

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TO PLANNING

Akue Leka-Oscar*¹ and Udom Mina Elsie²

¹Department of Urban and Regional Planning.

²Rivers State University, Port Harcourt.

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*Corresponding Author

Akue Leka-Oscar

Department of Urban and
Regional Planning.

ABSTRACT

Public perceptions and attitudes to planning is of pivotal importance to the planning profession as planning is public based, incorporating public opinions in to professional rational thinking of the planners.

This research adopted existing literature to assess and revalidate the role of public perceptions and their attitudes to planning the physical environment. Public perception essentially indicates the performance of the public participation system. Before planners can effectively find more sustainable community development patterns to adapt urban change, they must understand the source of public discontent and impact of their behavior and attitude towards neighborhoods and overall community well-being. Eighty five (85) respondents were purposively sampled in Port Harcourt to ascertain the level of citizen participation in planning the physical environment. The results revealed that the general public has different perceptions and attitudes to planning; although majority of those that have the willingness and interest for participation are rarely invited. The study recommends for public involvement and participation in planning the physical environment and that planning should be seen as public based where the opinion, views and perceptions of the general public is considered and integrated in to the planning process.

KEYWORDS: The Public, Perception, Attitude and Behaviour.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Public perceptions and attitudes towards public affairs over the years in Nigeria and most developing countries of West Africa has become a societal issue of growing concern and importance in the field of planning. Public perception essentially indicates the performance of

the public participation system. Before planners can effectively find more sustainable community development patterns to adapt urban change, they must understand the source of public discontent and impact of their behaviour and attitude towards neighborhoods and overall community well-being (Liepa-zemeda & Hess, 2016). The public forms a primary impression of public affairs and execute subsequent information extraction, internalized absorption and emotional judgment. Eventually the public show their attitudes and behaviours as they express feedback and appeal or put their emotion in to planning participation or other public affairs.

The public at large often receives enough factual information to form a general opinion about public affairs. Perception is a person's direct reaction towards an objective image. Perception could affect-peoples' attitude and thinking towards objective things; this is because human beings are thinking beings whose actions are mediated by cognitive processes. One cannot ignore how perception influences the peoples' effort at the formulation of policies and programmes to provide lasting solutions to environmental problems.

Perception is a mental process of recognizing and interpreting sensory information, enabling us to recognize meaningful objects and events. Perception is fundamental to man's activities in the environment. In most cases human perception and its attitude precedes decision, which generates behavior or actions that affects the physical environment. It should be noted that perception is the sum of awareness and the translation of stimuli through excitation of sensory receptors, memories, attitudes, preferences, and other psychological factors into an organized experiences. Planning is all about the translation of the perceptual sensory modalities in to reality. It's the conceptualization of the mental image of the spatial arrangement of the activities across space over time. The purpose is to achieve desirable environmental quality.

2.0 The Nature of Public Perception

For the purpose of understanding man-environment relationship most especially the physical environment that man's activities impinge upon, perception is concerned with the effects of social and cultural factors on man's cognitive structuring of his physical and social environment. This ofcourse is mostly referring to the human environmental perception, which is the sum total of awareness of stimuli as influenced or modifies by perceivers experiences, preferences, attitudes, values-judgments, current state or outlook, genetic-physiological make-up, beliefs and cultural characteristics (Ebong & Bassey, 1995). It should be noted that

planning incorporates public feelings and beliefs, opinions that are rational or irrational about the physical and cultural characteristics of an area or place. In this case, planning perception is much more than mere direct sensations, visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile and kinesthetic which could be termed percepts, perceptual experiences or sensory perception (Ebong & Bassey, 1995). This has to do with the complex process of human interpretation of space and the arrangement and proper utilization of land uses. The hallmark here is environmental quality and proper land use management.

Perception, thus serves a useful purpose in planning. It is the way an individual perceives the physical environment that influences his actions and plans towards achieving rational environmental decisions. Most importantly, the decisions planners make about the physical environment as well as the social, political and economic actions are based not necessarily on reality but on their interpretation of reality. Obviously, the physical environment itself has complex categories of information; but the human brain of comprehension has limited capacity to comprehend infinite complex of reality, hence planners tends to select the aspect of information that are essential to the needs of the general public in the interpretation of environmental stimuli through the involvement of the public in planning process.

Learning process plays an important role in perception. Planners tend to perceive particular learned patterns and ignore other possible patterns. For instance, decisions may be taken on the basis of what is believed to be the best from among known possible alternatives which is one of the planning processes. Here, public attitude to planning tries to create an influence on the planners' view but the planner becomes professional because of the learning process acquired overtime.

