

The Return of the Greens in Abuja, Nigeria's New Capital City

Ibrahim Usman JIBRIL, Nigeria

Key words: Green Area, Recreational, Parks, Gardens 'a city-beautiful' Master Plan restoration.

SUMMARY

When the decision to establish a new Capital City for Nigeria was taken in 1976, the founding fathers thought of creating 'a city-beautiful' that would be sustainable in the long run. Accordingly the International Planning Associates (IPA) was commissioned to prepare a Master Plan that would guide in the development of the new City. IPA submitted its report along with the Master Plan for the City of Abuja to the Federal Government of Nigeria in 1979. The Master Plan of Abuja became the guiding principle for the orderly development of the city and has been in use in the last 30 years.

Massive construction work has been going on since the early 1980s and the City has grown rapidly within this period. The implementation of this Plan is the key to the orderly development of the City. Part of the provisions of the Master Plan is the development of adequate recreational and Green Areas within the Federal Capital City (FCC) of Abuja. The City is to be developed in phases on an area of about 250 squared kilometres. The total land area for Phase I of the City is about 7076 hectares. Out of this about 1260 hectares is reserved for 'Greens' development. This includes Open spaces, Recreational facilities, Parks, Gardens, Children playgrounds, Out door games, Sport Centers, National and District/Neighborhood parks. Others include Green stretches along valleys, Riverbeds, Hilly patches and some incidental open spaces.

However, as the City grows the provisions of these 'Green Areas' became a subject of abuse and a lot of the areas were taken over by developers and converted to other land uses thereby leading to the abuse and distortion of the Master Plan of the City. In 2003 a serious effort was embarked upon to restore the 'greens' as per the provision of the Master Plan. This concerted effort continued up to the middle of the year 2007. This attempt at the restoration of the Master Plan, the reclamation of the 'green areas' and what follows after is the subject of this paper. The paper also attempts to x-ray the successes recorded, the challenges been encountered, the sustainability of the programme and the possible way forward.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Master Plan for the City of Abuja was prepared for the Federal Government of Nigeria by the International Planning Associates (IPA) and accepted in 1979. Full implementation of the Plan commenced in the early 1980s. This Plan is the guiding principle for the orderly development of the City and has been in use in the last 30 years. The founding fathers thought of creating 'a city-beautiful' that would be sustainable in the long run. Massive construction work has been going on since the early 1980s and the City has grown rapidly within this period.

The implementation of this Plan is the key to the orderly development of the City. Part of the provisions of the Master Plan of Abuja is the development of adequate Green Areas and other recreational facilities within the Federal Capital City (FCC) of Abuja. The City is to be developed on an area of about 250 squared kilometres. The total land area for Phase I of the City is about 7076 hectares. Out of this, about 1260 hectares is reserved for 'Greens' development. This includes Open spaces, Recreational facilities: - such as Parks, Gardens and Children playgrounds, Out door games, Sport Centers, National and District/Neighborhood Parks. Others include Green stretches along valleys, Riverbeds, Hilly patches and some incidental open spaces.

However, as the City grows the provisions of these 'Green Areas' became a subject of abuse and a lot of the areas were taken over by developers and converted to other land uses thereby leading to the abuse and distortion of the Master Plan of the City. In 2003 a serious effort was embarked upon to restore the greens as per the provision of the Master Plan. This attempt at the restoration of the Master Plan and what follows after is the subject of this paper. The paper also attempts to x-ray the successes recorded, the challenges been encountered, the sustainability of the programme and the possible way forward.

2. PROVISIONS OF THE MASTER PLAN

The basic concept of the Abuja Master Plan is the "Neighbourhood Concept". The Plan provides for Residential enclave with a threshold population of 5000 people served with common facilities. This allows its inhabitants get the basic urban needs within the proximity of their varied homes. A group of neighbourhoods however form a district and the districts in turn are served by district centers with several facilities such as schools, hospitals, fire stations, etc.

