The City as Public Space:
Abuja - the Capital City of Nigeria

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Abstract

This article explores the social construction of public space in the Central Area of Abuja, Nigeria's capital city. Using qualitative data collected from a survey of public spaces in the Capital City, the paper argues that the grand philosophy of 'City As Public Space' which permeated the master planning of the city and which itself was distilled from the nationalistic and egalitarian aspirations that conceived the new capital, have not been effected in its implementation. The paper posits that the cumulative effect of government effort to establish its presence in the Capital City ahead of the initial occupancy date resulted in the sidelining of public space development in the city centre particularly. The paper then concludes that this situation is detrimental to the proper functioning of the capital as the nation's 'public space', basing its argument on the premise that public space is the arena for social intercourse in any society, more so in the culturally rich and ethnically diverse one like Nigeria's.

Introduction

Urban design is primarily concerned with the physical and socio-cultural quality of the public realm, with a built environment that fulfils society's aspirations and represents its values (Worpole 1992; TheUrbanTaskForce 1999). To achieve this object urban design aspires towards "making better places for people than would otherwise be produced" (Carmona, Heath et al. 2003, p3). In its earlier stage of development urban design concentrated more on the visual qualities and aesthetic experience of urban spaces (Cullen 1971; Unwin 1971; Sitte 1979) rather than on the cultural, social, economic, political and spatial factors and processes (Lynch 1960; Alexander 1965; Whyte 1980; Jacobs 2000).

Contemporary urban design has synthesised these earlier traditions asserting the essence of place not only in terms of its spatial qualities but the diversity and activity it gives to life. Carmona et al discuss in some detail seven frameworks identifiable in this latest thinking (Carmona, Heath et al. 2003, pp9-12).

Within these traditions there have also been different critiques of the urban environment tacitly accepting that urban design involves a plethora of players and interests. There are critiques directed at the actors (Lang 1994; Bentley 1999; Llewelyn 2000), others at the product (Loukaitou-Sideris and Banerjee 1998), some others at the processes (Jacobs and Appleyard 1987) and yet others at the regulations (Rouse 1998).

The discourse about urban design and the public realm is located within a wider discourse about the 'City'. The literature on the nature and quality of the 'City' is vast. Essentially there are different approaches to imagining the city. These portrayals usually emphasise particular dimensions of the urban experience, basically: social, economic, environmental or political. Each offers some insight, although because of the wide spectrum, many of these approaches fail to connect in some respects. However there is in general a consensus that the 'City' ought to be understood in its "multiplicity of relational nets which weave across city space [sic] the connectivity of these relations and their variable interconnectivity" (Healey 2002, p1778). In her discussion of this, Healey posits that such a multiple imaging of the city has the potential to create and sustain the city as a "shared collective resource which is richer and more inclusive" (Healey 2002, p1778) in all respects, especially in the contemporary fragmented urban experience. She breaks down the basic categories and dimensions of the urban experience – i.e. economic, environmental, political and social – into seven finer points, namely:

1. As physical artefact

2. As cultural milieux

3. As every day life

4. As cultural identity

5. As collection of economic assets

6. As systems of interconnected parts

7. As symbol, an iconic identifier used to present to outsider and citizen

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Within this context of multiple meanings and continuous flow of recomposition, this paper looks at public space development in Abuja's city centre. The paper argues that the development of the Central Area and indeed the entire Capital City should be seen in the light of the social construction of space and conceived as a continuous two-way process in which the people, government and professionals create and modify public space within the city while at the same time are themselves influenced by the public spaces in various ways.

The context of this discourse is a qualitative survey of public spaces in the Capital City, carried out in August 2002. The survey was part of a wider research of public spaces in three case study towns in Nigeria. The methods used in the investigation were observation, interviews and documentary analysis.

The Conception of Abuja as Public Space

Abuja is the Capital City of Nigeria. It came into being on 4th February 1976 by federal government decree (see among others FCDA 1979; Barbour, Oguntoyinbo et al. 1982; Umeh 1993). Before then, and for about sixty years, Lagos had served as Capital City (see among others Aderibigbe 1975; Akinsemoyin and Vaughan-Richards 1977; Folami 1982; Adefuge, Osuntokun et al. 1986). At the expiration of its Master Plan period (1980-2000), which coincided with the beginning of the new millennium perceived as quintessentially urban, the Capital City is gradually catching on to its role as the nation's hub. It is becoming more and more familiar with its function as the modern administrative city of national and continental significance it was envisaged to be.

Abuja's paramount role however is to serve as "a symbol of Nigeria's aspiration for unity and greatness"(FGN 1975; AFRICA 1983). This idea of the City as:

- Seat of Government
- A place of and a symbol of unity
- A melting pot of Nigeria's diverse cultures, and a magnet of diverse peoples and nations
- A place of physical beauty and an exemplary physical environment

pervaded, not only the choice of but also the design and planning of the Capital City.

