

ABANDONED BUILDING PROJECTS: SOURCE OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

L. A. T. Lawal Maarches and Goshi S. K

Department of Architecture

Federal University of Technology, Minna, Niger State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

*Buildings irrespective of size, form and function have effect on observers and also the physical environment. This effect could either be positive or negative. The issue of abandoned buildings in Nigeria is not a new phenomenon. Depending on how one looks at it, it represents a failure in that a specific goal has not been achieved. This paper examines abandoned buildings as sources of environmental degradation. It highlights factors that are responsible for abandoned buildings as largely man-made such as insufficient budget provision for the project and litigation among others. It presents findings on some of the abandoned buildings in Minna, Niger State, Nigeria. The paper recommends reclaiming of titles by the government on the one hand and periodic evaluation of distressed properties with a view to determining and preventing abandonment of buildings on the other.*

**Keywords:** *Abandonment, Building, Environment, Degradation, Properties.*

INTRODUCTION

A city's aesthetics is largely the results of its orderly nature, its planning, infrastructure provision and the physical nature of the built environment. The buildings no matter how efficient in designs have their useful lives and tend to deteriorate as they age and consequently may be abandoned if they are not maintained. A cursory glance at some of the cities in Nigeria reveals a preponderance of abandoned buildings, boarded up buildings and vacant plots. Meanwhile, it is very common to hear complain of economic and social problems associated with residential and commercial structures that have fallen into disuse and disrepair. The issue of abandoned buildings in Nigeria is not a new phenomenon. This paper examines abandoned buildings in Minna, Niger State and their effects on the environment.

THE CONCEPT OF ABANDONMENT

Frequently, urban decay has often been viewed in terms of deplorable state of buildings and their lack of basic infrastructure together with the kinds of economic and social ills that are prevalent in that environment. Put succinctly, the phenomenon of abandonment of buildings is often a clear symptom of urban decay. There is no clear cut definition of abandonment. Abandonment has been defined by Greenberg et al (1990) in terms of structures on which "taxes and mortgages were no longer paid, and also for which services are neither paid for nor provided". In a related study, Greenberg et al (1990) defines abandonment in terms of buildings that are unoccupied, vandalised, boarded-up, and deteriorated or those which have unmaintained grounds. As suggested by O' Flaherty (1993), abandonment can mean an owner ceasing to provide maintenance and operating services to a building, or loss of owners' legal right, or the demolition of a building. While the definition offered by Greenberg et al (1990) seems appropriate for this paper, it is also relevant to note that abandonment is a dysfunctional episode in which buildings or properties are no longer in productive use. In further classifying the type of properties that should be considered when looking at the issue of abandonment, Green berg et al (1990, 1993) developed a concept of what is called "Temporary Obsolete Abandoned Derelict Sites" (TOADS). TOADS are "scattered, random unused parcels of land of varying size and shape, abandoned buildings and empty plots of land that are no longer put into productive use or they never were". For the purposes of this paper, a wide range of types of abandoned buildings are considered; these include - residential buildings (bungalow or Multi-storey) for single or multi-family, commercial buildings such as financial houses and banks, and retail shops, educational buildings (such as classroom blocks) industrial properties like warehouse and overgrown, vacant plots of land in the hub of the cities which are connected to all utilities.

CLASSIFICATION OF ABANDONED BUILDINGS

Four types of abandonment are discernible and discussed. These are – underutilised dilapidated buildings, unsecured vacated buildings, vacated business buildings and abandoned properties such as undeveloped, vacant plots of land and heavy equipment.

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**Underutilised Dilapidated Buildings** – These are buildings that show visible signs of collapse due to either dereliction or lack of maintenance or natural ageing of the building. The common features include part of the roof blown up, walls dilapidation and ageing signs on the structure.

**Unsecured Vacated Buildings** – These types of buildings may have been vacated due to natural or man-made factors ranging from forced evictions by the landlords or through natural causes such as flooding, or war

**Vacated Business Buildings**- These are business properties that are unoccupied which may be due to change of business location or office or litigation over the properties.

**Abandoned Properties** – This includes all vacant plots of land, machinery and equipment of factories that are out of operation, abandoned building sites of governments and individual owners that remain unproductive.