Perception also tends to be influenced by motives. Sometimes, people fail to recognize things that are in conflict with preferred ideas or that might disturb them. Here, public opinions are highly needed in accomplishing planning goals and objectives. This is because perception is a two-way process between people and the physical environment. The physical environment presents the stimuli in terms of distinctions and relations; the individuals with his own aspiration, motives and expectation coupled with his peculiar psycho genetic make-up and socio-cultural characteristics select, organize and endows with meaning which he or she sees. Hence, the perceivers' image of the environment deviates more or less from the reality because certain aspects of the physical environment where not captured in the perceptual process. Also, since there are human variations in terms of tastes, needs, aspirations, culture

and so on, no two persons can perceive the environment in the same way: hence the idea of consultation with the public and/or involving the public in the planning process is deemed necessary in planning.

Nevertheless, if the planning vision provides a clear and convincing picture of the future and the information of planning is easy to understand by the public, then the public's cognition and emotion can be well integrated in to planning process. On the cognitive level, public expectations and their mental images and perception of the quality of the physical environment have positive contribution to physical planning. Public contributions to planning in this case cannot be overemphasized. This is because the core element of the emotional level is perceived value. The public is more concerned about a new planning project if it can add to the value of the land, protect community environment, and improved the conditions of low-income and minority of the populations (Mahdavinejad & Amini, 2011). On the behaviour level, public continuous behavior intentions could enhance perceived value, subjective norms and perceived availability. Public attitude to planning remains one of the most attribute of how the public perceived planning as a veritable tool of solving societal and environmental problems.

Land use planning for instance is concern with the issue of public affair which aims to coordinate land use in a proper perspective and resolve conflicts of interest of different stakeholders and groups in the society. What the public know and think in the process of planning can have important implications for a successful implementation of a project and can help to reduce conflict and build a society with sustainable development.

Public participation in planning focuses on the practice of stakeholder's engagement unlike public perception that has the conceptualization of the planning itself. The emphasis here is exploring the psychological process and then understands how the public structure their attitudes and behaviours towards planning the physical environment. Land use planning for instance should not only emphasize mechanical participation but also good perceptual processes and experiences. Planning should be understood by the public clearly and should be integrated with their knowledge and experiences to promote participation, which is term organic participation. The public at large often receives enough factual information to form a general opinion about public affairs. This is because perception is a person's direct reaction towards an objective image. It could affect peoples' attitude towards objective thinking.

3.0 Public Attitude to Planning

Attitude refers to the habitual response towards a particular object in a certain way. It is a more persistent and consistent internal intrinsic psychological expression which determine what kind of behavior and action people take in planning. Peoples' attitude and behavior is paramount in the actualization of planning views and aspiration.

Perception is also influenced by culture, socio-economic status, age, education, personality, prejudice, temperament and attitude. In this case, attitude is the most important factor conditioning perceptions particularly if it is viewed to include an individual's feelings towards and beliefs about stimulus, governed by past experiences (Pocock and Hudson 1978 cit. Ebong & Bassy 1995). Attitude comprises affective, cognitive and behavioral components.

In a perspective, individuals organize their affective (liking or non-liking) and cognitive (beliefs) to attitudinal system which has a predisposition to respond to an object consistent with that system (Mitchell, 1979).

People tend to conform to the norms and standards of the society to which they were born and bred; and with which they subsequently associate through accumulation and socialization. They tend to think, act and behave in accordance with the prevailing cultural milieu of their respective society. Consequently, individuals perceive their environment through acquired cultural glasses. The perceptions of men and women towards a planned environment may differ not only because of physiological and psychological differences but also because of the different roles prescribed for them by culture. This is why planning is all inclusive.

Feelings, moods, needs, or emotions of the moment could influence individual perception and attitude towards planning. Planners should appreciate and consider public circumstances, motivations, emotions, moods, needs and cultural attributes as critical factors in changing public attitudes towards facilitating maintenance of environmental quality through public participation in planning the physical environment.

Individual's personality and socio-cultural factors vary from person to person or from group to group. An individual may be pressurized to react in a certain way to environmental stimuli depending on the particular phenomena. Obviously, the way people view or react to

environmental stimuli is mediated by their interpretation and understanding of the stimuli with which they are confronted. The public do not only receive locational and attributive information about phenomena from the behavioral environment but also affects both environments by his actions through planning. In most cases, planners seek to monitor the effectiveness of their actions, assign value to experience and correct future behavioral strategies. These in turn may bring about a modification of spatial cognition, serving as stimuli for further action which is secured towards planning a healthy environment.

