

Investigating the Role of Spatial Zoning in Enhancing Inclusivity: A Comparative Study of Art Galleries in Abuja

¹Udi Okiemute, ²Ogunnaike Adekunle O, ³Babamboni Adekunle

¹Department of Architecture, College of Postgraduate Studies, ²Department of Architecture, School of Postgraduate Studies, Caleb University, Imota, Lagos state, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of spatial zoning in fostering inclusivity within art galleries in Abuja, Nigeria. It explores how spatial organisation enhances accessibility, engagement, and comfort for diverse visitor groups, including individuals with varying physical abilities, cultural backgrounds, and socio-economic statuses. Employing a comparative case study approach, the research analyses spatial zoning strategies at Thought Pyramid Art Centre, Retro Africa, and Nike Art Gallery. Findings highlight the impact of zoning on movement, interaction, and engagement, while also identifying challenges such as circulation inefficiencies, accessibility limitations, and inadequate wayfinding systems. Based on the analysis, the study proposes strategies including flexible zoning, improved wayfinding, and the incorporation of sensory and child-friendly spaces to enhance inclusivity. These recommendations underscore the significance of intentional spatial design in promoting cultural exchange and accessibility.

Keywords: Accessibility, Art Galleries, Inclusivity, Spatial Zoning, Visitor Engagement.

I. INTRODUCTION

Inclusivity in cultural spaces has become a core principle in contemporary design, emphasising the need to accommodate diverse audiences (Patrick, 2021). Art galleries have evolved beyond mere repositories of art into dynamic cultural hubs where accessibility, diversity, and engagement intersect (Mucha, 2022). By bridging cultural divides, galleries foster meaningful connections among individuals from varied backgrounds.

A crucial aspect of designing inclusive galleries is spatial zoning the strategic organisation

of space to serve different functions. Thoughtful zoning enhances accessibility, usability, and comfort for a wide range of visitors, including individuals of different ages, abilities, and socio-economic backgrounds (Dehalware, 2023). Effective zoning encourages participation and exploration, while poor zoning can create physical and psychological barriers, alienating users and undermining the gallery's role in fostering cultural exchange.

Abuja's rapid urbanisation and expanding art community necessitate design approaches that prioritise inclusivity and adaptability (Nuhu, 2024). Integrating thoughtful zoning strategies ensures that art galleries cater to diverse visitor needs, transforming them into inclusive spaces that bridge social, physical, and cultural boundaries (Elsamanoudy, 2023). This study examines the impact of spatial zoning on inclusivity within Abuja's art galleries, assessing how effective design strategies can enhance visitor experiences.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review explores the role of spatial zoning in promoting inclusivity within art galleries, it examines existing theories and practices, with a particular emphasis on art galleries in Abuja.

2.1 Spatial Zoning in Architecture

Art galleries serve as institutions dedicated to preserving, showcasing, and fostering appreciation for visual arts. Historically, these spaces have been recognized as cultural and educational hubs, offering artists a platform to share their work while providing audiences with opportunities for intellectual and emotional engagement. However, beyond their traditional roles, the design and organization of art galleries

have evolved to meet the diverse needs of visitors. (Noehrer,2021). Creating inclusive and interactive spaces is now a priority for gallery designers, as inclusivity ensures that galleries are welcoming and accessible to people of all backgrounds, abilities, and interests.

Spatial zoning, a critical aspect of gallery design, directly impacts the visitor experience by influencing movement, engagement, and interaction within the space. (Sharji,2022). By carefully planning zones that cater to different visitor needs, galleries can encourage meaningful connections between audiences and the exhibited works.

2.1 Art Galleries as Cultural and Artistic Spaces

Art galleries have long been regarded as vital cultural and artistic spaces. Their significance lies in their ability to act as conduits for artistic expression, education, and community engagement. Historically, galleries have played a central role in preserving cultural heritage by housing collections that reflect the artistic achievements and societal values of various periods. (Macdowall,2021).

