Decolonizing Disability:

Access Without Erasure

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis including any required final revisions as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically avaliable to the public.

Abstract

This thesis rethinks disability in the Global South by turning to Nigerian open-air markets, rather than institutional settings as primary sites of inquiry. More than points of exchange, these markets are cultural and civic arenas where economic activity intersects with social connection, mutual care, and collective identity. Marketplaces often function as "third places," sustaining relationships, preserving communal memory, and hosting the negotiation of public life alongside commerce. Within this context, disability is framed not as a fixed biological deficit but as a condition shaped by environments, social structures, and cultural narratives. Drawing on critical disability studies, African epistemologies, and the concept of relational access, the project positions design as a continual negotiation between bodies, space, and practices of care, challenging functionalist approaches that reduce access to technical compliance.

A central critique advanced in this research is the co-option of accessibility language to legitimize exclusionary development. In postcolonial African cities, modernization projects often promise accessible infrastructure while simultaneously displacing those most reliant on markets for survival. Under the banner of "ultra-modern" shopping complexes, elderly traders, people with impairments, and low-income groups are frequently priced out, excluded from decision-making, and stripped of long-standing spatial and economic networks. In such cases, access becomes a rhetorical tool for privatization and displacement rather than a pathway to justice. This thesis argues that genuine access must go beyond token infrastructural features to address the deeper social, economic, and political systems that sustain participation.

Methodologically, the study combines critical literature with graphical anthropology, using mapping and diagramming to interpret the spatial conditions of Nigerian markets. This approach, informed by Jos Boys's "Having a Body" framework, highlights how non-normative bodies engage space, revealing barriers such as uneven ground, sensory overload, or disorientation, alongside supports like shared seating, mutual caregiving, and assistance from load carriers. Through this iterative method, the research develops strategies grounded in lived realities rather than abstract standards, emphasizing collective arrangements that sustain participation. The design proposal focuses on Jos Main Market, a once-celebrated hub now in disrepair after arson and neglect. The intervention introduces a spine that organizes utilities and circulation while embedding care nodes for prayer, rest, sanitation, and basic medical support. A market workshop provides space for repair, fabrication, and low-cost assistive devices, affirming resourcefulness and local skill as vital forms of access. At its center, a market plaza serves as a commons, enhancing visibility and offering social services such as collective childcare, community kitchens, thrift collectives, and meeting areas. Together, these spaces strengthen support networks and ensure vulnerable groups remain active within the civic life of the market.

Ultimately, the thesis positions open-air markets as sites that resist the misuse of accessibility rhetoric by grounding access in reciprocity and collective care. Rather than treating informality as disorder to be erased, it demonstrates how markets themselves model alternative approaches to spatial justice. By centering lived experience, this project advances a decolonial vision of disability design, one where access is relational, negotiated, and inseparable from economic survival and community life.

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Illustration by author

introduction

access without erasure

01 | Introduction

Reframing Dis/ability

Neither fixed nor separate, disability and ability are part of a fluid spectrum woven into every human experience. Through our senses, we navigate the physical world, perceiving objects, spaces, and our own bodies in relation to our surroundings. The body exists both as a biological structure (Körper), made up of bones and organs, and as a lived, dynamic presence (Leib), shaped by movement and experience. Like the physical world, which gains meaning through structured perception, disability is not an inherent limitation, but a condition shaped by shifting spatiotemporal relations, where what is considered impairment in one setting may be unremarkable in another.[1] Our interaction with the environment is not just a physical encounter but a continuous negotiation of space and time that defines our lived reality. In this thesis, the term "disabled people" is not used solely as an identifier, but also to describe people whose abilities (physical, mental, spiritual, emotional, financial, etc.) are constrained by the structure and ideologies that shape our built environment. This approach shifts the focus from disability as an inherent characteristic to a consideration of how architectural and urban design can either enable or limit one's ability to navigate and engage with spaces.

figure 1.1

Designing for diverse abilities is not a straightforward process; rather, it requires a critical re-examination of how these categories are framed. This entails closely engaging with the diverse experiences and creative survival strategies of disabled individuals while also questioning the everyday assumptions that shape perceptions of disability and ability.[2] Disability, often framed as a deficit or something to be fixed, is a social and environmental construct, produced in the interaction between bodies and their built environments. This understanding shifts the focus from disability as an individual pathology to a product of exclusionary design and societal norms.

1 Jenny Liu, "Inclusive : A Human Centered Approach to Accessible Architectural Design" (Thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2018), 16, https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/118700.

2 Jos Boys, Doing Disability Differently: An Alternative Handbook on Architecture, Dis/Ability and Designing for Everyday Life (Routledge, 2014), 5.

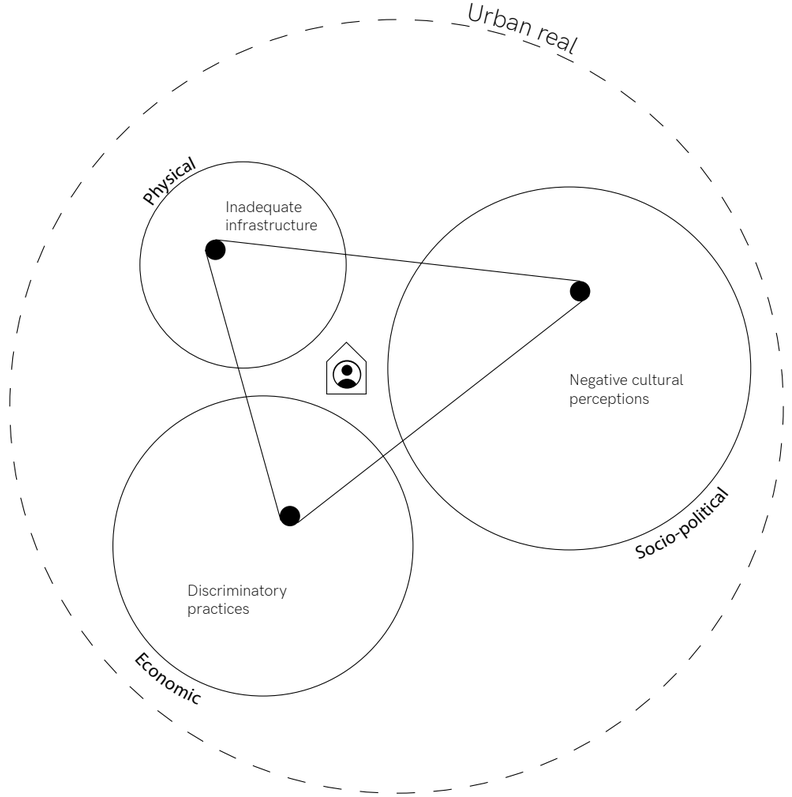


Fig 1.1 Diagram illustrating how our body/mind interaction with space is not merely physical, but shaped by psychological, socio-political, and economic forces.

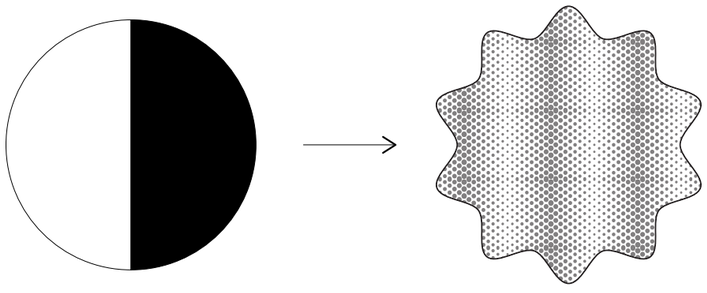


Fig. 1.2
Diagram illustrating the ideological shift from framing disability as individual pathology to recognizing people's lived experience and engagement with space.

Engaging with the lived experiences of disabled people reveals how we all actively navigate and adapt to spaces, challenging the conventional ideas of ability. As disability activists and theorists have shown, the notion of misfit is often a result of environmental barriers, not the body itself. By rethinking the design of spaces with this in mind, we begin to understand that disability is not an isolated condition, but an interconnected, dynamic process shaped by both individuals and their environments.[3] The approach that I have taken in this thesis is an attempt to invite a more inclusive perspective where design is not just about accommodation but about reimagining a world that benefits all. By rethinking the role of disability in architecture, we open new possibilities for design practices that transcend physical access.

