

## **URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL GRAPHICS: IMPACT, PROBLEMS AND VISUAL POLLUTION OF SIGNS AND BILLBOARDS IN NIGERIAN CITIES.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The concept of the urban and environmental graphics in the city aesthetic planning system has gained currency in many advanced countries. The belief is made strong by the fact that the planning of the city, environmental graphic signs have some impact on the quality of life of the people as well as providing healthy environment. Nigerian signs and billboards can be referred to as environmental pollution because they create problems, and affect the urbanization planning in Nigerian cities. Also, the concepts equally see the objects in the streets as making up the city as figure and decorations not mere junks. As a result, urban and environmental graphics embraces city planning, which lacks care of all spheres - physical, aesthetics, transportation, waste disposal, erection of billboards, posters and other constructions that could enhance the beauty as well as harm the image of the city. This paper looks into the aesthetics of urban graphic visuals, billboards as a means of environmental beautification, placement control and problems to the environment and concludes that Nigerian environments need refurbishment, and the removal of low standard signs and billboard from the city streets would enhance Nigerian environment .*

**Keywords: Urban, Graphic, Design, Billboards, Visuals, Aesthetic, Urbanization, Beautification**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The concept, urban graphics in modern times, is closely associated with urbanization development, and there is rapid increase in the number of young urban centres all over the world, especially in the developing countries (Durotoye, 1998). Nigeria's interaction with her environment is not a recent phenomenon. The sense of awareness of the environment could be found in traditional land use and human settlement practice. Nigerians relied directly on nature for supply of water, energy, medicine, food supplements, materials for home-building, arts, designs, crafts and cultural artefacts for environmental development and beautification. With increasing concentration of population in Nigeria urban places and the multiplication and growth of urban activities including physical construction and development, pressure on the natural environment inevitably deteriorates its aesthetics. Concern for the environment has become the most critical and tropical issue in Nigeria's urbanization and urban development in recent years.

The most critical and visible aspect of this issue is the problem of the graphic communication visual pollution caused by wrong placement of billboards which should have on the other hand

added to environmental beautification in Nigerian cities. While the ecologists and environmentalists are concerned with global warning (depletion of the ozone layer) caused by carbon-dioxide and monodioxide or ozone depleting substances (ODS) deforestation, water supply, energy food, transportation, over population, etc. The millennial Nigerian designers and artists should be concerned about the visual pollution in the Nigerian environment (Emeji, 2002). Actually, graphics visuals (billboards) are among the most prominent features of Nigerian urban centres decorations. They have become a “national” feature of our cities, however in several of the cities, signs were placed on wrong places, and they have encroached or completely blocked roads, thereby obstructing traffics and pedestrians view.

According to Ogunduyile (2000), the concept of urban graphics and city planning is not new in Nigeria. It has once gained momentum prior to independence. Even after independence, cities like Kano, Jos, Kaduna, Lagos and Port-Harcourt to mention a few, had developed dual urban structures with one poorly developed and the other with infrastructure characteristic of industrial cities. These cities were adorned with beautiful sculpture; billboards with beautiful pictures, flowers planted along major roads with relaxation parks to make life more pleasant to the populace. Street lights were prominent, and these really transform the urban centre at night. Harmonious neon lights illuminating and electronic signs also added to the city signscape in the night. With the present state of the uncared attitudes and lack of maintenance of the Nigerians, the situation appears to be different. Most of urban beautification signs have been subsumed and besieged by refuse dumps here and there. Therefore, this paper to examines the urbanisation aesthetics of the placement of graphics signs, the problems impact on the environment and the perception on urbanization development in Nigerian cities.