### CAUSES OF ABANDONMENT

In Nigeria, different reasons account for abandonment. These are –

- High cost of housing
- Uninvestigated housing alternatives
- Architectural obsolescence of building structures
- Forced evictions
- Prohibitive cost of building maintenance
- Litigation
- Improvisational housing

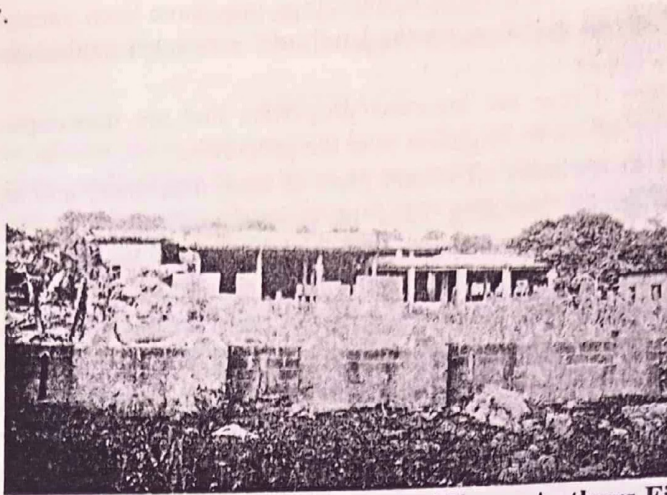
### THE STUDY AREA

The study was carried out in Minna, Niger State, to determine abandoned buildings and how they constitute environmental degradation as well as economic and social ills to the environment. For the purposes of this paper, Minna was divided into five neighbourhoods or zones; namely – Zone 1 comprising of Government Reservation Area (GRA), Zarumai Quarters and F- Layout, Zone 2 comprises of Mobil, Sabon-gari, Maitumbi and Emir/Kuta Road; Zone 3 comprising of Barkin-sale/Morris Fertiliser, Tunga low-cost, Saka-kauta, Shiroro – Nitecho Road; Zone 4 comprising Bosso, Tundun-Fulani, Okada Road, Kpakungu and Dutsen-kura, while Zone 5 comprises of Chanchaga and Tunga. Each zone having areas that are linked to major roads. Using stratified random sampling technique, twenty-two (22) abandoned buildings were sampled and data presented on them. The researchers made personal visits to the abandoned building sites and interviewed the respondents (in some still partly occupied) and personal observations of the abandoned buildings or properties.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

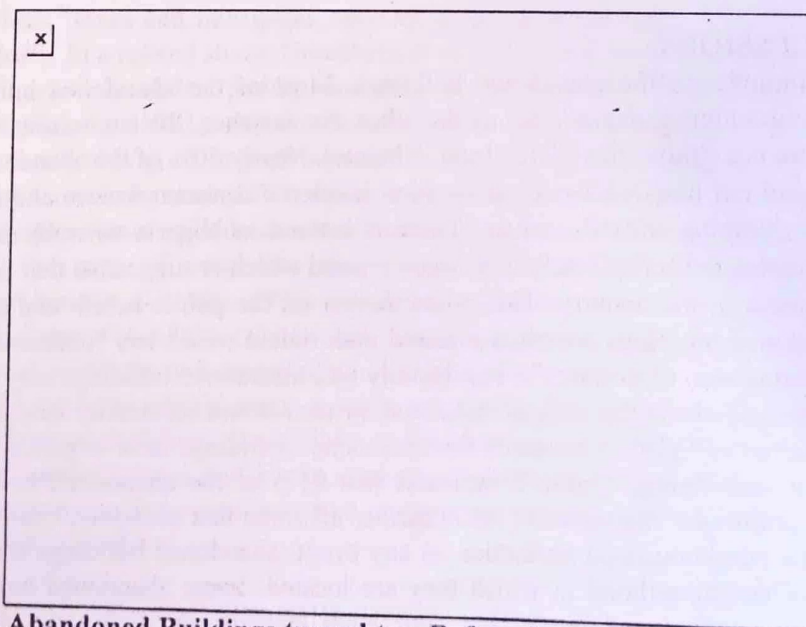
Table 1 presents the findings on the abandoned buildings. Most of the abandoned buildings in Minna featured one form of environmental degradation or the other. For instance, the environments in which these buildings are located were unsightly. (See Plates 1 and 2 below). Nearly 50% of the abandoned buildings are overgrown with weeds and tall trees. However, defecation is often a common feature and some of the sites have been converted to dumping sites for refuse. There is a trend in Nigeria whereby people just dump refuse from household wastes indiscriminately in an open ground which is suggestive that there is a problem of urban waste management in the country. This poses danger on the public health and safety. Wallwork (1974) asserts that abandoned buildings are often infested with rodent which has “undesirable connotations for the breeding and transmission of diseases”. Incidentally too, abandoned buildings may also create toxic waste hazards; this is often likely in the case of industrial structures and residential structures that contain lead paint or asbestos. Setterfield (1997) contends that abandoned buildings have negative impact on social and economic aspects of well being. Table 2 indicates that 91% of the abandoned buildings that were sampled promote visual pollution. Setterfield (1997) further affirmed that abandoned buildings are mainly unattractive and affect the neighbourhood aesthetics. In any event, abandoned buildings bring no aesthetics appeal to the residents of neighbourhood in which they are located. Some abandoned buildings in Minna have a few people living in them and interaction with other residents in the neighbourhood is not so pronounced. Thus there is an insidious effect on the social fabric of a community brought about by the presence of abandoned buildings which encourages “social atomization” – a situation which isolates individual or people within a community thereby weakening ties to others and removes the sense of belonging from the rest of the community. Social atomization is also fuelled by the notion that abandoned