Architects and disability theorists today are critically examining the history of accessible design. They push beyond the functionalist focus, which primarily addresses the needs of wheelchair users, and instead a more holistic approach that considers a wide range of impairments and disabilities. These scholars and practitioners also highlight the importance of co-designing with disabled individuals, recognizing their agency and contributions in shaping spaces that meet diverse needs.[4] Furthermore, the theory of collective access emerges as a pivotal concept in these critical approaches. This idea encourages communities to come together around access needs, challenging the individualistic framework that characterized earlier disability design efforts.[5] By focusing on collective access, the design process becomes less about solving isolated problems and more about fostering an inclusive environment where the diverse needs of all individuals are recognized and addressed together. This shift in focus from individual solutions to collective empowerment marks a significant transformation in how disability is understood in architectural practice. Moreover, a critical approach to disability inclusion challenges the very foundations of functionalism. It challenges the medical model of disability and asks us to question the assumption that disability is solely a physical or mental deficit to be accommodated or fixed. Instead, it invites us to view disability as part of the broader spectrum of human experience, where impairment and capacity are intertwined with cultural, political, and social forces.[6] Seeing disability as part of a shifting spectrum of social, spatial, and environmental relations directs attention to places where these dynamics are lived and negotiated daily. In the Global South, informal markets embody this complexity and serve as infrastructures of care, survival, and adaptation where access is continually improvised and contested.

Access and Disability in the Global South

The Global South presents a distinct urban context where disability is shaped by the interplay of geopolitical forces, religious beliefs, and socio-economic conditions. Within disability studies, there is a growing recognition that the field has been largely

3 Aimi Hamraie, Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability, Nachdruck (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 99–101.

4 Jos Boys, Disability, Space, Architecture (Taylor and Francis, 2017); Sara Hendren, What Can a Body Do?: How We Meet the Built World, First hardcover. (Riverhead Books, 2020); Aimi Hamraie, Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability, Nachdruck (University of Minnesota Press, 2020); David Gissen, The Architecture of Disability: Buildings, Cities, and Landscapes beyond Access (University of Minnesota Press, 2022); Moya Bailey et al., "Labs for Liberation Summer Institute Lecture Series," July 9, 2025, https://labsforliberation.org/.

5 Hamraie, Building Access, 260.

6 David Gissen, The Architecture of Disability: Buildings, Cities, and Landscapes beyond Access (University of Minnesota Press, 2022), Xiii–Xv.

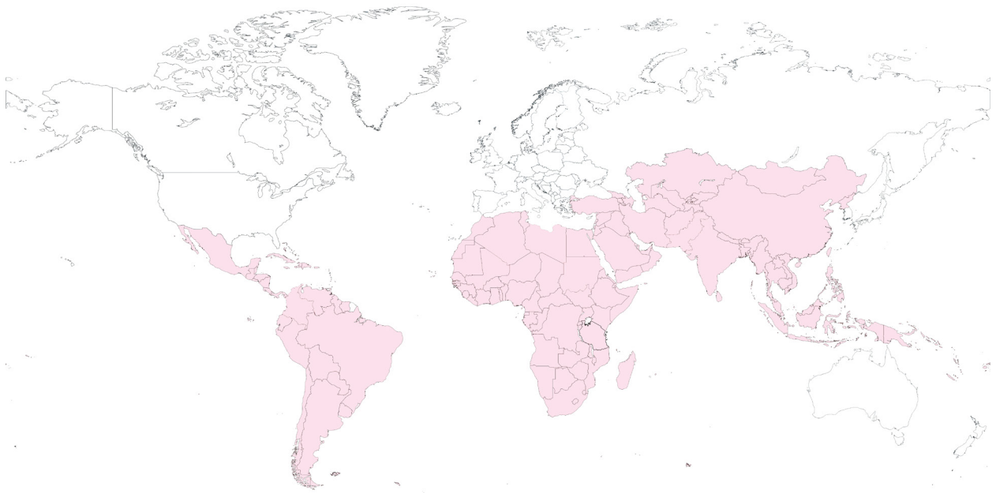


Fig. 1.3 Diagram highlighiting UNCTAD classification of economies in the Global South (developing countries)

shaped by a unidirectional flow of knowledge from the Global North to the Global South, necessitating a process of knowledge decolonization.[7] Recent scholarship has begun to challenge this imbalance by advocating for disability frameworks rooted in critical postcolonial perspectives and African epistemologies. Many of these scholars emphasize that African knowledge systems are inherently practice-oriented, collective, and socially embedded, which carries important implications for how disability is understood and addressed within African contexts.[8] Colonialism in Africa not only caused widespread physical and psychological disabilities through violence, forced labor, and systemic oppression but also imposed enduring social, political, and cultural structures that continue to marginalize disabled individuals.[9] These legacies are especially visible in informal urban environments, where overreliance on formal accessibility standards without considering broader dimensions of access and care, can intensify barriers and overlook everyday needs. Within this context, open-air markets present opportunities to rethink accessibility and challenge conventional planning paradigms. Unlike the rigid structures of formal design, markets evolve in response to shifting social and economic dynamics. They

7 Helen Meekosha, "Decolonising Disability: Thinking and Acting Globally," Disability & Society 26, no. 6 (2011): 668, https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2011.602860.

8 Toyin Falola and Nic Hamel, Disability in Africa: Inclusion, Care, and the Ethics of Humanity (Boydell & Brewer, 2021), 5–6.

9 Marcus Power, "War Veterans, Disability, and Postcolonial Citizenship in Angola and Mozambique," in War, Citizenship, Territory (Routledge, 2008), 191.



Fig. 1.4
Farin Gada Market (Plateau, Nigeria). An overview of a typical open-air market, where commerce intersects with social life. Beyond trade, these spaces serve as meeting points and places of visibility for vulnerable groups. This thesis explores how to expand access without disrupting the social ties and care networks that sustain them.

operate as both centers of commerce and vital community spaces, where diverse forms of interaction unfold. Research on marketplaces in the Global South shows that such sites can be reimagined to support disabled people through participatory, bottom-up interventions.[10] Taking this further, this research considers how these dynamic environments might serve as models for inclusive, context-sensitive design. As Huda Tayob has written in Opaque Infrastructure: Black Markets as Architectures of Care, these markets function beyond formal regulation, drawing instead on embedded social networks and shared knowledge. Accessibility here is not dictated by rigid standards but shaped through relational processes emphasizing mutual aid, lived experience, and social connection. Stalls, pathways, and gathering areas remain in constant flux, reshaped by the daily interactions of vendors, customers, and community members. The adaptive nature of open-air markets underscores the value of responsive design, one that recognizes the contributions and needs of all individuals, including those with disabilities, while questioning conventional notions of accessibility. Through community-driven practices, these spaces model inclusivity that prioritizes well-being over compliance.[11] By centering user-driven forms of accessibility, a more balanced relationship can be forged between

10 Pragashnie Naidoo et al., "Accessibility for Persons with Mobility Impairments within an Informal Trading Site: A Case Study on the Markets of Warwick, South Africa," African Journal of Disability 3, no. 1 (2014): 8–9, https://doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v3i1.120

11 Huda Tayob, "Opaque Infrastructure: Black Markets as Architectures of Care," Public Culture 34, no. 3 (98) (2022): 382–83, https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-9937283.

barrier-free design models and approaches grounded in context and diverse lived experiences.

Methodology

This study examines how networks of care such as vulnerable collectives, load assistance, charitable provisions and other shared practices of reciprocity shape participation in the Global South, particularly within Nigerian open-air markets, and guide approaches to disability inclusion in architecture and urbanism. Open-air markets are among the most widespread forms of commerce across Africa, serving as vital economic lifelines and centers of everyday exchange. In Nigeria, they account for a significant share of trade and employment, supporting millions of livelihoods while also functioning as key social and cultural hubs. Beyond their role in sustaining local economies, these markets provide spaces of visibility, belonging, and interaction, making them central to both civic life and survival

The unique spatial arrangement of these markets are often viewed as messy, adaptable, and community-driven. They don't necessarily follow official accessibility codes, but they often create their own ways of making space usable, even if imperfectly. The wide range of people navigating these markets shows both the challenges they face and the kinds of interventions (body to urban scale) that could make participation possible beyond just physical access. To explore these dynamics, this research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining a literature review with graphical anthropology. This combination allows the work to move between two registers: the conceptual, where frameworks and critiques are examined; and the grounded, where spatial realities might be mapped and interpreted. Accessibility here is treated not as a static checklist but as a changing relationship between bodies, environments, and social conditions.

The literature review provided the theoretical grounding. It brought together critical disability studies, African disability theory, and scholarship on urban informality to trace how ideas of access have shifted over time. Writers such as Aimi Hamraie, David Gissen, and Nigerian scholars Theresa Abang and Toyin Falola challenged

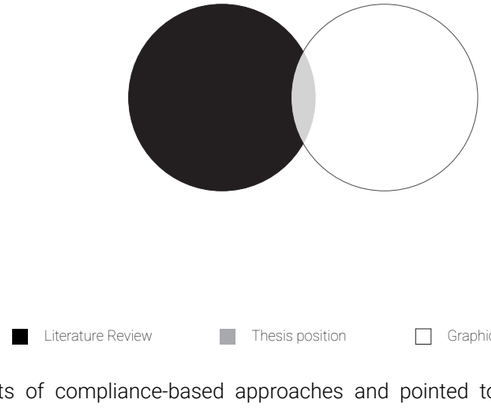


Fig. 1.5
Diagram showing the position of this thesis between the literature review (critical disability and African disability studies) and insights drawn from second-hand observations that retrace practices within these marketspaces.

the limits of compliance-based approaches and pointed toward more flexible, justice-oriented models. These readings also brought attention to concepts like "access washing," where the language of inclusion is used to justify redevelopment that displaces those it claims to serve.[12] At the same time, it highlighted how participatory design rooted in local knowledge and collective decision-making can offer context-specific alternatives that respond to a broader range of needs.[13] These insights shaped not only the research questions but also the decision to use visual and diagrammatic methods that could draw from a range of textual, photographic, and archival sources.