No doubt the problems experienced in Lagos, the former capital, contributed to the shaping and sharpening of this aspiration (McNulty and Adalemo 1988; Peil 1991). The need for such a capital city cannot be divorced from the history of Nigeria as a vast conglomeration of diverse nationalities, brought together to form a British colony at the dawn of the 20th century. In the nearly 100 years that Nigeria has been a political entity, she has had both centripetal and centrifugal forces tugging at her continued existence as one nation. The need for restructuring has been a recurring issue, but so also has the call for unity amidst her rich diversity (Achebe 1983; Isichei 1983; Beckett and Young 1997). Indeed she has weathered a bloody civil war 'to keep Nigeria one'[1].

Relocation of the Capital City

Figuratively, Lagos and Abuja are umbilically linked. The latter borne out of the former; the relocation to the present capital resultant from the role and character of the erstwhile capital. There had been informal but recurring consideration of the suitability of Lagos as Federal Capital[2] long before General Murtala Mohammed's government set up a seven-man panel to advise it on the contentious issue. Often referred to as the Aguda Panel[3], its terms of reference were in summary to examine the dual role of Lagos and advise government on the desirability or otherwise of retaining those roles (FGN 1975; FCDA 1979). The Panel after extensive investigation found Lagos unsuitable to continue to serve as Federal Capital and having been mandated to recommend alternative locations in the event, scored about thirty potential towns and locations on thirteen criteria and finally selected Abuja, a completely virgin site (FGN 1975; FCDA 1979; Umeh 1993; Olomola in Kalgo and Ayileka 2001). Several reasons informed the Panel's choice of Abuja including its ethnic neutrality and central location in the heartland of Nigeria, potentially accessible (physically and socially) to all parts of the country. The federal government accepted the Panel's recommendation affirming that "a centrally located Federal Capital in a spacious area with easy access to all parts of the Federation would be an asset to the nation and would help in generating a new sense of national unity" (as quoted severally in FCDA 1979, p27; AFRICA 1983).

This sense of or aspiration for unity was so important that the Aguda Panel noted in its report thus:

It is needless for us to state the obvious – that we are just in the process of building a nation of the many 'nations' which occupy the geographic area known as Nigeria. It is our belief that one way of forging the idea of unity of this nation is by building a capital city which will belong to every Nigerian, **where every Nigerian will rest assured that he has opportunity to live in parity with every other Nigerian, and where no Nigerian will be regarded either in law or on the facts as a 'native foreigner'.** (FGN 1975; AFRICA 1983, p67) (emphasis added)

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[1] This is the Nigeria-Biafra War fought from June 1967 to January 1970.

[2] In 1967 when 12 states were created out of the previous 4 regions, Lagos was made the capital of one of the states in addition to being national capital.

