IMPROVING URBAN RESILIENCE IN AFRICAN CITIES BY MAINSTREAMING TRADITIONAL PUBLIC OPEN SPACES; A STUDY OF IMO STATE, NIGERIA

by
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Abstract

The trend in urbanisation lends credence to the fact that by 2050 over 80% of world population will live in urban areas with majority of this being in Africa. This poses great challenges for the emerging cities of African which are known to have witnessed increasing environmental, social and security challenges, largely due to the distortions in the natural abilities of the physical and social environments to regenerate, maintain and self sustain themselves. This is quite different from the situation in traditional societies of old where the environment naturally accommodates and self regulates changes without much distortion and disequilibrium, thus making the traditional environment more resilient. This is largely achieved through the ability of the traditional public open spaces to adjust to changes in the environment. Imo state, with 534 Community Governments Centres, 27 local governments headquarters, at least 7 new towns, 7 urban centres and the state capital Owerri, making about 545 development and potential urban centres is set for not only democritising and spreading urban centres but creating resilient cities majority of which will evolve from traditional communities. With its high population density, this situation will make it one of the fastest growing urban states not only in Nigeria but in Africa. The paper draws attention of urban designers and planners to the need to integrate and mainstream traditional public open spaces into emerging cities for sustainable and resilient urban development. It establishes the survival of traditional public open spaces in Imo State, Nigeria, evaluates the extent of their contribution in the socio-cultural life of the people and the role of traditional public open spaces in solving environmental problems of the city. This study explores this

potential at the level of socio-economic and environmental values of the traditional public open spaces and concludes that emerging urban environments could function better, be more resilient and sustainable if urban design is not only democratised but conscious efforts made to accommodate, integrate and evolve urban public open spaces, systematically mainstreaming them into urban design.

Keyword: African, Cities, Improving, Mainstreaming, Open Spaces, Traditional

Introduction: Imo State is one of the 36 states of the Federal Republic of Nigeria with one of the highest population densities in the West African subregion. It is in the Igbo ethnic group and referred to as the Eastern Heartland due to its location in the heart of Igboland. Its location is within the hot humid rain forest zone with relatively high temperature in most part of the year, good rainfall and humidity which support a good variety of floral and faunal species. Naturally encouraged by the rich vegetation, the climate makes most activities of the people outdoor in nature with the interplay, integration of external and internal spaces very valuable. This is largely achieved through the creative use of open spaces over the years with increasing value from generation to generation. Open spaces therefore are not only the integral part of the outdoor morphology, but interpret and define the very life and lifestyle of the people. This is why in a typical traditional Igbo environment, public open spaces define and determine such activities as family life, education, public and family gathering, movement and communication, settlement, markets, festivals, public opinion, judicial settlement of disputes, security and indeed the whole life of the people is tied to the perception and understanding of public open spaces over the years.

However, urbanization is fast eroding this beautiful tradition such that in most urban areas not only that open spaces are inadequate but do not have the integrative milieu traditionally associated with the people let alone provide their needs. This has led to poor perception and value of the open spaces and more importantly resistance by the people in the use of public open spaces where they exist. Thus most of the incessant conflict, resistance to authority, fighting, violence, street trading, wrong parking, moral decadence and accidents are attributable to lack of this creative integration of open spaces based on what the people are used to. With the prediction that by 2050 more than 80% of the world population will live in the urban areas and majority of this being in the developing countries of sub-Saharan Africa,

the problem in the future can only be imagined if sufficient resilience is not built into urban design by creatively integrating traditional public open spaces.

Study Area: Imo State has twenty seven (27) Local Government Areas and lies within latitude 4°45'N and 7°15'N, and longitude 6°50'E and 7°25'E with an area of 5,100 square kilometers. It is bordered by Abia State on the East, the River Niger and Delta State on the West, Anambra State to the North and Rivers State to the South and hence referred to as the Eastern Heartland. Owerri, the state capital has roads radiating and linking the major South Eastern cities. The rainy season begins in April and lasts till October with annual rainfall varying from 1,500mm to 2,200mm (60 to 80 inches).This leads to flooding at times creating problems in the use of open spaces. An average annual temperature above 20 °C (68.0 °F) creates an annual relative humidity of 75%, with humidity reaching 90% in the rainy season. The dry season experiences two months of harmattan from late December to late February. The hottest months are normally between January and March every year. The rainy season begins in April and lasts till October with annual rainfall varying from 1,500mm to 2,200mm (60 to 80 inches) and leads to flooding at times creating problems in the use of open spaces. An average annual temperature above 20 °C (68.0 °F) creates an annual relative humidity of 75%, with humidity reaching 90% in the rainy season. The dry season experiences two months of harmattan from late December to late February. The hottest months are normally between January and March every year,(Fingerhurth,1978).