I explored graphical anthropology served as a way to engage with the marketspace, through second-hand observations, existing studies, and documented imagery as the basis for mapping and interpretation.[14] Rather than treating drawing as a tool for depicting finished spaces, it was used as a way of thinking through evidence; slowing down the reading of visual and textual material to capture movement, pauses, bottlenecks, sensory cues, and informal care practices. Building on Jos

12 Stacy Milbern, "Notes on 'Access Washing,'" Disability Justice Network of Ontario, February 20, 2019, https://www.djno.ca/post/notes-on-access-washing.

13 Falola and Hamel, Disability in Africa, 22–23.

14 Igea Troiani and Suzanne Ewing, Visual Research Methods in Architecture (Intellect, 2021), 83, https://www.research.ed.ac.uk/en/publications/visual-research-methods-in-architecture.

Boys' framework for mapping how different bodies engage with space, diagrams and orthographic mappings translated recurring barriers, uneven ground, high sensory load, narrow passageways alongside adaptive strategies such as shared seating, assistance from load carriers, or rearrangements for communal prayer.[15]

Both methods work together in dialogue. Theory shapes what to pay attention to in second-hand accounts, such as the significance of care networks, the politics of spatial control, and the ways exclusion operates beyond the physical. In turn, working through drawings raised new questions that sent the research back to the literature: How can the adaptability of markets be engaged without reinforcing the inequalities they also contain? In what ways can design interventions support the cooperative qualities of these spaces without undermining them?

Through this iterative process, the research developed an account that is both critical and situated. It recognizes that informal markets can inspire more inclusive design approaches, ones that value adaptability, shared use, and collective care while also being honest about the vulnerabilities and exclusions that persist within them. The result is not a model for mass production, but a set of grounded strategies for rethinking accessibility in ways that respond to specific cultural and spatial conditions, keeping lived experience at the center of design practice.

15 Jos Boys, Disability, Space, Architecture (Taylor and Francis, 2017), 144–54.

towards ubuntu: from individual rights to the collective

access without erasure

02 | Towards Ubuntu: From Individual Rights to the Collective

Early Western Disability Theory

medical model

For centuries, architecture has been shaped by the concept of a universal body, a "mythic average user" that serves as the ideal user.[16] This template is not neutral but represents a specific image: typically white, European, able-bodied, youthful, and often masculine. To understand how this standard became the model for design, it's crucial to examine the historical development of the concepts of "normal" and "average." These terms emerged in the 19th century with the rise of statistics, which began to shape modern power structures. According to Lennard Davis, unlike the classical notion of an ideal body, the "norm" is prescriptive, influencing how populations are perceived and aligned with an average.[17] This makes the norm problematic, as it shifts from being a mere reflection of reality to an active prescription of what is considered "normal." In architectural design, these distinctions between the ideal, the average, and the norm are less pronounced, as architecture is a practice that constructs the world. The idealized and average bodies thus become prescriptive templates, influencing how architects design and perceive space, with architects' roles often reflecting these norms in their work.[18] Architecture, in this sense, has historically been designed to fit an idealized body rather than one that is diverse in ability, size, or mobility.

social model

In contrast to earlier paradigms, the emergence of the social model of disability in the 1970s reframed disability not as an individual tragedy or medical deficit, but as a socially constructed condition shaped by environmental and structural barriers.

16 Hamraie, Building Access, 19.

17 Lennard J. Davis and Rebecca Sanchez, The Disability Studies Reader, Sixth edition. (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021), 3–16.

18 Hamraie, Building Access, 19–20.

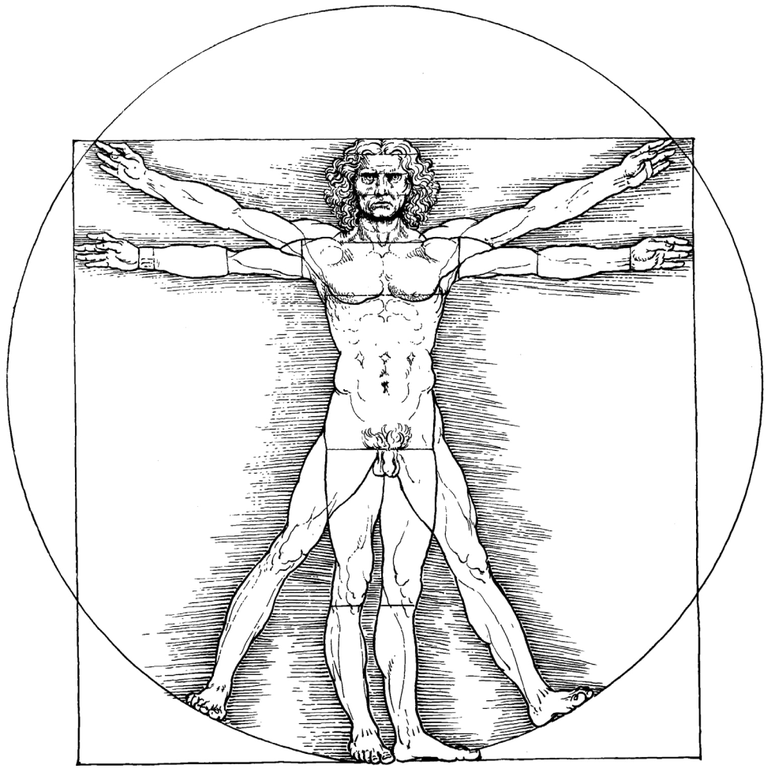


Fig. 2.1
The Vitruvian Man as a "normate" body (1490): a visualization of the able-bodied, youthful, European male that has shaped architecture's reliance on idealized and average bodies, marginalizing diverse embodiments.

Prior to this shift, dominant perceptions cast disabled individuals as dependent on medical interventions and institutional care, often portraying them as passive recipients rather than autonomous agents.This medicalized view reinforced public attitudes that framed disability as something to be fixed or managed, contributing to widespread exclusion from education, employment, housing, and public life.[19] The rise of disability activism in the 1970s directly challenged these assumptions, as disabled individuals and collectives increasingly emphasized that the obstacles they faced were rooted in societal design, not personal impairment. This gave rise to the disability rights movement, which called for dismantling both physical and attitudinal barriers to inclusion. Organizations such as Disabled People's International (DPI) played a pivotal role in amplifying these demands, contributing to global recognition of disability rights, including the United Nations' designation of 1981 as the International Year of Disabled Persons and the subsequent Decade of Disabled Persons (1983–1992).[20] This conceptual and political turn had significant implications for architecture and urbanism, reframing access as a fundamental design responsibility rather than an afterthought or accommodation.

Out of this political and conceptual realignment, universal design emerged in 1985; and this term was coined by Ronald Mace as a framework for embedding access into the design process from the outset.[21] It built on the social model's core insight that exclusion is produced by the built environment, not the body. However, as this approach gained traction among architects, engineers, and policymakers; what was absorbed into professional and technical discourses prioritized standardization over structural critique. Universal design increasingly focused on practical solutions like ramps and signage, rather than addressing the deeper cultural and systemic roots

universal design

cultural model

19 Jay Timothy Dolmage, *Disabled Upon Arrival: Eugenics, Immigration, and the Construction of Race and Disability* (Ohio State University Press, 2018), 24–69, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1h45mm5.