4.0 Conceptual Process of Public Perception

The conceptual process of public perception in this write-up is based on the ABC Attitude Theory of Consumer Behaviour. The ABC Attitude Theory of Consumer Behavior according to Zhongpiong, Yiming, Jianf, Bassett and Tan (2018) is used to explain the psychological process involved in public perception and attitude to planning. The theory has three elements: A which is the affect; B which is behavior and C which is cognition. As shown in fig. 4.1, the interactive psychological process begins with the acquisition and learning of planning information and relevant background information which is the public information input stage. Through proper screening and combination of the effective information, the public forms cognition with different thinking and mental conceptualization to comprehend the planning content. After the internalized knowledge is absorbed and properly construed, the public moves to emotional judgment. In this stage, the public has usually formed a kind of comprehensive emotional preference towards public affairs and social issues reflecting their experiences and individual values. Sometimes, media publicity will further strengthen this effect whether good or bad under the internal drive of emotional judgment, such as support for or opposition to the planning project, hence the public tends to express their behaviours. The public behaviour may be express via participation in hearing, give advice, or protest the project, or appeal against decision to implement the project. In land use planning for instance, the role of government is not only limited to funding, land governance and final decision making as regard to proper land use management; but good perceptual experiences that would inspire positive participation from the public as this will help to reduce conflict and create harmonious community development that is sustainable.

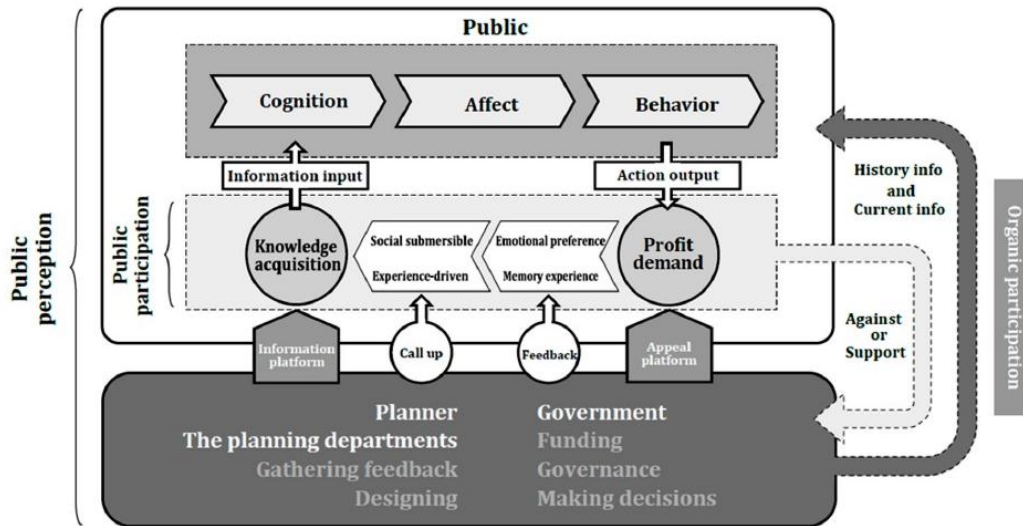


Fig. 4.1: Conceptual process of public perception based on ABC public theory Source: Adapted from Zhongpiong, et al., 2018.

The context of public perception as presented in this write-up includes the public cognition about planning, which then affects and reflect on emotional attitudes of the people and subsequently their behavioural intention which include public perception and the model of the three core elements: cognition, affect and behaviour. Following this sequence, it can be observed that the core elements of public perception can be measured as detailed variable (Zhongpiong, et al., 2018). However, the cognition levels are subdivided in to public expectations, perceived quality and perceived differences: The affect levels are also subdivided in to perceived value, perceived availability and public satisfaction: The behaviour levels are subdivided in to public complaints, public trust, perceived behaviour control, subjective norms and continuous behaviour intentions.

