

## **INFORMAL TRANSFORMATION IN PUBLIC HOUSING: A CASE STUDY OF ABESAN LOW INCOME HOUSING ESTATE LAGOS, NIGERIA**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Dwellers in public housing have been engaged in alteration and extension activities aimed at adapting their dwellings to better suit their needs. Hence, owners-occupiers, through their own initiatives and efforts alter or extend these houses so as to improve their housing conditions and at the same time to meet the developing needs of the households. In such cases, it becomes pertinent to examine the modalities and motives behind what happens within dwelling units in public housing estates. This research aims to identify explanations for the phenomenon of owner-initiated transformation of public housing particularly in low income housing estates. Indications are that housing transformations in public housing is inevitable and carried out irrespective of the socio-economic status and lifestyles of residents. The study employed a case - study research method and Abesan low-income housing estate, Ipaja in Lagos State was purposively selected for the study. The implication of this study to sustainable housing development is premised on the fact that people engaged in housing modification on a number of levels, in order to make a home more aesthetically pleasing or more suitable for their needs and also for qualitative improvement of the existing housing stock. The study concluded by suggesting a number of recommendations to assist policy makers in effective public housing delivery.*

**KEYWORDS:** Dwellers, Public Housing, Owner Occupiers, Transformation.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Transformation is synonymous with words such as alteration, adjustment, modification, improvement and change. Housing transformation is a situation where households carry out far-reaching alterations, extension, modification or addition to the original forms, extent and patterns of their buildings including their immediate environment. Residents of government housing estates in developing countries are in the habit of transforming their buildings, since these houses do not conform to their expectations (Triple 2000). The residential buildings in government housing estates often times were built without consultation with users, who usually indulged in unauthorized alterations, since the house did not conform to their expectations (Tipple 2000). Habraken (1975) asserted that no one could live satisfactorily within a fixed environment in which they had no input.

Public sector housing for the low income group in Nigeria will inevitably and continuously undergo a process of transformation carried out by the owner-occupiers, with or without government's financial backing, in order to meet the developing needs of the household. As a result of the inappropriateness of public housing and its failure to respond to users' needs, many families decided to take over their housing and started engaging in informal building activities inside the formal sector. Transformations have resulted not only in an increase of the actual housing stock, but in changing entire housing environments into dynamic, mixed-use

developments, where daily activities overlap and maximum use of the available space and resources is made.

In this study, user transformation is referred to as an “informal” activity because dwellers in public housing have been engaged in alteration and extension activities aimed at adapting their dwellings to better suit their needs. These activities have resulted in the transformation of entire housing developments in many parts of the world. Understanding this phenomenon is a prerequisite to any attempt to provide better quality housing environments and to improve living conditions in existing ones. This paper examines informal transformation in public housing using Abesan low income housing estate Lagos, Nigeria as a Case Study.

### **The Study Methodological Approach**

The study employed a case - study approach whereby physical transformation of the houses were recorded in the selected estate and by analyzing data collected through comprehensive and detailed observations. The methodology also involves the collection of data from secondary sources, relevant published and unpublished materials as well as sundry information. As a documentary research, the study deals with an extensive literature review of existing data documented in books, journals, articles, research reports on housing transformation in Developing Countries, published and unpublished papers, newspapers and the internet on the subject matter.

### **Expected Contribution to Knowledge**

Housing transformations can be attributed to the fact that dwellers always want to live in an environment that reflects their tastes and values. Occupants modify buildings and spaces around them to meet their needs that were not adequately provided for by the designers. The study has therefore significantly added to the body of knowledge on housing policy, concerning existing housing estates and policy on new developments, especially public housing delivery for the low income earners. This study will provide information on the types of transformation that take place in low income public housing estates and guide policy makers in effective public housing delivery.