20 Colin Barnes et al., Exploring Disability: A Sociological Introduction (Wiley, 1999), 10–12.

21 Boys, Disability, Space, Architecture, 80.

of exclusion. This shift narrowed its scope, treating access as a technical issue rather than a political one. The cultural model of disability, however, is an attempt to respond to these limitations. It highlights how norms of ability are not only socially constructed but also maintained through cultural narratives, institutional practices, and everyday design choices. This model emphasizes that disability is shaped by prevailing ideas of normalcy, fitness, productivity, and values that are embedded in both material environments and social expectations. From this perspective, access is not simply a matter of physical inclusion but involves interrogating how design itself can perpetuate normative assumptions about who belongs and how bodies should function. The cultural model thus calls for a broader and more critical engagement with design, one that addresses both the physical and symbolic dimensions of accessibility.[22]

As Disability Studies became more established in universities, it often shifted toward theory-heavy language rooted in post-structuralist thought. This made much of its work harder to understand and less accessible to those outside academic spaces, including many disabled people. While the field has done important work exposing how disability is shaped by cultural and institutional forces, it has sometimes struggled to connect theory to real-world change. This reflects a common issue in academic fields: balancing complex theory with practical impact. Without that balance, disability studies risks becoming disconnected from the activism that inspired it. While challenging fixed ideas about impairment is intellectually useful, it can also leave people without the tools they need to understand or navigate their own experiences.[23] Criticizing medical labels and systems is important, but without attention to material conditions, such critiques may miss the needs of the very communities they aim to support.

theory v. practice

22 Hamraie, Building Access, 174–81.

23 Tom Shakespeare, Disability Rights and Wrongs (Routledge, 2006), 70–71.

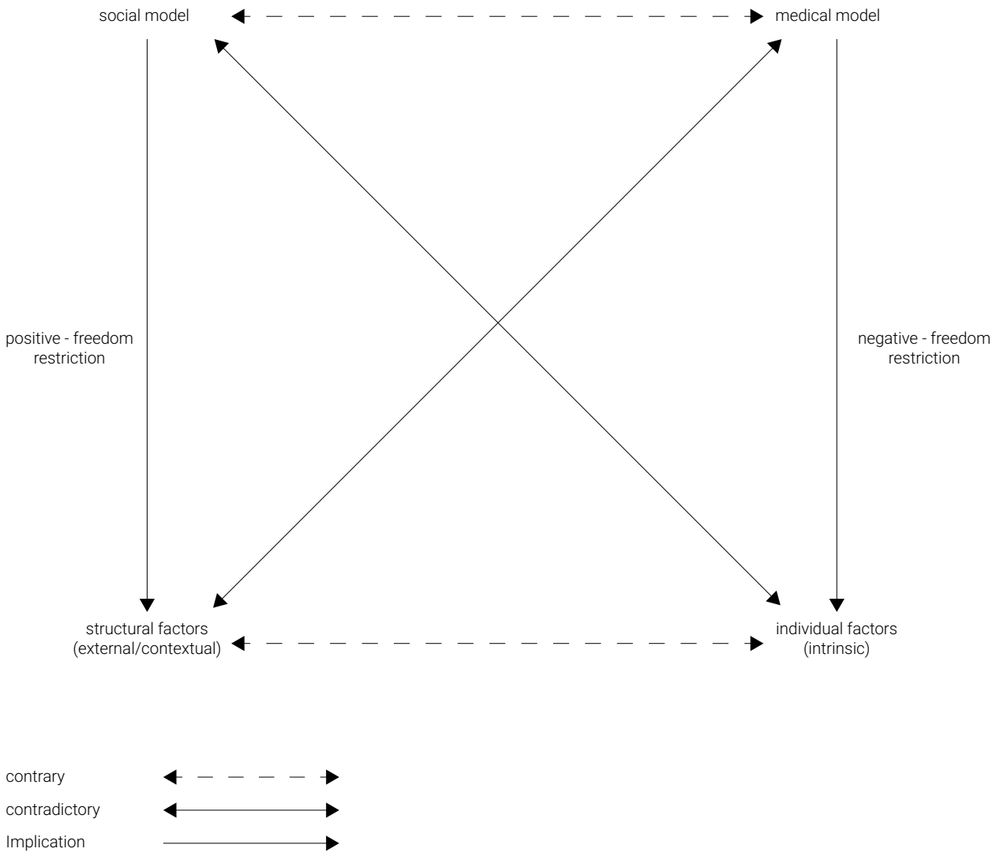


Fig 2.2 Diagram illustrating an intersectional approach (critical realist) to disability inclusion shaped by intrinsic factors and extrinsic conditions

critical realist approach

In response, some advocate for a critical realist approach, one that acknowledges both the social construction of disability and the real, material effects of impairment. Disabled people experience not only discrimination (negative freedom) but also a lack of access to resources, services, and support systems (positive freedom). Addressing these forms of injustice requires more than legal protections; it demands practical supports such as assistive technologies, care networks, and flexible work arrangements.[24] This tension is especially visible in disability policy, where efforts to promote "independence" have sometimes led to the erosion of vital supports. Policies focused on employment often assume that full-time participation is both possible and ideal, overlooking those whose capacities fluctuate or who cannot meet conventional expectations. This narrow focus reinforces the belief that social worth is tied to productivity, rather than recognizing other meaningful forms of contribution. An alternative view understands dependence not as a personal failing but as a shared aspect of human life that calls for collective care and responsibility. From this perspective, justice demands not only rights but also redesigned environments and redistributed resources. For architecture and urban planning, this means going beyond removing barriers. It requires starting from the understanding that access is not a one-time fix, but an ongoing process shaped by care, relationships, and the full diversity of human bodies.[25] The informal market place typology is a rich site that challenges accessibility compliance and the valorization of independence at all costs. In African cultures, communal philosophies of being in the world emphasize interdependence, privileging modes of interaction that have long shaped the marketplace in Nigeria. Moreover, the continual flux of the marketplace resists the urge to standardize and render static accessibility guidelines.

24 Tom Shakespeare, Disability Rights and Wrongs (Routledge, 2006), 88; Emily Macrea and Rabia Khedr, "'Justice Is about the Collective,'" in Living Disability: Building Accessible Futures for Everybody (Coach House Books, 2024);

25 Shakespeare, Disability Rights and Wrongs, 72–91.

Colonialism's legacy in African disability theory

culture and religion

The colonial legacy in African disability theory is complex and deeply rooted in the disruption of indigenous epistemologies, the pathologization of African bodies, and the spatial and symbolic exclusion of disabled people. Before colonialism, many African societies held multifaceted views on disability, with some perspectives being stigmatizing and others affirming difference as spiritually significant or morally neutral.[26] In Yoruba cosmology, for instance, the deity Obatala was believed to have created all people, including those with bodily differences, underscoring a divine logic of variation rather than deviation.[27] Similarly, epic traditions such as the story of Sunjata in Mali portray disability not as a limitation but as a marker of destiny.[28] However, these indigenous frameworks were displaced by colonial systems that viewed impairment through racialized and biomedical lenses. Colonial medicine, missionary intervention, and administrative policies redefined disability as a sign of inferiority and moral defect, positioning Africans as unclean, unproductive, and in need of salvation.[29] This transformation of bodily difference into social deficiency was not limited to discourse, it materialized in the infrastructure of colonial governance. Cities were designed for white settlers and able-bodied elites, systematically excluding disabled Africans through inaccessible architecture and materialized segregation and discriminatory practices.[30] Even after colonial independence, these exclusionary blueprints persist in public institutions across Africa, established through Western frameworks in which schools, hospitals, and transit systems often remain unusable for disabled citizens.[31]

built environment

26 Falola and Hamel, Disability in Africa, 9.

27 Theresa B. Abang, "Disablement, Disability and the Nigerian Society," Disability, Handicap & Society 3, no. 1 (1988): 73, https://doi.org/10.1080/02674648866780061.

28 Falola and Hamel, Disability in Africa, 10–11.

29 Heaton Matthew et al., "Health and Medicine in Colonial Society," in The Palgrave Handbook of African Colonial and Postcolonial History (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 307.

30 Falola and Hamel, Disability in Africa, 7–8, 15–17.

31 Abang, "Disablement, Disability and the Nigerian Society," 75–77.

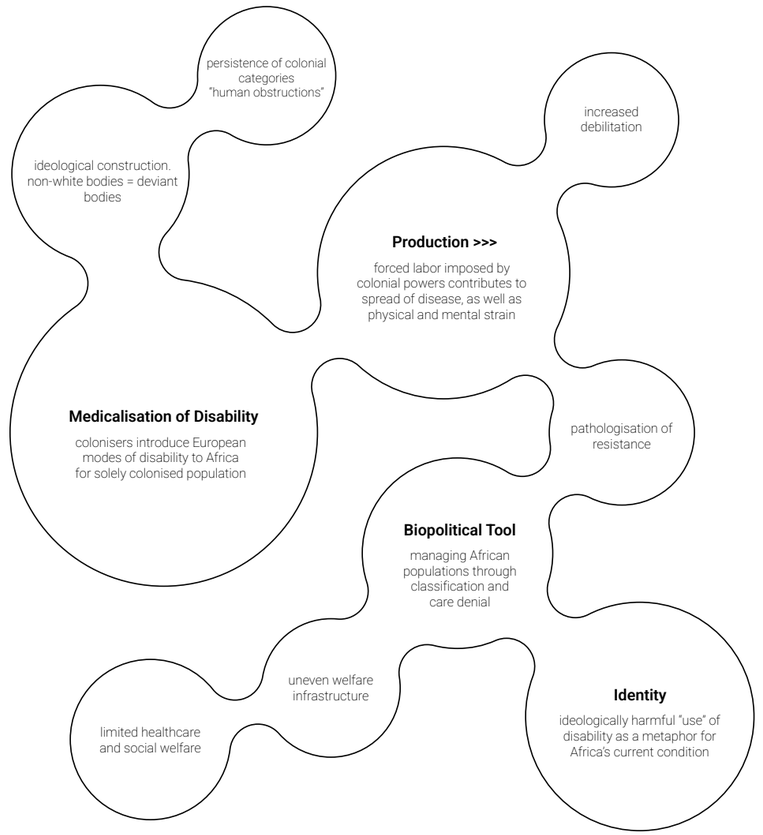


Fig 2.3 Mapping the colonial construction of disability in Africa: from extractive economies and epidemics to enduring stereotypes that cast disabled lives as marginal.