The Abuja "Central Area Urban Design" produced by the Consulting firm of Messers Kenzo-Tange and Urtec of Tokyo – Japan and approved by the Federal Capital Development Authority (FCDA) in 1981, described "Open Spaces, landscaping and vista planning as closely inter-related elements". Open spaces are therefore categorized in the "urban design" of Abuja as:-

- Street Space,

- Three Arms Gardens, (the ‘three arms’ implies the Executive, Legislative and Judicial arms of the Federal Government of Nigeria and the locations of these buildings in the City of Abuja are known as the ‘three arms zone’).
- Green Buffer Zone in the “Three Arms Zone”,
- Ministries’ Gardens,
- National Mall,
- National square/City Squares,
- Green Areas in the Cultural Zone,
- Pedestrian Ways (including squares and porticos),
- Courtyards in Ministries’ Zone and the Central Business District Zone,
- Green Zone along Expressways.

The Green Areas provided for in the Master Plan made provisions for both developable and un-developable green areas. The ‘Developable Green Areas’ includes:-

- Open Spaces,
- Recreational Facilities,
- Parks and Gardens,
- Children Playgrounds,
- Out Door Games,
- Sport Centers,
- National, District/Neighborhood Parks,

While the ‘Un-developable Green Areas’ includes:-

- Green stretches along valleys,
- Riverbeds,
- Hilly patches and
- Some incidental open spaces

This concept of ‘un-developable green areas’ does not in any way connote lack of technology or financial muscles by would-developers to turn these areas round for some form of economic activities. It is rather aimed at preserving the environment and enhancing the beauty of the City of Abuja.

3. SELECTED PARKS AND OPEN SPACES WITHIN ABUJA CITY, PHASE I

As at 1998 AEPB had a list of about 41 organised open spaces in its inventory. Prominent among these list are the:-

- Kwame Nkurma Park in Asokoro District,
- ECOWAS Park in Asokoro District,
- AREA 1 PARK – Along Ring Road 1 in Garki District,
- AREA 1 Mini Zoo and Park in Garki District,
- Area 2 Children’s Park in Garki District,
- Sokoto Street Park in Garki District,
- Old Parade Ground in Garki District,
- Wuse Amusement Park in Wuse District,
- Wuse Zone 6 Park in Wuse District,
- Maitama Sport Complex in Maitama District,
- Maitama Amusement Park in Maitama District,

