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User's Preference of Activity in Akure Public Spaces.

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Abstract:

Users' preferences of activities in public spaces are influenced by a variety of factors, such as personal interest, social types, available facilities, and the surrounding environment. This paper examines users' preferences for activity in Akure public spaces to explore and understand the activities that users prefer engaging in within shared spaces. Information on respondents' socio-economic characteristics, the availability of public space, and their activities was obtained from a structured questionnaire conducted with 334 respondents from the core, transitional, and peripheral zones in Akure. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse the data. The result shows that public spaces in the study area are used for social and religious activities, as they ranked 1st and 2nd, respectively. The result of the hypothesis testing shows that there is a significant relationship between the availability of public spaces in the study area and the activities that take place. This study recommends enforcement of the proper use of public spaces for their primary purpose of curbing indiscriminate and inappropriate use. Urban planners, architects, and policymakers should engage in designing and managing public spaces to meet the diverse needs and interests of the users.

Keywords: Public Spaces, Availability, Activities, Users, Preference, Accessibility, Akure.

1.0 Introduction

Cities and towns are subjected to various physical, social, and environmental changes that are reshaping the built environment (Daramola and Ibem, 2010). Over the years, urbanization trends have increased the number of migrants moving into the urban area for greener pastures, and there is a need for adequate buildings, public spaces, and the provision of basic infrastructure and services for the ever-increasing population. Important components of the built environment are public spaces that enhance social integration among city dwellers.

Public spaces are spaces that are open to people and accessible to all classes of people (Madanipour, 2010). They include squares, plazas, and urban green spaces that are open and accessible to everyone for gathering and socializing (Ravazzoli and Torricalli, 2017). They are to shape the pattern of the development of the built environment to satisfy residents' needs. In the same vein, they are to shape the built environment to provide a place for social interaction among the residents. Public spaces such as streets, parks, and gardens are significant components of urban form, which can be seen physically in the neighbourhoods (Larson, Jennings, and Cloutier, 2016). Public spaces are owned and managed by local or state governments, and recently by individuals and corporate organizations (Mitchell, 1996, Javadi, 2016).

The everyday use of public spaces has changed from recreational activities to other functions as deemed fit by the government and other interest groups. They provide a place for people to relax, socialize, and be part of urban life. Public spaces are subjected to a lot of uses depending on users' preferences for social, political, and economic activities. An effective circulation within the neighbourhood that connects places, people, and activities provides common areas for social interaction and facilitates the integration of communities (Madanipour, 2004). The use of public spaces differs from one person to another, even among age groups; there are preferences in the types of activities that can be engaged in while in public spaces. Ramoraka and Tsheola (2014) noted that public spaces provide a hangout for not only social integration but also for economic, social, and religious activities.

Public spaces have characteristics that encourage continuous patronage by residents and tourists to maximize their use. Accessibility and comfortability are the essential ingredients of functioning spaces (Ravazzoli and Torricalli, 2017). They must have free access with adequate facilities for users. As vital ingredients of successful cities; they help to build a sense of community, identity, and culture (Anderson, 2016). One of the characteristics of public spaces is that they allow free and unhindered access to residents and tourists as much as desired. Pojani and Stead (2015) opined that public spaces encourage ease of access to and from the city as a result of circulation flexibility. Good public spaces are required for the social and psychological health of modern communities. For an attractive city image, it is important to have effective public spaces to improve city attractiveness (Mehta 2013). Public spaces in Akure are used for many activities that are not recreational, most especially as event venues for Friday parties and Sunday church services.

Chitrakar, (2017) posits that some public spaces remain underutilized and some have been put to inappropriate uses, such as illegal encroachment of public space as a result of haphazard

development due to a lack of proper and adequate planning control. Aribigbola and Fatusin (2016) posit that the low quality of public spaces, the inadequate size of public spaces, poor maintenance, and the conversion of public spaces to other uses are some of the features of most neighbourhoods in Akure.