identity

Alongside this structural exclusion, colonialism intensified cultural stigma, reshaping traditional attitudes into more rigid and punitive forms. Missionary narratives framed disability as divine punishment, reinforcing feelings of shame among families and leading to the marginalization of children with disabilities.[32] This internalized stigma travels across borders, affecting Nigerian diasporic families, where disabled children often experience both racial and cultural exclusion.[33] The colonial state further institutionalized discrimination through census classifications and welfare systems that medicalized disability and erased indigenous understandings.[34] These frameworks were rarely dismantled in the postcolonial period; instead, they were repackaged into humanitarian aid programs, reinforcing dependence rather than autonomy.[35]

Decolonizing disability theory

In response to these layered injustices, African disability theorists are advancing decolonial approaches that reframe disability through relational, communal, and indigenous epistemologies. Decolonizing disability, however, is not only a theoretical reorientation; it demands a transformation of institutions and infrastructures that continue to operate through colonial logics. Disability through diagnosis, statistics, or classification, which were introduced through colonial administrations continue to manage, not liberate, impaired bodies. Postcolonial bureaucracies have often inherited these systems without reformulating their core assumptions, leading to state structures that provide minimal social support while maintaining exclusionary spatial, economic, and legal norms. A more intimate, family-centered perspective reveals how Nigerian diasporic households often internalize colonial and religious

32 Falola and Hamel, Disability in Africa, 15.

33 Victor Imade, Awakening Hope: A Critical Analysis of the Stigmatization of Children with Disabilities in Nigerian Families and Communities, June 16, 2016, 2, http://hdl.handle.net/10315/33798.

34 Falola and Hamel, Disability in Africa, 20–21.

35 Abang, "Disablement, Disability and the Nigerian Society," 77.

narratives that cast disabled children as cursed, burdensome, or unworthy of investment. These beliefs, transmitted across generations, foster environments of silence, shame, and marginalization around disability. Caregivers and communities are urged to unlearn these inherited frameworks not by conforming to dominant Western notions of special needs, but by reimagining disability through cultural affirmation, storytelling, and intergenerational resistance.[36] In this view, decolonization is not only institutional but also affective and relational: it means healing how we see each other, how we teach children, and how we reclaim stories of worth and capacity. Concepts such as *ubuntu* in African thought illustrates

ubuntu

that dignity and inclusion arise not from conformity to able-bodied norms, but from mutual responsibility and shared existence.[37] Disability, in this view, is not an individual deficit but a collective condition sustained through care and reciprocity. Central to ubuntu is the Zulu expression *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, often translated as "a person is a person through other persons"; which underscores the idea that humanity is realized through relationships with others.[38] This perspective highlights disability as part of a shared human condition and affirms respect for diverse ways of being. Access, then, should be understood as a continual and relational process rather than a static checklist. Open-air markets exemplify this through practices of cooperation and environmental relatedness (*ukama*), which counter Western ideals of independence as the highest good. As Chataika and McKenzie argue, *ubuntu* emphasizes interdependence, human dignity, and the recognition of disability as part of the shared human condition, offering a model that resists the individualization of support and cultivates community-based care networks.[39] In this context, decolonization must include epistemic justice: validating indigenous

36 Imade, Awakening Hope, 5–7, 19–23.

37 Falola and Hamel, Disability in Africa, 21–22, 381–84.

38 Augustine Shutte, Philosophy for Africa (Rondebosch: University of Cape Town Press, 1993), 46; Dirk Louw, "Ubuntu: An African Assessment of the Religious Other," Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy (Boston, 1998), citing Johan van der Merwe, "Ubuntu," 1996, 1.

39 Tsitsi Chataika and Judith A. McKenzie, "Practices and Discourses of Ubuntu: Implications for an African Model of Disability," Global Education Review 4, no. 4 (2017): 46–56.

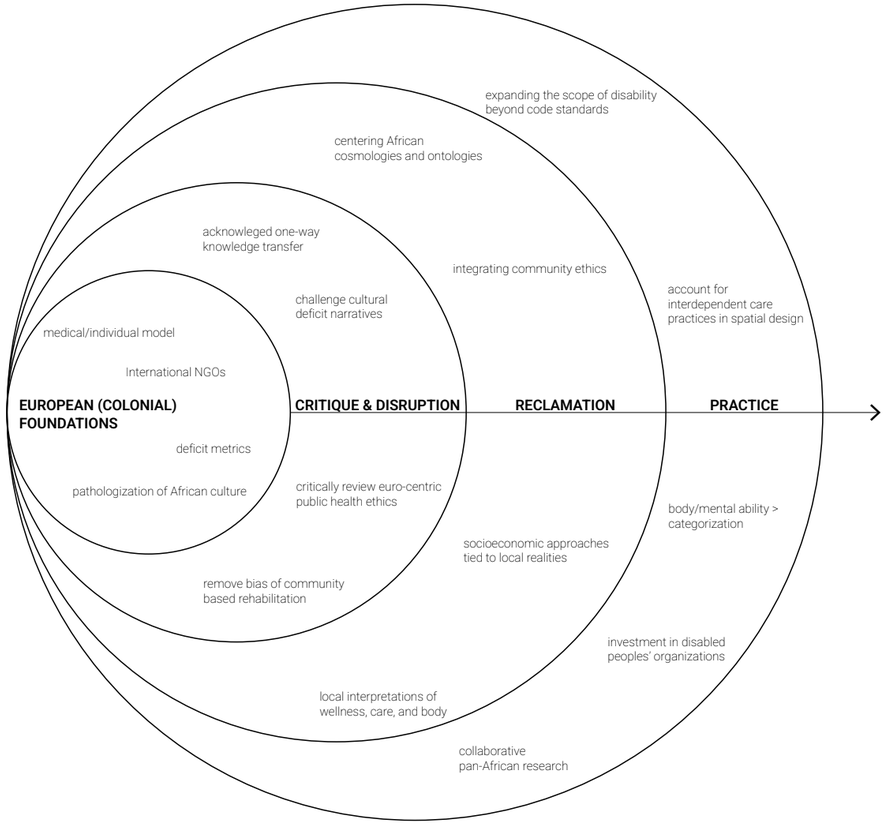


Fig 2.4 Decolonizing disability. Shifting from Eurocentric frameworks to African perspectives rooted in community, culture, and lived experience.

knowledges, healing practices, and modes of social care that have been rendered invisible or inferior by western paradigms.[40] The tokenism of infrastructural inclusion such as ramps or policy documents calls for integrated models of care, education, and visibility that emerge from within Nigerian society itself. For instance, the University of Jos, where blind students receive braille materials transcribed by long-term prisoners as part of a mutual rehabilitation initiative, illustrates how disability inclusion can be contextually embedded, participatory, and transformative.[41] This example highlights an ethics of interdependence rather than charity, an approach that aligns with African communal values while also advancing structural inclusion.

interdependence

A fully decolonized disability theory in Africa must therefore operate on multiple fronts. It must engage with indigenous philosophies and spiritual cosmologies, transforming the symbolic representation of disability. It must restructure educational, legal, and architectural systems to reflect relational and inclusive values. It must replace donor-driven or charity-based interventions with community-rooted initiatives that affirm agency, citizenship, and participation. And it must foreground the voices and knowledge of disabled people themselves not as data points or patients, but as theorists, educators, parents, and leaders. Ultimately, this project is not simply about resisting western models, but about redefining access, dignity, and belonging on African terms. Decolonizing disability requires a humanization of care that treats disabled persons not as objects of policy but as agents in the reconstitution of community.[42] This requires not only historical reckoning with colonial impositions, but a creative, forward-looking commitment to structural change and epistemic justice one where African disability theory is not an imitation of global norms, but a bold, locally grounded redefinition of what it means to belong.

redefining access

40 Falola and Hamel, Disability in Africa, 15–17, 20–21.
41 Abang, "Disablement, Disability and the Nigerian Society," 76.
42 Falola and Hamel, Disability in Africa, 384.

spatial practices in open-air markets

access without erasure

03 | Spatial practices in Open-air markets

The Global South | Nigeria

why markets?

