

# ORGANIZED OPEN SPACES AND URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL DEVELOPMENT

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## **Abstract**

The basic needs of human beings should be understood in terms of the quality of the environment. Of the many attempts at changing the urban environment in the direction of fulfilling human needs, organized open space approach seems to make the most important contribution to a more human environment. This paper shows that organized open spaces have social, religious, biological, educational, psychological, environmental, economical, demographic and ecological functions. In spite of these advantages, problems of organized open spaces in our urban areas abound and are largely responsible for the present environmental, social and psychological problems seen in the urban environment. The spatial pattern for the provision of organized open spaces in urban areas has to take into consideration the factors which influence the concepts, theories and models of open spaces, and these call for general guidelines for their design, preservation, maintenance and management.

## **Introduction**

The urban environment may be considered the opposite of the natural environment, since it concentrates so many people, buildings, and economic activities and their supporting infrastructure such as roads, water pipes, drains, electricity, etc. Even though human intervention has so radically shaped the urban environment that it seems far removed from natural processes and resources, all urban centres still remain dependent on natural resources and processes for disposing of their wastes. That is why one major challenge of urban growth in Nigeria has been to produce a tolerable urban environment for the increasing concentrations of people in towns and cities. Onokerhoraye (1977), rightly points out that it is increasingly realized that the quality of the environment in which urban dwellers live is an integral part of the overall indicators of development. Therefore, the basic needs of human beings should be understood in terms of their environment. Of the many attempts at changing the urban environment in the direction of fulfilling human needs, organized open space approach seems to be the most important contribution to a more humane environment. The development and improvement of the environment through the provision of organized open spaces help tremendously the activity, growth and development of not only the environment concerned but the citizens therein. The environment provides the condition in which people's safety and security needs; physical, mental, and spiritual health; comfort and self-fulfillment are adequately taken care of. Organized open space is one of the elements of human environment that helps fulfill these.

In the context of urban planning and design, organized open space refers to that land use category, not built upon, which may be either natural or man-made, or land developed as gardens for recreation purposes, amenity, conservation of land and other natural resources, historic or scenic landscapes, and for outstanding beauty. It can also be regarded as green belts which are essential in checking the growth and decay of urban centres.

In most urban areas, the problem of organized open spaces abounds both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Urban areas are centres of government, as well as engines of economic growth. They have the resources and capacity to improve the condition within which people live and work. For international policy makers and development agencies, such as DFID, they recognize that urban centres represent key focal points through which systematic changes in socio-economic, environmental and political development in developing countries can be effected (DFID, 2001). In spite of all these perceived and real advantages, our urban centres lack adequate organized open spaces. Even then, the existing ones are not maintained. The problem is that the inadequacy or lack of organized open spaces in most urban areas is believed to have contributed to the present environmental, social, health and psychological problems existing in our urban areas. This, in consequence, has led to the development and proliferation of slums in different parts of our urban areas, along with their attendant effects.

## **The Concept of Organized Open Spaces**

Open space is a term that has acquired an almost technical meaning for city dwellers, urban planners and designers, and landscape architects. According to Mumford (1969), the main underlying philosophy of open spaces is their social purpose as gathering places and their biological functions. Greenbie (1976), opines that organized open spaces are environments beyond the immediate home and neighbourhood that can bring strangers together in useful, orderly fashion, so that they realize their membership in social worlds beyond the immediate family locality. In an apt manner, Taylor and Miller (1980), see open spaces as having recreational, aesthetic or ecological functions. Yang and Fiyita (1983), further consider organized open space as an amenity resource or a local public good, which determines the amenity level or the environmental quality of an area, which in turn affects the well-being of the residents. From the economic point of view, Okafor (1989), observes that organized open space enhances the potential market value of neighbourhood lands and is a source of foreign exchange and income from tourists.

Organized open spaces have been classified in different ways. They can be classified according to ownership, location, catchment area, size, shape, development potential, recreation facilities and landscape character (Greater London Council, 1968; Colvin 1970; Country Side Commission for Scotland, 1974, Peter Smith, 1974).