Methodology: The research involved the use of 300 questionnaires distributed through the three zonal headquarters of Okigwe,Orlu and Owerri with 50 each of the two urban Local Government Areas (LGAs) secretariats of Okigwe and Orlu and three urban LGA secretariats of Owerri West, Owerri North and Owerri Municipal. The Federal secretariat,Owerri, had 50 copies while the Imo State secretariat had 100 giving a total of 300 copies of questionnaire. The number retrieved was 299 copies, collated and analysed for this research. Physical visits to selected traditional public open spaces were also made and pictures taken. A list of environmental, socio-economic and socio-cultural indicators were used for the survey, collated and analysed using the 'z' test statistic. Using life cycle theory, research questions were posed with traditional public open spaces do not have scio-econmic, socio-cultural and environmental values on the life of the people poses as hypotheses. The result showed significant influence of traditional public open spaces in the socio-economic, socio-cultural and environmental life of the people. The need to mainstream traditional public open spaces

in urban design for sustainability and resilience in the emerging urban centres not only in Imo State but in Nigeria and indeed Africa was established.

Literature Review: Looking at the concept of space, (Mustafa, 2008), identified abstract mathematical space , astronomical physical space, surrounding earthly space, psychologically territorial and personal spaces which are behavioural notions and architectural space as the three dimensional extension of the world around man which can be experienced and used. According to him, architectural space serves as habitation, shelter, circulation, cultural, social, scenic, economic, communication, recreation, symbolic or other intentionally appropriated functions. From this definition, not only well defined spaces such as halls, rooms but arrangement of furniture, structures, pathways, roads, water bodies, community, outdoor envelops and squares are architectural spaces. It also includes perceived natural arrangements such as tree places or shades, water bodies, pathways, which serve man in the physical environment.

In Igboland, community squares, as architectural spaces, are mostly physical or psychological and centrally located public open spaces in communities, villages or neighbourhoods used for meetings, ceremonies, traditional competitions such as wrestling, music and dances, rallies, markets, landmarks, paths and goals, vistas, passive and active recreation, tree canopies or places and other socio-cultural, economic or religious activities over time. They contain fauna and flora that help to stabilise, regenerate and purify the environment. They also not only form the basis and basic unit of environmental design but the organising elements in rural-urban planning and design. When located in the villages they are called village squares or neighbourhood squares when associated with neighbourhoods, kindred squares when in kindred and community squares when associated with community. They become town squares when the communities have transformed into towns, cities or urban areas. Other names for town squares are civic centres, city squares, urban squares, market squares, public squares, piazzas, plazas and town greens. Most town squares not only accommodate functions and centrally located but are surrounded by small shops, cottage industries such as bakeries, meat markets, public buildings and stores. They may have monuments, fountains, wells or statues and may be named after these features or as memorials for important people, revolutions and events. The transformation has led to some town squares accommodating royal courts, government buildings, city halls, theaters, restaurants, museums, parade grounds, public motor parks and preservation of cultural values that some are now national

squares or memorials and thus form wonderful heritage to the people. Since some of these community squares have people always resting under the tree canopies, they play great roles in community policing and security as observation and surveillance points where strangers to the community are easily noticed or identified and actions immediately taken.