In pursuing a redefinition of disability on African terms, this research turns to open-air markets (typically informal organizations) rather than an institutional setting because of its deep integration into the rhythms of Nigerian life. The Global South is a concept that extends beyond geography, encompassing countries shaped by histories of colonial extraction, uneven development, and systemic marginalization. It also signals the emergence of alternative economic practices, governance models, and survival strategies, particularly through informal systems.[43] Within this broader landscape, Nigeria provides a particularly revealing case, where the dynamics of the Global South are expressed through its scale, diversity, and reliance on informal systems. Nigeria is Africa's most populous country with over 220 million people, and it offers a compelling example of how informality operates not as a deviation from the norm, but as a critical infrastructure for everyday life.[44] Markets in Nigeria are more than points of exchange; they are cultural and civic spaces where economic activity intertwines with social connection, mutual care, and collective identity. As Oluwagbemiga Agboola notes, marketplaces frequently operate as "third places," fostering relationships, sustaining communal memory, and serving as sites where public life is negotiated alongside commerce.[45] They host religious observances, political discussions, and informal education, roles that formal institutions such as schools, hospitals, or administrative offices rarely fulfill with the same openness or immediacy.[46] In both rural and urban contexts, these markets often remain among the most accessible civic spaces; offering physical, social, and cultural

the significance of open-air markets

figure 3.4

43 Justin Dargin, Rise Of The Global South, The: Philosophical, Geopolitical And Economic Trends Of The 21st Century (World Scientific, 2013), 1–3.

44 "Population Growth (Annual %) - Nigeria," World Bank Open Data, accessed July 30, 2025, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.GROW?locations=NG.

45 Oluwagbemiga Paul Agboola, "The Significance of Rural Markets as a Public Space in Nigeria," Habitat International 122 (April 2022): 4–6, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2022.102519.

46 Agboola, "The Significance of Rural Markets as a Public Space in Nigeria," 7–9.

NIGERIA

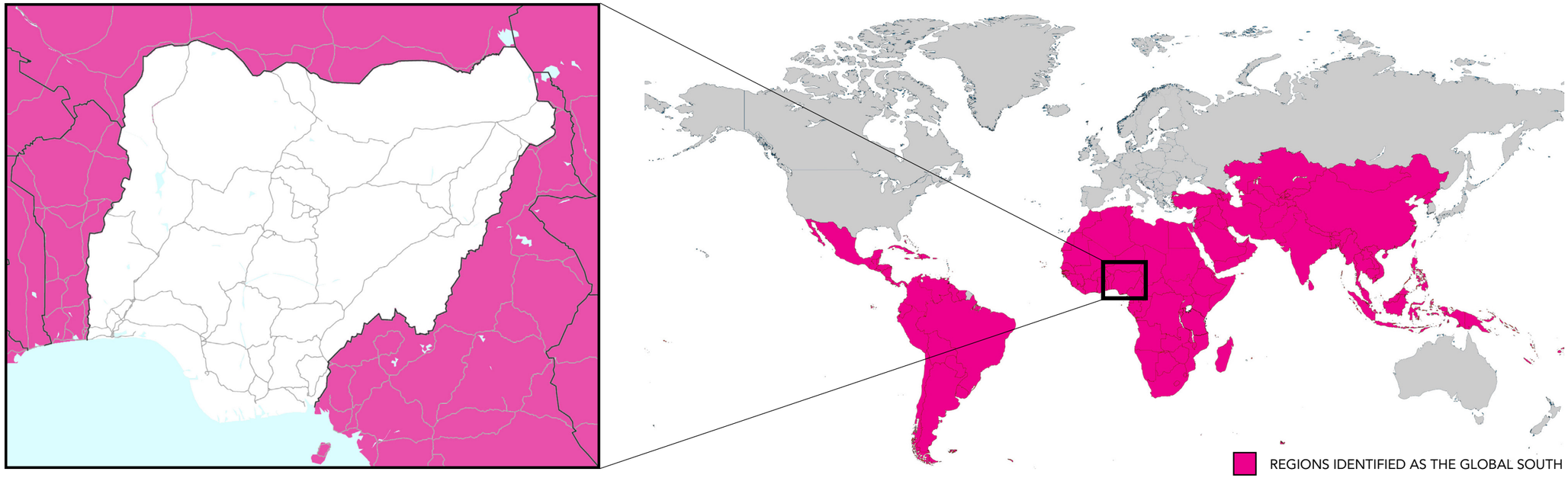


Fig. 3.1
Diagram situating Nigeria within the Global South. Accompanying data highlights the country's socioeconomic conditions, with particular attention to people who are classifiified as part of the disabled population living in poverty.

Geographical Location: West Africa
Land Mass: 923,768 sq.km (356,669 sq.mi)
Total population: ~223.8 million people
Total population identified as living with disabilities: ~25 million people
Population density: 247 people per sq.km
Total number of languages: 500 distinct languages (official - english)
Major Indigenous languages: Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Pidgin English
Religious groups: Christainity, Islam, Indigenous religions
Poverty rate: 40% of Nigerians live below national poverty line
Percentage of disabled people living in poverty: ~80% of national population



Fig. 3.2
Bodija Market, Ibadan (Nigeria). Pavilion within the market used by unhoused people. Many people in these collectives are living with disabilities or from displaced groups. Their presence is sustained by everyday acts of giving. These self-organized areas also support communal practices such as resting/dwelling, food preparation, and celebrations.



Fig. 3.3
Lafenwa market, Abeokuta (NIgeria). Social collective within the market for women who have just recently lost their primary caretaker. They are represented by a leader called "Iya Ilese", who advocates for the group . Without social security, they relyon charity and situate their group in densely populated areas of the market to survive.



Fig. 3.4
Ochanja Market, Onitsha (Nigeria). A mass service held within the market space, alongside the distribution of relief items to traders and families affected by a recent fire disaster.

access that enables disabled people to participate as traders, artisans, organizers, and community members rather than solely as recipients of medical care. The spatial and material composition of markets, blending permanent stalls with mobile vendors and adaptable gathering points, resists the rigid uniformity of institutional environments. This flexibility enables user-led adjustments that can respond to individual and collective needs, embodying principles of access that are negotiated in real time. Even in organically developed markets, spatial arrangements actively shape patterns of interaction and social cohesion, creating openings for inclusion that emerge from the environment itself.[47] By situating questions of disability justice within this context, accessibility can be understood beyond technical requirements, as a living practice embedded in the sociocultural fabric of Nigerian public life,

figure 3.2 & 3.3

47 Olatunde Adedayo et al., "Rural Markets an Attractor for Social Interaction in Rural Communities: A Case Study of Owena Market, Osun State, Nigeria," ResearchGate, ahead of print, October 22, 2024, 2–4, https://doi.org/10.46610/JoRAAS.2023.v08i02.001.

sustained through reciprocity, cooperation, and everyday acts of participation.

In Nigeria's urban centers, informality is not a peripheral phenomenon; it constitutes the mainstay of economic activity. From open-air markets and roadside vending to unregulated services and artisanal production, informal economies provide livelihoods for a majority of Nigerians excluded from the formal labor force.[48] According to Grossman, informal markets adapt governance structures in response to the threat of state action such as eviction or taxation, prompting what she describes as 'pro-trade' behavior intended to preserve market continuity.[49] In response, market associations frequently adopt what she terms "pro-trade" behaviors, increasing internal discipline and cooperation to present a unified and orderly image that might discourage state crackdown.[50] This dynamic relationship between the informal and formal realms illustrates how state presence is negotiated rather than binary.

State-led urban renewal efforts for modernization have often resulted in the displacement of informal traders under the guise of beautification and progress. Such interventions disproportionately impact marginalized groups, displacing them from central city zones to peripheral areas without providing viable alternatives.[51] These actions fracture economic networks and undermine the fragile but effective systems of care, cooperation, and trust that characterize informal markets. Although informal markets foster resilience, their dependence on relational governance exposes them to risks when those social ties break down.

48 Faith Ikioda, "Limits to Communities of Practice in an Open Air Market - The Case of the Alaba-Suru Market, Lagos, Nigeria" (Faculty of Social Sciences (Goeography), University of Sheffield, 2012), 21, https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/2376/.

49 Shelby Grossman, The Politics of Order in Informal Markets: How the State Shapes Private Governance, 1 Edition, Cambridge Studies in Economics, Choice, and Society (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 5–9.

50 Grossman, The Politics of Order in Informal Markets, 15–20.

51 Ikioda, "Limits to Communities of Practice in an Open Air Market - The Case of the Alaba-Suru Market, Lagos, Nigeria," 166–70.