### **The Case Study: Abesan Low-Income Housing Estate, Ipaja**

The research is based on a field study conducted in Abesan Low Income Housing Estate Lagos, Nigeria as where there has been evidence of informal user transformations. Abesan low-income housing estate is the largest of the three estates selected for this study. The estate consists of about 4272 housing units of two bedrooms (2112 units), and three bedroom (2160 units), arranged in blocks of eight flats (three-storey) and six flats (two-storey) respectively. The estate gives an impression of being highly populated, and having a very “open” character. The scheme was a project of Lagos State Government conceived in 1980 by Lagos State Development and Planning Cooperation (LSDPC). The total number of the housing units planned for was 4560, but till date only, 4272 have been built. The housing units were laid out in clustered form along defined neighborhood roads. The physical outlook of the estate environment depicts that of a typical heterogeneous housing environment where different classes of people with varying ethnic and religious background co-habit. Other facilities provided are; open field/spaces, land allocated for commercial purpose, religious facilities, recreation spaces, road network, sewers, electrification and other rudiment infrastructure to make the housing estate a worthwhile venture.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Philosophical Perspectives and Conceptual Approaches to Public Housing Transformation**

Housing transformation has been applauded on several grounds. Many researchers have studied public housing transformation over the years from different perspectives. In the context of housing, Tipple (1991) defined the transformation of a dwelling as the alteration or extension involving construction activity using locally available materials and technology. Kim et al. (2005) described transformation as the remodeling of completed buildings resulting to a change in the appearance or character of building envelope components. Tipple (2000a) noted that housing transformations in developing countries are often illegal and involved modifications and extensions of the external and internal parts of dwelling units or both. Transformations have resulted not only in an increase of the actual housing stock, but in changing entire housing environments into dynamic, mixed-use developments, where daily activities overlap and maximum use of the available space and resources is made.

Manalang et al. (2002) viewed housing transformations as self-built improvements, which apart from helping in understanding the adjustment behaviours of the residents, also indicates how the residents have augmented for the deficiencies in their current residences. This implies that housing transformations are often an initiative of housing owners and seek to improve housing conditions by providing more spaces to accommodate household needs.

Tipple (2000b) argued that transformation was common in public housing because potential residents are rarely involved in the planning and designing of such housing estates, and as such the dwelling units are neither in tune with their socio-economic, religious and demographic characteristics nor a reflection of their expectations and aspirations. In this situation, the residents find their housing units inappropriate to their household needs and way of life, and thus explore avenues of physically adjusting the units to suit their needs and lifestyle.

Tamés (2004) noted that transformations are pronounced in public housing because public housing estates are often uniform and monotonous and offer limited opportunities for self-expression by the residents. On the other hand, Salim (1998) was of the view that the need to have an extra space for the household and for income generation was a key motivation for transformation. This was corroborated by Tipple (2000a) who noted that many households transform their dwellings because they needed to work in their homes and let out additional spaces created in the course of transformation activities. He therefore concluded that one of the greatest motivations for transformation was to add value to the existing housing stock.

Hasan (2006) from another perspective argued that transformation of dwelling units by residents in public housing schemes was a response to the failure of the government constructed housing to cater for the housing needs of the people. This suggests that housing transformations are on the increase due to the perceived gap between what residents need and what they are provided with by public housing providers.

Kellet et al (1993) opined that Housing transformation seeks to obtain a more satisfactory habitat. People engage in housing transformation on a number of levels, in order to make a home more aesthetically pleasing or more suitable for their needs. Transformation can therefore be seen to be a means of renewing the housing stock and at the same time adding accommodation and services.

Manalang et al. (2002) have also indicated that transformation activities can enhance residents' sense of pride, confidence and feeling of attachment to their dwelling units. As they put it, 'residents could feel at home and secured when they gradually improve and maximize the space within and around their residences'. It is perhaps on this premise that

Turner et al. (2009) concluded that housing transformations are beneficial in improving the value of housing, increasing the housing stock within a locality and attracting more residents into the neighbourhood. This study focuses on housing transformation as it occurs in public housing estates where households effect alterations, extensions, modifications or additions to the original forms, extent, patterns or uses of their housing units including their immediate environment. Transformation of public housing in particular may take the form of attaching informal developments to the most formally developed neighborhoods. It could also be in the alteration of the original internal spatial arrangement of a house to accommodate more distinct spaces as evident in some low-income public housing or a deliberate distortion in the free flow open land use layout of the original concept.

