

Urban Renewal as a Tool for Sustainable Urban Development in Nigeria: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

Urban renewal revitalises deteriorated urban areas through renovation, new public space, and better public services. This paper argues that renewal improves quality of life, and keeps the character of a place, only when economic and environmental measures are organised to serve social goals. Drawing on definitions of renewal, the main methods of intervention, and the Sants renewal in Barcelona, the paper sets out social requirements for renewal and the practices that undermine them. Displacement of low-income residents, loss of architectural heritage, and weak community input are treated as the principal issues for Nigerian application. A short set of measurement indicators is proposed so that socially sustainable renewal can be assessed rather than only described.

Keywords: urban renewal, sustainability, social sustainability, quality of life, community participation

1. Introduction

Many urban renewal projects treat the dimensions of sustainability separately. The result is weak community engagement and little attention to the cultural and local needs of residents. This paper asks how environmental and economic sustainability can be used to serve the social dimension through urban renewal; how the elements of renewal contribute to social sustainability; and to what extent renewal projects reflect those principles. The Nigerian title is deliberate. The argument is developed from theory and from a documented international case, then read back as issues and challenges for cities that are renewing deteriorated fabric, including Nigerian cities.

2. Methodology

The paper is a theoretical and analytical study. It clarifies definitions, sets out renewal methods, reorders the dimensions of sustainability so that the social dimension is the purpose of the other two, and tests that reading against the Sants renewal in Barcelona. The case is read against a fixed set of social requirements rather than described only as a design narrative. Measurement indicators are then proposed for later empirical use.

3. Urban renewal

Urban renewal has been defined as slum clearance and physical redevelopment that also takes account of heritage (Couch, Sykes, and Boerstinghaus, 2011), and as a comprehensive integration of vision and action aimed at the economic, physical, social, and environmental problems of deprived areas (Ercan, 2011). It is also described as the strategic improvement of poorly developed or underdeveloped parts of a city, in both high- and low-density areas (Ansumant, 2019). In this paper it means the improvement of physical, socio-economic, and environmental conditions through redevelopment, rehabilitation, and heritage preservation.

3.1 Methods

Redevelopment removes most existing buildings, except those of historical value, and rebuilds after a reconsideration of land use. It is used where the fabric has reached the end of its functional life. It breaks social ties, demands large financial and technical resources, prices out low-income households, can worsen the housing deficit, and often produces a design that does not continue the character of the area (Al-Asasfeh, Jbour, and Al-Zoubi, 2007).

Rehabilitation raises the architectural standard of a damaged fabric, makes up shortfalls in infrastructure, social services, and open space, and replaces only some dilapidated buildings. It costs less than full redevelopment, keeps more of the social structure, takes less time, and retains the existing pattern.

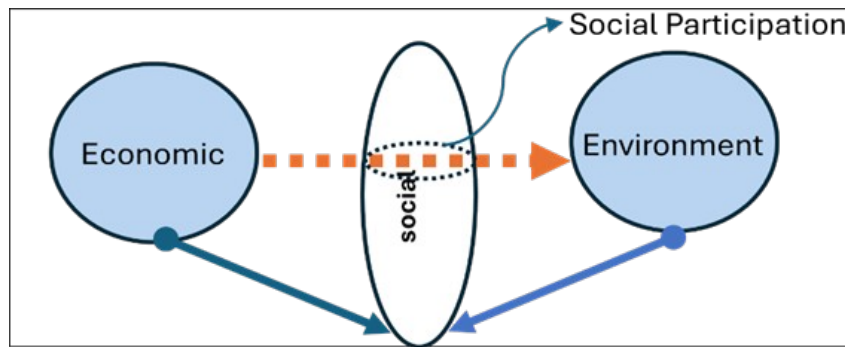
Historical preservation protects buildings and areas of heritage value and adapts them to contemporary use. Reuse need not restore the original function. Urban infill closes gaps in a connected historical fabric with new buildings that match height, skyline, mass, scale, facade, materials, colour, and setback. Comprehensive revitalisation divides a deteriorated area into fabric to preserve and adapt, fabric to reconstruct because it has neither economic nor historical value, and fabric that needs revival, with criteria for maintenance, repair, infill, and reuse.