### **The aesthetics of urban graphic visuals designs**

Urban graphic designs and environmental aesthetics should be understood from a wider perspective; the usage of the concepts should be transcending the parochialism and cultural barriers created by architecture engineering designs and industrial designs. Simply, it is a plan for order and the cardinal means by which man had long tried to modify his natural environment and improve his living generally. Mayal (1979) says that, design conceives and defines all means employed to satisfy our many and increasing intricate needs in developing of our immediate environment. It covers our cities, factories, hospitals, schools and houses together with all those products we need. It stretches over our other means of communication, whether by speech, writing or illustration, and extends to artefacts developed to help us express our thoughts and emotions in the field of art decorations. Urban graphic designs, according to Fadamiro (1999), are a creative problem-solving activity. It is the quality of a design solution, a function of the clarity of thoughts and emotional nurturing brought to bear on the problems at stake. The concept, according to Okunsanya (1992) is specifically defined by Spreiregan (1965) as the process of arranging the city elements together both functionally and beautifully. Paramount among the elements includes building, beautification, artistic billboards, posters and the illuminating electronic neon signs.



**Plate 1:**

Urban Environmental Graphics Well Placed Billboard, Lagos, Nigeria.

**Source:** Authors' Collection 2012

As a matter of fact, urban graphic design is a plastic art concerned both with how they actually operate in the environment. Man in his own environment and domain finds ways of making his habitation, town and city harmonious for living. This is not new about man, but the great contribution of today's urban graphic design concern is to set the proper goal for all these efforts of man. For instance, landscape design is an integral part of these compartments that man uses within his environment. Perez (1980) opines that Landscape design is an integral part of art and science of planning and designing of outdoor elements and open spaces to provide man with a better living and conducive environment. Urban graphic designs and aesthetic is the beauty of the cities. For man cannot live long without beauty otherwise the whole environment becomes bored. In support of this statement Spreiregan (1965), concludes that beauty in cities is not an afterthought, but rather a necessity. As a result, order and beauty in man's surrounding is a pre-requisite to good health and good living, for the outlook of a city stands on the urban design. Jackson (1957), observes that landscaping a city exists only by grace of life which pulsates in its streets and squares, so art and design can only adorn those things that the spirit has created. For a city to be beautiful and have a buoyant awareness, there are various elements used for improving the environment. The elements are divided into four basic ways in reference to Nwai-Usi (1995), as vegetation (plants and covers), water bodies, land forms and landscape features (man-made and natural). Of all these items, according to him, landscape features are man-made enrichment elements which have potentials of improving the aesthetic value of the environment when employed in the streets, sidewalks and other public or private open spaces especially when they are all aesthetically assembled to produce the cityscape. The impact of environmental graphics is the combination of natural objects (living and non-living) made by human beings, the interrelationships between these and various circumstance which surround people on earth, and most of the world are now seriously concerned about problems of environmental pollution, whether it be of water, air or land. These problems are great in the developed countries and in the countries with high population densities of which Nigeria is a practical example.

Onyebuagu (1983) is of the view that without population, there would be no pollution and that pollution is the price of progress. As a result, Nigeria being a populated country is full of environmental pollution. Nwai-Usi (1995) categorizes man his urban environment into three. The first is the man induced environment, which deals with the efforts put together to make life comfortable. These are structures, roads and means of transportation, communication, schools, hospitals and religious institutions. The second aspect is the natural physical environment which comprises of land, masses, water bodies and the atmosphere as well as the extraterrestrial bodies (the sun, moon and stars). The latter is guided by certain rules, norms and values. Broadbent (1998) says that environment cannot just be determined by physical arrangement of buildings and the socio-cultural values, pattern, beliefs governance and learning experiences made to bear on it. Urban environmental graphics impact and aesthetic or beauty, therefore, is the art of giving aesthetic quality to the environment. It can also be referred to as the adornment and utilization of outdoor spaces with natural and artificial forms. Virtually all objects in the environment contribute in one way or the other to its beauty (Sims, 1991).