The study focuses on public spaces in Akure, Nigeria. The study location is Akure, Ondo State. Akure is a traditional city that existed before colonial rule. According to Akinbamijo (2004), Akure is divided into four zones: the core area, the transition area, the peripheral area, and the public housing districts. This study covers five major existing public spaces out of the twelve identified in Akure, as shown in Table 1. Fig. 1 shows the locations of public spaces, (Games Reserve Amusement Park, Oyemekun Rocks, Democracy Park, the Ministry of Agriculture Botanical Garden, and the House of Assembly Arcade). The five public spaces that spread across the core, transition, and peripheral areas of Akure were chosen due to the rapid urbanization and expansion of the town and its growing commercial activities. The study summarizes and interprets findings from the quantitative research approach using a structured questionnaire; the data obtained were subjected to descriptive and inferential statistics.

Table 1: List of Public spaces in Akure.

S/N	Public Spaces	Owner	Location
1.	Illula recreation ground	Ondo state government	Sijuade, Akure
2.	Ondo state ministry of Agriculture botanical garden and park	Ondo state government	Alagbaka
3.	Democracy park	Ondo state government	Oja (Adesida road)
4.	Wotts garden	Private	Igbatoro road
5.	Oyemekun rocks and unity villagers	Private	Oyemekun
6.	Green square	Private	Off Oba Adeside, Ijapo.
7.	House of assembly arcade	Ondo state government	Igbatoro road
8.	Games reserve amusement park.	Private	Ikota junction. Akure-Ijare road
9.	Akure forest reserve	Ondo state government	Off Ondo-Akure Rd
10.	The rock amusement park	Private	FUTA
11.	Alagbaka biological park	Ondo state government	Alagbaka
12.	Neighbourhood recreation park	Private	Oba Adesida road

Source: Aribigbola and Fatusin, (2016). Ogunmakinde, Akinola, Siyanbola, (2011).

Physical features of public space extend from the streets, parks, and squares of a town or city into the buildings that enclose and line them. Examples of public spaces as described by Gehl, Gemzoe, and Rogers (2008) include streets, alleys, buildings, and squares everything that can be considered part of the built environment. Public spaces are not only places where activities take place; they are also places for mobility, for people to come to, leave from, and pass through. Bonenberg (2015) posits public space as a component of urban structure and a physical entity of neighbourhood facilities that enhances the physical and social components of the residents.

Gallacher (2005) posits that public spaces are the everyday spaces within a community where people meet to socialize with each other. Public space describes the physical features of the urban environment, such as parks, greenery, and street spaces; they provide recreational facilities, services, and amenities to its dwellers (Javadi, 2016, Whyte, 1988; and Hickman, 2013). Public spaces have an impact on residents' quality of life, such as green spaces, open spaces, playgrounds, plazas, and street furniture (Ramlee, Omar, Yunus, and Samadi, 2015). Morphet (2016) categorizes them into physical (environmental/green) and social communities, (Table 2).

Table 2: Categories of public spaces

S/N	Physical	Social
1.	Green Space	Markets
2.	Open spaces	Shopping mall
3.	Hills/ mountain tops	Schools
4.	Parks	Church/ mosque
5.	Waterfalls/ lakes	Hospitals

Source: Morphet, (2016).

The benefits of public spaces are enormous; they improve the quality of life, promote community existence, and add to the beauty of the city. Public space is a place where people meet and socialize irrespective of age, tribe, or religion, whether in a small neighbourhood park or a large city center. Public space brings people together for so many reasons, including social activities, political activities, cultural activities, religious activities, and sometimes economic activities. People can come together for social activities such as relaxation, exercise, and meeting people, which encourages social integration among city and community dwellers. Silaci and Vitkova (2017) conclude that social and cultural activities are carried out under the open sky, in public spaces, and in open spaces. Public space plays a vital role in the cultural and personal development of an individual; cultural practices can be shared and experienced by people only in public spaces. (Rupa, 2015)

Public space plays a vital role in the economic development of cities as a place where people engage in economic ventures and tourism development. Children are often seen in public spaces hawking one thing or another for their parents; inappropriate use of public spaces is a common occurrence in Nigeria (Adejobi et al., 2013). With the advent of democratic rule in Nigeria,

political rallies and campaigns take place in public spaces. Also, for weekend owanbe parties, public spaces are used as event centers all within the country.

