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The Implications of the Changing Face of Public Open Spaces in Old Port Harcourt Township, Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

There has been an increased consciousness recently in Nigeria on the importance of recreation. This is reflected in the increase in the use of public open spaces in Nigerian urban centres. As the population of the city of Port Harcourt is rising astronomically daily, it is also expected that there should be a corresponding increase in the number of public open spaces for recreational activities by urban managers but this expectation is far from reality. The available open public spaces provided by the designers of the initial development plan of the city are gradually being converted to other land use activities. The inability of the available open spaces to serve the high population in terms of their outdoor recreational pursuit has resulted into a situation where the open streets in residential neighbourhoods are being used for congregational meetings and as play areas by neighbourhoods kids. The implications in this respect are diverse both to the residents and policy makers. In view of this, a clinical study was conducted in order to advance solution on how best to tackle this unpleasant situation in the city of Port Harcourt. It was discovered that lack of statutory policy on the part of policy makers in the provision, development and management of public open spaces was responsible for the decrease in number and degeneration of existing public open spaces especially in the Old Port Harcourt Township. This study has therefore come to the conclusion that the establishment of a statutory policy to protect and guide the development of public open spaces should be the first step in the provision and development of public open spaces. This study believes that this can only be possible if the government will cease to look at public open spaces in terms of its economic benefit to the government alone but also in the light of its psychological and physical benefits to the members of the public.

This paper is an outcome of a rigorous field research covering several months. Mixed Method Research Design was adopted in the collection of information for the study. Literature from previous works of other scholars relevant to the study was also used to add some flesh to the study. The success of the response from respondents contributed greatly to the success of this research work.

Keywords: Recreation, Space, Ground, Township, Gardens, Natural,Conservation

INTRODUCTION

In the science of spatial planning, open spaces have long been accepted as an integral part of the residential environment. Its importance and significance lies in the fact that it adds beauty to the physical environment and also helps to bring some measure of improvement to its quality. Open space definitions vary by jurisdiction. For Asikogu and Asikogu(2006), open space is “either land not built upon which may be natural or man-made. It may also be land developed as gardens and recreational ground or under developed land which have value for recreational purposes, amenity or for conservation purposes”. Marilyn (1975), defines open space as “natural and cultural resources synonymous with neither unused land nor recreational areas or land or water areas with its surface open to the sky, consciously acquired or publicly regulated to serve conservation and urban shaping function as well as provide recreational “opportunities”. Thus when the term urban “open space” is used in the geography of spatial development we can borrow these and other definitions in land use planning. Scholars like David (2001), opined that open space could mean all spaces of public value not only restricted to land but also island, water bodies such as lakes, canal and reservoirs which offer important opportunity for sports and outdoor recreation and can also act as a visual amenity”. Urban open space may be privately or publicly owned but in all they are often designated for leisure, play or sports. They can also be provided for the protection or enhancement of the physical environment.

In Nigeria, there has been an increasing consciousness on the importance of urban public space within the residential districts. This consciousness is reflected in the astronomical increase in the number of users of recreational open spaces in our cities from the 1970’s. The high level of population usually recorded in public recreational centres especially during festive periods in the country is proof of the increasing consciousness and demand for such facilities. Urban planners are aware of this fact and have responded positively in the preparation of urban, community or city’s land use development plan in Nigeria. In the preparation of the Development Plan of Port-Harcourt in 1959 and 1973 the increasing demand for public open spaces was adequately accommodated by the designers of the plan. The 1959 Development plan of the city upon implementation saw the emergence of various public open spaces in the various residential districts; low, medium and high density. The objective was to add pleasantness to the environment and a measure of relief from the appearance of other physical structures or development such as. bridges, roads etc. Although the plan was overtaken by the intensive development in the city due to the astronomical increase in commerce and human population, the intentions of the plan was clear; to develop an aesthetically pleasing and functional environment were the population could dwell and do business with ease.

Method and Techniques

The public open spaces in Old Port Harcourt Township were located in the high density area of the southern belt of the city. It was expected to serve the population in thirty eight streets in the high density residential area. Six of these public open spaces were located between Niger and Bende Street. The seventh one was located between Accra and Freetown Street while the eighth public open space was located along Club road. Our target population for the study were residents residing 200metres radius within each public open space in the Old Port Harcourt Township. To derive our sample, a listing of all the buildings within the eight public open spaces was made(200metres radius). A total of 359 buildings were listed and a representative sample of 50% drawn around each public open space. Using the simple random sampling techniques we were able to pick a total of 180 buildings to which questionnaires were directed at. In each building questionnaire was directed at the Landlord. Where the Landlord does not reside in that building, it was directed at the tenant. Where there are multi-families in a single building, questionnaire was directed at the oldest tenant. Group discussions were conducted in each of the existing open public spaces used by members of the public. Four group discussion sessions were conducted using the four Saturdays in the month of June 2021. In the group discussion in each of the open spaces, the first ten users to arrive between 7am-10am were picked to form the group for that open space.