### **Billboard as a means of Environmental Beautification**

According to Ogunduyile (2000), the significance of signs and billboards became much in England in the 16th century. Also Steward (1993) notes that billboards came into being as a result of the evolution of signs usually associated with gesture or motion, which had a significant meaning until in the 1390s when merchants were required to label their premises with their own signs which gained a wider currency as it was defined as any writing including letter, pictorial representations, illustrations and decoration, banners, flags or any other figure of similar characteristic. Signs could be made into a structure pointed on, with the aim to announce direct attention, or to advertise a business, commodity or providing information. Steward further notes that the significance of signs and billboards became much in England in the 16th century. He explains that the merchants were directed to mount their signs on their building surfaces. This brought the ideals of house numbering for easy identification. As a result, both literates and illiterates embraced the arts that enable them to device certain easily recognizable emblems as their trademarks. Also traders began to construct signposts or billboards, and sought approval for erecting them. Sims (1991) notes that the mechanized typesetting and the moveable types of printing machines were invented. These gave additional impetus to billboard placements. In the 19th century other printing techniques such as the screen printing, lithographic printing, etc became more intensive. There arose a scramble for bill posting space. The situation degenerated to a point when street walls and all available spaces on houses were pasted forced to reject careless posting of bills, and the terms “**Post No Bill**” became popular with many supposedly free spaces. Billboard is the main outdoor advertising and beautification medium in Nigeria. Oladumiye (2002) looks at billboards as large structures erected on highways and roads for display of huge advertising posters. In Nigeria, billboard can be seen in the light of a structure for display of advertisement at the roadside in our surroundings.



Plate 2: A street in Portharcourt ,Nigeria. Author's Collection

According to Adeyemi (2002), billboards are portrait-fixed for double-crown poster as used by cinemas; they are sometimes used for temporary announcement. The use of billboards in Nigeria follows after the pattern in Europe. Oladumiye (2011) corroborates that urban growth in Nigeria took place before the arrival of the infrastructure characteristics of industrial cities. Thus, there are urban structures, those which are poorly developed and the others embracing some features of modernization in Nigeria. As a result, the genesis of billboard could be dated back to 1920s, during the emerging of advertising companies such as the West African Publicity Company, U.A.C. Later Afromedia, etc. began to prepare the use of billboards for highway advertising. Manufacturing industries with the increase in the volume of goods imported into the country. Oladumiye (2011) notes that most Nigerian businessmen especially the indigenous ones, did not earlier appreciate the significant roles of billboards advertisement until the late 1960. The usual one man owner business proprietors then were unable to reconcile the functions of billboards. Later, the petty traders eventually grasped the importance of billboards which they use initially to boost their trade. In 1990s signs and billboards were grossly abused which resulted to the chaotic and unpleasant situation in the cities because many people embraced petty trading which they advertised.

### **Billboards Placement, Impact and Problems on the Environment**

Billboard can be seen in the light of a structure for display advertisement information and beautification of the environment. For example, at the roadsides in Nigerian cities, signs and billboards are expected to perform such as locating users in an environment, providing information on merchandise, labelling a structure, beautifying the appearance of an environment as well as protecting the safety of the public (Ogunduyile, 2002). Signs and billboards, according to Oladumiye (2002), are works of graphics which have contributed immensely to the development of Nigerian cities. Hollis (1994) opines that signs and billboards belong to the category of presentation of promotion where images and works need to be economically connected. These can be found in the advertisement of products in Nigeria.

The placement and impact of billboards in Nigerian cities are essential to the understanding of the increasingly complexity in the built environments. They are important because, on the whole they are permanent and imposed. Unlike television or the printed word, they force us to look at them precisely because they are part of the fabrics of the environment and such can take on a life of their own. Many older billboards and signs create beautiful effect through chance and time, bits fall off are faded, reflected, cast interesting shadows, become distorted, folded, twisted and so on. Billboards today provide an opportunity for improving and embellishing the environment deliberately and creatively. Some billboards in Nigerian cities have a limited lifespan. Others will last for years and be enjoyed by generations. Actually they are subtle indicators of attitudes and change within society. According to Broadbent (1988), if a society cares about the trivialities such as either saving or creating, a fine piece of lettering, it will probably care about the building and care about the street that it is in, and care about the country itself. If they are to perform these roles, there are some qualities expected of them. All signs and lettering be it on billboards, wood, signposts, rotational electronic billboard are expected to be legible and harmonious. They must contain letterforms images that can be seen and recognized without difficulties. Background of letterforms should not interfere visually with its reading, it must maintain consistency in height, embrace good colour combination and the size of the letterforms should be dependent on the overall environment in which the sign is to be placed.



Plates 3 & 4: Bad Placement and Nuisance Billboard, (Akure, Nigeria).