The development of open spaces has been in stages since early civilization, and has sprawled from the ancient era through the renaissance times to our present industrial era. Industrialization has come with some attendant problems, such as threats to our natural features and ecosystems. The provision of organized open spaces, in the views of Impens and Ferma (1976), plays significant roles in improving the micro-climate of the area, fixation of toxic atmospheric pollutants, noise reduction, and in influencing the human emotional state. In the dynamics of city life, the demand for recreation represents a reaction against the psychological complexity of life introduced by centralization and industrialization, and reveals a tendency to reverse the prevailing spatial relations. In the view of Holiday (1977), it is an attempt to balance the centripetal concentration by centrifugal diffusion by a temporary escape back to the places of natural and historic origin of the people, in the hope of restoring, of recreating health, energy and mental equilibrium.

## **Theories and Models of Open Spaces**

Yang and Fiyita (1983), have explored some open space problems of spatial allocation, distribution and equilibrium vis-a-vis urban spatial structure using two basic models - an optimum model and a market model. Their argument is that the relationship between efficient allocation and competitive equilibrium allocation is necessary to clarify the problems of spatial allocation and distribution of open spaces. These have given rise to two theories. First, is that of the fiscal profitability principle, suggested by Margolis (1968) and explored by Brueckner (1979) and Kanemoto (1980), which is applicable in determining the efficient allocation of organized spaces in cities. The second is the concept of threshold population and the range of a good implied in the central place theory of Christaller (1966), which is applicable in determining the sustainable use and allocation of organized open spaces.

## **Organized Open Spaces and Urban Environmental Development**

In the view of Dhamija (1979), environment affects the state of the society and that the development of the environment either in urban or rural areas will help tremendously the activity, growth and development of the citizens and the nation. Ogwuche (1979), also states that when we create an environment, the environment recreates us. Open space is an important land-use category and the need to provide adequate organized open spaces can be better appreciated if one considers their overall importance. The provision of organized open space is considered a *sine-qua-non* in proper city development particularly in cities that evolved through planning. Organized open spaces can be used to achieve scenic beauty, provide social cohesion, space out neighbourhoods, lower gross population densities, preserve precious monumental artefacts or historic sites, manage the population of the city, serve as public functions, and enhance the quality and economic value of the environment. Scientific research has established that organized open spaces can mitigate the urban heat island effect thereby reducing photochemical smog and absorbing noxious air emissions. Open space lands can also be designed to reduce flooding during storm periods, assist in the treatment of municipal sewage, provide habitat for threatened species, and support a variety of social services such as schools, health clinics and community gardens.

Environmental planning is the beginning of a new era where the functional, aesthetic and recreational needs of the people in terms of space and environment are considered together. According to Greenwood and Edwards (1981), environmental planning is cultural adaptation that takes full account of natural systems, in which we can avoid becoming victims of our own culture. For urbanization to be effective, it should better seek to suit human needs since it is the ultimate human environment. Mixing of architectural styles and creation of open spaces are necessary to achieving a dynamic and invigorating environment (Petersmith 1974). A healthy city is one that is continually creating and improving those physical and social environments and expanding those community resources which enable people to support each other in performing all the functions of life and in developing to their maximum potential (Greg and Ilona, 1976). The World Health Organization's definition of health stresses the importance of mental, physical and social well-being as opposed to the mere absence of disease. Organized open space is one of the elements of human environment that help fulfill all these needs, and that is why the Federal Military Government in 1995, enacted Decree No 11 which called for the development of both national and state parks/open spaces services. There is therefore no gainsaying the fact that open spaces deserve a prominent place in our urban planning schemes.

### **Existing Constraints on Organized Open Space Provision**

Onokerhoraye (1977) has identified two major factors that have contributed to the inadequate provision of organized open spaces, as well as the existence of marked spatial imbalance in the distribution of the available ones. First is the historic origin of the urban areas which were built without any major land-use control, and the socio-cultural environment in which they developed. The second relates to the lack of public authorities' concern for the need to ensure the availability of organized open spaces in urban areas.

