fadamiro, Joseph Adeniran Adedeji, Rasaki Aderemi Ibrahim

Federal University of Technology, Akure, Nigeria
Department of Architecture
[1]Corresponding Author, joechrisdamiro@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The fast extinction of indigenous public open spaces in contemporary cities is one of the negative consequences of urbanisation. Since the physical environment is symbolically encoded, this development not only represents loss of infrastructural quality of cities but implies a change of value-system between the indigenous and the modern styles. Among the few conservation of the indigenous public open spaces and their value-system in Yoruba urbanization is Ilawe-Ekiti, Nigeria. This study therefore evaluates the value-system of some selected organized public open spaces in the city. The aim was to determine their significance towards formulation of sustainability framework. The primary data for the study was obtained through historical method, field survey and physical observation for multiple evidences as required of scientific enquiries. Qualitative results show that the spaces are material evidences of high indigenous value-systems in urban context. The study concludes with recommendations on the sustainable conservation of the spaces.

Keywords: urban open spaces, public infrastructure, indigenous value-system, cities, recreation.

© 2012, 2013 *Journal of Biourbanism*

INTRODUCTION

The significance of public open spaces in indigenous settlements has long been recognised (Okolo and Okolie, 2009). In particular, indigenous markets and town squares are major components in the urban morphology of the Yoruba nation of South Western Nigeria. These open spaces are not only parts of the urban grain but they determine the overall form of the urban pattern as major infrastructures. More importantly, traditional urban open spaces are historical documents of the cultural value-system of the people. They are cultural products of power, identity and belief semiotically encoded in the built environment (Low, 2000, Fadamiro and Adedeji, 2012). They are urban voids of quite public ownership that appears less structured to the human eye for place of relaxation, of stimulus release, in contrast to the intense and meaning-loaded communications encountered in the remainder of the city for outdoor assembly (Lynch, 1990). Unfortunately, the tide of the urbanisation process has not only swept away these symbolic icons, but has also eroded their inherent much-cherished cultural value-system. Post-industrial transformation of cities (Giseke, 2005) has destroyed the "heterogeneous complexity" – spatial, structural, and cultural – that provides a common denominator for human settlements. The social cohesion of indigenous societies was influenced by these open spaces. According to Amin (2008), "a city's streets, parks, squares, and other shared spaces have been seen as symbols of collective well-being and possibility, expressions of achievement and aspiration by urban leaders and visionaries, sites of public encounter and formation of civic culture, and significant spaces of political deliberation and agonistic struggle." "When public spaces are successful, they will increase opportunities to participate in communal activity. As these experiences are repeated, public spaces become vessels to carry positive communal meanings" (Carr et al, 1993). Therefore, "within the urban canon, to assert that only a weak link might exist between public space and civic culture or democratic politics, is a lot less acceptable" (Amin, 2008).

This "strangulation" of the public facet of enviable indigenous city life engenders withdrawal, individualism, non-communal dwelling pattern, nucleated lifestyle and a new social value-system. Unfortunately too, there is no replacement of these lost spaces with the acclaimed "modern" community infrastructure equivalents. The general trend of this development in the name of modernisation is disturbing. According to Abdulkarim (2004), "most Nigerian cities show inadequate consideration or even total neglect for landscape and open space development in the preparation of land use plan."

Despite this description of the state of public open spaces in Nigerian cities, there are few exceptions. In particular, indigenous public open spaces that still exist in urban context in few Nigerian cities, especially in the Yoruba land, are preservations of their archetypes. Among these few cities is Ilawe-Ekiti. The city has organised public open spaces of indigenous value-systems that should be studied towards enhancing their sustainable maintenance. The aim of this study therefore is to determine the significance of these public open spaces towards formulation of sustainability framework.