[3] The Aguda Panel was comprised of Justice Akinola Aguda (chairman), Dr Tai Solarin, Col. Monsignor Pedro Martins, Alhaji Musa Isma, Chief Owen Fiebai, Dr Ajato Gondonu and Prof O. Ogan.
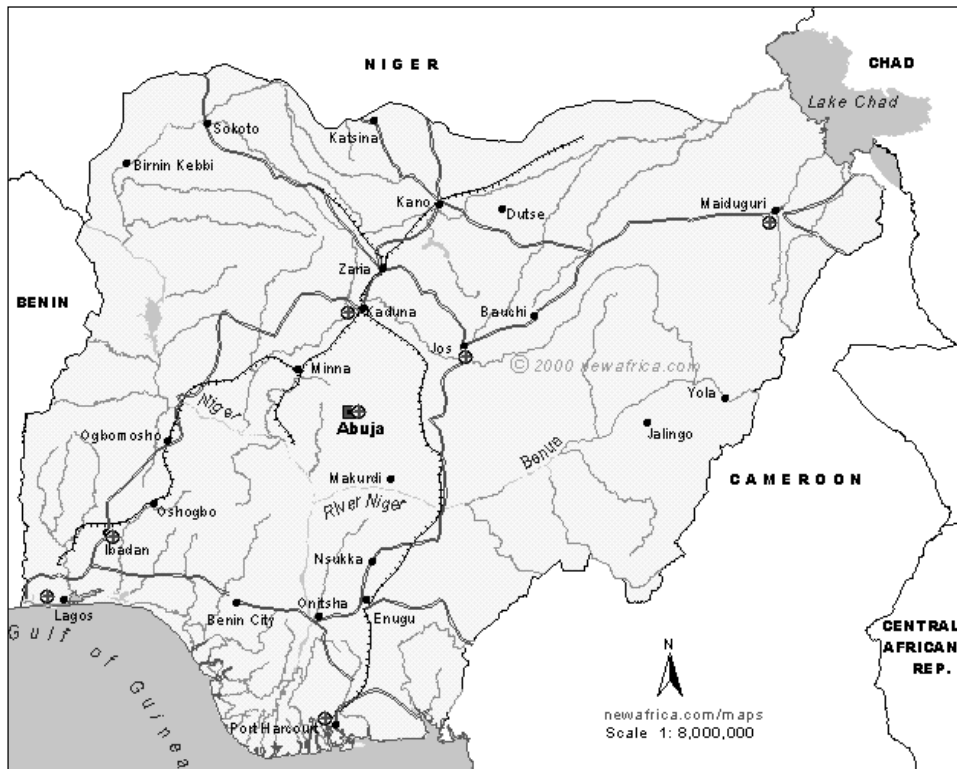
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Figure 1. Major cities including the new and old Capital Cities -
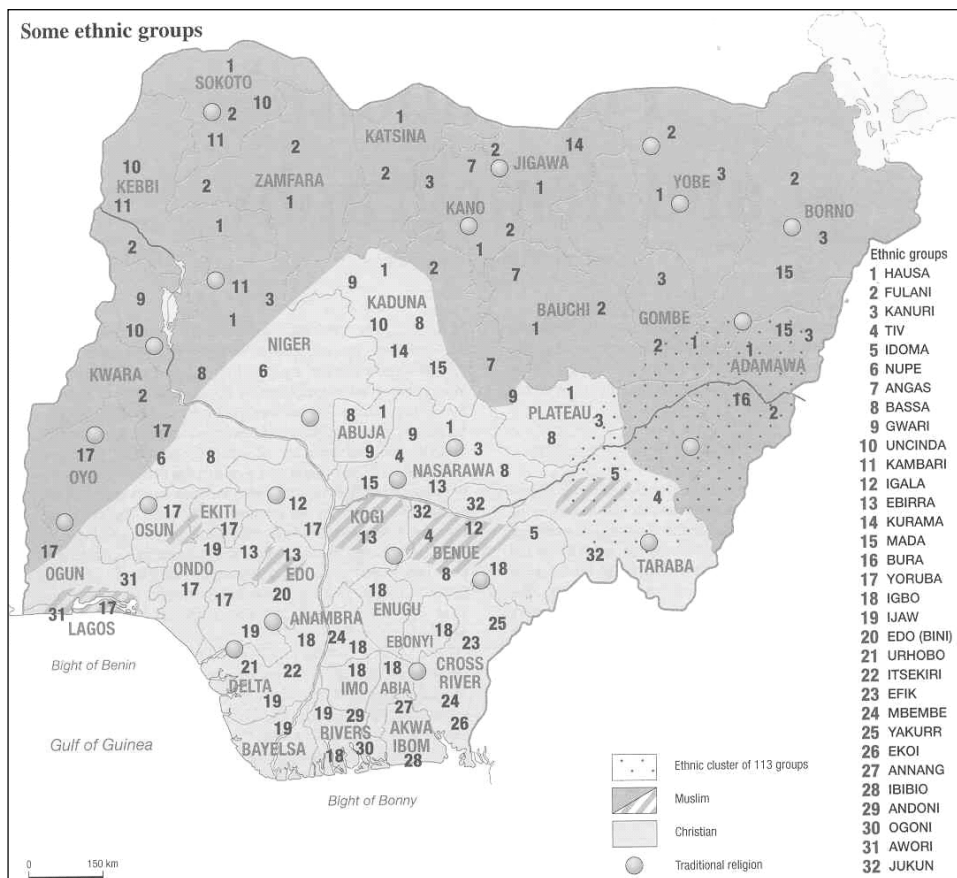Lagos & Abuja
(Source: NewAfrica.com)

Figure 2. Ethnic and Religious Diversity
(Source: Atlas of Nigeria)

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Similar nationalistic sentiments are frequently expressed in everyday life and at many fora by individuals, groups and the government. Achebe, internationally renowned for his insightful fiction which includes a series of novels on the problems of contemporary Nigeria[1], speaks in his non-fictional critique "The Trouble With Nigeria" of a dream-Nigeria. Though it is arguable whether this dream-Nigeria existed or can still be attained, it is undeniable that as he observed "…it never fully faded from our consciousness…" (Achebe 1983, p6).

The setting up of the new Capital was seen as a medium to meet some of the ideals for national unity and Abuja is still being expected to attain that goal of ethnic neutrality in reality. It may be useful to mention here that in the course of Nigeria's history various governments have set up specific programmes and policies to achieve this same aim, especially in the period just after the civil war. Examples of such unification programmes have been the Federal Government Colleges[2] and the National Youth Service Corps[3].

The Master Planning Of the Capital City

The Federal Government Decree No 6 which established the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), also provided for the constitution of the Federal Capital Development Authority (FCDA), and charged the agency with the responsibility of planning, designing and developing the FCT.