4. Sustainability and the social dimension

The paper uses the Brundtland formulation: sustainable development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Hasna, 2007). The usual three dimensions

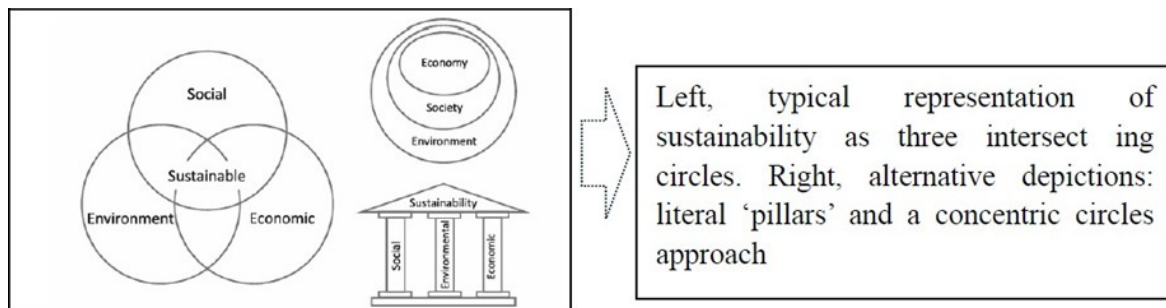
are environmental protection, economic opportunity, and social justice and quality of life (Purvis, Mao, and Robinson, 2019).

Figure 1. The three dimensions of sustainability (after Purvis et al., 2019).



This paper does not treat the three dimensions as equal pillars. Economic and environmental measures are taken as instruments that must serve the social dimension, and the community must take part in shaping both. Figure 2 states that reading.

Figure 2. Sustainability reordered so that economic and environmental measures serve the social dimension (author).



4.1 Social sustainability

Social sustainability is a continuing effort to improve quality of life for all groups, now and later, and to treat difference as a source of strength (Rice, 2023). Bacon and colleagues locate it in the individual and collective well-being that neighbourhoods provide, shaped by how people use the built environment. Woodcraft, Hackett, and Caistor-Arendar (2012) describe it as a strategy that builds capability, widens choice, and respects custom and identity. Alwah, Al-Attar, and Wei (2023) argue that a more acceptable built environment strengthens belonging, because residents meet others who share values and aspirations.

Applied to the city, the same idea means less dependence on a rural hinterland, more renewable energy, fewer pollutants, more efficient land use, and more recycling, so that development stays within the capacity of local systems to renew themselves (Bai, Wu, and Zhang, 2023). Participatory design is the practical route. Residents take part in planning, design, and implementation. Lai, Wang, and Xia (2025) stress interdisciplinary work across environment, sociology, and economics. Srinivasan (2024) adds transparent decisions, inclusion of diverse groups, response to stated needs, and tools such as virtual workshops and participatory mapping.

Table 1. Social requirements and key elements for urban renewal (adapted from Abbas, 2005, by the author).

Requirement	Key elements
Preserve social values and neighbourhood cohesion	Shared language between resident and designer; training to read plans; participation in decisions; community values; safety; choice; clarity; privacy; personal imprint.
Social cohesion and less segregation	A range of income levels and household sizes; choice of dwelling; group and neighbourhood life.
Conserve resources and protect the environment	Energy efficiency; use of existing resources; solar, wind, and photovoltaic supply; water conservation; biotic masses; open space; building on previously developed land.
Equity between needs and capacity	Match of services and housing to what households can carry; direct supervision of shared space.
Economic systems that reduce cost	Lower construction energy; local and recycled materials; cost reduction without removal of low-income residents.
Mobility management	Connection of housing to daily land uses; walking and cycling as part of the renewal, not an afterthought.

