OPTIMIZING THE CONCEPT OF PLACE-MAKING AS A PANACEA FOR INFORMALITY IN URBAN AREAS OF DEVELOPING COUNTRIES.

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ABSTRACT: *Informal settlements are pervasive in urban areas of developing countries. They dominate a greater percent of the cities and are characterized by poor infrastructure supply, degraded environment and poverty. Most revitalization efforts ignored informality and so fail. Yet the essence of informality speaks of the indomitable will and perseverance of the urban poor to partake in formality in the face of lack of infrastructure, services and amenities. Within this essence of informality is contained some design elements that have been used as catalyst to trigger change in place-making in some parts of the world. These elements, though untested in developing countries, have been found to work as facilitators of change in developed countries. Place-making is a concept where social and political processes are used to create value and meaning in a particular setting. This paper therefore explores the existing principles of informality found in African settlements, and compares them to urban design elements that have facilitated revitalization in developed countries with a view to making a case for the use of place-making as a possible initial approach for shaping informality in developing countries.*

KEYWORDS: Place-making, informality, urban renewal, slum.

INTRODUCTION

Informal settlements characterize urban centers of Africa. Their proliferation could be linked to rapid urbanization of African cities and inability of governments to cope with such rapid growth in terms of provision of infrastructure and amenities. As a result informal settlements are typified with poor degraded environments, lack of portable drinking water, electricity and roads. Sanitation is poor, and so, health and productivity are challenged so much so that urban areas in developing countries are being described as areas of deprivation, environmental degradation and deep poverty (Osinubi, 2003).This state of affairs has moved international development agenda of the 21st century to African cities at several global fora such as the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) and World Health Organization (WHO). Emphases on reshaping or eradicating informality are targeted towards remedial actions for which the bulk of the action for change rests on government, environmental, urban design and planning professionals.

Recent planning approaches in urban regeneration are evolving into strategies geared more towards onsite approaches which encourage improving existing situations and minimizing relocation of residents. However, street-based upgrading and place-making approaches feature prominently. Place-making can be understood, in the developed world, as a concept where social and political process are used to create value and meaning in a particular setting. It involves a physical setting and more importantly the people that make up the community. These components are focused on a highly structured and participatory formal planning process (Beza,Munoz-Villers and Garza, 2013). This planning approach has worked in many diverse

communities because of common urban design mechanisms that have been used in the process to trigger change. The role of place-making in African informal settlements is however largely untested. Informality itself is a salient statement which emphasizes bottom up community action to partake of the benefits of formality; need/desire for betterment, tenacity/innovation in the face of lack, and community cohesion. All these constitute the major principles of place-making. If a marriage can be contracted between place-making and informality, the union can play a regenerative role in informal settlements of Africa. This paper therefore reviews literature as a basis for making a case for place-making as a panacea for informality in urban settlements in developing countries. The notion of the essence of informality is discussed with the aim of highlighting existing positive attributes that can be used in the same ways as in place making as triggers for change. Also the triggers that have been found to work as catalysts in sustaining revitalization in other communities were highlighted, so as to bring out significant areas of similarity that can be compared with the highlights of informality to find a blend that could possibly be a solution to regeneration of informal areas in African cities.

Informal Settlements and the Essence of Informality

The American Heritage Dictionary of English Language, (2015) defines informality as the state, condition or quality of being informal or the absence of formality; while formality is defined as an established form, rule, or custom, especially one followed merely for the sake of procedure or decorum. In the context of human settlements informal settlements are described by the United Nations in two ways; first as residential areas where a group of housing units has been constructed on land to which the occupants have no legal claim, or which they occupy illegally. Secondly, unplanned settlements and areas exist where housing is not in compliance with current planning and building regulations (unauthorized housing) (WHO, 1999). Porter, (2011) succinctly defines informality as associated with modes of human settlement or exchange that occurs outside formal legal structures and processes. These types of settlements characterize majority of urban areas of Africa because of rapid urbanization and inadequate capability of governments to cope with the housing needs of people in urban areas. Other factors contributing to informality are high cost of land and 'red tapism' associated with obtaining land titles. These exist in the periphery and areas close to the center of most urban centers in Nigeria. Informal settlements make up more than 60-80 percent of the physical development in Nigerian cities (Nwaka, 2015) are characterized by poor infrastructure like street networks, poor sanitation, overcrowding, social problem, lack of access to amenities and services.