The FCDA first initiated a number of research/technical studies and planning exercises aimed at providing the requisite information for creating the Master Plan for Abuja. Then in June 1977, following an international competition, it commissioned Messrs International Planning Associates (IPA) - a consortium of architects, city planners and engineers based in the United States - to prepare the Master Plan for the development of the Capital City and its region. According to the terms of reference, the master planning process was to include a review and analysis of all available and relevant data. It was also to tackle:

- The selection of a suitable Capital City site from out of the extensive land area of the FCT (8,000 square kilometres[4])
- The preparation of general outline plans (i.e. Regional and City Plans) with accompanying design and development standards manual
- The development of guidelines for subsequent studies and more detailed development plans.

(FCDA 1979)

The Master Plan was ready in February 1979. Subsequently, a Central Area Urban Design Team was appointed to articulate the elements of the Central Area Plan further. The Team was made up of three Nigerian firms (namely: Benna Associates, Olumuyiwa Associates and Nsiegbe Associates) and one international firm (Kenzo Tange & Urtec of Japan). They submitted their Final Report in 1981. A third plan was later carried out by Doxiades Associates (Nig.) Ltd., the Nigerian subsidiary of Doxiades Associates International, based in Athens, Greece. The final report of this study was submitted in January 1983. These different studies together constitute the Abuja Master Plan (Kalgo and Ayileka 2001).

The Master Plan took the declared nationalistic aspirations of the decree and expounded on them. Consequently some seven principles, explicit and implicit, can be identified in the philosophy that underpinned the planning of the new Capital City. These are:

1. The principle of 'equal access'
2. The principle of 'equal citizenship'
3. The principle of environmental conservation
4. The principle of 'city beautiful'
5. The principle of 'functional city'
6. The principle of effective regional development
7. The principle of rapid national economic growth

Mabogunje has classified these seven principles into three broad categories which I have termed thus: first - national inclusion and egalitarianism, second - exemplary physical environment and third - economic development (Mabogunje in Kalgo and Ayileka 2001). It can be argued that the second and the third categories are implicit in any planning exercise, be it of a new town, city, capital or sections thereof, as well as the regeneration of existing ones. This thus leaves the first category (i.e. national inclusion and egalitarianism) standing out as a unique ideal, clearly differentiated from the other two and specific to an end. It particularly emphasises the 'City as Public Space'.

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[1] No Longer at Ease, A Man of the People and Anthills in the Savannah

[2] The Federal Government Colleges (also called Unity Schools), were established by the Gowon government in the early 1970s. There are two of these colleges in every state. Their acceptance and success is attested to by the establishment of new ones in the states subsequently created after the initial batch of colleges. Admission is on state basis to ensure nation-wide representation. At inception the schools were exclusively boarding even for those students who lived within commuting distance. This policy was to foster maximum interaction between the students.

[3] The National Youth Service Corps, also of Gowon's administration, is a programme where every graduate serves the nation in a state other than that of their origin or residence or education. Initially it took on graduates from every tertiary institution. But from the mid-1980s because of dwindling resources the intake has been systematically curtailed.

[4] For size comparison the FCT is larger than some countries and would fit in between Singapore (6,927 sq m) and Cyprus (9,250 sq m) on the world table of country sizes by land area.

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In 1999 (twenty years after the making of the Master Plan and at the expiration of its lifespan), a workshop1 was held in preparation towards its review. After examining all aspects of the philosophy, objectives and implementation of the Master Plan so far, the over-500 workshop participants, made up of various stakeholders (government, professionals, private sector and the general public) concluded in their final communiqué that "the philosophy and objective for the creation of Abuja remained valid" (Kalgo and Ayileka 2001, pix).

Urban Design of the Central Area

Though expressed in very broad terms the vital role of urban design is to "establish long-term spatial or physical 'vision' for localities, by means of a master plan or urban design framework" (Carmona, Heath et al. 2003, pp16-17). The Master Plan of Abuja recognized the importance of the Central Area (i.e. the city centre) in the design concept defining it as:

The hub of both the city as well as the nation itself. This is true not only in a symbolic sense but in physical actuality as well. All affairs in the city and the nation will focus on it. It will also be the centre to which representatives of other nations will come. Therefore, it will symbolize Nigeria to the world, thus reaching beyond national concerns alone.
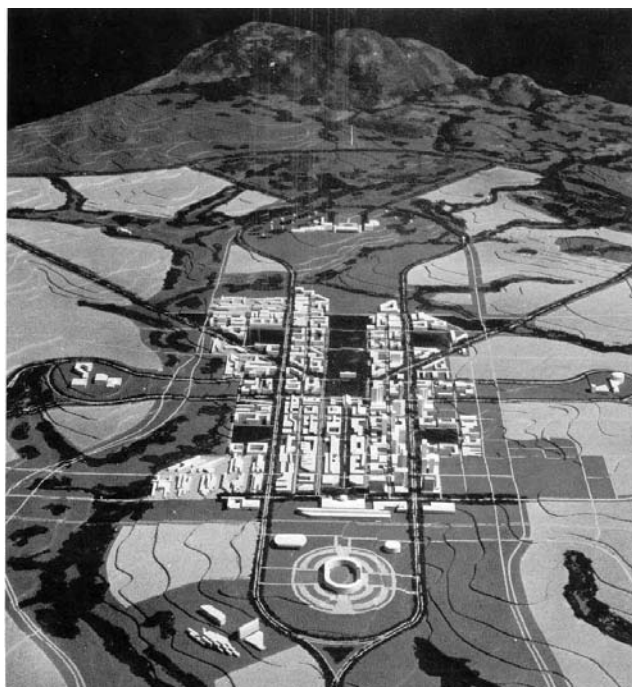
(FCDA 1979, p79)