Public space is an important aspect of human existence that aids interaction and is a meeting point for social activities. Successful public spaces are designed and developed to attract a range of uses and activities by providing an opportunity for socialization among users' (Chitrakar, Baker, and Guaralda, 2017). One of the major challenges in the management of public spaces is the regulation of use and how to ensure that public spaces are used for their main function, be it for social, political, or religious purposes (Chitrakar et al. 2017).

Public spaces are faced with numerous challenges, and their management is vital to their continued existence and use. Some of the factors affecting public spaces are encroachment, conversion in use, decay, insecurity, a lack of basic amenities, funding, and economic decline. A major challenge is ensuring safety in public spaces with the high rate of crime, kidnapping, unknown armed men, the presence of mentally deranged people, and other illegal activities in society. Ensuring the safety of users of public spaces and curbing inappropriate use will increase patronage and increase economic gains for investors.

DeMagalhaes and Carmona (2009) examined the practices in the management of public space and their potential consequences and noted that the management of public spaces is associated with the public sector and local governments, and public spaces are traditionally owned and managed by public agencies and management. Management identified four (four) interlinked approaches to public space management by the public sector, community-based organizations, and private sector: the regulation of uses and conflicts between uses, the maintenance routine, the new investment into on-going resourcing of public spaces, and the coordination of interventions in public spaces.

. Many authors have attributed poor maintenance as one of the problems facing the management of public spaces, Chitrakar et al. (2017) noted that lack of regular maintenance and weak urban governance at the neighbourhood, local, and state levels also affect the use of public spaces. The management of public spaces enables the space to fulfil its functions as a venue for social contacts through regular maintenance and the regulations of use while keeping it safe and inviting for its uses Chitrakar et al. (2017) state that the management of public space must consider regulating its uses, enforcing proper usage, especially by unwanted people, and controlling accessibility.

3.0 Methodology

The research was carried out using the survey research method. Numerical, descriptive, and explanatory data were obtained. Questionnaires were administered to residents and tourists who utilized the public spaces in the three (3) zones selected out of the four zones of Akure. A total of 384 copies of the questionnaires were distributed, and 334 were retrieved and used for this study. Information on respondents' socio-economic characteristics, the availability of public space, and their activities was obtained from a structured questionnaire.

The sampling frame comprises twelve (12) public spaces in Akure, of which five are: Game Reserve Amusement Park, Oyemekun Rocks, Democracy Park, the Ministry of Agriculture

Biological Garden, and the House of Assembly Arcade. Data collection occurred in the evening, on weekends, and during the festive period. Both descriptive and inferential techniques were used in analysing the data obtained from the field survey. The relationship between the availability of public spaces and activities was analysed using Spearman's rho correlation coefficient, which is used to infer whether there is a relationship between two variables at the ordinal level.

3.1 Results and analysis

The field surveys in Table 3 revealed that the majority of the respondents are male, with the highest percentage of 63.5, while 36.5% of the respondents are female. This study revealed that people younger than 30 engaged in more leisure time and physical activities than all other age groups, with a percentage of 43.4%. About 2.1% of the age group, which was between 70 and 80 years old, was not involved in leisure or physical activities. About 42.5% are self-employed, 22.5% are unemployed, 17.7% are civil or public servants and the least number of respondents (4.8%) are retired. 41.3% had higher education compared to all other levels of education. The majority of the respondents who used the public spaces are educated. 47.6% of the respondents are single, and 47% are married. Meanwhile, the monthly income of the respondents is low (50,000 Naira).

Table 3: Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	212	63.5
	Female	122	36.5
	Total	334	100
Age	Less than 30 years	145	43.4
	31 – 40 years	95	28.4
	41 -50 years	49	14.7
	51 – 60 years	27	8.1
	61 – 70 years	11	3.3
	Above 70 years	7	2.1
	Total	334	100
Employment Status	Unemployed	75	22.5
	Self-Employed	142	42.5
	Civil/Public Servant	59	17.6
	Private Sector	42	12.6
	Retired	16	4.8
	Total	334	100
Educational	No formal Education	1	0.3
	Primary	7	2.1
	Secondary	87	26.0
	NCE / OND	64	19.2
	HND / BSC	138	41.3
	Postgraduate	37	11.1

	Total	334	100
Marital Status	Single	159 (47.6)	47.6
	Married	157 (47.0)	47.0
	Widow / Widower	12 (3.6)	3.6
	Divorced	4 (1.2)	1.2
	Separated	2 (0.6)	0.6
	Total	334	100

Source: Researcher's Field Work, (2023).

