

Appropriating Cultural Aestheticism in Urban Tourism

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Abstract

As cultural tourism becomes an important focus for policy and research, the synergy of culture, art and other built environment disciplines in urban tourism is significant and relevant in cities. While architectural and artistic structures can be listed as landmarks and cultural focal points, studies on tourism locations have largely treated heritage and ecotourism sites as prime locations in geographical terms. This paper is an empirical analysis on the current state of artistic and socio-cultural icons in sub-Saharan African cities that examines the transformation of urban spaces within the field of urban tourism. Analyzing the city of Abuja, Nigeria this paper assesses the relationship between iconic structures and the city, the relative power they both have over urban tourism, and the utilization of an aesthetic and cultural model for place-making. Through an ethnographic approach, this analysis is carried out in the contexts of culture, art, and history, and mediated by urban spaces. As evident from findings, the place-making transformation of the city is driven by the need to create vibrant cultural scenes and attract both local and foreign tourists. Some themes emerge from this study that show tensions between cultural commodification and community empowerment and show that the physical change of Abuja is driven by a desire to create vibrant scenes and attract visitors. These changes have implications for tourism policy in Abuja and other cities in sub-Saharan Africa. This paper contributes to a deep understanding of cultural heritage and tourism and highlights the need for sustainable urban development that prioritizes cultural sensitivity and community engagement.

Keywords: icons, aestheticism, urban tourism, place-making, Abuja

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Introduction

In the study of urban tourism, there is an awareness of the concept's relationship with culture, heritage, and the built environment, and how this relationship affects the way people spend their leisure time and perceive the space around them (Evans, 2011; Lew, 2019; Saarinen & Rogerson, 2014; Selby, 2003). The aesthetic effect of art in culture, built forms, and other landmarks provides tourists and visitors from distant lands with the opportunity to appreciate entirely different cultural and historic identities. These attributes related to heritage are key in crafting the marketing of a place or destination (Korstanje et al., 2018). These destinations allow tourists and visitors to engage in experiences that can deepen their appreciation for and knowledge of a location's history and culture. According to Urry (1995), cultural aestheticism is the concept where cultural elements are used to create a sense of place, sense of identity, and experience in urban environments. And urban tourism often relies on the appropriation of cultural aestheticism to create authentic and memorable experiences for tourists (Richards, 2018). This paper examines the infusion of cultural and iconic structures in place-making, with a focus on assessing the role of icons in creating memorable and engaging experiences for visitors and tourists in Abuja, Nigeria.

Icons in Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory

The synergy of art and other built environment disciplines in studies of developing civic tourism is significant in terms of culture and heritage, and its applicability in contemporary urban surroundings. The complexity of conservationism and artistic heritage is studied as pastoral landmarks and archaeological sites (Council of Europe, 2012; De la Torre, 2002; Historic England, 2019). The aestheticism of iconic structures is the admiration of tourists, and indeed residents experience as they try to create meaning from these structures. Metropolises may learn from other cultural diversities and art forms, but it will be grueling to imitate them. With a show of diverse, rich, and colorful cultures in Sub-Saharan Africa, a lot is anticipated to be on offer in Abuja. In terms of planning and design, the city is a fantastic location, but its cultural and artistic assets are still not exploited and fully utilized. The design and planning of Abuja were intended to allow Nigeria to rid itself of its colonial history and undo everything the British colonials had done wrong in Lagos (Elleh, 1997).

Abuja is a city steeped in culture and history. Abuja's hidden, unbroken culture melds traditions from the indigenous Gwari tribe with those from the surrounding region of Kogi, Nasarawa, Niger and Kaduna states, telling the story of the territory's diverse cultures, history and identity. With a rich cultural history that goes back with the migration of the Gwari people from Borno into the Abuja region (Chigudu, 2008; Smith, 1981), it is expected that historic art forms should find new audiences in the urbane space of the city. With no visible and recognizable city brand, monuments and other iconic structures are seen by this study to produce a platform for the cities' image perception assessment, a means to solve the destination choice problem – and the direct impact on its tourism. However, it is worthy to acknowledge the constructed Millennium Tower located at the fringes of the Abuja Municipal Area in the Federal Capital Territory; arguably the tallest monument in Nigeria to date (Figure 1). The tower is part of a cultural development complex called the Nigeria National Complex, including the Nigeria Cultural Centre dedicated to the art and culture of Nigeria. Although the structure is tall, measuring approximately 170 meters high, it gives a rather dull first impression and fades away on the horizon as people move uphill or downhill in any direction of the city. Reasons for this shortfall are the monument's location, absence of aesthetics, and the lack of identity and meaning –

elements that create uniqueness in iconic structures. A more compelling shortfall is the immediate environments' lack of place-making attributes for leisure and recreation.