Figure 3. Model of the Central Area showing the use of its landform and axiality in composition
(Source: Master Plan of Abuja)

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[1] This international workshop organized by the Federal Ministry of the Capital Territory and Federal Capital Development Authority was held at Ladi Kwali Centre, Sheraton Hotel in Abuja from 29th November to 2nd December 1999.

To further this symbolism of the Central Area of the Capital City as the hub of the nation, the Master Plan set forth certain guiding objectives towards its design organization, inter alia:

- To define the Central Area as a unique and special place so that it may be the symbolic and actual Seat of Government of Nigeria
- To organize the principal elements of both its natural and built environments to emphasize the symbolic aspects
- To take advantage of the special views, vistas and axes inherent in the selected site of the Central Area

(FCDA 1979)

These design objectives encapsulate aspects of the seven guiding principles, which underpin the grand philosophy of the Master Plan.

The public spaces proposed within the Central Area were sequentially arranged to create an areal axis thus:

1. National Arboretum and National Monument at the Aso Hill end of the axis

2. Central Park in between the National Assembly Complex and the Mall

3. Mall flanked by ministerial buildings on its two longer sides

4. Presidential Gardens next to the Mall with the Presidential Residence in its midst

5. Central Square or National Square at the opposite end of the axis, terminating the series of open spaces and the two diagonal parkways

Dispersed within the Central Area were four adjacent minor squares to serve as nucleus for future public buildings. The several block-long Mall visually connected the Legislature (i.e. National Assembly Complex) and the Executive function (i.e. Presidential Palace and Municipal Administration Centre). The Judiciary (i.e. Supreme Court) was located further along the axis, beside the Central Square. This grouping of buildings was so arranged to emphasise the Seat of Government.

The Deviations from the Central Area Plan

As built, the National Assembly Complex is situated in its proposed location on a knoll overlooking the rest of the Central Area. It is the terminus of the axis centring on Aso Hill, symbolising the Legislature as the place where the nation's laws are made, by focusing all other functions in the Central Area, and implicitly the nation, on it.

The rest of the composition of the Central Area has changed considerably. The Executive (Presidential Villa Complex) and the Judiciary (Supreme Court Complex) have been relocated to two knolls next to the Legislature

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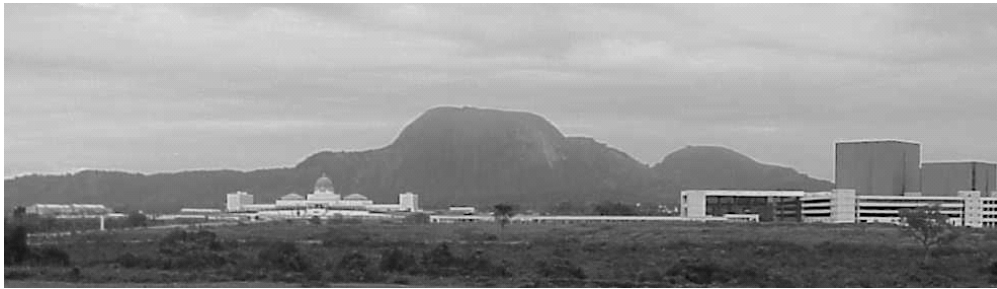(National Assembly Complex). The road network has

Figure 5. The Presidential Villa Complex, National Assembly Complex and Supreme Court within the Three Arms Zone with Aso Hill in the background, August 2001 (Source: author)

Figure 4. The Central Area Plan (Source: Master Plan of Abuja)

been altered encircling all three arms of government in one location, hence the name The Three Arms Zone. This arrangement is propitious in that it consolidates the Aso Hill terminus of the axis and amplifies the symbolism of The Three Arms Zone as the focus and centre of the nation.

The other changes however are not as auspicious. The Mall and the four minor squares are no more. The site of the Central Square remains, though it is yet to be built. However another national square, variously called Eagle Square or Festival Ground, has been built. It is located where the Central Park was proposed and has an adjoining Memorial Arcade jutting into The Three Arms Zone.