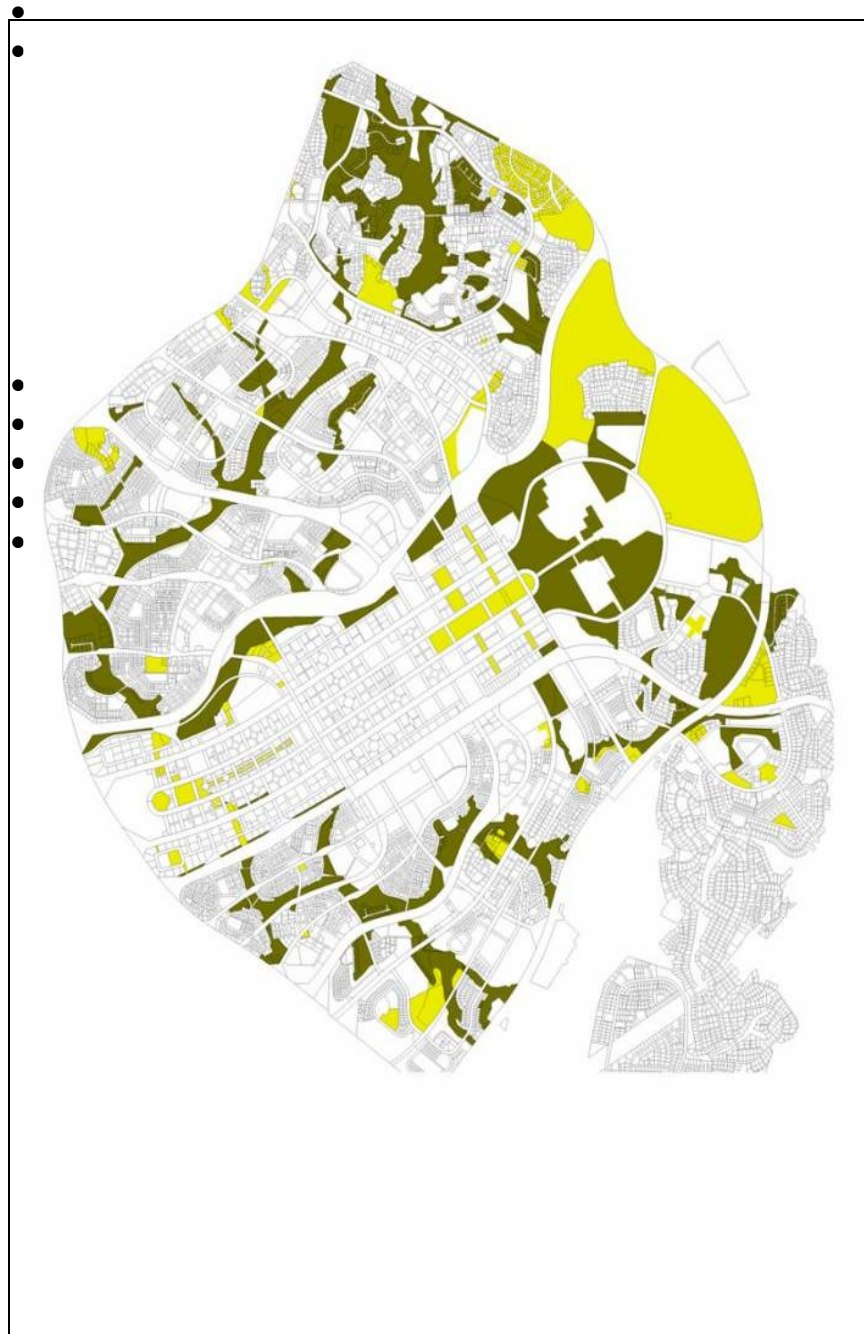


Figure I:- Green Overview Map Phase I Of The City Of Abuja (Source Agis 2006)

– Minister’s hill in Maitama District.

4. WHY DO WE NEED GREENS?

The motives behind the provision of the Greens in the City Plan are for good habitation, beautification and Conservation purposes. They were also created to protect hill-tops, hill-sides and streams/rivers courses in their natural form. Therefore tampering with them could result in generating soil erosion, landslides, deforestation and their effects on the natural

ecology of the environment and climate protection. At the recent International Summit on Climate Change held in Copenhagen – Denmark, it became clear that in addition to serious funding by Developed Economies of the World, concerted and coordinated efforts are needed by all concern in order to save the environment. Therefore the provisions of the Abuja Master Plan as it concern the preservation of the Green and the foresight shown is a commendable step, bearing in mind the fact that this effort started over thirty years ago.

5. HOW IT ALL STARTED

When the initial planning and development of Abuja City started in the early 1980s, a unit for landscaping activities was set up under the Planning and Architecture Department. It was then referred to as ‘Parks and Gardens Unit’ and was headed by Landscaping Architect/Planner. It was charged with the responsibilities of planting and maintenance of trees, shrubs and flowers all over the first phase of the City as it was been developed. The first public park – at ‘area one’ along ring road one and Tafawa Balewa way was developed. It was located at Garki District. (See figure 2 below).



Figure 2: the 1st park developed in abuja (the commercial development was cleared in 2005 but the park is yet to be restored to its proper use) (source: - ago & jibril 1999).

Subsequently a plant nursery for Abuja City was developed along with other parks, as well as the soft landscaping of all major streets within the built up areas of Abuja. The activities of this unit became more pronounced with the establishment of Abuja Environmental Protection Board (AEPB) in 1985. The AEPB took over the functions of ‘Parks and Gardens’ unit. With a full pledge agency the development and maintenance of Open Spaces, Parks, Gardens and other recreational facilities became more purposeful and more pronounced.

6. WHAT WENT WRONG?

The AEPB continued with its activities of development and maintenance of these ‘Green Areas’ of Abuja. The Board is also responsible for waste management – both solid waste and

liquid sewage - of Abuja. As the City kept growing at an alarming rate, the Board started getting some problems. It was increasingly becoming more difficult to maintain these 'Green Areas'. There was also the problem of inadequate funding as a result of competing needs. Therefore some of the 'green areas' started receiving less attention from the Board.