All the questionnaires sent out were returned successfully and the response positive. Relevant information were extracted and used for the study. Oral interviews were also conducted with a senior staff each randomly selected from the Ministry of Urban Development, Tourism and the department in charge of management of open spaces in the Port Harcourt City Local Council office. Personal observation technique was also adopted. Documented information relevant to the study were also extracted

Table 1 Number of buildings within 150metres radius, sample size and questionnaire administered

Location of open space	Name of Open Space	Total number of buildings within 150metres raduis	Sample size(50%)	Questionnaire Administered
Niger/ Bende street	No.1 Field	50	25	25
Niger/ Bende street	No.2 Field	52	26-	26
Niger/ Bende street	No.3	52	26	26
Niger/ Bende street	No.4 Field	51	26	26
Niger/ Bende street	No.5	40	20	20
Niger/ Bende street	No.6 Field	42	21	21
Freetown/Accra street	Freetown Open Space	33	17	17
Club road	Liberation Drive Open Space	38	19	19
Total		359	180	180

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The Concept of Open Space

The United States Environment Protection Agency conceptualized open space to mean “any piece of land that has no building or structure on it and can be easily accessed by members of the public”. Within this framework are community gardens, playgrounds, vacant lots, public sitting areas, school field, green open spaces and public plazas. Each of these serves as a recreational site for members of the public although the manner of recreational activities varies among them.

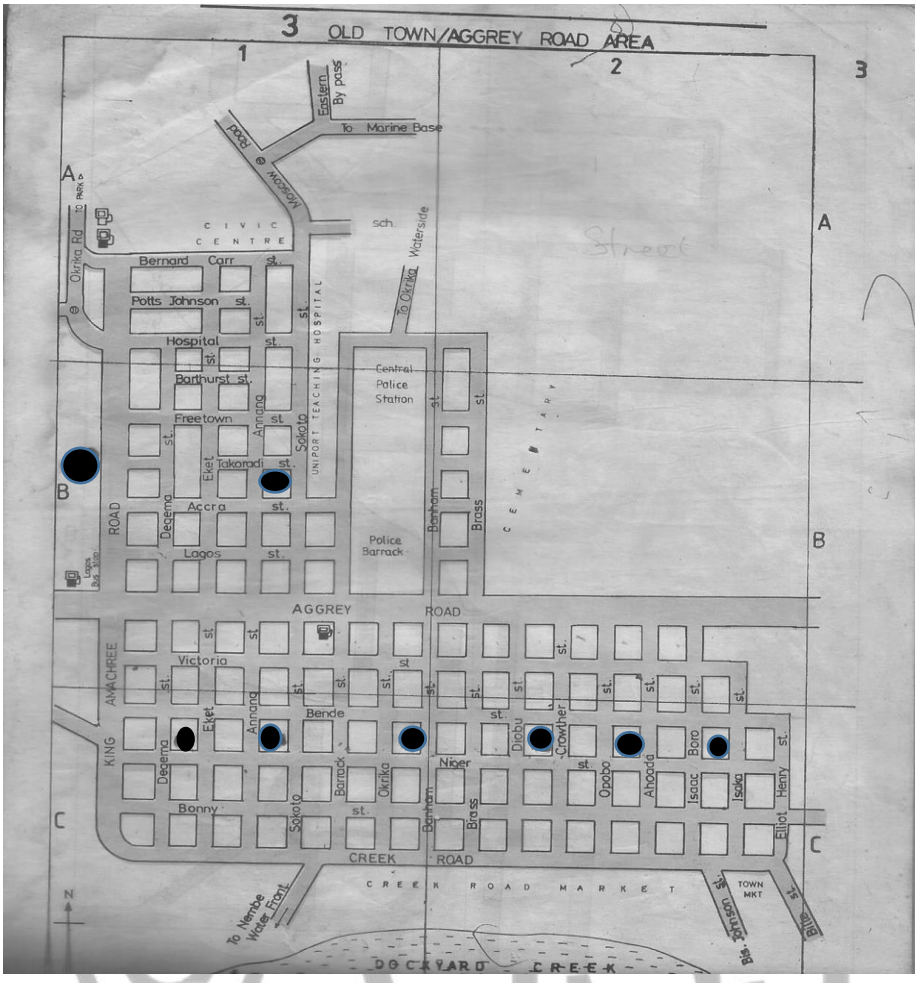

Fig.1 ● Part of the street map of Old Port Harcourt Township showing the Location of the public open spaces

Besides recreational activities which open spaces offer, urban planners have seen it as a tool to improve the aesthetic quality of the residential environment. The thought of Ayah, Chaham and Glen (2016) is in line with this. In their work they opined that the use of open space "impact on our sense of quality of life and on our physical and psychological wellbeing……." This is to say open space as part of the built environment stands to encourage chains of physical activities or human behaviour. They are created and maintained for the residents of the city or urban centre. Open space definition is very broad and could range from areas very active to areas very passive in nature. In the former, you have areas like parks, ball field, swimming pools and in the later are areas like wetland and hunting areas.