The development of the informal sector follows closely the general pattern of urban development in Nigeria. Many urban centers in Nigeria predate colonialism. Traditional centers in those urban areas often retain their traditional outlook, attitudes and practices; housing styles and cultural practices side by side modern formal areas. They have persisted after colonialism forming areas of informality which are extensive. Also, British colonial administration did not conceive of nor promote cities as centers for industrial production or job creation rather as small enclaves for administration, colonial trade and transportation; hence development of urban areas was very conservative with emphasis on provision of infrastructure restricted to the European Reservation areas. Sadly, these restricted areas were inherited with little rethinking by the post-colonial administrations and have been quickly overtaken and overwhelmed with the process of rapid urban growth and transformation. In present day Nigeria and other African countries a new process of urbanization is being unleashed unto urban centers with the masses of relatively low income immigrants taking the center stage in

trying to solve problems of accommodation and employment on their own. According to Nwaka (2015), the urban poor are now dominant and in most cases are transforming the city to meet their needs, often in conflict with official laws and plans.

These dominant populations highlight a significant and appealing characteristic of informal urban areas which is- its apparent direct manifestation of the rights and need of residents of such settlements. Bayet (2000), concisely states this fact as he defines urban informal settlements as "the silent, protracted but pervasive advancement of the ordinary people on the properties and powerful in order to survive and improve their lives. This characteristic of informal settlements brings out powerfully the essence of informality, described as the loudly silent need of informal residents to also partake in the benefits of formality. This is seen in the tenacity and persistence to obstinately eke out a living in the face of the lack of structure and infrastructure, that has forced them to look inwards by providing electricity lines with poles that resemble matchsticks, and water using hand dug wells. The desire to provide infrastructure in the face of lack represents a bottom up approach to planning the city even though in the context of developing countries, the lack of structures to guide planning foster poor and degraded environments. Nevertheless, these settlements are thriving and growing and taking over many Nigerian cities.

Another aspect of the essence of informality is the community cohesion that exists in such settlements. Though the settlements are a mix of diverse ethnic, socio economic and cultural heterogeneity, actions that improve and benefit the communities happen on a daily basis. These actions such as community development associations, shared infrastructure like boreholes, self-help contributions and shared banking highlight cohesive community action that can be further harnessed to improve the community. Community cohesion is also noticed in the manner of arrangement of buildings which depict rural compound styles.

Innovativeness has ensured that even though the poor dominate informal settlements, the urban environment is slowly evolving to suit the needs of the informal residents. An area where ingenuity is seen is in the distribution and linking of electricity line without intervention by providers and provision of drainage networks that are hand dug. Satellite connections for television are tapped from providers even though these are illegal. Nonetheless, these efforts show innovativeness and the desire to partake in these necessities. These elements of the essence of informality depict the potential on the side of communities that can be harnessed by government and agents of city planning to bring change to the state of informal settlements.

Then again the position of agents of change and planners concerning informality is one that dismisses the sector as an anomaly, a source of disorder, and an obstacle to the development of a modern economy. In most cases they denounce all that is associated with informality such as slums, health risks, insecurity, and exploitation. Planning decisions are carried out as if informality is a transient phase in the course of development, and the informal sector will wither away with time and economic progress. These positions have influenced government policies to remedy informality like urban renewal and gentrification, which have been dismal failures. Consequently, planners and policy makers find the informal settlements problematic and have undecided and antagonistic attitudes towards the sector. They question if the informal sector is beneficial or harmful. The quandary of planners is daily exacerbated because in planning for improved settlements, some issues plague the mind of planners, such as; if the informal sector thrives because of its informality, and because rules and regulations are minimal, does it make sense to try to formalize and integrate it into the formal economy with laws, codes, and standards that could disrupt its activities and growth? On the other hand, what about the health

hazards, as well as the rights and safety of the vulnerable groups that works in the informal sector? These mind bugging questions arise because improved   conditions in rapidly developing cities   make the cities attractive to rural dwellers who in turn exacerbate the problems of unemployment and squalor; which if persistent could make cities unlivable and unsustainable for present and future generations.

Remedial actions sought by government policies have often not only   failed to stop the predictable and irremediable process of urbanization, but has caused social fragmentation, loss of cultural values, social problems and have pushed the cities to grow in a disorderly way with accumulated urban problems. Contemporary planning approaches suggest that the path to urban sustainability lies in greater realism in building and managing more inclusive and socially equitable cities.   This would involve among other things like legislative and administrative policies, broad-based partnerships that take the needs and participation of the informal sector fully into account (Nwaka 2005).