The Life Cycle Model explains the survival of traditional public open spaces due to the fact that not only the people use them but they are highly cherished and used as transmission agents for culture. Rapoport, (1980), defines culture as a way of life typical of a people, a system of symbols, meanings and cognitive schemata transmitted through symbolic codes as a set of adaptive strategies for survival related to ecology and resources for the people. This creates the basis for the transformation of traditional community squares, to form landmarks, produce images, strong and collective memories in their users no matter how distant they may be from the spaces, (Lynch, 1986). Open spaces may be relatively natural or substantially man-made such as community squares, gardens, may be recreational, amenity and conservation grounds, land with historic and scenic landscapes or places of natural beauty such as water bodies, valleys, hills, mountains, lakes, oceans and bays, economic such as market squares (Byrom, 1974).They are considered public when accessible to the public and unrestricted.(Rapoport, 1979) in his contribution, states that concepts and theories of Urban design based on western and ethnocentric traditions which neglect folk or popular traditions of Africa and other less developed areas, have failed to meet the needs of modern cities as they concentrate on the role of planners neglecting the environments and people that created them with much vacuum between modernity and history. A city seen from the spirit of popular tradition, he argues, as public open spaces not only accommodates the concept of Western and eccentric traditions, but becomes an element with cosmic organising power for the people with functions for the larger human settlements. Although the people's beliefs, tradition and culture at times seem abstract, they are expressed as symbols in dances, crafts, arts, and in architectural spaces such as village or community squares, roads and tracks, shrines in artistic forms. In the historical development of the people all inter play and find expression in public squares they use. These therefore as components find expression in open spaces as the main organising element which may have international, national, regional, neighbourhood, community and domestic influences. Open spaces whether terrestrial, psychological, physical or architectural express directly the activities, attitudes, feelings and emotions of those who use them over time and space, thus transit these from generation to generation as patterns and virtues in form of patterns expressed in pattern language, (Christopher,1977) . This implies that open spaces such as community squares are the

embodiment of the people's beliefs and symbols of expression with understandable meanings, patterns, language and communications of the activities of the people who use them and therefore much more than the physical eyes can see or ears can hear, (Lynch, 1986). These spaces range from courtyards and activity spaces in homes or cluster of residences to unrestricted spaces that accommodate pathways, roads, natural features such as streams, river, oceans, mountains and valleys among others. Open spaces may be fully public or semi public or private but which ever reflect the active emotions, feelings and entire life of the people in physical forms. The public spaces seen in the urban built environment are therefore the evolutionary transformation and changes through history of the people's activities into physical spatial forms with psychological and emotional meanings to the people and those associated with them, (Lynch, 1986). It is therefore certain that the study of surviving public spaces when identified, recognized and incorporated in urban design leads to a sustainable environment as it relives the people and becomes traditional. Tradition is not ancient, but what takes its root in the ancient, while accommodating the dynamic trend of the modern society in a continuum. Oguejiofor, (2005), therefore sees tradition as an activity or object in which the past and present are fused. Louis, (2007), in his contribution feels that tradition as continuum is not static but a means of transmitting values and institutions. Furthermore, he posited that so long as there is no attention to origin, there can be no understanding of tradition and therefore no understanding of contemporary world with the future in jeopardy. Traditional public open spaces in cities are therefore open spaces that have their roots in the past but have dynamically fused with current trends over time by being still useful even in transformed states and will determine the direction of the cities to serve future generations. Hence the images and patterns perceived in the city space is a combination of immediate and past experiences and therefore determine the future (Lynch, 1996). In an attempt to explain the dynamics of survival of architectural space, the cyclic lifecycle model is very relevant.(Mustafa, 2008), proposes five stage cyclic lifecycle namely; problem formulation, problem solution, implementation and use. It believes that as a given space gets to the end of its useful life, the cycle is repeated by way of renovation, remodeling, re-adaptation of use or the generation of new space and or improved usage by those who use or need them. Therefore no space can be obsolete but will always find relevance in the socio-cultural, traditional, environmental and economic setting of the people it serves by transformation. This explains why spaces although may change in form and function, survive many generations and therefore sustainable.

Data collection and analysis Data collection involved the use of questionnaires, physical measurement, photographs and interviews. Traditional Public Open Spaces In Igboland have various values, with various patterns, (Christopher, 1977). Some of these are;

a). **Economic**: These are agricultural land, Rivers, regional transport, regional boundary,identifiable neighbourhood, neighbourhood boundary, T-junction,Y-junction, market squares, markets, shops, bulk storage spaces, yam barns which not only generate revenue for the people but increases their living standards, plates I and II.