The Politics of Building the Capital City

Having set in motion the relocation of the Federal Capital and all the necessary action towards its design, planning and implementation, General Murtala Mohammed was assassinated in a bloody coup in February 1976. The mantle of Head of State fell on General Olusegun Obasanjo, the erstwhile second-in-command. He basically followed up on the programmes of his predecessor; the master planning of the Capital City continued. During his tenure the underbelly agitations for a return to civil rule gained momentum and he was prevailed upon to institute a political transition programme, which produced Alhaji Shehu Shagari as the new civilian president, after 13 years of military rule. Abuja's Master Plan was ready in February 1979 just before the transition. In his electioneering campaigns Alhaji Shagari had promised to accelerate the movement of the capital from Lagos to Abuja. On assumption of office, he proceeded to make good his promise. And so began what many commentators have called "the mad rush to Abuja".

The Capital City was still under construction, and in fact had been dubbed "the largest construction site on earth" (AFRICA 1983) when an elaborate 22nd Independence celebration was held there on October 1, 1982. It was the first time it would take place outside Lagos. This marked a symbolic rather than actual movement to the new Capital City. Barely a year later, Alhaji Shehu Shagari's government was overthrown in a coup led by General Muhammadu Buhari and his dynamic second-in-command, General Tunde Idiagbon. They did not pursue many of the programmes of the former civilian administration, which they portrayed as being extravagant and wasteful. So the construction of the Capital City came to a virtual standstill. Five years later, in 1988, General Ibrahim Babangida, who was very visible in the Buhari-Idiagbon government, ousted them in a palace coup. He re-invigorated the construction of the Capital City and by December 12 1991 formally transferred the seat of government from Lagos to Abuja, effectively establishing government presence there. A very brief civilian interlude followed when General Babangida instituted an interim civilian government and 'stepped aside'. Shonekan's government lasted only a few weeks before the military re-

intervened. The succeeding regime of General Sani Abacha continued vigorously the building of the capital and in 1995 gave directive that all remaining ministries and also foreign missions should move to Abuja by the end of 1996 (TSM 1995). General Abacha died in office on June 8 1998. He was replaced by General Abdulsalam Abubakar whom the international community prevailed upon to bring to a positive conclusion the political transition programme Generals Babangida and Abacha had aborted. On May 29, 1999, his regime ushered in the third civilian administration since Independence. Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, retired army General and former Head of State who had facilitated the construction of Abuja, emerged as civilian president. He is currently serving another four-year term as president having been re-elected in the April 2003 elections.

Modified Schedule of Construction and Accelerated Development

Because of the magnitude of development involved in the construction of the Capital City, the Master Plan had adopted a phased development programme to formally accommodate and provide for orderly urban growth from 1980-2000. But with every new government came a change in attitude to the relocation of the Federal Capital which translated to either a slowing down or acceleration of the construction schedule. The change could also be perceived in the different focus and priority in development. And so within the twenty-year period proposed the schedule had been altered drastically.

The accelerated growth of the city in the 1980s has been attributed to concerted effort by various government administrations to establish full presence there ahead of the 1986 initial occupancy date. The 1990s witnessed a steadily increasing tempo of physical development by private individuals and corporate bodies.

The Central Area has been rapidly developing. It accommodates the major government, institutional and commercial buildings as well as public and open spaces. The residential districts and the major roadways beyond the city centre are in place. In summary, the city infrastructure has been laid out and land use patterns established. As at now, Phase 1 comprising the Central Area (essentially the Seat of Government and Commercial Core) and some residential districts (Garki, Wuse, Asokoro and Maitama) is nearing completion, though 17 years behind schedule. The other phases are yet to commence and so the influx is crammed into this portion of the Capital City, which has already exceeded the population target (FCDA 1979; NPC 1992; LesEditionsJ.A. 2002).

Access to Public Space in the Central Area

Most definitions of public space emphasize the necessity of access which can include access to the place as well as to the activity within it (Carr, Francis et al. 1992; Madanipour 1999; Moughtin 1999; Carmona, Heath et al.

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2003). Madanipour further draws out the different levels of access. At one level what characterises public space he says is that "anyone is entitled to be physically present in them" and at another it is "where strangers and citizens alike can enter with fewer restrictions" (Madanipour 1999, p881). Three forms of access, namely: visual, symbolic and physical can also be identified (Carr, Francis et al. 1992).

The Three Arms Zone is the principal node in the urban fabric of the Capital City. Its aesthetic as well as symbolic meaning as Seat of Government had been thoughtfully designed. This node lies within the Central Area which is the hub of the nation, the centre of a gigantic, multi-cultural community.