ILAWE-EKITI: AN OVERVIEW

Ilawe-Ekiti is a Yoruba town in Ekiti State, Nigeria, whose geographic coordinates are 7° 35' 60 N and 5° 5' 60 E. The town existed before colonial influences in Nigeria, but was not

© 2012, 2013 *Journal of Biourbanism*

much favoured by colonial developmental forces. This may be responsible in part for the survival of the indigenous public open space systems of the town, which have been swept away in majority of Yoruba urban centres by the so-called modernised style of urbanism. Ilawe-Ekiti is one of the fastest growing residential neighbourhoods and has the largest population in the Ekiti South-West Local Government. It is the seat of the local government secretariat and a low-density neighbourhood of low income earners. The majority of the families in the town depends on farming while a few others are employed in civil service. The town has many educational institutions and moderate literacy status. Its morphology is much similar to a typical Yoruba urban centre with the King's palace and market being central and surrounded by residential quarters administered by lower traditional chiefs. The communal lifestyle typical of Yoruba towns is prevalent in the town. Consequently, the majority of the residential quarters are provided with organised public open spaces for communal gathering and cultural functions. The spaces are representative of the indigenous chieftaincy value-systems of the town which make them suitable for the study. This has sustained the indigenous public open space system of the town as major infrastructures which are not common in Yoruba towns of the present modernism.

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out through historical investigation, field survey and physical observation of the six organised public open spaces in the town. It evaluated and described the physical structure, accessibility, patronage, ownership, uses, management, and maintenance of the spaces. The spaces are Eku Oja Aaye Cultural Centre in Aaye, Imodagbo Cultural Centre in Okepa, Orosun Adin Recreation Centre in Adin, Idi-Ogun Yaya Recreation Centre, Imo Erebe Recreation Centre in Oke Emo, Idi Agba Recreation Centre in Okebedo.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Eku Oja Aaye Cultural Centre, Aaye Quarter

Description and Significance

Eku Oja Aaye is located along Iloro Sreet, Aaye Quarter of the town. It is known to be the origin of the quarter and it is surrounded with clusters of dwellings. The total gross floor area was formerly about 800 m^2 and presently about 1500 m^2 after its reconstruction, as Aaye Community Hall. The Centre is associated with some notable shrines. These include Omoweere, which is believed to be the god of children that is responsible for giving children to the infertile and Esi, which is worshiped for longevity of life.

Other features of Eku Oja Aaye Cultural Centre are: Ori Awo, a raised earth above the ground; Igi Odan, a big tropical rainforest tree, which is forbidden for children to climb; Eye Aaye, a pillar, on which Olojaaye, Elemikan and Elejofi chieftaincy titles are installed; a pavilion, constructed with sandcrete blocks, plastered and covered with corrugated roofing sheets.

© 2012, 2013 *Journal of Biourbanism*

Uses and Management
The significance of Eku Oja Aaye Cultural Centre transcends the Aaye Quarter of Ilawe-Ekiti. Olofin festival is a notable festival for the town and takes place at the centre. The priests of Olofin, Alaworo, on the way to Olofin Forest for rituals usually entertain audiences with dancing at the centre during the yearly Olofin Festival. In addition, political rallies, statutory registration of voters, population census and community meetings usually are held at the centre.

Eku Ooja Aaye is sponsored as a community self-help scheme. Members of the community contribute to finance the development of the space, while the Egbe Eyeweere (age group) are appointed to maintain the cleanness of the space excluding the Ori Awo as a taboo. While the space can harbour intruders, who are security threats to the community, the taboo limits the overall cleanness of the place. The open nature and occasional use of the space also presents maintenance challenges to the community.

Imodagbo Cultural Centre, Okepa

Description and Significance
This is an organised open space with tiered row of seats for about 160 people with approximately 1100 m^2 space on rock under a big rainforest tree (Plate 1). The spot of Imodagbo Cultural Centre is claimed to be the origin of *Okepa* Community of Ilawe-Ekiti. The notable features in the centre include *Obanifon* House also called Esi Omo which is a shed where Chief *Ejigbo*, the priest carries out rituals to the god (*Obanifon)* believed to be the representative of Olofin god. Esi Omo is a strategic point at the centre where barren women worships to appeal for children and healing of the sick. Oju Ogun and Itawa are other shrines at the centre for the worship of god of iron and praise respectively.