In the urban planning context, open space is generally regarded as "managed open space, typically green, available and open to members of the public" (Cormona, 2010).

The Importance of Open Spaces

Castillo (1994) in his summation of the underlying importance of open space opined that "it enhances community health and wellbeing" He believes that social isolation and exclusion can be very detrimental to the health of an individual. The provision of "designed spaces" to promote or encourage the gathering of people or social interaction in communities according to the World Health Organization can improve mental health. Such designed open space for Tailor (1995), can be very positive, psychologically rewarding and equally inspiring, promoting a sense of chains of positive feelings(McConnell and walls, 2005). The provision of neighbourhood parks and lined trees along urban streets create good scenery for the city's residents. Green infrastructure such as gardens helps to absorb dust and gases emanating from urban activities and helps in preserving the natural need of residents to stay healthy. Wildlife conservation helps to protect endangered plants and animal species. Open space can be used

as a tool to protect and preserve areas of scenic beauty, cultural values and historical importance. It can also be used to protect areas with ecotourism potentials. Undeveloped coastal and estuarine land can help in protecting the ecosystem. Providing green open spaces close to residential abode not only supports regeneration or improved quality life in the community but affords residents of all ages the opportunity for informal and formal recreation. Such open spaces can also serve as places for congregating or to hold public events.

The Public Open Space Concept in Nigeria

One of the challenges seemingly confronting the country today in the provision, development and management of public open space is the absence of green space legislation. This has greatly affected the development, implementation and sustenance of urban public open spaces provided in the various urban master plans across the country. This factor coupled with the lack of serious awareness on the part of the bulk of the urban population on the importance of urban green spaces has placed serious constraints in the development and sustenance of green urban public spaces in Nigeria. Historically, most Nigerian urban centres had taken off either as products or creation of the colonial government, or meeting point for the exchange of agricultural products by the local population. For the former it was for the purpose of administrative convenience and economic benefit. The later metamorphosed from mere transit points into ancient commercial and administrative headquarters for the traditional government and the locals. The creation of public open spaces was part of the provision in the structure of these traditional urban centres. These open spaces were used for different functions ranging from commerce, religion, agricultural to socio-cultural activities (Abdulkaem, 2004). Public open spaces in Nigeria are as old as ancient traditional settlements in Nigeria. The emergence of traditional settlements also came along with as part of the structures of the town, the provision of public open spaces. Villages and towns adopted different form of public open spaces which they call different names; town square, market square, family playground etc. The Igbo “court yard” concept is an example of the traditional architecture of town structure in our rural settings. The rise in the number of industrial urban centres in the country, the attendant rural-urban migration problems coupled with the socio-economic crises arising from over population had given birth to the various town planning laws in the country. The most recent of these laws was established by the federal government in 1992(Urban and Regional Planning Law, 1992). The various laws emphasized on the preparation of urban master plan to guide the physical development of the astronomically growing urban centres in the country. In urban centres where such spatial plans exist, adequate provisions were made to accommodate public open spaces. It is on record that due to political rascality, lack of continuity in government and lack of strict adherence to the provisions of the planning laws by successive governments in various regions and states, most urban centres in terms of spatial growth are a complete deviation from the consciously prepared spatial plans(Kio-Lawson, Duru, John and Eebee, 2016). Thus areas designed as green public spaces(for recreational purposes) in our cities are most often put into other land use activities. Even in urban areas where efforts were made to implement the urban master plan strictly, the absence of laws on public space in the country has hindered the development and maintenance of public open spaces. Thus from city to city, urban area to urban area in the country there is great deficiency in the availability and development of public open spaces.

The Public Open Space Concept in Old Port Harcourt Township

The development plan introduced by the colonial masters in 1959 to guide the spatial growth of the city made provision for the creation and development of several public open spaces in the city. The Old Port Harcourt Township was adequately considered in the distribution of these open spaces because of the high concentration of population and economic activities in that part of the city. The bulk of these public open spaces created in the city were geographically developed between Niger and Bende streets in the Old Port Harcourt township(popular referred to as Town). They were numerically labeled as Number 1 to Number 6 field. Another open space was created between Freetown and Accra street while along King Amachree(Club) road another public open space was created.