As spaces for artistic expression, galleries offer artists the opportunity to communicate complex ideas, emotions, and narratives through their work. This role extends beyond the display of art to encompass educational and cultural exchange. (Noble,2021). Visitors to galleries engage with exhibitions in ways that foster learning, critical thinking, and appreciation for diverse perspectives. The layout of exhibitions within galleries is pivotal in how visitors interpret and interact with the art. Thoughtfully designed layouts create a narrative flow, guiding visitors on a journey that enhances their understanding of the works on display. (Li,2021).

2.2 Spatial Zoning in Art Galleries

Spatial zoning refers to the deliberate division and organization of physical spaces within a gallery to achieve specific functional, aesthetic, and experiential goals. (Sandoval,2024). This concept is rooted in the understanding that the arrangement of spaces can influence how visitors navigate, interact with, and interpret the environment.

The primary purpose of spatial zoning in galleries is to create zones that cater to diverse activities and needs, such as exhibition areas, rest zones, workshops, and interactive spaces. (Evans,2024). By segmenting spaces, designers can guide visitor movement and foster intuitive navigation. For example, entryways and

transitional spaces often act as introductory zones, setting the tone for the gallery experience and preparing visitors for what lies ahead.

Key principles of spatial zoning include wayfinding, balance, and flexibility. (Mamajonova, 2024). Wayfinding ensures that visitors can navigate the space effortlessly, using clear pathways, signage, and visual cues. Balance involves creating a mix of open spaces that encourage social interaction and intimate spaces that promote personal reflection. Flexibility is essential for accommodating dynamic and multi-use functions, allowing galleries to adapt their spaces to different exhibitions and audiences.

Spatial zoning also plays a vital role in shaping visitor interactions with the art. By strategically positioning artworks and creating zones for different types of engagement, galleries can cater to a wide range of visitor preferences and needs. (Hutson,2024). For instance, quiet zones may be designed for contemplative viewing, while interactive zones invite hands-on exploration and participation.

2.3 Inclusivity in Art Gallery Design

Inclusivity in art gallery design refers to creating spaces that are welcoming, accessible, and engaging for all visitors, regardless of their physical abilities, cultural backgrounds, or personal preferences. (Reiger,2024). Inclusivity goes beyond mere compliance with accessibility standards; it seeks to foster a sense of belonging and ensure that everyone can enjoy a meaningful experience. One of the key aspects of inclusivity is physical accessibility. Galleries must be designed to accommodate individuals with mobility challenges, incorporating features such as ramps, elevators, and tactile pathways. Additionally, clear signage and wayfinding systems are essential for guiding visitors with visual or hearing impairments. (Mostafa,2023).

Multisensory experiences are another critical component of inclusive design. By engaging multiple senses such as touch, sound, and smell, galleries can create more immersive and engaging experiences for diverse audiences. For example, tactile displays allow visually impaired visitors to interact with art, while audio guides and descriptive narratives enhance understanding for those with hearing impairments. (Hou,2023).

Galleries must strive to represent diverse cultures, perspectives, and identities in their exhibitions, ensuring that all visitors feel seen and valued. (Piacente,2022).

2.4 The Role of Spatial Zoning in Enhancing Inclusivity

Spatial zoning is a powerful tool for fostering inclusivity in art galleries. By creating zones that cater to diverse visitor needs, galleries can ensure that everyone feels welcome and valued (Srivastava, 2024). For instance, designated quiet zones provide a respite for visitors who may find large crowds overwhelming, while child-friendly spaces encourage families to explore art together. Zoning also enhances inclusivity by promoting interaction and engagement. Interactive zones, such as multimedia installations or hands-on workshops, invite visitors to participate actively in the art experience. These spaces break down barriers between the art and the audience, making the gallery more approachable and enjoyable for all. In addition, spatial zoning can help reduce physical and perceptual barriers to access. Clear pathways and intuitive layouts enable visitors with mobility challenges to navigate the space independently, while visual and tactile cues support visitors with sensory impairments. By prioritizing inclusivity in zoning decisions, galleries can create environments that celebrate diversity and foster a sense of belonging (Krukar, 2014).

III. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted to evaluate the spatial zoning strategies employed in art galleries in Abuja, Nigeria, with a focus on assessing their impact on inclusivity and user engagement. The research aimed to identify existing zoning practices and recommend optimal strategies that promote inclusivity in the design of art galleries in Abuja.

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a case study research design, which is explanatory in nature and is particularly effective for addressing “how” and “why” questions. This design facilitated an in-depth exploration of spatial zoning practices in

selected art galleries, providing insights into their impact on accessibility, user interaction, and inclusivity.

3.2 Case Study Selection

The selection of case studies was guided by specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. Art galleries were chosen based on the following considerations:

- I. The presence of distinct spatial zones, including entrances, exhibition areas, rest areas, and pathways.
- II. A demonstrated focus on inclusivity through architectural features and design strategies.
- III. A diverse collection of art that attracts varied user demographics.
- IV. The gallery's prominence and accessibility within Abuja's growing art scene.

Based on these criteria, the study selected three art galleries for analysis:

Thought Pyramid Art Centre in Wuse II, Abuja, Retro Africa Art Gallery in Maitama, Abuja and Nike Art Gallery Abuja in Wuse II, Abuja.

3.3 Data Collection

An observation guide was developed based on a comprehensive review of relevant literature on spatial zoning and inclusivity in cultural spaces.

Data were gathered through structured observations of the selected galleries, with a focus on how spatial zoning influenced user behaviour and interactions. Photographs and field notes were used to document observations for analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data collected from observations were organized and analysed using descriptive and comparative methods. Tables were employed to systematically categorize and compare zoning strategies across the selected galleries.

Table 1. Observation Guide Parameters

Parameter	Description
Navigation Efficiency	Ease of movement through pathways
Accessibility Features	Presence of ramps, signage, and assistive tools
Spatial Allocation	Allocation of spaces for exhibits, rest areas
Social Interaction Zones	Spaces for group activities or interaction

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Case Study Overview

4.1.1 Thought Pyramid Art Centre

Located at 18 Libreville Crescent, Wuse II, Abuja, the Thought Pyramid Art Centre is a

two-story building with expansive spaces over two floors. The main art gallery is on the ground floor, featuring wide corridors that facilitate easy movement. The center is designed to be accessible, with ramps and clear signage to assist navigation.



Plate 4.1 Approach view of Thought Pyramid Art Centre, Abuja.

4.1.2 Retro Africa

Retro Africa is a contemporary art gallery based in Abuja, Nigeria, founded in 2015 by Dolly Kola- Balogun. The gallery is housed in a repurposed two-story building that also includes The Atelier Hotel. The interior features a white space typical of art galleries, with intimate exhibition areas designed to create a unique visitor experience.



Plate 4.2 Approach view of Retro Africa Art Gallery, Abuja.

4.1.3 Nike Art Gallery Abuja

Nike Art Gallery in Abuja Owned by Nike Davies-Okundaye, is located at Km 7.5 Abuja Airport Road, Central Business District, Lugbe, 900103, Federal Capital Territory, Nigeria. This prominent cultural institution showcases a diverse collection of Nigerian art, including traditional and contemporary works from various artists across the country.



Plate 4.3. Approach view of Nike Art Gallery, Abuja (showing ramp for wheelchair access).

4.2 Spatial Zoning Analysis

The comparison of spatial zoning across the three galleries reveals significant insights into their inclusivity and accessibility. Key parameters include circulation efficiency, accessibility features, and spatial flexibility.