Figure 1

Millennium Tower, Abuja



Source: Author

With these challenges in Abuja, this paper places the urban space as a platform of human activity and discusses the current state or lack of significant cultural icons in sub-Saharan African cities and offers a range of strategies for a multi-dimensional perspective in the field of urban tourism. This paper assesses the relationships between iconic structures and the urban environment, the relative power that they have over urban tourism, and the utility of artistic and historic models. By focusing on artistic practice and architectural designs in Abuja, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of research in tourism geographies and the emerging discourse of creative spaces in tourism development.

Locating the Problem

While monuments and iconic structures are widely used as ornamentations in gardens and corporate buildings, their adoption on monumental scale by cities in sub-Saharan Africa is less contemplated. A major challenge for urban tourism in sub-Saharan Africa is infrastructure (Adeola & Evans, 2020; Leonard et al., 2020; Rogerson & Visser, 2014). Providing the necessary urban environment requires a coordinated approach to planning and place-making, as well as tourism infrastructure and utilities. The challenge for most cities' tourism development is the delicate balance of considering historic conservations and preservation of urban spaces with their cultural heritage while taking into consideration planning, infrastructural and environmental concerns (Council of Europe, 2012; De la Torre, 2002). Large scale architecture is minimal in sub-Saharan African, but where they do exist, present a bland outlook, and older structures are mostly destroyed from lack of preservation and conservation. This situation eliminates any form of urban identity that iconic architecture espouses. In response, this paper endeavors to fill this gap by putting forward a methodology for testing how cities are seen and perceived by people. It is pertinent to study how the aestheticism of cultural and artistic icons is adopted by cities as a tool of enhancing place identity, urban landscape and increasing tourism activities.

Purpose of the Study

This paper is an exploration of the realm of socio-cultural and artistic production associated with tourism in cities. Drawing on emergent strands of enquiry associated with environmental art and especially with place-making approaches, appropriating cultural aestheticism investigates the broad scope of urban tourism by focusing on the identity narrative of iconic structures. Iconic structures have been identified by this study as place-making gaps that require development, and the underperformance in tourism terms of sub-Saharan African cities relative to their cultural and artistic potential. Thus, the aim of this paper is to explore the concept of cultural aestheticism in cities by identifying various factors that contribute to the development of cultural tourism. The study goes further to investigate the significance of aesthetic appeal and cultural heritage of monuments in cities. The place identity approach is based on integration which allows the relationship between the icons and the urban landscape to flourish, and to direct tourism policies for Abuja.

While the aim of this study is to aid in the creation of business environments around iconic structures and documenting urban tourism and the influence of iconic structures in the evolution of cities in sub-Saharan Africa, having a distinctive aesthetic vision and exploring cultural landscapes of form is important to recognize any sociological and geographical approaches that transcend any problem-solving process in urban tourism. Public spaces in cities are continually defined by a mixture of visitors, businesses, and residents, hence the need to consider place identity as a viable means of enhancing urban tourism and economic activities by integrating iconic structures in the urban landscape of sub-Saharan African cities, concentrate on visual quality of icons, and the visibility of cultural forms on the cityscape. Icons transform not just urban spaces, but any geographical location. As public art that forms part of material culture, it is an act of place definition that distinguishes and makes a place distinctive (Cook, 2008).

This investigation is anchored on the concerns of the socio-economic and cultural processes that shape urban tourism, and the quality of life within them. Underlining this inquiry are questions related to spatial effectiveness, aesthetics, and visual appeal. Thus, there is a need to provide a comparative understanding of and a detailed insight into different aspects of tourists' experiences around icons in cities, and to examine the meanings and aestheticism attached to them from the perspective of the tourist. Consequently, in the quest for exploring urban space through the study of urban tourism, two questions are raised: (1) How are cultural icons and practices appropriated in urban tourism contexts? (2) How can place-making be utilized to prioritize visitor experience and create a sense of place? These questions direct the study to explore the fields of marketing, urbanism, and environmental art, and to identify and analyze their interrelationships regarding the making of the city in the context of history, culture, and practice.