These open spaces were to serve the population in the Old Port Harcourt Township housing a population of approximately above two hundred thousand persons in the 70’s. This geographical area of the city was largely dominated by the low income cadre. Plot sizes ranges between 12x20 metres and 15x30 metres respectively. Plot types were designed to encourage the development of multi-family homes. Because of the smallness in the size of plots provision of space for indoor recreational activities were not considered by private home developers. The creation of public open spaces was therefore seen as a well thought out plan by the designers of the city’s development plan. They were created to provide opportunities to the different age structures for outdoor

recreational activities. By their structural composition and creation, the open spaces provided opportunities to walk, cycle, physical exercise, swimming, play football and other games as well as a place for congregating and hosting community or family events. From the design, each of these open spaces was to satisfy particular primary recreational need and other related activities(see table 2).

Table 2. Open Spaces provided by the 1959 Port Harcourt City Development Plan

Location	Name of Open Space	Primary use	Secondary use
Niger/ Bende street	No.1 Field	Footballing Activities	Community Meetings, Funeral Services, Birthday celebration
Niger/ Bende street	No.2 Field	Basket Ball Sports	-
Niger/ Bende street	No.3	Football	Community Meeting
Niger/ Bende street	No.4 Field	Housing a Swimming Pool and Cycling area	Community Meetings, Religious Activities
Niger/ Bende street	No.5	Information Centre	Wedding Ceremonies, Religious Activities
Niger/ Bende street	No.6 Field	Football	Religious, Activities, Community Meeting
Freetown/Accra street	Freetown Open Space	Basket Ball, Football	Religious, Activities Community Meeting
Club road	Liberation Drive Open Space	Major Football Competition for Amateur Clubs Age grade football competition/Secondary and Primary School games	

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Source: Author's Field Work

The vision of the designers of the Development Plan of the city concerning the provision of public open spaces in the old Port Harcourt Township was among others;

I. Develop play ground with modern equipment that was to aid recreational activities for all age groups.
II. To provide recreational areas for social and family meetings, picnics, ball games involving few persons.
III. To provide gardens or green spaces in the neighbourhoods as to create good scenery for residents within the area.
IV. To help students to fulfill their sporting pursuit e.g football, jogging, table tennis, cycling etc.

The designers of the Development Plan of the city knew that the absence of open spaces for recreational activities in the old Port Harcourt Township will result into the younger population using the streets to satisfy their recreational pursuit. It will also result into residents occasionally closing the streets against vehicular traffic for the purpose of family or community meetings as the population of the city was already rising at an astronomical level. Secondly, the rising population was already creating housing famine in the old Port Harcourt Township causing squatter settlements to emerge in marginal lands found at the periphery of the Old Port Harcourt Township. These settlements were known as waterfront settlements and were already gaining ground as at the time the Development Plan was designed. There was already the gradual growth of population around these waterfront settlements. They were initially used by the fishermen from the riverine communities as transit camps and later grew into permanent residential settlements with the astronomical rise in housing famine in the city. The physical geography of these waterfront settlements does not permit for outdoor recreational activities. The younger population needed a place to recreate. This was adequately considered by the Development Plan of the city. Also considered was the astronomical rise in the population of the Old Port Harcourt Township, south of the city as against the northern axis. This was also part of the reason that accounted for the large concentration of public open spaces along this geographical belt of the city. In totality, the broad objective of the plan was to build a city that will be economically and socially viable, and functionally efficient. Two things worked against the plan from actualizing this broad objective. The first was the absence of effective development control agency to implement the plan. The other was the intensive physical development in the city which was not predicted by the plan. This intensive development came with some attendant problems: the city was growing without 'walls' and development 'control'. There was intense pressure on land for residential, industrial and commercial purposes. The government response was the introduction of the Port Harcourt City Master Plan in 1975. It was meant to guide the intense development in the city; rapidly growing human population and physical development.

Consideration was given to the adequate development of the public open spaces in the city by the Master Plan. The sudden change in government in Rivers State and the lack of political "will" on the part of successive Administrations did not allow these recreational open spaces to be developed in line with the visions of the Master Plan. Despite the fact that these open spaces lacked modern infrastructure to boast recreational activities they were still able to provide some measure of opportunities for residents of the area to fulfill their recreational needs. Each of these open spaces has its own recreational status and category of users among the population.