Uses and Management
Imodagbo Cultural Centre serves the purpose of maintaining societal norms in the town, so that stealing and other social vices are confessed there to avoid negative repercussions. Also, Ilawe Festival, termed *Olofin*, normally starts in the morning at this centre and ends there at night every July or August of the year. Installation and coronation of important chiefs are held at the centre. These include *Odofin, Onipa, Elejofi, Saruku, Elegiri, Oisa, Ekuara* and *Ajero*. The centre serves recreational purposes for playing Ayo and Draft Games.
The centre is managed by Okepa community members through donations from members. Through these donations the centre has been renovated three times in 1980, 1993 and 1994. Despite the importance of the centre, it harbours nocturnal activities, lacks adequate materials for recreational activities and is often dirty because of its occasional use and therefore not attractive.

Orosun Adin Recreation Centre, Adin Quarters

Description and Significance
According to legend, Orosun Adin Recreation Centre (Plate 2) has existed for over 300 years. Consequently the centre was used to name the quarter. The centre was constructed as tiered rows of concrete seats on a hilly natural stone in 1965. The centre is landscaped with trees and enriched with natural stones and it has no artificial roof covering.

© 2012, 2013 *Journal of Biourbanism*

Uses and Management
The centre serves as meeting point for the whole *Adin* Community for relaxation by old people throughout the periods of the day, especially in the evenings. Young people are disallowed from using the centre in the morning and during working hours. To further enhance the usefulness of the centre, a market stall was built there by Ekiti South West Local Government in 2006. In contrast to other centres discoursed earlier, Orosun Adin Recreation Centre is occasionally used for non-indigenous religious activities in addition to rituals. It is also used for chieftaincy coronation programmes, festivals, community discussions, national population census, and immunisation of children. It is a community self-help project and the presence of the market stall enhances cleanliness of the centre by the market women. On the negative aspect, the centre has been a place of constant conflict, gossiping, quarrelling and other social vices.

Idi-Ogun Yaya Recreation Centre, Okebedo Quarters

Description and Significance
Idi-Ogun Yaya Recreation Centre (Plate 3) was founded on a rock outcrop as a pavilion that is presently covered with corrugated zinc roofing sheets. Though the age of the centre could not be ascertained, it was however confirmed that the centre is as old as Okebedo Quarters.

Uses and Management
The centre is mainly used for relaxation in the evenings by members of the community after returning from work. Funding for maintenance of the centre is usually carried out by members of the community. Its present status has high aesthetic value.

Imo Erebe Recreation Centre, Oke Emo

Description and Significance
Imo Erebe Recreation Centre, Oke Emo is known as the origin of Ilawe-Ekiti town according to legend. It was founded by Chief Elero, who migrated from Ile-Ife. Imo Erebe represents the ruling compound in the entire town. Therefore, the paramount ruler, the King of Ilawe-Ekiti is usually installed at the centre, including chieftaincy titles as Elemo, Ausi, and Elero. It is a community centre consisting of series of tiered seats made of concrete and covers a space of about 1200 m^2. Recently, new facilities including Events Hall, restaurant, bar and lock-up shop are being constructed at the centre.

Uses and Management
Imo Erebe Recreation Centre is used for playing activities during leisure times by community members. It also serves as a meeting point for the entire community for corporate prayers, national registration of voters, the king's coronation, and immunisation of children. Draft and ayo olopon are the games, usually available free of charge, and offered as recreational activities at the centre. There is no provision of maintenance staff for the centre. This hinders good management of the centre in addition to the low finance enjoyed by the centre from contributions by community members.

© 2012, 2013 *Journal of Biourbanism*

Idi Agba Recreation Centre, Okebedo

Description and Significance
Idi Agba Recreation Centre, Okebedo (Plate 4) has existed for over 300 years according to legend. It covers a relatively small area of about 42 m2. It is historically associated with the origin of the community and used for the annual sacrifices and traditional festival called *Oro Kereje*. The centre has series of stepped concrete seats with a big rainforest tree at its centre which provides shade.

Uses and Management
In view of the core location of the centre in the town, it is commonly used by the old people who inhabit the community houses and prefer to stay outdoors at the centre to overcome the loneliness of their indoor apartments. Therefore, the centre has been a place for reflection, jokes, discussions, debates and observations in addition to relaxation, refreshing, restoration and fellowship. In fact, it was described as great outdoor living room and as an open house. Young people are disallowed from using the centre during normal working hours to discourage laziness. Female members of the community are also disallowed from using the centre as a traditional practice.

RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

The study revealed that the indigenous public open spaces in towns and cities can still be retained in modern context. This has been demonstrated in Ilawe-Ekiti, the study area. They are embodiments of traditional value-systems that enhance communal living in the age of individualism and "civilisation". They are symbols of healthy communal living standards and sustain the indigenous value-systems of communities and human settlements. The study reaffirmed the semiotic resemblance between the culture of a people and their built environment (Adedeji and Amole, 2010).

The sustenance of the studied public open spaces over decades through community self-help endowment funds and the preservation of the community's indigenous value-systems through the upholding of taboos, as control mechanisms, indicate a high level of effectiveness of traditional administrative mechanisms. The study therefore suggests that value-systems can be influenced by space-systems and public open space patterns in particular to dictate the tune of citizens' participation in communal activities. Though these all-important part of well-envisioned urban settlement, patterns have been eroded in most modern cities. In the towns and cities, where they are still maintained, especially in Yoruba land of South Western Nigeria, they should be financed by the government and non-governmental agencies towards their rehabilitation, restoration and conservation. This will enhance the preparation of robust maintenance schedules that will lead to more vibrant and viable use of the open spaces.

These recommendations become necessary in view of the significance of the public open spaces for human physical, psychological and spiritual well-being and the structural framework of a city. They are infrastructures whose significance cannot be negotiated in the pursue of healthy urban centres.

© 2012, 2013 *Journal of Biourbanism*



Figure 1. Showing *Imodagbo* Cultural Centre, *Okepa*, Ilawe-Ekiti, Nigeria. Source: Authors' fieldwork, 2011.



Figure 2. Showing *Orosun Adin* Recreation Centre, *Adin* Quarters, Ilawe-Ekiti, Nigeria. Source: Authors' fieldwork, 2011.

© 2012, 2013 *Journal of Biourbanism*



Figure 3. Showing *Idi-Ogun Yaya* Recreation Centre, *Okebode* Quarters Ilawe-Ekiti, Nigeria
Source: Authors' fieldwork, 2011.



Figure 4. Showing *Idi Agba* Recreation Centre, *Okebode* Ilawe-Ekiti, Nigeria.
Source: Authors' fieldwork, 2011.

© 2012, 2013 *Journal of Biourbanism*

REFERENCES

Abdulkarim, M. (2004) Contemporary Issues in Urban Landscape Design, *Journal of Nigerian Institute of Architects*, 4(1):12-16.

Adedeji, J.A. and Amole, S.A. (2010). Book Review: House Form and Culture Amos Rapoport 1969. House Form and Culture (Foundations of Cultural Geography Series) Englewood Cliffs, N.J. :Prentice Hall, 150pp. ISBN: 978-0133956733 In: *Space and Culture-The International Journal of Social Spaces*, United Kingdom. Available at http://www.spaceandculture.org/2010/07/15/book-review-house-form-and-culture/.

Amin, A. (2008) Collective Culture and Urban Public Space. *City,* 12(1):5-24.

Carr, S., Francis, M., Rivlin, L., Stone, A. (1993) Public Space. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fadamiro, J. A. and Adedeji, J. A. (2012) Cultural Morphology of Cityscapes: A Semiotic Analysis of Osogbo, Nigeria. Covali, A. (ed.), Germany: Lambert Academic Publishers.

Giseke, U. (2005) New Town Sceneries – Potential Rooms for an Urban Culture, The Difference, In: Garden And Scenery, 0/2005, 27-28.

Low, S. (2000) On the Plaza, The Politics of Public Space and Culture, University of Texas Press, Austin.

Lynch, K (1990), Wasting Away, San Francisco: Sierra Club Lynch, K. (1960) The Image of the City. Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press.

Okolo, N. and Okolie, A.O.(2009) Revitalizing Urban Public Spaces in Nigeria through Vegetative Enclaves. *Journal of Environmental Management and Safety*, 1(1):124-130.

© 2012, 2013 *Journal of Biourbanism*