

PHYSICAL PLANNING AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN DESIGN- A PANACEA TO HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

As a result of non-inclusion of citizens in the programmes and activities in the oil producing areas of Nigeria, there have been low level of development • i -ases of oil bunkering, vandalization, and violence had persisted unabated which led to the recent signing of memorandum of understanding between the government, the affected communities and some oil companies in Ondo State. In a study by Amolc and Mills-Tetty (1998), of the Festac Estate in Lagos, they found the majority least satisfied, corroborating the earlier work done by Awotona (1990) in the same estate that found only a moderate level of satisfaction from the respondents. Also Kainji Resettlement Scheme done by the Federal Government was also not successful as the socio-cultural ways of life of the people were ignored in the accommodation provided for them. To sustain a healthy environment in the next millennium, physical planning efforts must embrace consensual planning /design and public opinion across the spectrum of the classes of society should be sorted and well coordinated. This paper attempts to show that user-oriented design is successful only when designers do not think of themselves as the only experts and when they do not impose their mandatory designs on others. They should respect the value of users' input to the design process and the main concern of designers and planners should what actually happens when someone uses their design; for that is the ultimate measure of every design's worth. Also, the need for the designers to be involved in politics and the adoption of advocacy planning concept in Nigeria are the thrust of this paper.

Introduction

The footbridges in Hong Kong which were designed only for pedestrian traffic have been redefined as social gathering places by housewives, as resting places by older people, as business places by hawkers, as playgrounds by skateboarders, as a scribble-canvas by youngsters, as homes by beggars and so on. All of these people produce and redefine the meanings and functions of the footbridges when they use them. Some people do not even care about their original predetermined or assigned meanings and functions and in some Gases, such as when salesmen set up temporary booths on the bridges to promote their products, their new defined meanings and functions go against the original intentions of the designers(Michael, 2003).

In the last two decades, there has been a considerable movement towards the direct involvement of the public in the definition of their physical environment. The increasing sense of social responsibi it; I ok root in the mid 1960's, when a feeling of community consciousness prevailed in many low-income urban neighborhoods. The concept of advocacy planning introduced the participation of non-professionals and non-designers in the process of decision-making. This means the citizens ought to be heard, to be well informed about the reasons behind planning proposals and be able to respond to them in technical language of professional planner/designers (Davidoff, 1965). This approach to development has been aptly described as bottom - top; as against the old notion of top - bottom strategy.

The advocate represents an individual group or organization that assists the clients in clarifying and expressing their ideas. He is responsible to the client, so he seeks to express the client's views and interests.

...Citizen participation is a categorical term for city power. It is the redistribution of power that enables the have- not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic process, to be deliberately included in the future. "...Participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless. It allows the power holders to claim that all sides were considered but makes it possible for only some

Community Participation and Democracy

Community participation emanates from the idea of consensus (opinion held by most or all), which is the crux of democracy. This idea can be interpreted to mean that the government and indeed the designers/ planners at all levels must constantly be refreshed from the wells of popular participation.

Given that democracy is a form of government in which public policy depends in a systematic, if sometimes indirect way, upon public opinion (AYeale, 1991). Development plan preparation ought to allow the community and those interested in physical change to participate in drafting policies of promotion or conservation. The resultant policies within development plans must be viewed therefore as an agreed set of principles to guide decision-making on the future of the built and natural environment.

In a democratic setting, planning policy ought to be a product of long process of bargaining, negotiation and political compromise, which encompasses the views and activities of a wide range of organizations including central government, local planning authorities, statutory bodies and the public. All these agencies influence the planning policy process in some respect at various stages of policy formulation and implementation.