Public expectations are the benefits that the public perceives from a potential planning project. Perceived quality implies that the public perceived the quality of the information as contained in the plan presented by planners to them, such as the planning documents containing pictures and prototype diagrams of projects at a glance or views of planning. Perceived differences are the differences between expectations and reality when the plan has been executed. Perceived value includes the public perception of environmental value, economic value, social value and equitable value of such executed project. Perceived availability is the responsiveness of the public to the plan, such as whether plan illustration is explicit or easy to understand by the public, thus public satisfaction generally refers to whether the public is satisfied or dissatisfied with the planning process. Public complaint

comes as publics' negative thoughts and/or mindset towards the government or the planners, while public trust is the publics' positive feelings.

Perceived behaviour control on the other hand is an individual behaviour that supports or opposes the planning program, subjective norms can be understood as the behaviour formed by the public themselves or influenced by the society or others, rather than caused by the planning projects. Continuous behaviour intention is whether the public would like to participate or not. Accordingly, a conceptual framework for planning public perception is thus established.

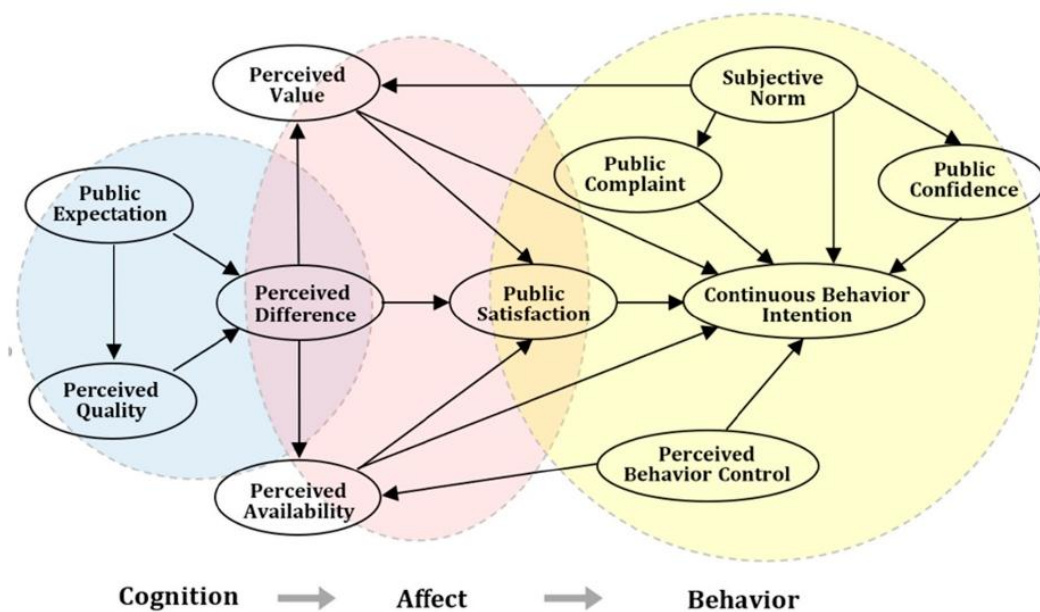


Fig. 4.2: conceptual framework for planning public perception Source: Adapted from Zhongpiong, et al., 2018.

5.0 Significance of Public Perception to Planning

Increasingly people and experts in various fields are becoming aware of the fact that there is no one objective environment (Ebong and Bassegy 1995). An individual acts on the basis of his perceived environment and not on the basis of the actual environment. The individual perceived healthy, aesthetics, scenery, well planned and organized environment devoid of pollution, congestion, etc. The beauty of the physical environment is borne out of human perception. The significance, or beauty of perception lies in the fact that by identifying the inner working of man's mind and culture, attitude and behavior, it will be easy to draw his or attention to the most crucial aspect of changes and innovation of the man's environment via planning.

The fact that perception varies from persons to person and from groups to groups and even nations to nations has planning implications. For instance, research has shown that significant difference occurs between the public and resource planners (Mitchell, 1979). This suggests the need for public involvement in taking decisions concerning resource planning and management. The point to note here is that in value laden decisions, the expert which is the planners are not necessarily the best judges as to what is desirable. Planners and designers must, therefore, ensure that values, tangible and intangible are identified and entered in to public decision-making process.

Worthy of note is that spatial knowledge is gained through interactions with the environment which comprises the social-cultural milieu in to which an individual is born and bred. Generally, every group of people has its own peculiar way of organizing and using space depending on the sets of rules, norms, conventions and regulations that is based on its values and goals. Any given environment is an overt expression of a people's value and attitudes. The accumulated experiences of each individual or group provide the individual or group with a set of interpretive-evaluation screens which filter all environmental experiences through sensory modalities. Thus, even though it provides all sorts of requirements for man, environment means many things to many people hence their different perception on how it should be planned. When dealing with peoples' perceptions, attitude, behaviour and preferences, it is essential to explore peoples' cultural history and life experience in the context of its physical setting most especially in planning the physical environment having known that people wear cultural spectacles to translate sensory stimuli to meaningful experience. To justify this assertion in planning the physical environment, public participation is needed in planning process to drive down an inclusive planning and decision making process.