At the initial stage of Abuja City's development the Government was keen in developing these areas in order to set the pace and encourage private and Corporate Organizations. Therefore it was the desire of government to 'do- it- alone' and the unwillingness of people to participate in such ventures that led to these initial problems.

The few private sector participants that got involved at the initial stage did not see any economic sense in the development of greens for recreational purposes. It was discovered that most of the developers were more interested in purely commercial activities rather than recreational purposes that the areas were designated for as per the provisions of the Master Plan. A lot of the places were turned into 'drinking joints' which in turn generated so much noise and other social vices. It was clear that the operators of most of these parks were lacking the technical know-how of running and maintaining such areas for their intended uses and put their profit motives over and above all other considerations.

By the time the seat of the Federal Government moved from Lagos to Abuja in 1991, the tempo of development increased tremendously within the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). There was therefore a corresponding increase in the demand for service plots of land within the Phase I of Abuja City. The lack of such facilities within the other phases of the City contributed significantly to the pressure on the Phase 1 of Abuja City. Since this is the area that has most services – roads, sewers, water, power, communications, schools and many more- the pressure became unbearable and these areas became easy targets of abuse.

This scenario provided a perfect setting for series of abuses and distortions of the provisions of Abuja Master Plan as it affects the 'Green Areas'.

7. NATURE OF THE ABUSE

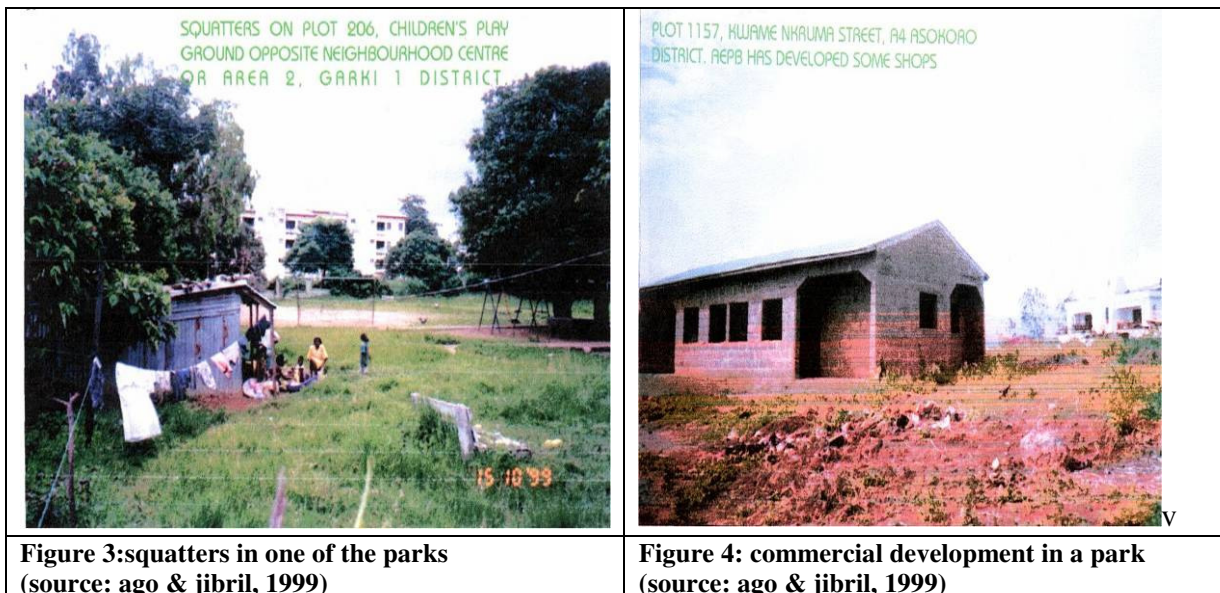
When it became clear that the AEPB could no longer continue with more development and management of these facilities it had no viable option than to lease these facilities out to private operators in order to optimize the uses and for the citizens to equally derive maximum benefits of the facilities. Therefore by 1998 AEPB had leased about 41 organised open spaces to various Developers and some NGOs within Phase I of Abuja City. The leases were for an initial term of 5 years. Eighteen special terms and conditions were spelt out for the beneficiaries of this arrangement. Prominent among these are that:-

- The space shall be developed to beautify its immediate environment.
- The major activities in the area must be recreational.
- Not more than 25% of the space shall be devoted to light commercial activities which must be hidden within the garden and must not constitute a nuisance in whatever form.
- The space is not convertible to other uses other than those of beautification and recreation.