The art of physical planning- laying out of streets, location of activities e.g. residential, commercial, industrial, parks and playgrounds has both direct and indirect impact on the public. Therefore, designers, planners and indeed the government need to plan with people rather than for them. This is in line with the principle of constitutional democracy, which we have adopted for the third republic. There is need for the government and all professionals to adopt the doctrine of participatory democracy. This also is in line with our constitutional provision, which respects the right of individuals to know and be informed of the physical development, which has direct impact on them. Fortunately, this idea had been in practice in Nigeria before the advent of the British where people in their various settlements engaged in building their houses in relation to the existing ones; even, they contributed to labour and materials to the building of the new houses. Footpaths, bridges, culverts, markets, wall or trenches around settlements for security were all built and maintained by the community (Akinmoladun, 1995).

Problems of Democratic Politics and Community Participation in Nigeria

The features of liberal democracy are lofty and good but its operations in Nigeria have been fraught with many problems. Such include the ethnic composition of the Nigerian state, which has in turn led to ethnicization of Nigerian politics (Amuwo, 1998). The incessant intervention of the military in politics has prevented the growth of democratic principles. Also the existence of parochial political apathy and zero- sum nature of political competition. There is low level of economic development that is manifested in excessive poverty, which eventually encourages corruption and prebendalism; the non-implementation of lofty policy statements by the in-coming regimes and finally the extrapolation of democratic ethos from the western democracy into Nigerian society without considering the local context.

The assertion that the operation of democracy as a system of government in any society is always promotive of development is incontrovertible. The reason for this is based on the fact that democracy has, as one of its tenets, popular participation, which allows individuals to express their views, and further consult on various policies and programmes of government. It follows that for any effort to count as development, it must aim at improving people's chances or what has been referred to as being "people centers" (Okeje, 1995).

Therefore, only programmes or policies decided or executed through democratic principles have greater tendency to impact positively on people's life than any other. Politics is the art of getting things done through government and planning is the art of deciding what is best to do. These are not mutually exclusive. However, planning is not fruitful unless it produces plans and actions and since most of the actions necessary must be taken through government, it is germane that planners/designers should engage in politics so that their works are not on paper alone or wasted. However, this situation has been elusive in Nigeria and until the country is able to overcome all the dysfunction associated

with her operation of democracy, the situation might remain precarious, though, the present government is making frantic efforts at redressing some of the issues raised.

Current Views on community Participation

User participatory design means different things to different users and even to the same users, depending on the issue, its timing and the environment (physical, cultural, political, social and also religious) in which it takes place.

The purposes of participation have been more modestly defined to include information exchange, resolving conflicts and to supplement design and planning. Participation reduces the feeling of anonymity and communicates to the user a greater degree of concern on the part of the management or administration. With it, residents are actively involved. By involving as many interests as possible, not only in its development process, there will be a better maintained physical environment, greater public spirit, more user satisfaction and significant financial changes (Becker, 1997).

(Sanoff, 1990), categorized user participation in seven major forms: representation, questionnaires, regionalism, dialogue, alternative, co-decision and self-decision. Representation is a form of a design in which the designer represents the anonymous user through a personal and subjective interpretation of the user's situation. The use of questionnaires consists of the statistical gathering of a user group's requirements and is an indirect form of participation by an anonymous group of people . v e similar cultural heritage within a geographical limited area such that this form of participation directs itself towards the symbolic qualities of a group of users (for instance, a specific community). Dialogue, also called consultation, is based on the concept of using users' knowledge as a source of information and asking users to comment on the designers while the design is in progress. It can be considered as a form of two- way communication between users and designers. The alternative is a form of participation that goes a step further in involving the user in the design process with the designers. It is based on a process whereby users are given the choice of several alternatives within a fixed set of boundaries. Co - decision is a method of participation that involves participation in a balanced decision making situation. It involves the population from the beginning of the design process and aims at the direct and active participation by users. Self-decision is when a decision is made by users themselves. Obviously, if a design with a high degree of user fitness is desired, co-decision should be the form of users' participation most often used by the designers.