Recreational Status of the Open Spaces in Old Port-Harcourt Township

1. **No. 1 Field:** Measuring approximately 50m x 120m in size. The open space is walled by four streets; Niger, Bende, Degema and Eket street. Apart from the open field, there was no facility that could have qualified it as a modern recreational centre. It was mostly used by the youths in the evening after school hours as a football pitch. At weekends especially Sundays, it provided venue for community and family congregating. By the side of the field is the largest "Suya" market in Port Harcourt operated largely by Hausa traders. The market operates all night. The area is popularly called "Suya Joint". Night life here is very active and could last into the early hours of the day. The open space is also used as make-shift sleeping joint by some of the Hausa traders that do business around the area at night and some homeless youths. The popularity of this centre was facilitated by its closeness to a popular night club(Romeo Hotel) that provided very lucrative atmosphere for night life; approximately 100 metres away;
2. No. 2 Field: This open space was provided with a basketball court and was a congregating point for the different age groups that were interested in the basketball sports. It was a very popular field used sometimes to host inter-street, inter-school or some major state and national basketball competitions in the city.
3. No. 3 Field: This open space was like the number 1 field. It was lacking in modern facility to aid recreational activities. Approximately the same size with the number 1 field with only an open space for soccer and congregational meetings.
4. No. 4 Field: This was perhaps the most popular open space in the area among the youths. It was known as "Jubilee Pack". Its popularity was partly because of the presence of a public swimming pool attached to it. It was an open space noted for cycling activities. Most urban youths visited the area just to learn how to ride the bicycle. It also provided bicycle-hiring services for those youths who desire to hire a bicycle for few minutes to run around the street. The presence of garden trees and mobile food vendors daily at the site made the 'park' a good place to relax during the heat of the day. At weekends, the 'park' was a busy place for picnics or celebration of birthday parties or club meetings.
5. No. 5 Field: It was the smallest of the open spaces along the Niger /Bende street stretch. It was called information centre because it was
   housing part of the office of the then Ministry of Information. Later the large hall there was converted into a public space and placed on hire to members of the public for congregational use.
6. No. 6 Field: The open space here was used to host major inter-street soccer competitions. Occasionally the field was also used by some secondary and primary schools in the old Port Harcourt Township for inter-house sporting competition. This field was the most used by religious groups for religious crusade because of its strategic location.
7. Accra/Freetown Street Open Space: This open space housed a mini-basket-ball court and an average space for soccer.
8. Club Road: This was the biggest open space in old Port-Harcourt Township and the most central. Though it was empty in terms of recreational facilities, the open field was used as a soccer pitch and sometimes used to host major youth soccer competitions in the state. Beside the soccer pitch it can accommodate up to 2000 fans in major competition.

The Changing Face in the Use of Public Open Spaces in Old Port Harcourt Township

The establishment of Port-Harcourt in 1913 by the colonial masters and its geographical location made it an important center for commercial and industrial activities. The initial pressure for physical development of the city was towards the southern axis of the city. The colonial masters desirous of pursuing their economic interest established a railway line and seaport in the city. The seaport was located in the southern part of the city. They also established a residential development pattern in the southern part of the city that displayed element of planning and development control; establishment of a Central Business District (CBD), a colonial quarters and native quarters with well laid out access roads. The development increased the status of the southern part of the

city. It was not surprising therefore why the initial pressure for land development was at the southern part of the city among the competing land use activities. By the turn of the 80's the city's population was above 500,000 persons. The largest percentage of this population resided in the southern part of the city that has a higher concentration of government facilities. Valuable land space at this period was already exhausted in this section of the city forcing land use activities to face the northern part of the city. The implication was that public facilities in this part of the city had to contend with over usage at this period. Another implication was the emergence of squatter settlements at the mangrove swamp walling the southern part of the city. They were formed by those from the riverine communities who were not ready to move north ward because of their economic benefits. They were initially used as a transit camp by this group but with the growth in the economic status of the city permanent residency became inevitable. With the increasing population in the city accompanied by housing famine and astronomically rising rent the mangrove swamp offered some of these residents a place to raise a home(Kio-Lawson, 2013). With development now moving north ward the southern part of the city became known as the "Old Port Harcourt Township. The over concentration of population in the old Port-Harcourt Township did not only affect land use pattern, public open spaces in this area were also affected. While the Master Plan advance by the Diette-Spiff administration in 1975 was to sustain the development structure of the colonial masters, lack of commitment to this vision by successive administrations in the state stood as an obstacle. This singular factor is largely responsible for the changing face in the use of public open spaces in the Old Port Harcourt Township.

Fig.2 The Club road public open space now converted to a Mono-rail station(uncompleted)

While not denying the fact that some of these open spaces have received some attention on the part of the government (upgraded to increase their recreational status), some of them have been converted to satisfy other land use activities. The Number 1 field has received a total rehabilitation. It has been developed into a modern football field with improved surfaces and beautiful seating area that can house a capacity of two thousand spectators during soccer competitions. It has become popular for hosting some major inter-street football competitions.

The Number 2 field has also received a major boast from the state government. Several improvements have been added to the existing facility there. Beside the Port-Harcourt Civic Centre, it stands out as the only basketball court in the city that has the capacity to host major national basketball competitions.