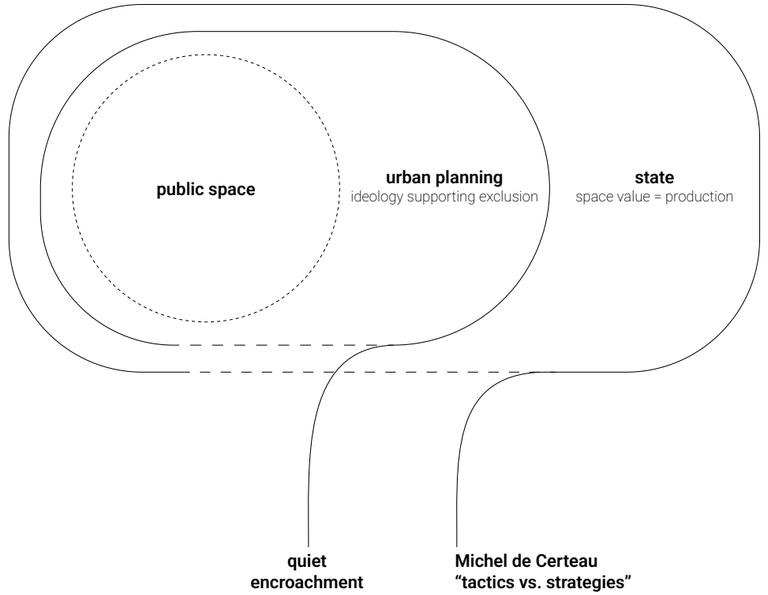


Fig. 3.5
Contesting spatial exclusion. Urban renewal projects framed as modernization often displace informal organizations, fracturing fragile systems of care and cooperation. Yet through quiet encroachment, bribery, and adaptive tactics, the urban poor resist and reclaim their right to public space.

Furthermore, while these systems often promote cooperation, they are not immune to exploitation or inequality, particularly along lines of gender or political affiliation. Still, they challenge conventional binaries between formality and informality, illustrating how regulation, planning, and adaptation often emerge from below. As Justin Dargin argues, the rise of the Global South reflects not only the continuation of postcolonial struggles but also the creation of new global realities in which economic survival depends on innovation within constraint.[52] Informal economies in Nigeria exemplify this paradigm. They are dynamic, relational, and interwoven with both local knowledge and global flows. To address the complexities of informal

52 Dargin, Rise Of The Global South, The, 44.

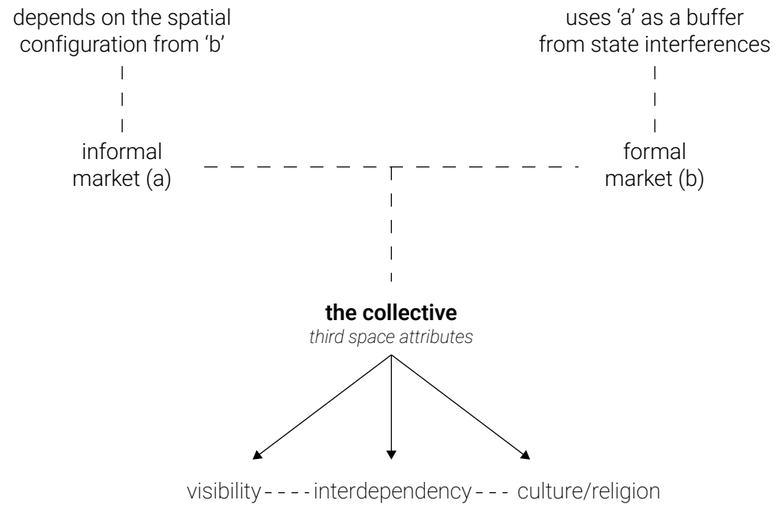


Fig. 3.6
Open-air markets in Nigeria function as more than centers of trade, they are collective spaces of mobility, care, and mutual support, where flexible structures and community governance create visibility, safety, and inclusion for vulnerable groups.

economies, development strategies must recognize their legitimacy rather than attempt to eradicate or formalize them. Engaging with the systems of care and governance already in place can lead to more equitable urban policy. This would mean supporting existing structures through participatory planning, infrastructure investments, and regulatory frameworks that are built upon rather than undermining community agency.[53]

Access washing

In postcolonial African cities like Abuja, Nigeria, the concept of accessibility is increasingly co-opted into what disability justice activist Stacey Milbern calls

53 Ikioda, "Limits to Communities of Practice in an Open Air Market - The Case of the Alaba-Suru Market, Lagos, Nigeria," 179–80.

access washing.[54] This refers to the strategic use of "access" rhetoric to justify structural harm. Rather than promoting justice for disabled or marginalized people, access washing masks exclusionary agendas behind the veneer of modernization.[55] A striking example of this is the repeated demolition and proposed remodeling of Utako Market in Abuja, where the government cited redevelopment for a more "ultra-modern" shopping complex, presumably one that includes accessible features. However, the very traders, many of whom are low-income, elderly, or living with impairments were not consulted, compensated adequately, or meaningfully included in planning. Police accompanied with demolition machinery, and traders were locked out of negotiation and forced to purchase new stalls at inflated prices. Many described these actions as extortionate and exclusionary.[56]

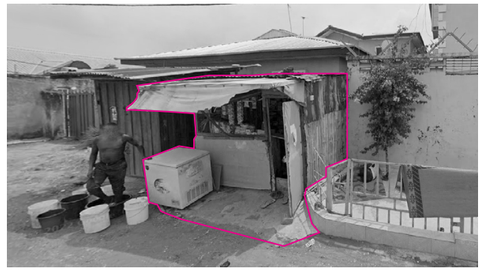
This pattern is not incidental. It is systemic. As Milbern argues, access washing often appears as "accessibility at people's expense," where the most vulnerable often disabled, poor, or chronically ill are displaced in the name of inclusion. What is marketed as accessible infrastructure becomes a justification for eviction and privatization.[57] In the Nigerian context, the conversion of open-air markets into mall-like settings does not create inclusion. Instead, it creates sterile, high-cost environments that cater to middle and upper-class consumers while displacing the traders who built these markets with their own resources, as was the case in Utako. The so-called modernization enforces spatial and economic norms that reflect colonial ideals of order, hygiene, and productivity rather than the messy, relational economies that sustain informal livelihoods and care networks. This form of redevelopment contradicts the deeper principles of disability justice, which

54 Milbern, "Notes on 'Access Washing.'"
55 Milbern, "Notes on 'Access Washing.'"
56 Azeezat Adedigba, "Traders Protest Planned Market Demolition by Abuja Council," Premium Times Nigeria, October 11, 2017, https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/north-central/245811-traders-protest-planned-market-demolition-abuja-council.html.
57 Milbern, "Notes on 'Access Washing.'"

Fig 3.7 Rising formal regulation and demands for "accessibility" and sanitation reduce the openness of public space, driving a shift towards shopping arcades, and the fracturing networks of care and support.

A Pocket markets

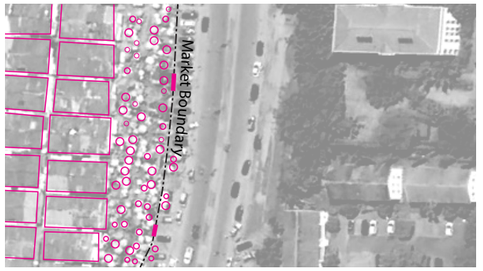
Pocket markets typically arise at the neighborhood scale, occupying vacant plots or roadside pockets. They emerge organically to meet immediate needs, offering vital economic and socio-economic lifelines, particularly for marginalized groups excluded from formal systems. As they expand, these markets often evolve into semi-permanent hubs with greater regional reach.





B Semi-permanent markets

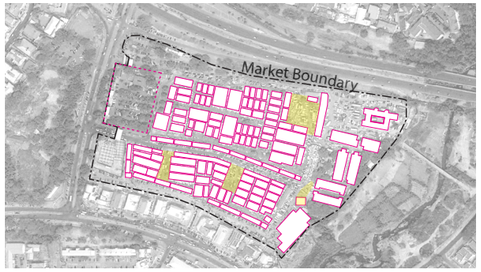
Utako Market illustrates this stage, by connecting rural producers with urban consumers. Despite minimal oversight, it thrives on vibrancy and visibility, enabling diverse participation and access to affordable goods. Yet greater visibility invites enforcement, where development and sanitation often overshadow equity and inclusion.





C Municipally recognized markets

Wuse Market's demonstrates the shift by providing structured facilities but marginalizes vulnerable participants, pushing them to peripheral zones. While central areas regulate commerce, fragmented pockets remain crucial for affordable goods, social presence, and mutual aid, sustaining disabled people's visibility within increasingly exclusionary market systems.





D Shopping arcades

Supermarkets and shopping arcades operate under strict licensing, zoning, labor, and hygiene laws. While these frameworks ensure order and uniformity, they erode small producers and care practices, narrowing diversity and reinforcing barriers for groups once central to earlier market typologies. Within this system, the demands of production are elevated above social support.





Formal regulation

Open systems

rejects infrastructural tokenism such as the installation of ramps without elevators or braille signage as sufficient.