Author's Collection 2011

### **Environmental Pollution of Billboard and Control of Placement**

According to Emeji (2002), little or nothing has been written on billboards and signs pollution as a subject. As a result, this section of the paper is to draw attention to the visual pollution of the

Nigerian visual environment. Billboards pollution is defined as indiscriminate and proliferous erection of low quality sign-systems that inform, warn, identify corporate goods and services, medium, large and small sign system for individual traders and professionals with little or no consideration for human, psychological and environmental factors coupled with juxtaposition of incompatible elements that cause visual disorder, overload of visual information, and obstruction to motorists and pedestrians in a given environment.



Plate 5; Wrong Placement of Billboards (Oshogbo, Nigeria),

Author's Collection 2012

Oshiga (1975), says that the city scene has been a conflux of many diverse things; the individual messages and their untidiness are incomprehensible to pedestrians and even motorists. The inability to communicate in some cases is very often complicated by the mingling of designs that are contradictory; for many billboards have contributed to visual pollution in the Nigerian cities. For example, weak ones were pulled down and destroyed by wind, some were torn into pieces; the peeling of some billboards all constitute visual environmental pollution; broken billboards were not replaced for many years, thereby polluting the visual environment of the city. Some of the signs and disabled billboards have one thing in common. They have failed to deliver the message due to the lack of the application of the basic design elements such as system modular rules, letter spacing, type and size of typography, colour scheme and contrast value. They therefore project visual disorder and visual clutter perpetuating visual pollution, visual chaos and visual obstruction which tend to diminish aesthetic sensibility and visual literacy in Nigerian cities. Environmental pollution of billboards is assuming global magnitude, and its frontiers are no more confined to any particular part of our planet.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines visual pollution as limited to situations in which the outer ambient atmosphere contains materials in concentrations which are harmful to man and his environment. Also in Nigeria, the Nigerian Public Health Law of 1917 mandates that before a man displays his wares whether it is an advertisement board or posters, approval must be sought from the appropriate authority. While documents above or evidence on ground, the town and country planning law of 1946 also supports that approval must be given for advertisement and hoarding

The Town Planning Authority Decree 88 of 1992, that is Nigerian Urban and regional planning laws stipulate also that every developer is expected to seek approval for whatever he or she wants to display. Also, the local government is mandated by the constitution and decree 21 of 1998 to control and collect levies on outdoor advertisements (Osunbiyi, 1999). However, it appears that the local authorities are only interested in the money making aspects leaving out the aesthetic planning of the various elements in the hands of traders, The rules guiding the erection of billboards in Nigeria spelt out necessary and acceptable conditions which could be applied to the control and development of outdoor sites all over th, a standard of 100 metres must be allowed between billboards.

- ❖ Billboards can be located on the verges of defined walkways.
- ❖ Billboards should not, in any way impede pedestrians and vehicular movements.
- ❖ Billboards should not be erected in a way to disrupt, endanger or damage drainages and other public utilities.
- ❖ Minimum distance of 100 metres must be allowed for on either side of a T-junction before location of a ground surface billboard in order not to obstruct the view of the motorists (Osunbiyi, 1999).

The laws were not followed by the agencies erecting the billboards as a result some of the boards and signs create nuisance in the cities. Also some of the sites have been rented to the Agency or Individual advertisers as the case may be, the outdoor company is expected to post the board regularly and ensure board is always in good condition. The boards should constantly be monitored from time to time. This is to guide against billboards becoming an environmental nuisance.

Over the years various decrees have been promulgated by the Nigerian government to set up regulatory bodies to help regulate advertising practices in the country and erecting of billboards. These bodies include:-

- Advertising practitioners council of Nigeria, (APCON)
- Association of advertising practitioners of Nigeria, (AAPN)
- Outdoor Advertising Association of Nigeria, (OAAN)
- Advertisers association of Nigeria (ADVAN).