The Number 3 field was initially used as a make-shift market for some of the traders that were affected by the rehabilitation and expansion of creek road (the road accessing the Creek Road Market). The Creek Road Market is the largest and oldest market in Port Harcourt City. The market due to its popularity expanded to cover parts of the vehicular section of the main road. Traders who could not find any space inside the market took over the road thereby making it difficult for cars to access the road with ease. The government response was the fencing of the market and the rehabilitation of the road. During this period, traders affected were relocated to the Number 3 field. It was to be a temporary measure and the traders were expected to move back to the market at the

completion of the project. But this was not to be as the space today has been converted into a fully blown market. It is a famous market today for dry fish and fairly used clothings locally referred to as second-hand clothes, bend-down select or Okrika wake-up.

The number 4 field (Jubilee Park) still maintains part of its recreational status. The government recently added some improvements to the facility, thereby increasing its recreational status. It is used by churches and families to organize picnics and outdoor meetings. The open space that once housed a public swimming pool opposite the Jubilee Park now has a huge public building named after a former Nigerian beauty queen "Agbani Derego" with a large hall. The hall is used for public functions and sometime rented out to members of the public for personal use.

The Number 5 field has been fully developed into a lawn tennis court but most often rented out by the government to members of the public for social functions. By renting it out to members of the public for social functions, the government is making some revenue from the facility. The facility is fully gated and has restricted access to neighbouring kids for recreational purposes.

The Number 6 field has been developed into a football facility. Perhaps this field is the most popular field among the open spaces within this vicinity. It can be accessed by neighbourhood kids at any time of the day. It is not restricted to any particular set of users. It is noted for hosting urban community and street soccer competition. The field is also noted for hosting religious crusade and other activities.

The Accra/Freetown open space has been sold to a private investor. The space is now housing an imposing private hotel.

Fig. 3 The location of the Accra/Freetown open space now housing a private hotel

The club road open space has completely lost its recreational status. The government of Hon. Rotimi Ameachi converted the space to a mono-rail station(although abandoned and not functional)

The Implications for Residents and Urban Managers

Open spaces in Old Port-Harcourt Township were located along the low income belt. Plot sizes in this area ranges between 21x20 and 30mx15metres with buildings designed to accommodate multi-families. The development pattern of plots does not provide enough space after development for kids to play indoors. The response by the neighbourhood kids to satisfy their recreational desire within this high density area is to turn the streets into play fields. The development plan of the Colonial Masters provided for these open spaces along this high density residential area to help neighbourhood kids to satisfy their recreational needs. The location and provision of these open spaces added pleasantness to the low income residential environment as well as a measure of relief to the appearance of physical structures. They also provided for neighbourhood sense of oneness among street kids. Mr

Vincent Daniel, a 58year old civil servant who had lived close to the Jubilee Park (No. 4 field) for 25 years and one of the respondents had told us " I was less than 15 years then when I had my first bicycle experience at the Jubilee Park. I was scared of riding the bicycle but one day through the encouragement of other kids I took a bold step and that was it. Then there were also the bigger boys at the playground who made few coins daily by teaching those who do not know how to ride the bicycle. We also have those who came with their bicycles for hire. It was great fun those days having a place to hang around every day with your friends. It was also a safe place for kids to run around and parents were sure to find any kid not at home at the playground".

Mrs. Magdaline Jumbo, another respondent, now 60 years old who had lived all her life in the Old Port-Harcourt Township added that "where Agbani Darego Hall is standing today was a swimming pool. That was where I met my husband. I had gone there that faithful day with my five friends after school. Among the six of us I was the only one that could not swim and coming from a riverine community I was never comfortable with that. That day after close of school I had followed by friends to the pool, determine to break the yoke. On getting there, I was still very scared of the water, and then this big boy seeing I was scared offered to help me. Later we became close friends and fell in love, then marriage followed after we both graduated from the university".

Those who designed the development plan of the city knew that the provision of public open spaces will afford residents the opportunity for congregating and physical exercises among the younger population. The change in use of some of these open spaces coupled with the astronomical increase in population has resulted into overcrowding of the few available ones. It has also led to a rise in the use of the street for soccer and congregational meetings. A survey conducted in the first week, each of June, July and August, 2021, to find out the number of users in the available public open spaces showed a high figure with the Number 6 Field standing out as having the highest number of users at 36.07%(see table 3). This high figure explains the importance attached to public open spaces by neighbourhood residents.

Table 3. Number of Users in the available Public Open Spaces in the first week of June, July and August, 2021

Open space	Number of user in the first week of June	Number of users in the first week of July	Number of users in the first week of August	Total	Pecentage
Number 1 field	4447	4807	4210	13464	25.58
Number 2 field	2007	3201	3106	8314	15.80
Number 4 field	2927	2511	2633	8071	15.34
Number 5 field	1302	1201	1089	3792	7.21
Number 6 field	6244	6401	6332	18977	36.07
Total				52618	100

Source: Author's field work

One horrifying trend arising from this situation in Old Port-Harcourt Township is the emergence of night street soccer. Most neighbourhood kids who could not use the streets in the day because they were busy with vehicular traffic have resorted to night street football. The same trend is also noticed every Environment Sanitation day in the city (the last Saturday of every month set aside by government for general cleaning of the city). During this period there is restriction of both human and vehicular movement between 7am and 10am).