3.2 Availability of public spaces and their activities.

The people visiting the public spaces used the space for one activity or another. The activities include social, religious, economic, cultural, and political. The result displayed in Table 4 shows that the majority of the people who visited the public spaces used the space for social activity, with the highest RII value of (0.787) and the highest standard deviation of (0.918) being rated "agreed" by the frequency and percentage distribution of 194 (58.1 per cent). Other activities mostly carried out in public spaces include religious (0.726 RII; ± 1.155 std) being rated "agreed" by 134 (40.1 per cent); economic (0.711 RII; ± 1.113 std) being rated "agreed" by 143 (42.8 per cent); cultural (0.687 RII; 1.068 std) being rated "agreed" by 136 (40.7 per cent); and political (0.683 RII; 1.177 std) being rated "agreed" by the frequency and percentage distribution of 121 (36.2 per cent). This implies that the public spaces in Akure, which are divided into three zones, including the core zone, transitional zone, and peripheral zone, indicate that in all the zones, the respondents always use the public spaces for social activities, religious activities, as well as economic activities. Smith (2016) posits that more events are taking place in public spaces, unlike in the past when events were held in parks, streets, and squares. The respondents also used the zone for other activities, such as cultural and political ones. For instance, the public spaces in the core zone are mostly used for political activities, while some areas in the transitional zones are used for cultural activities. Meanwhile, in the peripheral zone, all areas are used for religious and social activities; this finding is in accordance with the study Ikoku (2004), which posits that public spaces can be used for numerous activities such as social, cultural, economic, religious, and political ones.

Table 0: Descriptive analysis of the activities in public spaces

Activity	Frequency and Percentage Distribution					Relative Importance Index			
	SD (%)	D (%)	U (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Total Score	Statistic	Std. dev	Rank
Social	11 (3.3)	18 (5.4)	32 (9.6)	194 (58.1)	79 (23.7)	1314	0.787	0.918	1
Religious	19 (5.6)	46 (13.8)	55 (16.5)	134 (40.1)	80 (24.0)	1212	0.726	1.155	2
Economic	16 (4.8)	53 (15.9)	58 (17.4)	143 (42.8)	64 (19.2)	1188	0.711	1.113	3

Cultural	14 (4.2)	59 (17.7)	77 (23.1)	136 (40.7)	48 (14.4)	1147	0.687	1.068	4
Political	21 (6.3)	65 (19.5)	65 (19.5)	121 (36.2)	62 (18.5)	1140	0.683	1.177	5

Where SA indicates strongly agreed; A – agreed; U – undecided; D – Disagreed; and SD – strongly disagreed, Std. dev – Standard deviation

Source: Researcher’s Field Survey, (2023).

3.3 Relationship between the availability of public spaces and their activities

The relationship between the availability of public spaces and activities was analysed using Spearman's rho correlation coefficient. The result in Table 5 showed that variables are significantly associated with the availability of public space at a P-value < 0.01 (1% significance level). The variables that are significant include political ($\rho = 0.253$; $p = 0.000$); religious ($\rho = 0.181$; $p = 0.001$); cultural ($\rho = 0.271$; $p = 0.000$); social ($\rho = 0.252$; $p = 0.000$), and economic ($\rho = 0.153$; $p = 0.005$). Meanwhile, the degree of the relationship shows a weak positive relationship between activities and the availability of public spaces. It is therefore pertinent to generalize that public spaces are used for other purposes as required by the government or other interested individuals or groups because such places are within the neighbourhood and hence could serve as a point of gathering for the populace. The study by Silaci and Vitkova (2017) showed that public spaces performed other civic functions in cities, such as social, political, physical, economic and symbolic functions.

Table 5: Correlation of availability of public space and activities

	Availability of Public spaces	Political	Religious	Cultural	Social	Economic
Availability	1.000					
Political	.253** (0.000)	1.000				
Religious	.181** (0.001)	.460** (0.000)	1.000			
Cultural	.271** (0.000)	.526** (0.000)	.474** (0.000)	1.000		
Social	.252** (0.000)	.392** (0.000)	.223** (0.000)	.364** (0.000)	1.000	
Economic	.153** (0.005)	.230** (0.000)	.198** (0.000)	.204** (0.000)	.317** (0.000)	1.000

Where *** indicates P-value < 0.01; ** indicates P-value < 0.05, and * indicates P-value < 0.1, ρ indicates the Spearman’s rho correlation coefficient, NS indicates Not significant and S indicates Significant.