Good child(1997) suggested that one of the main factors contributing to transformation in housing forms is the shortage of accommodation and the desire for an increase in the space under the dwellers' control. This situation may also inform the need for user-initiated transformations.

People engage in housing modification on a number of levels, in order to make a home more aesthetically pleasing or more suitable for their needs. It therefore becomes pertinent to examine the modalities and motives behind the transformation of dwelling units in public housing estates. Through physical transformation, the extended and altered spaces are sometimes used in carrying out home-based enterprises or let out for renting purpose by low-income households. The dwelling is one of the few resources used for generating income. The wide range of home-based enterprises found in government estates including sewing, hair dressing, livestock keeping, daycare and general trading (Strassmann, 1986). Aduwo (2011) concentrated on housing transformation and its impact on neighbourhoods in selected low-income public housing estates in Lagos, Nigeria. More recent study conducted by Morakinyo (2014) concentrated on the patterns, processes and product of public housing transformation in selected low income public housing estates in Lagos.

This study is therefore considered imperative as it will increase the understanding of why some people make such changes, and how they transform their dwellings. Understanding the phenomenon of user-initiated transformations in government- built housing projects is a prerequisite to any attempt to provide better quality housing environments and to improve living conditions in existing ones. It is expected that this study will bridge some gaps in the literature and inform housing policy and design practice in Nigeria.

### **Explicit Reasons of Spontaneous Transformation in Public Housing**

People transform for various reasons and there have been studies to relate the transformation incidents with different issues. Thus, understanding transformations implies identifying explicit reasons and the degree of transformation and its potentiality to change the domestic spaces of a dwelling depend on many reasons. Once people settle in houses, their use of the spaces and the building fabric provided depends on their behavioural preferences. Owner-occupiers exhibit a wide range of characteristics and motives for transforming these low cost houses.

### **Economic Reasons**

Alterations or transformations are done to dwelling units to increase accommodation capacity of the house for home residence, for commercial use (Home Based Enterprises - any form of money making venture carried out from the house), for rental residential purposes (to increase rental income in the form of habitable flats) and for rental commercial purposes (to increase rental income in the form of renting shops, or offices). Tipple (2000) studied transformation in different parts of the world where people transform a lot due to the need for extra income. The economic reason for transformation is as a result of the rents they get from their rooms or shop tenants, personal business outlets like shops and other services rendered from their houses. Residents claimed that it made most of them to engage in home based enterprises (HBEs) for additional income. Such small and medium scale businesses which are carried out from places of residence are generally referred to as home based enterprise (HBEs). Some of the residents may have transformed to express affluence and to achieve a desirable level of comfort while some others may do so make money through sales or rentals. Especially in houses where owners do not need the whole house for themselves, they can transform part of it for rental income which would benefit to their survival issues.

### **Household Demographic Changes**

Demographic issues have been universally recognized as major reasons behind transformation. In houses where the owners are the only inhabitants, the demographic issues are the prime concern for transformation. It is obvious that one of the main factors contributing to transformation is the shortage of accommodation; Residents transformed their houses not only for financial benefits but also for so many other reasons from which they find satisfaction. Dwellers respond to increased demand for space due to the expansion of household size, the inevitable increase in family size due procreation and extended family ties have also been cited as a motivation to carryout transformation(Tipple 2000). For example, a family with a large size would simply alter the house by either converting a garage to a bedroom or building additional boys quarter. The need to create more rooms or enlarge existing ones to accommodate family members came as a pressing challenge which was tackled through what they considered to be most affordable when compared with other option opened to them (i.e Better arrangement of spaces to suit changing family needs) (Tipple 2000). Most times ,their sizes were quite small as at the time they moved in, compared to what happened years after or even their present sizes.