- There should be no permanent or residential structures at the site.
- Perimeter fencing that demarcates the park/garden must be of wire mesh and or chain links. Concrete or block fencing is not allowed.
- Pets and unguided animals as well as other until societal activities - such as smoking are not allowed into the parks.
- The operations of these parks must be between the hours of 6 to 22 daily.

As the pressure on serviced land continued to mount on Abuja City Managers particularly through out the 1990s, AEPB started given out permission for shops to be developed on these 'green areas'. This was in direct contravention of its own terms and conditions. As a result of this, buildings started springing up in most of these areas thereby leading to increased commercial activities. (See figure 4 below).

Some of the areas were converted to residential uses while some were taken over by informal activities such as Car dealers and Auto related activities - Auto mechanics and spare parts dealers.



8. THE TURNING POINT

Such was the trend through out the 1990s up to 2003. A study conducted in 1999 for the FCDA/FCTA concluded that Phase I of Abuja City is stretched beyond acceptable limit and recommended reversal of the dangerous trend. (Ago & Jibril, 1999). It specifically recommended the recovery of most of the 'green areas' of the City. Government accepted the recommendations. It should however be noted that though most of these types of recommendations were frequently submitted at different times in the past and often accepted by Government, the lack of political will on the part of the leadership of the FCTA prevented their implementation.

However by the year 2003 it was clear that the situation could not be allowed to continue any further if the 'greens' are to be preserved and maintained. Accordingly a 'Task team on Greening of Abuja' was set up in the year 2003 and its first major assignment was to embark on the planting of one million trees along most of the major high ways of Abuja before the end of the year 2003. The success of this team later led to its transformation into a full pledge department - renamed 'Park and Recreation Department'. The hitherto abandoned plant nursery was rehabilitated and serious attention was given to the development of the 'greens'. It was a big turning point even though at a very high cost to the people and Government.

The Authorities then turned it attention fully on the recovery of the loss 'green areas' of Abuja City. The recovery of the 'green' became part of the larger programme of the 'restoration of Abuja Master Plan'. This programme though highly controversial as a result of the destructions of properties that were developed in most of these areas, (see figure 5 below) to a large extent succeeded in restoring some of the 'greens' in Abuja. The cost implication of the destruction is a matter for another study.



Fig.5 Debris In One Of The Green Areas Recovered In 2005 (Source:- Jibril, 2006)

9. THE JOURNEY SO FAR

When the programme took up in 2003, the target was for the recovery of all the lost 'green areas' of Abuja and restoring them to their original uses i.e. for recreational purposes. Therefore virtually all the shops and residential developments within these areas were cleared. (See figure 5 above). Similarly clearance of squatters that have invaded road corridors / reservations and other green open spaces were carried out.

The Parks and Recreation Department after the clearance, secured all the recovered areas by way of fencing and planting of trees, shrubs and other ornamental flowers. The steps taken not only assisted in the beautification drive of the Government it also effectively prevented a repeat of the past abuses of these important areas of Abuja City. (See Figure 5).

To further give a boost to the restoration drive the Department embarked on partnership with private concerns in the development and management of some of the parks and open spaces. (See Figures: 5 & 6).



Figure 5 suez park in wuse district (source jibril, 2006)



Figure 6: millenium park (developed and donated for public use by a private company- the most popular public park in abuja)(source jibril, 2006)

10. THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

It is over two years now since the demolition exercise stopped. There is no doubt that this exercise was a source of concern both at home and internationally too. A part from the massive destructions of properties running into millions of dollars during the recovery of these ‘green areas’ in Abuja there were a lot of anguish on the side of the affected people as result of the dislocations and the attendant lost of income. In a report from an International Organization, Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE, 2008, Geneva – Switzerland), that did a post demolition study in Abuja the Government was heavily criticized for the seeming lack of compassion for the affected citizens.