It soon becomes apparent to a visitor[1] or even a newly arrived citizen in Abuja that the Seat of Government, though impressively located and inviting exploration, is inaccessible. In capital cities the world over, some portion of the Seat of Government is always open to the general public, tourists especially.[2] When the Seat of Government was in Lagos, the State House and its vicinity (Tafewa Balewa Square, the Supreme Court etc) were reasonably accessible. Not so in Abuja; no part of the Three Arms Zone is accessible to the public. Undoubtedly capital cities are always subject to security concerns, more so since the September 11 attack on the Pentagon in the United States of America. In its aftermath most governments have tightened security in sections of their capital cities. The situation in Abuja however is not in response to the global implications of the American catastrophe. The Three Arms Zone has always had this defensive ambience.

Of the numerous public spaces proposed for the Central Area, which would have given a sense of belonging to the citizenry, only one has been built while several have been eliminated. As Mabogunje points out regarding the elimination of the Mall: "The idea behind the Mall, of course, was to make the City a lot more pedestrian-friendly such that people can move around and enjoy their Capital City between discharging their business with various government ministries." (Kalgo and Ayileka 2001, p6).

Eagle Square, the only public space which exists, and the most important national public space, is adversely limited in its role and function. It is a 5,300-seat capacity arena, built to provide a befitting outdoor venue in Abuja for the hosting of state functions. It was designed and constructed in a few months by a company better known for road works. Since then the ceremonial parades on Independence Day (October 1), Worker's Day (May 1) and Armed Forces Remembrance Day (January 15) now take place there. Political rallies are frequently held there, including

the very obnoxious ones by ABN[3] during the regime of General Sani Abacha. Those ABN rallies gave the Eagle Square a negative image it has not yet shaken off, just as Tiananmen Square in Beijing carries the stigma of the student massacre (Hershkovitz 1993). The swearing-in of former General Obasanjo as civilian president on May 1999 was held there. On some rare occasions Eagle Square has been used for national prayers.

The square is enclosed with barbed wire fencing, so no one can enter except during those state functions mentioned above. At the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, in the adjoining Memorial Arcade, "a sentry guard from the Brigade of Guards keeps watch 24 hours with a ceremonial change of guards" (newafrica 2002). Partly because of this and the surrounding military developments, The Three Arms Zone and its periphery are a high security area and access here is restricted. Eagle Square and the other (proposed) public spaces fall within this restricted area.

The literature on accessibility and exclusion centre around the prevention and exclusion of undesirable/undesired social behaviour, restriction of democratic gatherings and alienation of part or all of the public (see among others Zukin 1991; Yeoh 1996; Bentley 1999; Low 2000; Madanipour 2003). The situation in Eagle Square is a classic case of alienation, by government appropriation of a public space that was meant for the legitimate use of the citizenry. By its present use pattern Eagle Square is, to borrow a phrase, "where city inhabitants gather to pay respect to authorities" as it is "meant to serve a public institution rather than the public" (Chua 1992, p56).

Scored on the three forms of access set out by Carr et al, this is how Eagle Square fares:

1. Visual access – people can see into the square but are not allowed to use it if they wanted; neither do they feel that they would be comfortable, safe and welcome in it because of the intimidating atmosphere.

2. Symbolic access – the animate objects (soldiers) as well as inanimate objects (keep-off signs, barbed wire fencing) and the fortified Three Arms Zone complex in close proximity are rather menacing than inviting.

3. Physical access – Very rarely if at all is it available to the general public. During its use for state functions it is the political elite and not the citizenry who enjoy its facilities.

Interestingly in Nigerian common parlance inaccessibility to a place is symbolised by Aso Rock. If a Nigerian compares a building or place to Aso Rock[4] he/she means that it is inaccessible because it is either strongly fortified

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[1] Except of course the visitor has come here on the prior invitation of the government, for instance state visitors and journalists.

[2] Westminster Abbey in London, the Reichstag in Berlin, the Whitehouse in Washington, DC to mention a very few examples.

[3] ABN is an acronym for Association for Better Nigeria, a youth organisation set up by Senator Arthur Nzeribe to transmute General Sani Abacha to a civilian president and perpetuate him in office.

[4] Aso Rock in this jocular context is a nickname for the Presidential Villa and could refer to The Three Arms Zone as a whole.

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or requires a tedious procedure to gain access. This expression, coined from the impenetrable character of Aso Hill, has now been reinforced by the impenetrable nature of the Aso Rock complex.

Figure 6. Eagle Square with its pavilion in the background and barbed wire fencing supported with concrete stand in the foreground, August 2002 (Source: Author)

Plurality of Activities in the Capital City's public spaces

To buttress the point that inaccessibility is a peculiar characteristic of Eagle Square, investigation into the Capital City's public spaces beyond the Central Area revealed a very different ambience. Although the activities in each public space are diverse and dependent on several factors, some general conclusions can be reached. Some of the activities are universal while others are more peculiar to Nigerian attitudes, a fact established in an earlier study[1]. They can also be classified into three main categories: socio-cultural, commercial and political.