### **Users' Dissatisfaction with Original Plan and Layouts**

The level of satisfaction of the residents with their houses particularly with some specific aspects of their houses may be one of the reasons responsible for the massive transformation of the public housing schemes in the developing countries. Housing satisfaction is a subject that is frequently looked at and it is an important issue which if properly explored could serve as a 'feed-forward' for such future developments because the behavioral response of physically altering their houses is one way in which their reactions are expressed. The residential buildings in government housing estates often times were built without consultation with users, who usually indulged in unauthorized alterations, since the house did not conform to their expectations (Tipple 2000). Habraken (1975) asserted that no one could live satisfactorily within a fixed environment in which they had no input. Aduwo (2011) observed that often times, households find the architectural plan and general arrangement

of most public housing grossly inadequate even with the absence of some simple but vital features that could enhance the performance of such housing.

### **Aesthetics and Modernization needs**

Transformation is also carried out solely to enhance the looks (exterior and interior looks) of their buildings as a result of the need to actually remodel their houses to meet modern trends and improve their housing condition.

### **Lack of Maintenance in Public Housing**

The lack of maintenance of public housing by the appropriate public authorities (government) often led to uncontrolled dilapidation of diverse measures and as a result, negative transformation takes place. Korboe (1993) posited that in spite of the huge resources most developing nations plough into projects like public housing, there exists no policy on maintenance in place. Hence, there is a need for planned maintenance in order to avoid any form of transformation resulting from necessity to improve dwellings by occupants. Aduwo (2011) suggested other cogent reasons why maintenance needs to be carried out in public housing; It helps to prevent or reduce deterioration significantly; It helps to continuously maintain good appearance; It helps to retain the value of the investment; Ensures safety of occupants, visitors and the general public; It helps to maintain the building in a condition in which it continues to fulfill its function. It is apparent therefore that there is a need for the appropriate authorities to establish enabling principles that will guide the formulation of a maintenance policy.

### **Territoriality and Privacy**

Aduwo (2011) considered this as the tendency for humans to desire to take control and possibly ownership as well as access to a defined space and resource. Most public housing scheme for the low-income is given an open plan format which by virtue of their design generate territorial behavior in their occupants. Features which foster territoriality include placement of dwelling units on site in order to define zones for individual building, and as a result, most households as observed gradually become aware that the areas around their buildings belong to them and as such responsibility is taken for activities in the area. Transformation is carried out to maximize influence on the immediate environment by erecting fence walls/barriers and other forms of physical barricades such as low fence, open gateways and changes in the texture of walking surfaces. This act is also made in order to serve as an antidote to crime and checkmate intruders into personal and private properties.

### **Acute Shortfall in Housing Supply**

The inability of the shelter delivery system of a society to cope with housing demand has brought about congestion and flagrant erection of attachment structures within planned layouts Aduwo (2011). Shortages in housing are held to be largely caused by bottlenecks in the supply of affordable land, target oriented architectural designs, materials, skilled workers, and other inputs to the housing system.

## Identity Creation

Human beings usually like to be different from each other however the housing design in mass housing does not reflect this. It is therefore common to find house owner within the estate trying to differentiate themselves from others so as to create an identity for them, this identity they seek to create is a key factor in post-constructional changes. The changes could be as little as painting the house a different colour or as much as structural changes.

## House Security

Adedayo O. F. (2012) opined that the issue of security is of great concern to home owners in housing estates regardless if the entire estate is fenced. Individuals always seek out ways of providing extra security for themselves and this they do through the provision of fences. These fences are often not designed by any architect and as such they oftentimes do not complement the house design.

## CONCLUSION

Dwellers in public housing undertake transformations that lead to compromised environments in housing neighbourhoods. This paper examined informal transformation in public housing through a survey of a purposively selected low income public housing estate in Lagos, Nigeria, (Abesan Housing Estate). It reported explicit reasons of Spontaneous transformation in public housing in the selected estates identified and derived from the literature. Owners-occupiers, through their own initiatives and efforts, to alter or to extend these houses so as to improve their housing conditions and at the same time to meet the developing needs of the households. The fact that so many low income households transform the low cost housing units through their own initiatives and efforts indicates that these houses are not meeting their developing. This gradual shelter improvement among the low income households in the urban communities of developing countries contributes to the improvement of housing quality and increases the existing national housing stock. The study has shown that owner households transform their houses in order to improve their livelihoods and the findings of this study confirmed the prevalence to the phenomenon within public housing schemes and the different perceptions dwellers attached to physical, social, and economic values in dwelling neighbourhoods.