FIGURE 7: CHILDREN'S PARK & ZOO LOCATED AT THE FOOT OF ASO ROCK (SOURCE JIBRIL, 2006)



FIGURE 8: A TYPICAL LOCAL STREET IN ASOKORO DISTRICT (SOURCE JIBRIL, 2006)

This criticism both at home and abroad somehow slowed down the pace and zeal of the present FCT administration on further development of the ‘green areas’. There is no doubt that a lot has been recovered but a lot has also been lost. The tempo has slowed down quite significantly in the last two years for obvious reasons.

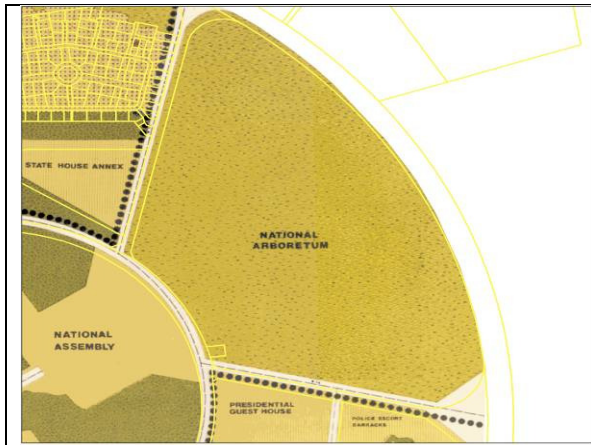


Figure 9: land use map of national arboretum - the only green area in abuja that has so far not been tempered with (source agis, 2006)

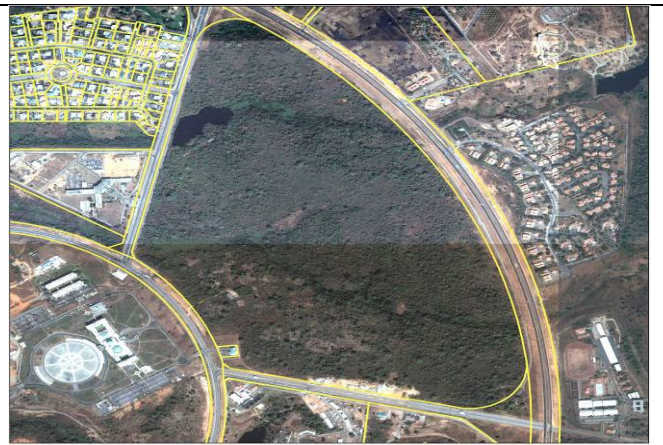


Figure 10: 2006 satellite image of national arboretum - the only green area in abuja that has so far not been tempered with (source agis, 2006)

There is also a new dimension to further development of these ‘green areas’. A conflict has arisen between the Department of Parks / FCT administration on one side and the Private Park operators on the other. While the later favour little or no restrictions in their activities within the parks leased to them particularly on the type of items to be sold, the FCTA on the other hand is insisting on the closure of such parks on or before 22hours daily. It is also insisting on alcohol and tobacco-free parks at all times. This tussle is now a subject of litigation between the two parties. This is also another factor that may be militating against further orderly development and management of ‘green areas’ of Abuja.

As earlier seen a lot has been achieved but a lot of the greens were also lost to either residential or commercial development. See Figures 11 - 14



Figure 11: asokoro district park lost to commercial development (source: jibril, 2004)