building sites and their environs are unsafe; they are havens for criminals and all other illicit, anti-social tendencies. Setterfield (1997) contends that apprehensive of anti-social criminal behaviour has encouraged residents to curtail their normal social interaction and associations with the occupants of abandoned buildings in a community.



**Plate 1 Abandoned Building on a major street in Minna. Authors Field work, 2007**

Abandoned buildings promote illegal activity. Study shows that abandoned buildings are magnets for crime. This is evident as these buildings provide centres where people mostly youths, take to consumption of hard drugs, Indian hemp, cocaine and so on This is in consonance with Spelmann (1993) in a study of 59 abandoned residential buildings in a low-income Austin, Texas neighbourhood 34% of the buildings were being used for illegal activities. The study notes that out of 41% of the buildings that were unsecured, 83% were being used to perpetrate illegal activities. Crime rate has also increased over the years, especially in Minna and its environs although some of it may not be caused by abandoned buildings, but abandoned buildings have offered safe havens as hideouts for criminals where they first assemble before robbery attacks and crimes take place. Spelmann (1993) contends that such is possible because the abandoned buildings are well suited for this purpose because they tend to shield criminals from the attention of passers-by. There are also economic losses to be contended with in abandoned buildings because they also affect other properties within a neighbourhood by reducing the property values (Greenberg et al. 1993). This is mainly due to loss of aesthetics appeal, lack of maintenance and security implication which abandoned buildings imposed on other properties in the neighbourhood.



**Plate 2 Abandoned Buildings turned to a Refuse dump Site in Minna. Authors Field work, 2007**

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### MEASURES TO CONTROL SPREAD OF ABANDONED BUILDINGS

Abandoned buildings are well entrenched in our society. This is not just because there is no political will to deal with the problem but because everyone looks at abandoned buildings as problems of others and consequently must be solved by those who are directly affected. Also contemplating outright demolition of abandoned buildings may not be the best solution because demolition in itself is a capital intensive programme. Therefore given the fact that abandoned buildings create a good deal of social and economic impact on the environment, therefore holistic approaches have to be thought – out in curbing the spread of abandoned buildings. The following methods can be appropriate:

#### Introduction of Anti-Blight Ordinances

The aim of these ordinances is to identify blighted structures and buildings and to encourage owners to remedy the situation within a given period. This is usually done by issuing official notices to the affected owners of the blighted properties. The anti-blight ordinances were used in Hartford and New Britain to address the problem of abandoned buildings in their countries. This can also be encouraged in Nigeria; such anti-blight ordinances must be comprehensive and suited to Nigeria's local yearnings and situations.

#### Enforcement of Fines

As part of the anti-blight ordinances, fines can also be levied on each day a building is identified to violate anti-blight ordinances for failure to maintain, secure and clean-up a property.

#### Transferring Property Ownership to the Government

One of the reasons why abandoned buildings remain unsolved is the obstacle of private property ownership whereby the government cannot simply tell owners what to do with their property nor can it take full possession of such property. First, the social problems of abandoned buildings are often from privately owned property. (See table 1) Most of the abandoned buildings are privately owned. Legislation has to come into force which shall compel owners' of abandoned buildings or properties to go through confiscation of titles for failing to remedy and maintain their structures or properties. However, this may appear difficult in Nigeria where there is likelihood that perhaps, owners of abandoned buildings can ask to be compensated and governments too on their own are not always too eager to succumb to such demand; therefore, if such law exists it can encourage owners to maintain their properties whether they have been developed or not.