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**APPENDIX: PHOTOGRAPHS OF INFORMAL TRANSFORMATION IN ABESAN HOUSING ESTATE, LAGOS.**



**Plate 1**



**Plate 2**



**Plate 3**



**Plate 4**



**Plate 5**



**Plate 6**



**Plate 7**



**Plate 8**



**Plate 9**



**Plate 10**



**Plate 11**



**Plate 12**



**Plate 13**



**Plate 14**



**Plate 15**



**Plate 16**

### **ANNOTATION OF PLATES**

- **Plate 1-** Picture showing transformation made by the residents with addition of perforated blocks to terraces in Abesan Low-Income Housing Estate. Source: Authors, 2014
- **Plate 2-** Picture showing transformation made by the residents with addition of outdoor spaces in form of covered terrace in Abesan Low-Income Housing Estate. Source: Authors, 2014
- **Plate 3-** Picture showing a transformed made by the residents with addition of perimeter dwarf fence wall for creation of car park & change of window materials from louvers to aluminum sliding window in Abesan Low-Income Housing Estate. Source: Authors, 2014

- **Plate 4-** *Picture showing transformation made by the residents of a typical flat by repainting of separate flat externally in Abesan Low-Income Housing Estate. Source: Authors, 2014*
- **Plate 5-** *Picture showing transformation made by the residents of a typical flat by illegal littering of building environment with commercial shops in Abesan Low-Income Housing Estate. Source: Authors, 2014*
- **Plate 6-** *Picture showing transformation(modification) made by the residents with addition/attachment of illegal structures(containers,wooden structures etc) along the length of the building used as shops for commercial activities in Abesan Low-Income Housing Estate. Source: Authors, 2014*
- **Plate 7-** *Picture showing transformation (modification) made by the residents with creation of a unroofed terrace with dwarf wall in Abesan Low-Income Housing Estate. Source: Authors, 2014*
- **Plate 8-** *Picture showing transformation(modification) made by the residents with creation of a unroofed terrace with dwarf wall as well as addition of sun shading devices in Abesan Low-Income Housing Estate. Source: Authors, 2014*
- **Plate 9-** *Picture showing transformation (modification) made by the residents with addition/attachment of illegal structures to an existing building used for HBEs (Home Based Entreprises) and encroaching into open Space in Abesan Low-Income Housing Estate. Source: Authors, 2014*
- **Plate 10-** *Picture showing a transformation made by the residents with addition of perimeter fence wall (1.50m) high for creation of territoriality, and also with addition of sun shading device on windows in Abesan Low-Income Housing Estate. Source: Authors, 2014*
- **Plate 11-** *Picture showing houses that have undergone massive Transformation made by the residents with addition of required services (water tank) for adequate water in Abesan Low-Income Housing Estate. Source: Authors, 2014*
- **Plate 12-** *Picture showing transformation (modification) made by the residents of a bedroom been converted to shop for HBEs in Abesan Low-Income Housing Estate. Source: Authors, 2014*
- **Plate 13-** *Picture showing physical transformation (modification) made by the residents with addition of covered terrace and metal barricades used for enclosing the building to depicts a form of territoriality in Abesan Low-Income Housing Estate. Source: Authors, 2014*
- **Plate 14-** *Picture showing transformation made by the residents with addition of entrance canopy, burglar proof to windows, change of window materials from louvers to aluminium sliding in transformed building showing a functional conversion from residential to a clinic/dispensary in Abesan Low-Income Housing Estate. Source: Authors, 2014*
- **Plate 15-** *Picture showing another physical transformation(modification) made by the residents with addition of a covered terrace, water tank supported with a scaffold, AC*

*unit fixed to walls, shading devices fixed to windows and bedroom converted to hop used for HBEs(Home Based Entreprises) in in Iponri Low Income Source: Authors, 2014*

- **Plate 16-** *Picture showing another physical transformation (modification) made by the residents with addition/attachment of illegal structures used for HBEs(Home Based Entreprises) in Abesan Low-Income Housing Estate. Source: Authors, 2014*

Source: Authors' Field Survey, 2017