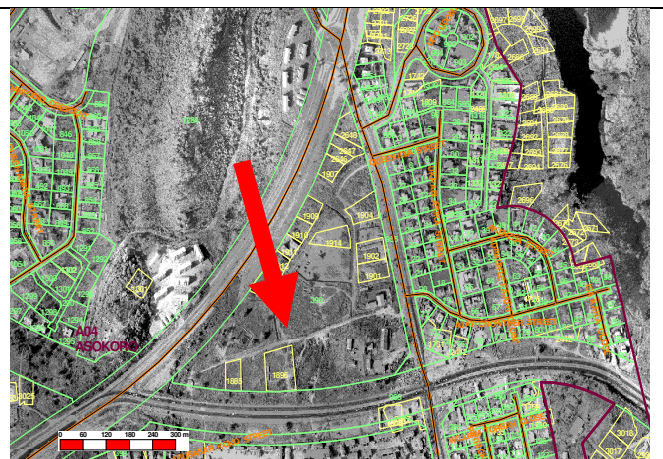
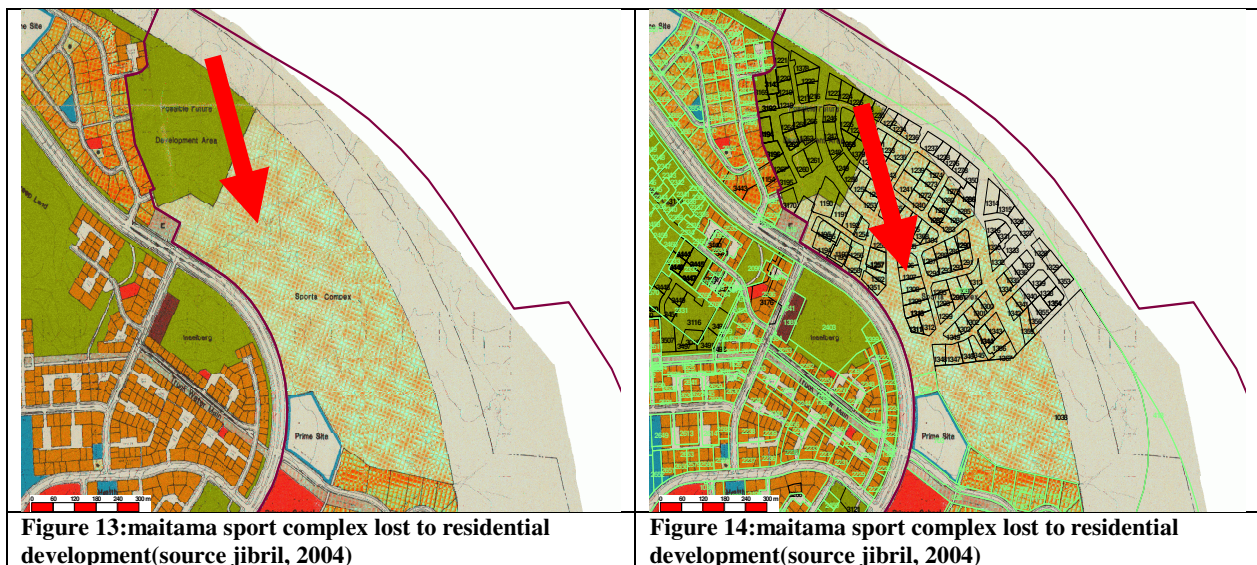


Figure 12 :asokoro district park lost to commercial development (source: jibril, 2004)

The FCTA is currently in the process of formulating a standard policy that would be a guiding principle for the maintenance of all the recovered 'greens' in Abuja. When finally prepared it is expected to guide against future development and maintenance of 'greens' in subsequent phases of Abuja City development.



11. THE WAY FORWARD

It is clear that the FCTA can not run away from the lion share of the blame for what happened in the past. In order to avoid the costly mistakes of the past, a concerted effort must be made to sensitize the private sector 'park operators' to realize the environmental value of what their activities on these parks means to the citizenry. What they do a fail to do in these parks could have an adverse effect on the environment. Though they operate these parks as business venture and the profit motive might be strong, it should be seen as a long term investment that would definitely be profitable in the long run.

The FCTA through Park & Recreation Department should continue to regulate and enforce the rules governing the operations and management of these parks with out any fear or favour. The new policy been developed in this respect is therefore a step in the right direction and it should hasten action towards the completion of the document so that operators and the general public would have a much clearer picture of what is expected of them.

The FCTA should place less emphasis on negative development control activities within the City and concentrate on preventive measures. In other words areas meant for green development should never be given out to developers for any other uses other than what it is intended for in the Plan. Strict controls must also be put in place to prevent land use conversion as it affects green areas of the City. To this end closer cooperation is needed between the key Government departments, i.e. Parks & Recreation, Urban Planning, Surveys & Mapping, Abuja Environmental Protection Board (AEPB), Development Control and AGIS. Information sharing is therefore very important between these key operators and should be improve from its present level to a much higher one.