A survey conducted in ten streets randomly selected in Old Port-Harcourt Township in all the Sundays of the month of October, November and December 2021 showed an average of four streets involved in night street soccer. The same survey conducted in the same ten streets on three State Environmental Sanitation Days(Saturdays) recorded a total of nine street soccer points on the vehicular carriage way. The implications are numerous; as residents find it difficult to sleep at night when such games are on. They could last into the early hours of the day. Secondly kids are left with injury of diverse degree arising from the hardness of the road surfaces (not meant for soccer but vehicular traffic).

Public open spaces are also used for congregational meetings. The change in use or restriction in usage of some of these open spaces has its own implications for residents and neighbourhoods. The number 1 Field has been completely restricted to soccer. Due to the large concentration of population in the vicinity the pitch has been completely taken over by the youths for soccer activities throughout the week. The pitch is never available for any other activities. It is never free for even congregational meeting. The Number 5 field though has been development into lawn tennis court but hardly available for neighbourhood kids to use. Because of the revenue government is getting from it, the space is more in use for social function than for recreational purposes. The response of neighbourhood kids for the change in use of some of these open spaces in Old Port Harcourt Township

is the use of the open street as their play area. In the same way, families and residents have also resorted to the use of the open street for congregational meetings on the payment of the approved fees. A survey conducted between January and June in 2021 on the use of the open street to host congregational meetings showed the following result in ten streets randomly selected in Old Port Harcourt Township.

Table 4. The use of Open Street to host congregational meetings in ten streets from January-June 2021 in Old Port-Harcourt Township (with approval from the City Council and the Nigerian Police).

S/No	Name of Street	Number of Use	Percentage
1	Bonny	8	10.8
2	Victoria	12	16.22
3	Bende	10	13.51
4	Niger	13	17.57
5	Lagos	5	5.76
6	Freetown	6	8.11
7	I.B Johnson	7	9.46
8	Barthurst	4	5.41
9	Bernard Carr	6	8.11
10	Banham	3	4.05
Total		74	100

Source: Port Harcourt City Council and the Nigerian Police

The implication is that such roads are usually closed to vehicular traffic during the hours of such congregational meetings thereby putting much pressure on the adjoining roads or streets. It is common to see horrifying traffic congestion in the adjoining streets and roads during such hours. Another emerging trend that has become part of the urban life in Old Port-Harcourt Township is the issue of “community boys or street gangs” These ‘gangs’ though are considered ‘illegal groups’ in the eyes of the law yet have established some degree of control over the available open public spaces and streets in Old Port Harcourt Township. These street “gangs or community boys” have developed themselves into an organized structure, and had succeeded in integrating themselves into the urban socio-economic life and are presently out of the control of established democratic governance. Besides getting the necessary approval from the relevant authorities for the use of any of the open spaces or streets for congregational meetings or social functions by members of the public these ’gangs’ must also be settled. The consequences for refusal always attract violence from the gangs.

One of the issues confronting public open management in old Port Harcourt Township is the absence of adequate security structure to protect users. With a democratic government ready to do little or nothing toward the nightmarish issue of housing famine in the city, public open spaces in the Old Port-Harcourt Township have become a dwelling place for most urban street gangs who do not have basic education or skill to earn a decent living. Thus most of them cannot afford to pay for high rental accommodation in the city. The public open space for them therefore offers an alternative place to lay their heads during the day and night. Each of the public open spaces in the area has been colonized by different street “gangs”. They are usually recognized by politicians who also use them to settle political scores. This explains why some members of the public avoid the use of some of the public open spaces in Old Port Harcourt City. Out of the 181 household heads interviewed living in close proximity to the open spaces, forty percent acknowledged that members of their families do not use the public open spaces in their neighbourhoods for recreation or any other purpose. Some of them opined that the decision is part of a way of “staying safe” from the criminality associated with the open spaces in their neighbourhood. Documented report had shown that indeed these open spaces are not free from some of the criminality associated with old Port-Harcourt Township. Some of these criminality are cult-related crime, prostitution, homosexuality, drug sales, robbery etc.