Also, Ogwuche (1997) identified existing constraints on the key players - the town planning authority, the inhabitants and the government. According to him, the town planning authorities in both the state and local governments have not only been unable to control land-use, but have not made provision for organized open spaces in their planning schemes. While the citizens (especially those who own the adjoining lands) encroach on the existing open spaces, the governments lack the ability to enforce strict laws against such encroachments, as well as the will to maintain existing ones.

### **Framework for the Provision of Organized Open Spaces**

As a public good, the provision and control of organized open spaces are in the hands of public authorities. As a result, the supply of organized open spaces should not be subjected to market forces. Adequate care must be taken in the amount of space to be provided for in any town plan and the planner should weigh the costs and benefits which will be involved. Access should be guaranteed, both in terms of financial capability or geographical location. These, therefore, call for a consideration of the distinction, location and size of organized open spaces in providing them in urban areas. Onokerhoraye (1977) recommends the central place theory of Christaller (1966), as a useful perspective on the design of an appropriate spatial pattern for the provision of organized open spaces in our urban areas. The relevant concepts, which are implied in the theory, include the threshold population and the ranger of good. According to him, the spatial pattern for the provision of organized open spaces has to take into consideration the factors which influence the concepts of organized open spaces, and these include the population density, land availability, level of socio-economic development, minimum distance to access the open space and the mode of travel within the area.

### **Guidelines for the Development of Organized Open Spaces**

In practice, the landscape architect is responsible for the design and detailed layout of organized open spaces both in civil designs and/or regional planning and should act in consultation with the planner, architect and civil engineer on the one hand and the agricultural and horticultural experts on the other. In reviewing site designs, account should be taken of such factors as the visibility of spaces, their relationship to surrounding houses and walkways, their management and maintenance. Sidewalks should be widened, suitable spaces should be provided for sitting, playing games, and other conveniences. These spaces should be suitably drained and paved, well lighted with no dead corners at right, and trash containers provided. There should also be trees and plants of various species to provide some shade.

Suitable preservation and maintenance of organized open spaces ensure that opportunities and potentials that exist today still remain in decades to come. To achieve this, Marcus (1975), suggests two sustainable ways. The first is to find an economic use for it, and to be protected by legislation. The

second is to associate it with the preservation of historic sites, natural vegetation, communities or even geologic wonders. These, according to him are necessary in order to provide protection and encourage positive maintenance and renewal. However, while others argue that the solution is to acquire it for public recreation, others such as Sidney and Penelope (1974), suggest the use of participating residents on individual basis and adjoining residents to exercise surveillance over neighbourhood open spaces.

Comprehensive recording of sites on a country and indeed local plan scale can probably help to alleviate the problem of decay and loss as it enables sites to be evaluated, their location defined, and policies and guidelines established. This can then minimize damage and get the conservation needs of open spaces more widely recognized as well as measures taken to safeguard and maintain this resource for future generation.

### **Policy Implications for Planning of Organized Open Spaces**

Public participation in all planning decisions, including planning for organized open spaces, is critical to a city's long term sustainable development in order to overcome the conflict resulting from the benefits of organized open spaces, and maximize and sustain their multi-use potential. This means that local residents must be actively involved in the planning and management of the areas. There is a need to understand what residents consider to be the important benefits and critical problems related to organized open spaces. Effective public consultation, creating an open process, which encourages dialogue between varieties of stakeholders, is essential to understanding these views and gathering the information necessary to maximize the benefits of organized open spaces. This can be achieved through community mapping, which is a meaningful approach to consultation in which each other's values, opinion and solutions are appreciated.

### **Conclusion**

The development of the environment through the provision of organized open spaces helps tremendously the growth and improvement of not only the environment concerned but also the citizens therein. This is because a healthy city is one that is continually creating and improving the physical, social, economic and psychological environments. Organized open space is one of the elements of human environment and an important land-use category that helps to fulfill all these. There is therefore the need for the development, conservation and maintenance of an optimal urban organized open space system in our urban areas.

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