An important point in the participatory process is individual learning through increased awareness of a problem. In order to maximize learning, the process should be clear, communicable and open. It should encourage dialogue, debate and collaboration. Thus participation may be seen as direct public involvement in decision-making processes. Citizens share in social decisions that determine the quality and direction of their lives. This requires provision of effective communication media in order to provide suitable grounds for citizen participation in designing. There are many benefits accruing from such an approach for the community, the users, the designers and planners.

Firstly, from the social point of view, participation results in a greater meeting of social needs and increasing effective utilization of resources at the disposal of a particular community such that it eliminates "white elephant" projects. Secondly, to the user group, it represents an increased sense of having influenced the design decision-making process and an increased awareness of the consequences of the decision made (Hester, 1990). Thirdly, to the designer, it represents an increased and up to date information than was possible before. Creating a methodological framework can enable the use of rational design methods without affecting the creative process.

Since participation has a diversity of expression, a design and planning solution from this approach will need to be made transparent so that the decisions are understood by the people who made them. By converting public forums that encourage community participation, people can openly express their opinions, make necessary compromises and arrive at decisions that are acceptable. By involving as many interests as possible, not only is the product strengthened by the wealth of inputs but also the user group is strengthened as well by learning more about itself.

Design Issues

The first option that a designer should as a matter of seriousness consider is the allowance of users to fill more 'gaps'. This means that designs should offer more flexibility and encourage users to modify them. For instance, in designing a community park, or public space furniture, the design with the highest degree of user fitness is the one which allows an t encourages residents to voice their preferences and to make modifications to fit their community and individual needs.

The other option is the encouragement of user-participation in developing designs. This participatory design allows users to engage in the design decision-making process. This opportunity to participate not only results in better user-fit solutions but also an increased sense of having influenced the design making process as well as an increased awareness of the consequences of the decision made. This is not very obvious if the design is just a product for a small number of people in a particular group of social class. However, it is very significant if the design involves divers and greater number of users. To designers, participating design provides more relevant and up to date information.

In user participation design, designers should act as coordinators gathering together different interested groups and professionals and then as facilitators assisting users in participating, modifying, experiencing, producing and actualizing the design. Therefore, designers should work closely with the various interested and potential impacted groups (users and professionals such as workers, landscape architects, product engineers) and facilitate a supportive environment for working together. During the participation process, designers should give users the opportunity to:

- (a) Identify their needs and preferences
- (b) Set goals
- (c) Voice their ideas and opinions
- (d) Make decisions
- (e) Be involved in implementation
- (f) Evaluate the outcomes and
- (g) Set up mechanism to follow up on post-occupancy conditions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the recommendations are offered as a way of sustaining a healthy environment in Nigeria in the next millennium:

1. The planners, designers and the government should plan with people rather than for them in any development that has direct and indirect impact on the public.
2. The planners and designers should engage in politics so that policies and programmes that impact positively on the environment can be formulated and implemented. Hence, their ideas are not wasted or become a paper work.
3. In the process of designing the physical environment, the cultural, political, social and religious values and beliefs should not be ignored but well articulated and coordinated in to the designs.
4. The right of the users to know and be informed of any development should be protected. Government should involve users in developing designs and be engaged in the decision making process as these allow for well functioning, people and environmental- friendly projects.
5. As users are carried along in the process of decision - making, the inclusion and participation of non - designers/non - professionals are germane so that flexible designs can still accommodate modifications.

Conclusion

To develop effective participation strategies, there is the need to consider the type of issues, goals and objectives, the stage in the planning process, what is open to influence and the types and amount of resources. The designer's job no longer is to produce finished and unchangeable solutions but to develop solutions from continuous two-way communication with those who will use his or her work. The energy and imagination of the designer should be directed towards raising users' level of awareness about design choices. This means that the final design should arise from the exchanges

between designers and users: The designers provide opinions, professional advice, discuss consequences of various alternatives and users give their opinions and contribute their practical experiences.

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