5. The Sants renewal, Barcelona

Sants is one of Barcelona's older districts and an industrial centre from the nineteenth century. Renewal has shifted it from an ageing industrial zone toward technology and innovation while keeping historical landmarks and adding infrastructure (Aldayjover Arquitectura y Paisaje, 2018). The social-sustainability elements used there were

adaptive reuse of industrial buildings for offices, co-working, and galleries (Lusiardi, 2019); solar systems and green roofs; pedestrian and cycle infrastructure; water recycling for irrigation and maintenance; jobs that held local ties; plazas and gardens; cultural events; education and technology facilities; and participation.

Residents, neighbourhood associations, and former industrial workers took part through hearings and design workshops organised by the city council. Their comments shaped which heritage buildings were kept, the mix of uses, and the priority of walking over cars. That is the mechanism the paper treats as transferable, not the Barcelona plan itself.

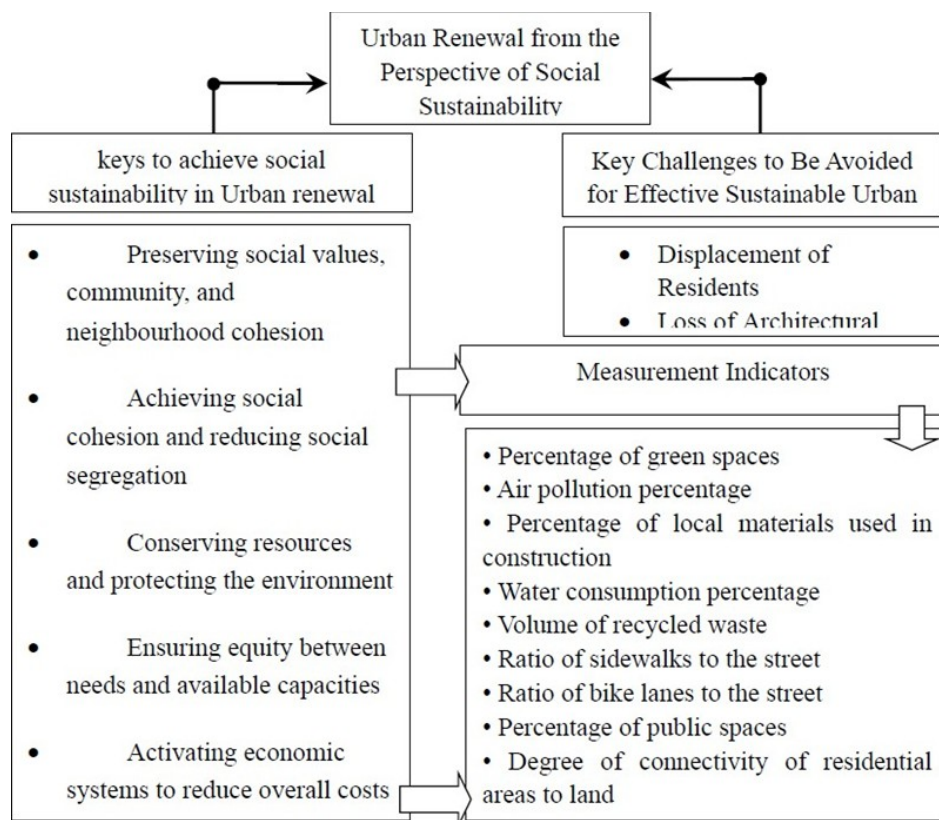
Table 2. Social-sustainability requirements in the Sants renewal.

Requirement	How Sants met it
Social values and neighbourhood cohesion	Adaptive reuse and public space kept local identity and community bonds.
Cohesion and less segregation	Plazas and cultural programmes brought different groups into contact.
Resources and environment	Solar energy, green roofs, and water recycling cut environmental load.
Equity of needs and capacity	Clean mobility, educational space, and a mix of jobs addressed different needs.
Lower overall cost	Reuse of structures and support for local innovation reduced new-build cost.
Mobility	Pedestrian and cycle paths, with public transport, improved access.

6. A framework, and what to avoid

Figure 3 gathers the argument. Socially sustainable renewal depends on the requirements in Table 1, on the practices illustrated in Sants, and on an explicit check for gaps. Indicators are needed so that a project can be judged.