Empirical Review

The empiricism that has dominated humanities, business and social sciences research has inspired new concepts and theories in tourism (Crompton, 1977; Leiper, 1989; Ritchie et al., 2005; Urry, 1990). The interaction between theory and practice is central to appropriating cultural aestheticism in urban tourism. Thus, the argument for an appropriation of cultural and historic themes in cities is a means of strengthening identities and the increase in business, cultural, and artistic inquiry. As an approach to city research, there is a close examination of the relationships between built forms, people, and places with the intention of improving the

quality of physical settings of public spaces for enhanced tourism experience. Strategically rooted in tourism geography, architecture, and environmental art, but broadly incorporating other disciplines such as sociology, economics, and place marketing, the strength of this study lies in its focus on human perception of place and the visualization of creativity and culture within the built environment.

There is a focus on monuments, architectural structures, and urban infrastructure, and all are treated as art and cultural forms by evaluating both artistic and engineered structures as urban artifacts and enablers of place-making and place identity. As enhancers of urban space, aesthetic imagination is given prominence as illustrations of visual appeal are taken from various cities across the world to demonstrate the embeddedness and influence of culture on the built environment. Thus, the aim is to create knowledge on cities in sub-Saharan Africa and the global south. This study is distinguished by ethnographic, experimental, and empirical research that covers different disciplines and sits within the strands of cultural studies, identity and place, cultural heritage preservation and management.

Culture and Aestheticism of Built Form

Based on a broad context, focus has been on analyzing art forms and aestheticism, and the role they play in tourism and culture in both a contemporary and a historically reflective way. Within the scope of this paper, aestheticism is seen as a multidisciplinary concept with a focus on art and culture in modern society. The aesthetic quality of a monument or other built forms, and the fascination it inspires, is an integral part of its utility in environmental design, urban design, and urban planning. Even in abstraction, it is uncomfortable for visitors to put up with a structure that is confusing, and which tourists are unable to relate to. However, it is a challenge to argue about aesthetic quality because it is difficult to talk about anything visual that requires interpretation by different people. Also, aesthetic quality deals with physical details and other visual elements.

Relational aesthetics, art inspired by social context (Bourriaud, 1998) which has been developed as a critical theory for analyzing and evaluating such undertakings, have still been contested. These debates on the aestheticism of forms have raised questions like, to what extent should the physical products of relational art be evaluated aesthetically as well as for their economic relevance and social effects? For any positive outcome to emerge from such evaluation we start to re-conceptualize the way artworks, in any form, are theorized “by looking at it in relation to its cultural context rather than seeing it as a self-sufficient entity” (Paetzold, 1997, page 4–13). These considerations should, however, include site-specific works like environmental art and urban landscape architecture, and take cognizance of artistic meaning. Art’s embeddedness in cities drives this exploratory investigation and its attempt to capture art and cultural ideas, and to suggest how cultural creativity might be developed and appreciated in a built environment. Abuja, the administrative capital of Nigeria, is renowned for the quality and wide range of its architecture (Figure 2). This analysis is comparative to the overall urban structure of the city while avoiding any form of tentative presumptuousness.

Figure 2*National Cathedral, Abuja**Source: Author*

The centrality measure of a built form creates a sense in which we may regard tourists as making destination choices amongst entire holiday plans or in the process of executing any plan (Varley et al., 2020). On such an occasion the tourist would not be choosing a city to visit in the belief that a mundane or ordinary environment will materialize. The effectiveness of place-making in creating a sense of place is part of the semiosis in the underlying intent of built forms and urban design, with monuments becoming the main attraction in a constructed environment. Monuments in cities, unlike most urban forms, imbibe the spirit of artistic aestheticism with a view to making a place attractive. According to Papastergiadis (2010, p. 15), “placement of art in everyday surroundings has created the need for new tools to determine its aesthetic value and social meaning”. Thus, it becomes plausible to view artistic forms like monuments in a philosophical sense. Aesthetic response is rapid, and this occurs within a short time of exposure to the art form or artifact (Ulrich, 2011). This is evident in contemporary urban design where, for example, the erection of a monument may evoke an instant aesthetic response due to its size or beauty irrespective of the message it is meant to relay.

Cultural Identities in Tourism

Visualization of places is an approach that addresses urban challenges arising from these developments. Urban theory and visualization techniques tackle challenges, combining practice with theoretical and methodological understanding of urban systems (Rose, 2022). Here is a transfer of architectural meaning across spatial distances and embedded in this space is the visual language of culture that is ethnographic. Even if an introduction to the concept of cultural aestheticism of monuments and other built forms might seem superfluous, Abuja has not been traditionally considered as one of the high-end tourist destinations of sub-Saharan Africa, but this research presupposes that there is much to add to the cultural and artistic attractiveness of locations than just impeccable urban planning and design. Mankind’s inherent desire to learn about the cultural identity of different parts of the world has been one of the drivers of the tourism industry (UNWTO, 2001). No doubt, first time tourists and regular visitors alike may find the well-planned cityscape in Abuja appealing. Tourists looking for more varied attractions within the city are more likely to end up at the shopping mall. As a

practical human activity, “culture is an inherent part of both individual and collective development, from the education of a single child to the finest artistic expression of entire peoples and nations” (Zukin, 2004, p. 3).