Plae 1: Umunaokwu Lagwa Village Square Aboh Mbaise, Plate II: Omuma Community Square Transformed Into Market Square. Omuma, in Oru East Local Government Area, Imo State, Nigeria, used for direction , advertisement, market square, shops,Imo State, Nigeria, used for gatherings, festivals, morning markets, local roads

Source: Author's Field Work (2014)

b). **Socio-cultural**: These are for, nuclear settlement, carnival routes. Grave/burial area outdoor cooking layout, public space to wait, community square, animal/ fauna areas, public reception community hall, positive outdoor space, market squares, T-junction,Y-junction which provide communal and cultural opportunities, recreation, resting places, settlement of disputes in arbitration which enhance the quality of lives of the people and improve social and emotional resilience, plates III and IV.

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Plate1II:Okpuruobu Tree Awaka Kingdom, Owerri North, Imo State, Nigeria used for relaxation, gatherings, festivals, local roads and Plate1V: Community Square, Umutanze, Orlu Local Government Area, Imo State, Nigeria, used as shrine, religious activities, settlement of disputes

Source: **Author's Field Work (2014)**

c). **Environmental control**: This is found under Cross road, Paths and goals, Water bodies, Natural flood routes, Water bodies, Dump sites. Pond/shallow, well site House cluster Row of houses Roundabout, Family bathing, Family bathing, Still Pond water, Hierarchy of open spaces Tree canopy, Main gate way, Main entrance, Green area, Indoor sunlight, Water basin receptacle, Street window, Water basin receptacle, irregular path shapes, Irregular path shapes, Intimacy gradient and are important in environmental control, quality and resilience.

Plate V: Umuoke Umuelele Village Square Owerri West, Imo State. Nigeria with its tree places for relaxation, local routes, refuse dump, flood water (arrowed) now a problem due to building on the flood route and receptacle basin built up leading to water logging of the square. **Source:Author's Field Work (2014)**

Data Collection, Collation And Analysis. Secondary data are not readily available, the data collection therefore involved the use of questionnaires, physical measurement, photographs and interviews. The results are as given below;

s/n	Cluster centre	No.sent out	No.collected	No not collected	%collection
1	Okigwe	50	45	5	90
2	Orlu	50	36	14	72
3	State secretariat	100	61	39	61
4	Owerri Municipal	50	43	7	86
5	Owerri west	50	44	6	88
	total	300	229	71	76.3

Table 1:Questionaire Collection

Source; Author's field work, 2014

14. Factoring, Listing and Specification of variables for the research. All the identified variables are nominal, Kothari (2013) as listed below;

s/n	Description of Variable	Code of Variable	Range of values	Scale of measurement	+ve values	-ve values
1.	Agric land	AGL	1-6	Nominal	US;58,SS;30, RA;55=143	UNS;69,SNA;4, RNA;5=78
2.	Rivers	RIV	1-6	Nominal	US;52,SS;17, RA;30=99	UNS;13,SNA;17, RNA;17=47
3.	Regional transport	RET	1-6	Nominal	US;109,SS;37, RA;41=187	UNS;19,SNS;13, RNA;13=45
4.	Regional boundary	REB	1-6	Nominal	US;80,SS;28, RA;35=143	UNS;23,SNS;13, RNA;14=50
5.	Identifiable neighbourhood	IDN	1-6	Nominal	US;109,SS;33, RA;49=191	UNS;17,SNS;7, RNA;9=33
6.	Neighbourhood boundary	NBB	1-6	nominal	US;109,SS;33, RA;66=208	UNS;20,SNS;5, RNA;3=28
7.	T-Junction	TJU	1-6	Nominal	US;110,SS;35, RA;47=192	UNS=13,SNA;7, RNA;9=29
8.	Y-Junction	YJU	1-6	nominal	US;112,SS;26, RA;48=186	UNS;11,SNS;17, RNS;9=37
9.	Vegetable garden	VEG	1-6	Nominal	US;67,SS;28, RA;45=140	UNS;56,SNS;17, RNS ;10=83
10.	Fruit tree orchard	FFTO	1-6	Nominal	US;40,SS;23, RA;35=98	UNS;69,SNS;25, RNS;21=115
11.	Bulk storage ban	BSB	1-6	Nominal	US;49,SS;24, RS;44=117	UNS;75,SNS;23, RNS;3=101
12.	Community farmland	Cf	1-6	Nominal	US;53,SS;28, RS;52=133	UNS;66,SNS;15, RNS;8=89
13.	Cottage industrial area	CIA	1-6	Nominal	US;94,SS;18,RS;33 =145	UNS;25,SNS;24, RNS;16=65
14.	Community project site	CPS	1-6	Nominal	US;72,SS;29, RS;51=152	UNS;53,SNS;10, RNS;6=69
15.	Animal/fauna	ANF	1-6	Nominal	US;59,SS;20,RS;36 =115	UNS;55,SNS;15, RNS;15=85