Figure 3. Urban renewal from the perspective of social sustainability (author).



6.1 Challenges to avoid

Displacement. Improvement often raises rents and pushes out low-income residents, breaking social ties and removing affordable housing. Loss of architectural heritage. Historic buildings have been demolished for new development. The demolition of Penn Station in New York in the 1960s remains a standard caution (Zhang, 2020). Lack of community input. Decisions taken by officials and planners without residents produce distrust. Residents of Boston's West End protested the demolition of their neighbourhood on that ground (City of Boston, n.d.). These three failures are the issues this paper places against any Nigerian renewal that clears first and consults later.

6.2 Measurement indicators

The paper proposes percentage of green space, air pollution, share of local materials, water consumption, recycled waste, sidewalk-to-street ratio, bike-lane-to-street ratio, percentage of public space, and connectivity of housing to other land uses. Sources are municipal environmental and planning reports, census data, GIS, and local

sustainability monitoring. Higher green and public space, better air, lower water use, local materials, and better walking and cycling provision are read as gains in health, local economy, cultural identity, and access.

6.3 Reading the case for Nigerian cities

The paper does not present a measured Nigerian scheme. It does identify the conditions under which renewal in a Nigerian city would count as socially sustainable. Redevelopment should be the exception, used only where rehabilitation and reuse cannot recover a safe fabric, because clearance is the method most likely to break neighbourhood ties and to raise rents beyond the reach of existing residents. Heritage fabric should be listed before design begins, and reuse should be allowed to change function. Participation has to occur before the land-use plan is fixed, through hearings, mapping, and a record of which resident comments altered the scheme. Indicators in section 6.2 then give a city a way to report whether green space, local materials, walking access, and public space actually changed.

That reading stays inside the author's framework. Economic tools, including cost reduction and local materials, and environmental tools, including energy, water, and open space, are accepted only insofar as they serve cohesion, equity, and the choice to remain. A renewal that improves environmental scores while dispersing the households who gave the quarter its identity fails the test this paper sets.

7. Results

Renewal is a strategic process covering redevelopment, heritage, and the socio-economic and environmental problems of deprived areas (Couch et al., 2011; Ercan, 2011; Ansumant, 2019). Its methods are not interchangeable: redevelopment disrupts ties and raises cost; rehabilitation and preservation keep more of the social and physical structure; infill and comprehensive revitalisation depend on a prior division of the fabric (Al-Asasfeh et al., 2007).

Sustainability is commonly framed as three dimensions (Purvis et al., 2019). This study treats the economic and environmental dimensions as servants of the social dimension, with community participation as a condition rather than an extra. Social sustainability widens choice and protects identity (Ricee, 2023; Woodcraft et al., 2012) and is strengthened when the built environment matches residents' values (Alwah et al., 2023). Renewal supports that outcome only inside the carrying capacity of local systems (Bai et al., 2023).

The Sants reading, and the wider set of practices the paper draws on, point to public space, cultural programmes, clean transport, access to education and technology, basic needs, accountable governance, jobs, participation, safety, and care for vulnerable groups. Success also requires the avoidance of displacement, heritage loss, and closed decision-making. Indicators should be attached to the framework so that social impact is measured.

8. Discussion

The literature moves from demolition of old areas to renewal as a social process. That shift matches the reordering in Figure 2. Absence of public space, equitable services, accountable governance, and work does not merely weaken social impact. It is associated with displacement, loss of heritage, and weaker cohesion.

The manuscript also points to Katara Cultural Village as a heritage-based model. Its formal cultural infrastructure will not transfer unchanged to cities with fewer formal cultural assets. What can transfer is the reinforcement of local identity, inclusive public space, and organised encounter, including through informal cultural activity. The same limit applies to Sants. Nigerian renewal can use the requirements and the three prohibitions without copying a Barcelona or Doha plan.

Projects should therefore be participatory, specific to place, and assessed with indicators that record social as well as environmental change. The paper does not report primary Nigerian field data. Its claim is that the issues and challenges are already visible in the methods and in the international record, and that they are the right tests for Nigerian schemes.

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