These agencies, according to Estsaname (2007), have formed a monitoring body called the Advertising Standards Panel, whose duty is to monitor the erecting of billboards. There is nothing to



indicate that the body is monitoring the practice of erecting billboards in Nigeria. This brings to question whether visual pollution of signs and billboards are not perceived to be advertisement media or such are out of the degree of the regulatory body. If advertisement is defined as a form of commercial mass communication designed to promote the sale of a product or service (Robbs 2005) then one wonders why the regulatory bodies have thrown a blind eye on the pollution caused by signs and billboards in Nigerian environment.

According to Okpara (2005), in street environmental graphics, a number of faculties are challenged; visual information psychological effects of colour, space, form and proportion. All human processed information in diverse situations, street signs or graphic billboards provide insight into reason why there seem too many signs attempt to say too much at the same time and place. There is need to help minimize the phenomenon of pollution and confusion generated by such uncontrolled street graphics.

#### DISCUSSION:-

From the survey of this paper, it is obvious that aesthetically placed signs and billboards could contribute to the beauty of the Nigeria Urban environmental graphic. The use of neon-signs electronic billboards, cold-cathode incandescent light and computerised billboard system could bring a type of refurbishment to Nigerian city, and the removal of unwanted graphic materials would enhance the vitality of the environment of the country. Urban environmental graphics is a work of art and designs executed to beautify the environment to put colours to the environment, without which the environment will be dull and loses its beauty, and it is an extension of nature modified creatively for comfort and benefit of man, but with the present situation in Nigeria, the placement of signs, sign post, billboard, poster in Nigeria has created nuisance to the built environment.

The beauty and pride of a country is measured in terms of planning, good architecture, clearness, street graphics, and art, and these have effects on mass communication and social environment. Street graphics, according to Estsaname (2007), provide insights into some limitations, for instance. When too many signs attempt to say too much at the same time and missed place, indicated in this paper, there is need to help minimise the phenomenon of noise and confusion generated by such uncontrolled street graphics or signs.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:-

- Urban environmental graphics code and conduct should be developed and promulgated into law to incorporate the present system in Nigeria whereby signs and billboards are erected and placed in an inappropriate site, should be discouraged, while the Local government authorities should wake up to their responsibilities.

- The government should mount educational programmes to educate and create awareness to the people generally on the need to maintain pleasant and good environment.
- The advertising industry, the outdoor advertising association of Nigeria, the town planning authority should embark on research programmes that could check mate chaotic sight in our city environments.
- The graphic designers should contribute to the city planning because they are more into environmental layout, colour study, signs layout and good environmental graphics works.
- Nigeria is getting ready for the gains in tourism, which is impossible in the present dispensation because of the state of our environment as a result a stop must be put to the indiscriminate erection of billboards on the Nigeria street.  
\* For effective implementation of environmental policy in Nigeria a monitoring team of honest and hardworking environmental graphics agents should be inaugurated, and they should be visiting sites where billboards are erected regularly to see to the beautification of our environment.

## CONCLUSION

From survey of this paper, one could conclude that environmental graphics is inseparable from man and his environment. The place of billboards and signs in built environment cannot be ignored for billboards, signs and visual designs, according to this paper, are signature of ancient civilization and the pivot on which beautiful environment rotates. In this technological age the modern man perceives billboard as having an aesthetic value, that enriches the quality of living and making life and communication more pleasant because it creates an awareness and educates people about product and services.

Urban graphics adorn the spaces in which we live and work, it gives man the idea to recreate in this world for maximum benefits: As a result, the maintenance of environmental graphics and aesthetics practices should be a phenomenon to be agitated for by the Nigerian, because a proper functioning of environmental graphics conceptualization should be to foster a symbiotic kind of relationship between man and his environment in such a way that man would take his environment with sympathetic consideration. However the unfortunate aspect of the matter in Nigerian cities is the unpleasant and hazardous condition to which built environmental graphics is subjected to through environmental pollution of visual graphics, signs and billboards. Nigerian street is subjected to an uncared for environment filled with sub standard billboards, thus a city or ordinance that could help to control the size of billboards and signboards in street and road, irrelevant banners and posters should be prohibited. The existing signboards, posters and banners on the street should be cleared from their present positions. By doing all these and others not mentioned in this paper, urban environmental pollution of billboards placement would be eradicated in Nigerian cities.

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