The socio-cultural include: socializing (e.g. meeting old friends, making new ones, unwinding after work); eating and drinking; having a family outing; participating in some light sports (like table tennis, snooker, football, jogging); dancing, singing etc. Religious activities (prayers and evangelistic congregations) can also be included under this category.

The commercial include: buying and selling in shopping centres, markets, plant gardens and informal open spaces.

The political include: State/civic receptions; ceremonial parades; rallies and demonstrations.

The survey showed that while the public spaces in the wider city were used for a variety of activities, the Eagle Square (the only public space in the Central Area) was used almost exclusively for political purposes.

Yet it is possible that Eagle Square could fulfil the social-cultural as well as political role if it was more accessible. Certainly it is well equipped for the staging of outdoor musical shows, cultural festivals and some sport events, all of which are very popular uses of similar public spaces in other towns (Ikoku 2001). This would inject liveliness into the public realm in the Central Area and enhance the functioning of the Capital City as Public Space, the very aim of the urban design plan.

Drawing on Gehl's categorisation of activities in public spaces three categories can be discerned: necessary, optional and social. He further demonstrates how the quality of the physical environment influences which of these activities occur, arguing that moving along a spectrum from poor to high quality public space, more and more of the optional and social activities will take place (Gehl 1996).

Examined from another perspective, the socio-cultural activities are carried out by individuals of their own volition while the political are state orchestrated.

Availability of public spaces in the Capital City

In the earlier section - Politics of Building the Capital City - the effect of the numerous interventions by successive governments on physical development through the 1980s and 1990s (coinciding with the Master Plan period) was established. As the situation in the Capital City is now revealing, the frenetic rush to move into the new Capital City has resulted in what many commentators agree to be devastating consequences on the city layout. (Mabogunje, Olomola, Abumere and others in Kalgo and Ayileka 2001). The gravity of the situation is such that within the Central Area and at a city-wide level, Abuja suffers from a scarcity of public spaces and other facilities for leisure and recreation as several proposals are yet to be implemented. The situation is further aggravated as sites designated for public facilities in the Master Plan have been converted to other purposes. Taking into consideration its status as Capital City and comparing Abuja with other towns and cities[2], it has very little public space at present.

In addition to the austerity of public spaces, not much use is made of the street. In all the other towns and cities, (whether the newer ones like Lagos, Kaduna and Aba or the more traditional ones like Arochukwu, Zaria and Benin) a lot of activities – social, political, commercial - are carried out in open spaces and streets. The favourable climate of tropical sunshine and high temperatures all year round are suited to outdoor living. Also in the Capital City, as in other urban centres, household units tend to be rather large, comprising the nuclear as well as extended family and often times non-family members[3] (Peil 1981). Added

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[1] Public spaces in the Capital City and two other case study towns were used in both the 2001 and 2002 surveys.

[2] This was one of the emerging issues from the qualitative surveys of 2001 and 2002 earlier mentioned.

[3] The nuclear family might include more than one wife, while the extended family might include siblings of the husband and in-laws. The

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to this housing is in short supply, like other towns and cities (Osondu 1992). Housing is also most expensive in Abuja than any other, so sometimes more than one family have to share (Ikejiofor 1997). In such a setting there is need to spend time outdoors especially in the evenings. People usually do, making use of the few formal public spaces or improvising in informal spaces in their absence (Ikoku 2001).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that a well-articulated public space development within Abuja's Central Area is required. Such a plan ought to take cognizance of the grand philosophy of its Master Plan while addressing the consequences of the various political interventions and the resultant deviations from the original plan.

The Capital City at its conception was envisaged as the public space of the Nigerian people. The Master Plan well articulated this philosophy in formulating the design objectives for the Central Area mainly through its composition and the location of public spaces within it. Some of these locations have been depleted in size or number. Of the sites unaffected, only a few have been developed.

The non-implementation of the public space proposals of the Master Plan has adversely affected the effective realization of the planning concept of the 'City as Public Space' envisaged for Abuja. Furthermore, the militarization of the environs of the Three Arms Zone and the condoning off from public access of Eagle Square has created a fortress atmosphere in parts of the Central Area aggravating the situation. These developments continue to hamper the actualization of the grand philosophy of national inclusion and egalitarianism laid down at the inception of the Capital City.

The recreational needs of the citizens of Abuja are diverse requiring different types of public spaces as well as multiple use of those already available. Without the existence of places for social, cultural, religious and political interaction then the goal of cohesion within society cannot be realised.

In advocating a return to the Master Plan vision, the argument is not for environmental determinism, claiming that the physical environment of the Central Area alone has created the state of affairs vis-à-vis public space in the city centre. Rather this paper has asserted that human behaviour and perception are inherently situational, embedded in the physical as well as social, cultural, political and economic contexts and settings.

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non-family members could be paid help or apprentices in the trade/business of the householder. Also a newly-arrived person in the city would invariably stay with friends or family until they found their own accommodation.

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