Table 2. Comparison of Spatial Zoning Features

Parameter	Thought Pyramid Art Centre	Retro Africa	Nike Art Gallery Abuja
Circulation Pathways	Structured, wide corridors	Narrow, intimate pathways	Open-plan pathways
Accessibility Features	Ramps, limited signage	No ramps, compact layout	Ramps and elevators
Spatial Flexibility	Modular zones	Fixed, small intimate spaces	Adaptive spaces
Wayfinding	Moderate signage	No signage	Extensive signage

Table 3. Accessibility Challenges Identified

Accessibility Aspect	Thought Pyramid Art Centre	Retro Africa	Nike Art Gallery Abuja
Wheelchair Access	Moderate	Poor	High
Signage for Wayfinding	Minimal	Absent	Adequate
Rest Areas	Moderate	None	Abundant

4.3 Detailed Observations

1. **Thought Pyramid Art Centre:** Structured zoning enhances navigability, and ramps

improve accessibility. However, signage is minimal, posing challenges for new visitors.

2. **Retro Africa:** Intimate spaces create a unique visitor experience but exclude individuals with mobility impairments due to narrow pathways and compact layouts.
3. **Nike Art Gallery Abuja:** Open-plan pathways and extensive signage improve accessibility and navigation but may lack the intimacy found in smaller galleries.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Design Strategies

- i. **Flexible Zoning:** Modular layouts with clear pathways and reconfigurable spaces allow for dynamic use of gallery spaces. This ensures adaptability to accommodate

different visitor needs, including special exhibitions and events.

- ii. **Wayfinding Systems:** Incorporating tactile maps, braille signage, and digital navigation tools can significantly enhance the accessibility of galleries. Wayfinding systems should include multilingual options and clear visual cues to assist all visitors in navigating the spaces efficiently.
- iii. **Inclusive Features:** Child-friendly areas with interactive activities, sensory zones for neurodiverse individuals, and adaptive technologies like adjustable lighting and sound control can foster a welcoming environment for all visitors.

Table 5. Suggested Improvements for Each Gallery

Gallery	Improvement Suggestion
Thought Pyramid Art Centre	Enhance signage, introduce sensory-friendly zones, and allocate more rest areas.
Retro Africa	Introduce ramps, child-friendly interactive spaces, and improve signage.
Nike Art Gallery Abuja	Improve intimacy with modular zoning and create more sensory-friendly experiences.

5.2 Policy Advocacy

The study underscores the need for policy interventions to ensure inclusivity in art galleries. Key recommendations include:

- i. **Accessibility Regulations:** Mandating universal design principles in cultural spaces, including ramps, tactile pathways, and adequate signage.
- ii. **Incentives for Inclusive Design:** Government and private sector collaborations should

provide grants, tax incentives, and subsidies to encourage inclusive architectural practices.

- iii. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Regular audits of gallery spaces should be conducted to assess compliance with accessibility standards, with visitor feedback informing continuous improvements.

Table 6. Policy Recommendations and Their Impact

Policy Recommendation	Expected Impact
Accessibility Guidelines	Ensures baseline inclusivity standards across all galleries.
Incentives for Inclusivity	Encourages more galleries to adopt universal design principles.
Community Engagement	Strengthens the relationship between galleries and their diverse audiences.
Monitoring and Evaluation	Provides continuous improvement opportunities and measures the success of strategies.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the transformative potential of spatial zoning in enhancing accessibility and inclusivity in art galleries. By addressing design gaps through flexible zoning, improved wayfinding systems, and policy interventions, Abuja's galleries can become models of inclusivity, setting a benchmark for other cities in Nigeria and beyond. The integration of child-

friendly zones, sensory rooms, and adaptive technologies underscores the importance of considering diverse user needs in gallery design.

6.1 Future Directions

Future research should explore global comparisons of spatial zoning strategies in art galleries, focusing on best practices that can be adapted to the Nigerian context. Additionally, the

integration of digital technologies, such as virtual tours and augmented reality, offers exciting opportunities to further enhance visitor experiences and accessibility. Inclusivity is not just a design challenge but a moral imperative for public spaces. By embracing innovative spatial zoning strategies and prioritizing inclusivity, art galleries can become true cultural hubs that reflect the diverse societies they serve.

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