Source: Researcher’s Field Survey, (2023).

3.4 Testing of Hypotheses

A bivariate analysis was conducted on the usage and availability of public space in the zones. Kendall-Tau b correlation analysis is a non-parametric test used to test the strength of the relationship between two variables. The two variables considered are the availability of public space and activity.

The null hypothesis used in the analysis showed that there is no significant relationship between the availability of public space and its activity. It is further stated that if the probability value (p-value) < 0.05 (95% confidence interval), reject the null hypothesis; otherwise, do not reject the null hypothesis.

From the result of the analysis displayed in Table 6, it is shown that there is a weak positive relationship between the availability of the public space and its usage, as indicated by the value ($\tau = 0.323$). This implies that an increase in the number of public spaces will increase their usage. A significant relationship is established between the variables at a P-value (0.000) < 0.05 (95% confidence interval). This proves that the null hypothesis is rejected at a P-value < 0.05 and the alternate hypothesis is accepted. The study hereby concludes that there is a significant relationship between the availability of public space and its usage. Ord, Mitchell, and Pearce (2013) noted that the availability of green space and its attractiveness within the neighbourhood are associated with its usage and can improve patronage.

Table 6: Availability of public spaces and activity

	τ (coefficient)	P-value	Remarks
Availability	0.323***	0.000	Significant

Where *** indicates P-value < 0.01; ** indicates P-value < 0.05, and * indicates P-value < 0.1, and τ indicates the Kendall tau correlation coefficient.

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, (2023).

Policy Implications

The study established that users' preferences were for social and religious activities in public spaces in the study area. From the results, it shows there is a change in use and there is no control or enforcement of use for the main purpose of public spaces, which is recreation. The government, through the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, is involved in the control and management of public spaces in the study area. There is a need for private agencies, corporate organizations, and investors to take over the running of public spaces through investment, and revenue from this can boost the internal generation of revenue for the state. This can be achieved by introducing affordable fees that will ensure proper maintenance and management of public spaces.

Conclusion

The use of public spaces in Akure is a major problem, as evident from the observations made during this study, which include a lack of adequate spaces, the conversion of spaces for economic purposes, and political and religious activities. Challenges such as lack of basic amenities and change of use, for example, are turning public spaces into mere event venues for weekend parties. Akure, like most cities, has witnessed a significant level of transformation in its urban environment.

Findings from the study revealed diverse uses of public space in the study area. Generally, there is a change in use, from serving as a place for relaxation to a large social gathering for parties, religious activities, political activities as a result of democratic rule in Nigeria, and economic activities; this situation is reflected in the three zones of the study area. Although the existing public spaces in Akure are not adequate and are not suitable for the activities that take place in public spaces, the study noted that more attention has not been given to usage and activities in public spaces in Akure as a result of the change in use of the space to other uses than providing relaxation needs for the populace. Public space should be accessible for social and recreational use while incorporating other activities such as political, religious, and economic activities that are properly monitored and controlled. A functioning public space will attract tourists and be a source of revenue for the government and other interested groups. According to the findings of this study, public spaces should meet the needs of users for a variety of activities as deemed appropriate by the government, individuals, and other organizations.

An ideal public space should allure people to enjoy the visual experience of using the place; it should not just be used as a transitional space to pass by, but rather, it should be a place that improves the lives of the people using it (Chopa and Mahapatra 2018). The study recommendations include that public spaces in Akure are used for other purposes, such as political, economic, religious, and cultural activities, and that regulations of use and maintenance strategies should be put in place for proper use of the spaces.

The result showed that existing public spaces in the study area are used for social activities, as evidenced by their ranking as the first, and that efforts should be geared to making them comfortable and satisfying for the users, which can subsequently increase revenue generation and attract investors to public space development. Enforcement of the proper use of public spaces, whose primary purpose is to curb indiscriminate and inappropriate use.

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