6.0 Actualizing Public Perceptions in Planning through Citizen Participation in Planning Decision Process

A thorough democratic process requires that any planning decision that would have any impact on the quality of life of the citizenry, should take in to account the opinion of the people for whom the plan is being made. This orientation therefore requires that there must be information dissemination and public hearing about the specific project. This ofcourse is to sensitize the general public concerning the project and/ programme, thus creating awareness and response reactions which sometimes may lead to the modification of the

original planning project. For instance, an urban renewal project that may warrants the clearance and demolition of certain houses and other structures. This type of project requires public hearing in a true democratic process as this will makes such plan more democratically effective as it permits some inputs from the citizens or the affected community.

Public perception can be held through public participation in planning decisions process in what is commonly known as '*due process*' This ofcourse is a factor of importance for citizen participation in the process of planning. In other words, the citizens are carried along in the preparation of such master or comprehensive plan. Infact, no plan reaches an implementation stage until it has received the inputs of the affected community or communities. This is what is being regarded to as *due process*. Essentially, the stage for citizen participation would not be jumped or sidetracked by planners; otherwise such plans can be described as illegitimate and non-problem solving. Moreso, adopting citizen participation, planning is made less dictatorial where public opinion and perception are integrated in to the planning process.

Another important aspect of citizen participation that will explore the perception of the public to planning is what has been described by Friedman (1973, cit. Ebong & Bassey, 1995) as a transactive process in planning. What is meant by the concept of transactive process in planning is that the planners on one hand and citizens on the other hand must transact the business of planning. In this case, there would be trade off by planners resulting in give and take between the planners and the citizens in a face to face agreement and disagreement, reject and acceptance, bargaining and other components of transaction, which ofcourse there will be negotiations in respect of physical, economic and social cost, focusing on the planning goals and objectives.

In a survey conducted by the researchers in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, on citizen participation in planning, eighty five (85) respondents within the study area was randomly interviewed to ascertain the level of citizen participation in planning the physical environment. The myriad opinions regarding the attitude, perception and participation of the public towards planning the physical environment is shown in table 3.1.

Table 6.1: Public Attitude, perception and participation in Planning the Physical Environment.

s/n	Responses	Freq.	%
1	Invited for contribution	5	6
2	Expecting invitation but not invited	30	35
3	Have no time for such	12	14
4	It is their job and business of planners	15	18
5	Not my discipline hence nothing to contribute	13	15
6	Not willing to partake hence not necessary	10	12
	Total	85	100

Source: Researchers' Survey, 2020

The information obtained from respondents of the sampled area as contained in table 6.1 revealed that only 6% of the total sampled respondents are invited for contribution when planning is carried out. 35% said they have been expecting invitation from planners during planning process but never invited, 14% display their attitude towards planning by saying that they have no time for such; 18% shows their level of perception to planning by saying that it is the job and business of planners; while 15% of the respondents expressed their attitude and perception about planning by saying that it is not their discipline hence nothing to contribute and finally 12% said they are not willing to partake hence not necessary. The implications of the data presented in table 6.1 shows that the general public have different perceptions and attitudes to planning although majority of those that have the willingness and interest for participation are rarely invited. This have shown that perception and attitude of the general public towards planning the physical environment varied and is rather very important if planning is to be all inclusive.

7.0 CONCLUSION

Public perception and attitude to plan the physical environment is of pivotal importance to the planning profession. This is because people see things in diverse ways and their mental image about the physical environment varies. Public perception essentially indicates the performance of the public participation system in planning process. Before planners can effectively find more sustainable community development patterns to adapt changes, they must understand the source of public discontent and impact of their behaviour and attitude towards neighborhoods and the overall community well-being. The public forms the primary impression of public affairs and executes subsequent information extraction, internalized absorption and emotional judgment. The public forms their own opinions via the accumulation of relevant knowledge which is mainly the information related to the passive

acquisition of public affairs and the evaluation information of other public services. Eventually, the public show their attitudes and behaviour towards planning the physical environment. The public perception towards planning directly influences their value judgment and their degree of participation.

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