**Periodic Evaluation of Distressed Properties** -- This is aimed at identifying currently occupied residential, commercial structures that are in a state of distress and providing technical and financial resources for them to prevent their possible abandonment. The building and health inspectors of the Urban and Housing department should from time to time undertake visits to the developed areas to ascertain buildings or properties that are going into distress and issue notices on their owners. Every individual should be alive to the responsibility of culture of maintenance and should not just be pronounced but to engender action be it in one's property or rented. This will go a long way in mitigating abandoned building scenarios.

**Land Value Taxation** – This encourages urban development and discourages abandonment simply by shifting the burden of property taxes. Generally, the aim of LVT is to orient property taxes towards taxing the value of land rather than taxing the value of buildings to that land. "The idea is to ensure that the burden of taxation falls on property owners whether or not they make good or bad use of their land. This creates an incentive to improve land – to maintain and/or to develop buildings in an effort to ensure that it is used productively" (Setterfield (1997)).

### CONCLUSION

This paper discusses abandoned buildings and their consequences on the urban environment. It notes that abandoned buildings can be associated with social and economic problems which manifest in danger to health and public safety. The paper stresses that visual pollution can affect property value in neighbourhood in which abandoned buildings are located and also affect the overall aesthetic appeal of the urban landscape. The paper proffers solutions on how to reduce the spread of abandoned buildings in the society.

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**Table 1 Abandoned Buildings and their Characteristics**

S/n	Abandoned Building	Nature of Abandonment	Ownership	Observation
1	Savannah Bank Building along Paiko Road	Vacated business building Since 2001 taken over by NDIC	Private	Secured Premises
2	Fertiliser's Warehouses along Paiko Road	Underutilised dilapidated building	Government	Lacks maintenance, site used for defecation
3	Intercity Bank, Minna	Uncompleted	Government	Farming within the site, bushy
4	News Engineering Ltd (New Site) along Shiroro-Niteco Road	Abandoned vacant plots	Private	Site secured but old equipment litter the ground
5	Vacant Plot along Shiroro Road	Abandoned	Private	Refuse dump site
6	Abandoned Filling Station	Abandoned building	Private	Bushy site
7	2 Blocks of Residence along Shiroro Road	Abandoned building	Private	refuse dump site
8	A pharmaceutical complex	Vacated business building	Private	Secured but grounds are untidy
9	One storey building at Mustapha Junction	Underutilised dilapidated building	Private	Building overgrown with plants
10	Blocks of Shops opp. Farindoki hotel	Uncompleted	Private	environment untidy, no roof
11	Proposed Heritage University along Bosso Road	Abandoned	Private	Few buildings on site, bushy
12	MNL Factory along Bosso Rd.	Vacated business building	Private	Site still secured
13	2 storeys residential building at Tundun Fulani close to SSS Building	Underutilised dilapidated building	Private	Building overgrown with plants
14	Residential Structure opp. Berger Factory	Uncompleted	Private	Building overgrown with plants
15	10 Blocks of Market Stalls at Tundun- Fulani	Underutilised dilapidated building	Government	environment untidy, no roof
16	Vacant Plots	Abandoned	Private	Refuse dump site
17	Warehouse opp. Shiroro Hotel	Abandoned	Government (PHCN)	Dilapidating, roofs removed
18	Blocks of Classroom beside Tunga lowcost Police Station	Abandoned	Private	roofs removed,
19	3 Blocks of Classroom (Umaru Audi Pry. School )	Underutilised dilapidated building (still in use)	Government	No roof, windows
20	Blocks of Flat Nipost Qtrs	Underutilised	Government	Untidy environment
21	Residential Block opp. Murtala Park	Uncompleted and dilapidated	Private	Building overgrown with plants
22	Blocks of Residence at Bosso Estate	Abandoned	Government	Building overgrown with plants, Refuse dump site

Source: Authors Field work, 2007

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Table 2 State of Abandoned Buildings and Effects on the Environment

Site Characteristics	Frequency	%
Site Description (Bushy)	13	59
Unsecured abandoned site	15	68.1
Defecation on the site	5	22.7
Refuse Dumping	10	45.4
Visual Pollution	20	91

Source: Authors Field work, 2007