Table 11: Economic Value of Traditional Public Squares

Source; Author's field work, 2014

s/n	Description of Variable	Code of Variable	Range of values	Scale of measurement	+ve values	-ve values
16.	Cross road	CRR	1-6	Nominal	US;113,SS;28,RS;56=197	UNS;11,SNS;11,RNS;5=27
17.	Paths and goals	PAG	1-6	Nominal	US;99,SS;23,RS;33=155	UNS;20,SNS;20,RNS;19=59
18.	Natural flood routes	NFR	1-6	Nominal	US;100,SS;27,RS;29=156	UNS;24,SNS;11,RNS;26=61
19.	Water bodies	WAB	1-6	Nominal	US;107,SS;13,RS;32=152	UNS;27,SNS;30,RNS;18=75
20.	Dump sites	DUS	1-6	Nominal	US;98,SS;19,RS;35=152	UNS;23,SNS;23,RNS;25=71
21.	Pond/shallow well site	PSW	1-6	Nominal	US;34,SS;23,RS;44=101	UNS;83,SNS;22,RNS;20=125
22.	House cluster	HCL	1-6	Nominal	US;95,SS;29,RS;43=167	UNS;16,SNS;16,RNS;14=46
23.	Row of houses	ROH	1-6	Nominal	US;99,SS;17,RS;22=138	UNS;18,SNS;28,RNS;25=71
24.	Roundabout	RDA	1-6	Nominal	US;111,SS;27,RS;49=187	UNS;12,SNS;13,RNS;13=38
25.	Family bathing	FAB	1-6	Nominal	US;54,SS;28,RS;44=126	UNS;66,SNS;12,RNS;16=94
26.	Network of paths	NOP	1-6	Nominal	US;101,SS;26,RS;34=161	UNS;17,SNS;17,RNS;15=49
27.	Still Pond water	SPW		Nominal	US;38,SS;18,RS;35=91	UNS;77,SNS;22,RNS;32=131
28.	Hierarchy of open spaces	HPS	1-6	Nominal	US;62,SS;22,RS;32=116	UNS;59,SNS;28,RNS;16=103
29.	Tree canopy	TRC	1-6	Nominal	US;96,SS;23,RS;42=161	UNS;29,SNS;20,RNS;12=61
30.	Main gate way/entrance	MGW	1-6	Nominal	US;88,SS;28,RS;49=165	UNS;25,SNS;14,RNS;10=49
31.	Inbuilt courtyard	INC	1-6	nominal	US;86,SS;23,RS;40=149	UNS;38,SNS;15,RNS;11=64
32.	Green area	GRA	1-6	Nominal	US;79,SS;16,RS;31=126	UNS;25,SNS;25,RNS;23=73
33.	Indoor sunlight	INS	1-6	Nominal	US;64,SS;21,RS;43=128	UNS;49,SNS;18,RNS;29=96
34.	Water basin/ receptacle	WBR	1-6	Nominal	US;86,SS;14,RS;27=127	UNS;32,SNS;31,RNS;26=89
35.	Street window	STW	1-6	Nominal	US;49,SS;10,RS;17=76	UNS;66,SNS;35,RNS;37=138
36.	Irregular path shapes	IPS	1-6	Nominal	US;79,SS;32,RS;40=151	UNS;41,SNS;12,RNS;11=64
37.	Intimacy gradient	ITG	1-6	Nominal	US;79,SS;16,RS;26=121	UNS;39,SNS;24,RNS;14=77
38.	Pedestrian path/walkway	PPW	1-6	nominal	US;98,SS;26,RS;41=165	UNS;18,SNS;15,RNS;16=49
39.	Space connected buildings	SCB	1-6	Nominal	US;88,SS;28,RS;39=155	UNS;34,SNS;21,RNS;11=66
40.	Inbuilt courtyard	IBC	1-6	nominal	US;86,SS;23,RS;40=149	UNS;38,SNS;38,RNS;11=87