The Role of Place-Making

Renewal of urban areas involves a number of approaches generally six can be identified as; An economic/market driven approach, a legislative approach, a program driven approach, an academic/theoretical approach, a community engagement/participatory approach and a professional/applied approach (Jacobs 1961; Whyte,1980, Alexander, Ishikawa, Silverstein, Fishdahl-king and Angel, 1979; Bacon 1974). These approaches can work singly or as a combination. Their purpose is to improve the quality of life of urban residents as well as improve the urban environment. Contemporary planning approaches are targeted towards compact, mixed-use, and walkable communities with spaces that have meaning to residents. These approaches emphasize bottom up participatory processes by the community in conjunction with urban design professional and government officials. However, they are relatively new and untried in African cities.

Urban renewal has been attempted in Nigeria in the past examples like Maroko show that the attempt ended as dismal failures causing problems of social fragmentation, social problems and riots. The experience has made urban planners in Nigeria to look at more bottom-up approaches being under taken by developed countries such as place making which is a combination of legislative, economic and community participatory approach.

Place-making is both an overarching idea and a hands-on tool for improving a neighborhood, city or region. It has the potential to be one of the most transformative ideas of this century (Project for Public Spaces, 2015). Place-making involves collectively shaping the public realm to maximize shared value. This is done by planning, design, management and programming of public spaces. It is entrenched in community-based participation and facilitates creative patterns of activities and connections (cultural, economic, social, and ecological) that define a place and support its ongoing evolution. Place-making creates successful urban places because it is community-driven, visionary, adaptable, inclusive, and focused on creating destinations, flexible, culturally aware. Further to this, place-making places function above form; is ever changing, trans-disciplinary, context-led, transformative, inspiring, collaborative and sociable.

Place-making has being used in many cities of the world to create and recreate public spaces .in these culturally, economically and politically diverse areas some aspects of place making have been identified as triggers for change. Beza, Munoz-Villers, Garza, (2013) highlighted six of such strategies that have contributed to renewal of two urban areas as; a leader or

visionary of the process of change, dialogue between parties and data gathering, development of cultural programs targeted at a specific response, plans guidelines, policies and or technical notes, physical transformation and cultural/social evolution and vision development/regulation. These design elements and the essence of informality is discussed below:

A Leader or Visionary

In the areas where place making has been used to achieve urban revitalization it is notice that one individual or a group of people have championed the cause of revitalization by maintaining the tempo of action. In developing countries' informal settlement, because of the sense of community that exists, they usually look to a community leader for resolution of differences. This leader is often chosen by the community themselves and in most cases serve as a vigilante. Where this is not in place traditional institutions should have a representative in every settlement in urban centers. Such leaders can be educated and sold the idea of revitalization and can serve as a rallying force for revitalization.

Dialogue Between Parties and Data Gathering, Development of Cultural Programs Targeted at a Specific Response

In many informal communities, there are already meetings of heads of households that gather to discuss difficulties facing the settlement. In most cases these meetings are held in a central place and convened by the vigilante head or locally acknowledged leader. These meetings are a good forum for gathering data that is relevant for place-making initiatives. Also these settlements are made up of culturally diverse ethnic groupings, have their meeting days, and display artistic performances on festival days. These festival activities could be used as a cultural rallying point for place-making.

Plans, Guidelines, Policies and/or Technical Notes

These inputs are professional and technical. However, the challenge is moving urban design professionals out of their offices to take on advocacy roles in the community. With the social and physical structures on ground, there is a veritable stage already set on which place making can be practiced. Streets form a good ground because in these informal settlements streets are the most prominent and available public space, hence they are places of importance and collective ownership to residents of informal settlements. All kinds of activities take place on such streets as they provide places for identity, social and cultural interactions and economic exchanges due to paucity of other types of public spaces. Also, the network and distribution of streets ensure that whatever activities that are prevalent on them reflect on the city. Urban planning practitioners can use street spaces to experiment on applying place making to revitalize informal settlements. Challenges that may exist range from legislation, finance to frame transformation. Also existing as a challenge is finance which self-help schemes by the communities can offset. Even aids from international agencies can be accessed if a community based transformation plan can be worked out.

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