Studies in the last half century have revealed the importance of cultural representation in tourism (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 1990; Cheung, 1999; Prosser, 2001; Simpson, 1993; Uzzell, 1989). Some researchers have proposed that culture and tourism be combined in tourism development (Patterson, 1976; Ritchie & Zins, 1978). In cities, culture materializes almost everywhere in the built environment and parks, which become visual symbols of local identity. In a 2001 report, the United Nations World Tourism Organization attested that cultural heritage stimulates national pride for domestic tourism, and this cultural pool is always maximally explored by countries. Perhaps the only region with more diversity in terms of cultural heritage than sub-Saharan Africa is the Asia-Pacific sub-continent. Besides being the birthplace of the world's major religions, the interchange of cultures over centuries has resulted in the Asia-Pacific region having some of the most remarkable historical monuments in the world (UNWTO, 2001).

In contrast to sub-Sahara African cities, most North American, Southeast Asian, and European cities have within their landscapes, cultural and historic icons blend in scale and weight with monumental architectural structures and statues. Further out of the city centres, little remains of traditional aesthetics that connect these cities with their religious, historic, and cultural heritage and with other ethnic cultures. Culture might not have accepted standards but when embedded in the built environment, it takes a definite form with defined visual and artistic purpose (Cheung, 1999; Smith, 2007) A monument instigates tourists to ask artistic and cultural questions, probing deep into the history of their host city, a scenario where historical inquisition is at par with pleasure seeking. Sub-Saharan African countries like Nigeria are particularly rich where few have produced beautiful and accomplished artworks in stone, metal, and terracotta. Thus, Abuja may not have a rich history but its geographical location and status as the seat of government makes it an ideal destination to thrust forward the rich cultures of Nigeria.

Theoretical Foundation

This paper draws from theories of cultural studies, tourism studies, and urban studies to examine the complex relationships between cultural aestheticism, urban tourism, and local communities (Hall, 2008). Cultural appropriation is the process of drawing and adapting cultural elements from one context to another (Schneider, 2006). The aestheticization of structures is the process of creating a sense of beauty or attractiveness through cultural practices and symbols (Featherstone, 2007), while place-making is the process of creating meaningful and memorable places using cultural aestheticism (Lefebvre, 1991). This framework challenges traditional notions of space and place, and highlights the interconnectedness of people, objects, and environments through various forms of movement and gaze. The concept of a person's gaze is interesting when thinking about the context of exploring a place and traveling. Urry (2002) emphasized the globalization of the tourist gaze, “as multiple gazes have become core to global culture sweeping up almost everywhere in their awesome wake” (p. 2). The tourist gaze is the idea that a visitor will have a certain viewpoint of a structure or landmark, and that visitor gaze is much different compared to a local gaze. This is because “tourism activities are social in nature, and practiced by various social groupings” (Urry, 1995, p. 131).

Arguments have been made that space is largely constructed through tourism and leisure practices, and we are freer to move through space in our leisure time (Nielsen, 2013). To

understand the various forms of interactions and consumptions related to tourists' travel experience while visiting different cities, this framework aids in the review of the underlying theory and assumptions. As a way of achieving this study's objectives and answering the research questions, this framework is embedded into the research to help assess the leisure, economic and environmental impacts of icons, and how best to create an enhanced urban space for leisure and businesses in a way that produces value for the city.

Methodological Approach

This study does not have a single prescriptive research methodology but adopts an objective-led approach, with appropriate methods selected and applied according to the objective of the research. This approach utilizes visual methodologies and ethnographic methods advanced by Rose (2022). These are premised on interviews, observation and data gathering obtained from the primary research areas, including in-depth case studies of major cities within and outside Africa. Baker's (2012) evaluation criteria are adopted to develop methods for analysis of the cities' identity and evaluate tourists' performance measures. Tourism's multi-facetedness places it on every environment inhabited by man. This study, however, takes Abuja as the setting for this urban tourism inquiry. The investigation is confined to the urban areas of the city but places it within the overall tourism concept in sub-Saharan African context and globally. As tourists reside around the city centre of Abuja, there is access to them and will know their leisure and tourism infrastructure needs.