Table III: Environmental control Values of Traditional Public Squares

Source; author's field work, 2014

Key;

US = Urban Surviving public open spaces

SS = Suburban Surviving public open spaces

RS = Rural Surviving public open spaces

UNS = Urban not Surviving public open spaces

SNS = Suburban not Surviving public open spaces

RNS= Rural not Surviving public open spaces

Analysis of Data and testing of Hypothesis:

'Z' test statistic: $Z = PQ/\sqrt{NPQ}$

Where;

P = Proportion of positive responses

Q = Proportion of negative responses

N = sample size

B = level of significance = 0.05

C= critical value at 0.05 level of significance, the 'Z' score taking value between -1.96 to 1.96.

D = Decision rule: if the computed 'Z' value is between -1.96 to 1.96 of our critical value, we reject the null hypothesis

E= Computed 'z' value

s/n	Options	Code	Frequency	%	
1.	Urban public open spaces Surviving	US	1173	36.91	
2.	Suburban public open spaces surviving	SS	409	12.87	
3.	Rural public open spaces surviving	RS	667	20.99	2249 (71%)
4.	Urban public open spaces NOT Surviving	UNS	584	18.38	
5.	Suburban public open spaces NOT surviving	SNS	187	5.88	
6.	Rural public open spaces NOT surviving	RNS	158	4.97	929 (29%)
	Total		3178	100	

Table IV: Traditional Public Squares do not have Environmental control Value

$Z = 0.71 \times 0.29 / \sqrt{3178} \times 0.71 \times 0.29 = 0.2059/34.92 = 0.0064$

Decision: Since the computed 'Z' value 0f 0.0081 is between -1.96 and 1.96 of our Critical value we reject the null hypothesis, we therefore accept the alternative hypothesis that open spaces have economic values in Imo State, Nigeria.

s/n	Options	Code	Frequency	%	
1.	Urban public open spaces Surviving	US	2089	38.44	
2.	Suburban public open spaces surviving	SS	560	10.30	
3.	Rural public open spaces surviving	RS	923	16.98	3572 (66%)
4.	Urban public open spaces NOT Surviving	UNS	887	16.32	
5.	Suburban public open spaces NOT surviving	SNS	521	9.59	
6.	Rural public open spaces NOT surviving	RNS	445	8.19	1853 (34%)
	Total		5435		

Table V: Traditional Public Squares do not have Economic Values

$Z = 0.66 \times 0.34 / \sqrt{5435} \times 0.66 \times 0.34 = 0.2244/34.92 = 0.0064$

Decision: Since the computed 'Z' value 0f 0.0064 is between -1.96 and 1.96 of our Critical value we reject the null hypothesis, we therefore accept the alternative hypothesis that open spaces have environmental control values in Imo State, Nigeria.

Observations: The following observations were made;

1. Traditional public open spaces as community squares abound in urban, suburban and rural areas all over Imo State;

2. While the traditional public open spaces are intact in rural communities ,they are progressively changed, transformed into other uses in the suburban areas and cities leading to resistance by the people who still want to use them as of old as socio-cultural, economic and environmental control places leading to conflict and disobedience to planning uses of the spaces.

3. Where the environmental uses have been abused and converted to other uses flooding, erosion, refuse heaps and other abuses were observed.

4. Traditional public squares still play great role in the life of the people.

Conclusion

The Community Government of Imo State with the community as the organising element has great potential in democatising urban design, development and preserving the traditional public open spaces through integrative planning and modernisation using communities and community squares as the organising units. Every community government council has its headquarters which translates into physical development urban centres. The concept of local layout in each center headquarters will provide all the physical infrastructures needed within the area with identified traditional public open spaces as the integrating feature. The integration of traditional public open spaces in the emerging urban design proposals from the onset would lead to more traditional public open spaces not only identified and surviving but would lead to a resilient, sustainable, peaceful and orderly urban development. This would not only democratise planning and public participation but would open up more urban centres thereby discouraging rural-urban migration with its attendant social and economic problems. Thereby not only improve the life of the people but lead to improved economic, socio-cultural, environmental benefits and strengthen the grassroot development as the hallmark urbanisation and also hence preserve the heritage of the people.

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