With the establishment of the Abuja Geographic Information Systems (AGIS) as the only official source of geo-spatial data in the FCT, the Parks & Recreation Department has a willing partner that could assist in the monitoring of all the existing parks within the City. With the data available in AGIS it is much easier to detect any form of land use abuse or mismanagement. It is now easy to find out when a 'green area' is being proposed for other land uses and prevent the conversion. It is therefore strongly recommended that the Parks and Recreation Department should increase its level of cooperation with AGIS in order to avail it with all the available data that it needs in its operations.

It is also recommended that the practice of offering short leases of five years to park operators should be stopped. This is because park development is capital intensive. A short lease period may not be attractive to some financial institutions that could be approached for some loans facilities. This 'short-lease-regime' has been found to be the main reason behind park operators always wanting to convert the green area land use to commercial uses in order to make more profit at short time. Therefore a much longer lease period of between 40 – 60 years is recommended. That way a developer could be able to invest and recoup his investment with little or minimal stress.

12. CONCLUSION

So far the 'greens' have returned to the city landscape of Abuja even though at an extremely high cost to both the Government and the Citizens. It is regrettable that such a high cost was incurred in the process. It is clear that a little more care, a little discipline, a strong political will and above all a strong sense of responsibility in obeying planning regulations could have prevented the abuse in the first place. The fact that this development was allowed to take place over a long period of time speaks volume of our concern and respect for planning regulations. It does not make any sense for Government to spend huge tax payers' money in order to get a policy document (such as A Master Plan) prepared by Consultants and then shy away from implementing the provisions of the Plan.

So far the present administration has been very cautious over this sensitive matter and has tried to stay away from any controversy. While it is clear that not all the 'green areas' could be recovered within the Phase 1 of Abuja City, the provisions of such areas within the remaining Phases of the City could be preserved and developed as per the provisions of the Master Plan. That way the FCTA can avoid the costly mistakes of the past. It is double jeopardy for government to spend tax payers money on preparing a Plan and then spends money to demolish citizens' property as result of its own lapses. The pain of the past is gradually healing. It is hope that such a costly mistake would be avoided in future.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|------|----------------------------------------|
| AEPB | Abuja Environmental Protection Board. |
| AGIS | Abuja Geographic Information System. |
| FCC | Federal Capital City (of Abuja). |
| FCDA | Federal Capital Development Authority. |
| FCT | Federal Capital Territory. |

| | |
|-------|---------------------------------------------------|
| FCTA | Federal Capital Territory Administration. |
| GIS | Geographic Information System. |
| COHRE | Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions. |
| SERAC | Social and Economic Rights Action Center – LAGOS. |
| IPA | International Planning Associates. |

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Educational qualifications: B.A.ED (Geo/Educ.) & M.Sc. (Land Resources with specialization in Land Administration)

Working experience: Has put in 25 years in the Administration of the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja as a Land Officer in the Department of Land Administration FCTA. Has worked (during my National Service year) as an Instructor in Map Reading with the Nigerian Army School of Artillery, Kachia – Kaduna State, Nigeria,

Has worked as a Geography Teacher in many Secondary Schools and a Polytechnic in Nigeria. Attended advance training programme in Gavle – Sweden on Land Administration and Geographical Information, organized by Swedesurvey (the Overseas Agency for the National Land Survey of Sweden) sponsored by SIDA, has served at various times as Secretary of the, Technical Committee on Rural Lands within the FCT, Ministerial Committee for the Appraisal of Physical Planning and Development Issues within the FCT, Land Use and Allocation Committee of the FCT, Taskforce on the Computerisation of the Cadastral and Land Registry of the FCT,

Currently working with the Department of Land Administration & AGIS of the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja – Nigeria.

CONTACTS

Ibrahim Usman JIBRIL
 Department of Land Administration,

TS 9E - Sustainable Planning and Urban Renewal

Ibrahim Usman Jibril

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Federal Capital Territory Administration (FCTA),
AGIS Building,
No. 4 Peace Drive, Central Area (CBD),
Abuja
NIGERIA
Tel. +234 8(0)6541 0011
Fax +
Email: ijibril@gmail.com
Web site: www.abujagis.com