Data Collection

Drawing on existing literature on urban tourism, placemaking, and visitor experience around iconic landmarks for secondary data, this study employed a qualitative approach of data collection and analysis. The population of this study is taken from a sample of 50 tourists, 50 residents, 50 indigenes, and 50 business owners and organizations around the research area of Abuja. These numbers are chosen to make the data manageable. Primary data was collected through interviews, observations, and government policy documents. Qualitative data collection was carried out with participants Interviews that includes fifty residents of Abuja with demographic of characteristics of respondents between ages 18–65 years, 30% of whom were government workers, 40% private sector workers, 10% students, and 20% retirees, all of whom have been residents of Abuja for between 2–20 years. Interview of fifty visitors to Abuja with demographic characteristics of respondents includes ages: 18–65 years, nationality: local and foreign; purpose of visit: for leisure, research or business. Interviews of fifty hospitality businesses in Abuja with characteristics of the respondents include various types of business: Hotel, Restaurant, Bar, and tour operators.

Discussion

Using Leiper's (1989) framework of analysis, there is a different way of examining sub-Saharan Africa's perception of its position in relation to the perception of other cities in the world, and the highlighting of key areas the subcontinent needs to develop to attract visitors. By expanding and extending Leiper's concept, I show how governments use a variety of policy regulations to manage the cultural production of arts and architecture in Abuja. I argue that Abuja's quest to become attractive global cities is hindered due to their inability to emphasize the concept of place-making and the erection of iconic structures through the way it attempts to micro-manage the creation and production of material culture in Abuja. These issues,

coupled with a changing perception of African cities through the global lens, hinders the subcontinent's ability to compete with other global cities.

Themes emerge from these analyses that indicate that unless there are fundamental shifts in the way tourism and urban planning policies are implemented and enforced, it is unlikely that sub-Saharan African cities can truly reach their full potential and attain their goal of becoming global tourism hubs. Findings from this study indicate the importance of urban spaces in Abuja, Nigeria, in creating a memorable experience for visitors. Such findings are reflective of the need for clean and well-maintained spaces that reflect the city's identity. Cities, according to the Project for Public Spaces (2018), should be designed to prioritize the needs and experiences of residents and visitors. Iconic structures such as the Central Cathedral and National Assembly Complex play a major role in urban tourism development. There was emphasis on preserving, as well as promoting these structures which are essential for creating a sense of place and identity (Montgomery, 1998). These findings support the literature reviews in this paper that highlight the importance of icons in placemaking (Project for Public Spaces, 2018). The study's results also suggest that icons can help create a vibrant and inclusive public space that promotes cross-cultural understanding and exchange. The study's results also suggest that engaging with community members and residents can ensure that cities are designed and managed to reflect the needs and aspirations of local communities.

Conclusion

This paper has made an in-depth exploration into the role of iconic landmarks in the placemaking concept with a focus on the aesthetic nature of city spaces and examined the strength of icons in creating unforgettable experiences for visitors to Abuja. When tourists recognize they are moving into a vibrant and active environment, we should expect them to increase their budget plan that leaves them with more spending options. These options manifest due to shops and other business entities around tourist sites which monuments and statues espouse. Note should be taken of the economic context in which tourists and visitors spend their leisure time. However, in the leisure context, leaving aside the question of customer/provider relationships of the hospitality industry, many tourists and visitors are reduced to the status of “spender” whose preoccupation is buying under the influence of a leisure environment. In some situations, all perceived travel options may give a tourist cause for anxiety.

Some of the issues discussed in this paper are built on studies of different urban projects and initiatives. It looks at how urban identity can contribute to enhanced visitor experience and tourism competitive advantage. Furthermore, this study goes beyond utilizing icons as a form of cultural, social, or religious symbolism, but also focuses on how design strategies can be equaled by physical transformation. The results presented in this paper are not intended to serve as a template for any form of branding strategy or rallying call for branding. However, I hope the practices observed can help tourism practitioners and policymakers develop strategies that contribute to tourism growth. Built forms like monuments are not just about attracting tourists to a place but also help develop businesses and attract investments for residents. Monuments feed into the environmental arts narrative for the enhancement of sense of place. This analogy makes place-making an integral part of the tourism experience in cities.

Future Research Directions

Moving forward, this study will lead to exploring the application of innovative visitor experience strategies in other urban tourism destinations, exploring the impact of icons in placemaking on visitor behaviour and experience, investigating the role of technology in enhancing the visitor experience in urban spaces, and investigating the potential for placemaking to promote sustainable urban development and community engagement.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that no AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate, refine, or correct the content in the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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