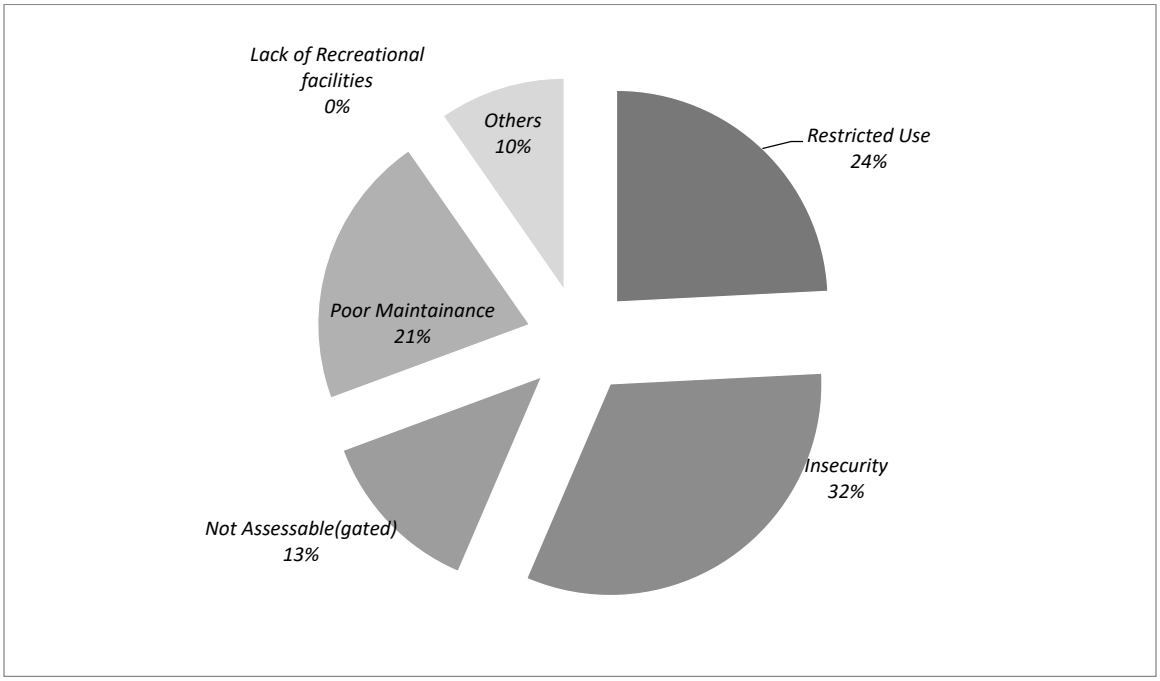

Fig. 4 Reason for not using the public open space in your Neighbourhood

Table 5 Incident of criminality associated with some of the open spaces in Old Port-Harcourt Township 2017-2020.

S/No	Name of Open Space	2017-2020	%
1	Number 1 Field	18	27.7
2	Number 4 Field (Jubilee Park)	24	37
3	Number 5 Field	6	9.23
4	Number 6 Field	17	26.15
Total		65	100

Source: Nigerian Police and Newspaper Report

Conclusion and Recommendation

Open spaces are integral parts of every growing urban centre. They add pleasantness and quality to the urban environment. They also afford the population the opportunity to take some time away from the hustle of urban daily life. The users of urban open spaces therefore have so much to benefit. The chain of physical activities that takes place in public open spaces creates positive impact on the quality of life of the urban dwellers and also promote their physical and psychological wellbeing. An understanding of these benefits was behind the reason why the designers of the development plan of the city of Port Harcourt provided for public open spaces in the Old Port Harcourt Township. However the extensive physical development of the city and the lack of effective management, monitoring and control of the physical growth of the city on the part of public office holders had distorted the original structure of the city. Subsequent administrations after the colonial masters lacked any clear policy direction on the provision, development and management of public open spaces in the city. This singular flaw is largely responsible for the gradual degeneration of public open spaces in the city. While there is an astronomical increase in residential and commercial land use activities, there is no corresponding increase in the provision of public open spaces especially in the high and medium density residential neighbourhoods for recreational purposes. The failure of the government to develop the recreational open spaces to meet the recreational interest and demand of the residents has created unpleasant situation in the recreational habits of residents especially neighbourhood kids. The changing face in the use of some of these public open spaces is a display of the lack of commitment on the part of the government to meet the recreational needs of the inhabitants of the city. The increase in patronage of the few established private and public recreational centres during festive seasons is an indication of the increase in the consciousness of the importance of recreation among the urban

population. An understanding and acceptance of this fact is the first step in tackling the issue of provision and development of public open spaces in the city. This will start with the establishment of statutory policy to protect and guide the development of public open spaces. This is achievable if the government will cease to view recreational open spaces beyond its economic benefit but in the light of its psychological, physical and spiritual benefits to members of the public. Any statutory policy established to guide the development and maintenance of public open spaces in the city should make provision for the establishment of a special agency. The duties of the agency should be to resuscitate decaying public open spaces as well as make recommendation for the establishment and development of more public open spaces in the city.

The period of usage of these public open spaces by members of the public should be fixed. Outside the period, the gates of these open spaces should be shut and adequately protected to prevent miscreants from assessing them. There should be a clear description of activities to be permitted in each public open space to prevent abuse

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