True inclusion requires more than surface-level modifications; it demands the transformation of broader systems to support genuine access, meaningful participation, and self-determination.[58] The problem is not simply technical exclusion but a political economy that defines access narrowly while extracting value from historically excluded communities. Milbern warns that access washing is not about conflicting access needs. It is about the manipulation of disability discourse to divide communities, mask exploitation, and reinforce dominant power structures.[59] In the case of Utako, no environmental study, community forum, or independent valuation preceded the demolition plans. Rather, the justification rested on promises of "modernity" that were never designed to include the people most impacted.

Therefore, access washing in Nigeria is not a rhetorical misstep. It is an implicit strategy that exploits the language of accessibility while undermining the very lives it claims to protect. Access is not transactional. It is relational, collective, and about all of us getting free. Real accessibility in the African urban context must involve participatory interventions, and economic justice, not the replication of exclusion under the banner of reform.[60] Without structural shifts in how we define and implement access, redevelopment efforts like the Utako Market case will continue to erase informal economies, silence disabled voices, and re-entrench colonial patterns of spatial control.

Nigerian markets: An analysis

Open-air markets in Nigeria are complex spaces that extend beyond economic

58 Abang, "Disablement, Disability and the Nigerian Society," 76.
59 Milbern, "Notes on 'Access Washing.'"
60 Milbern, "Notes on 'Access Washing.'"

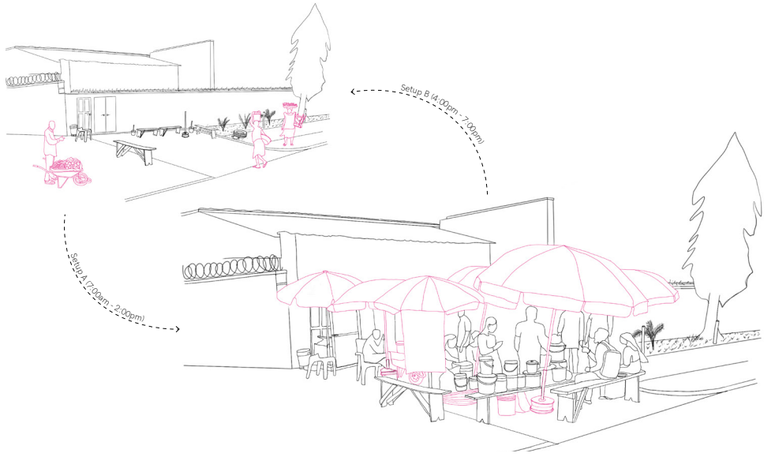
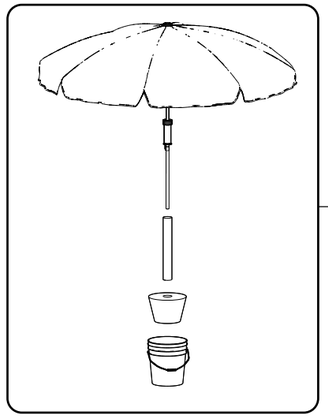


Fig. 3.8
Street food stall "*Mama-put*" (Abuja, Nigeria). The spillage must be packed away at night: a permeable edge retreats back into the store. Surfaces are occupied and returned to the public real on a regular cycle.

exchange. They function as socially embedded systems where access, care, and spatial use are constantly negotiated. Their structure is not fixed in advance but emerges through daily adjustments and improvisations. Stalls, circulation routes, and gathering points often shift as traders extend roofs, attach kiosks, or infill narrow paths to accommodate demand. Such spatial negotiation reflects what Hesam Kamalipour and Kim Dovey call "incremental production," where small modifications such as extensions, attachments, or divisions accumulate to shape the overall form of the market.[61]

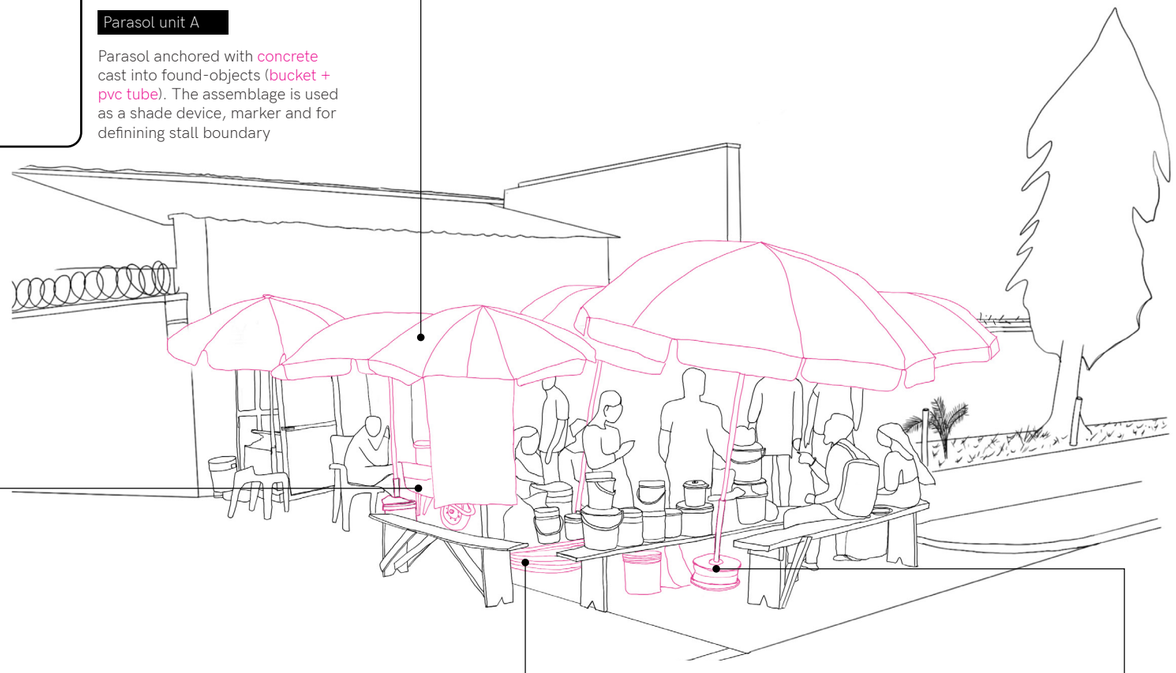
This process sustains participation but also introduces contradictions. Flexibility allows traders to enter without formal permits and to rely on trust-based arrangements, such as goods sold on credit. At the same time, the same adaptations can lead to congestion, unsafe walkways, and exclusionary layouts

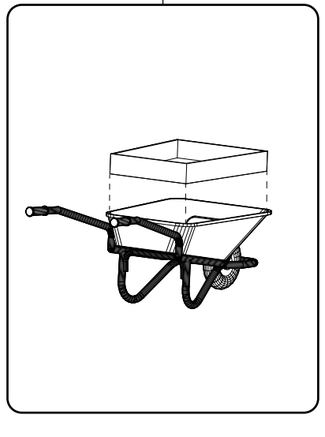
61 Hesam Kamalipour and Kim Dovey, "Incremental Production of Urban Space: A Typology of Informal Design," Habitat International 98 (April 2020): 3, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2020.102133.



Parasol unit A

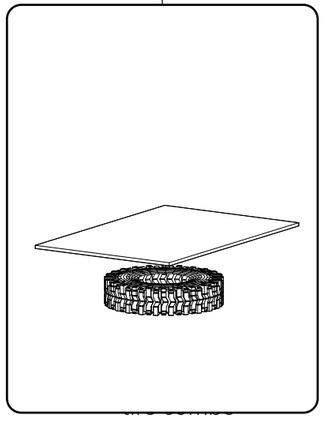
Parasol anchored with concrete cast into found-objects (bucket + pvc tube). The assemblage is used as a shade device, marker and for defininig stall boundary





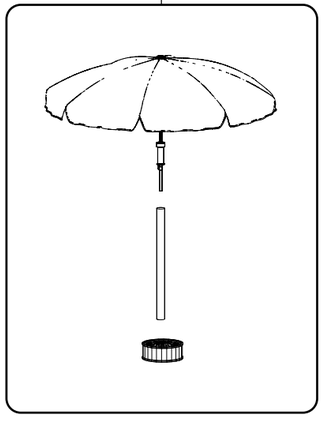
Mobile stall Units

Wheelbarrows often double as makeshift stalls for displaing goods. Vendors enhance functionality by customizing them with planks for better visibility



Merchandise stand

Tires + wood sheets are often repurposed as sturdy foundations for stalls. This low cost approach allows for easy (dis) assembly and adaptability.



Parasol unit B

Parasol anchored into found-objects assemblage (tire rim + metal tube). The assemblage is used as a shade device, marker and for defininig stall boundary



Fig. 3.9
These spaces often emerge through the division of space, where found objects are used to mark boundaries for activity and then securely stored away at day's end.

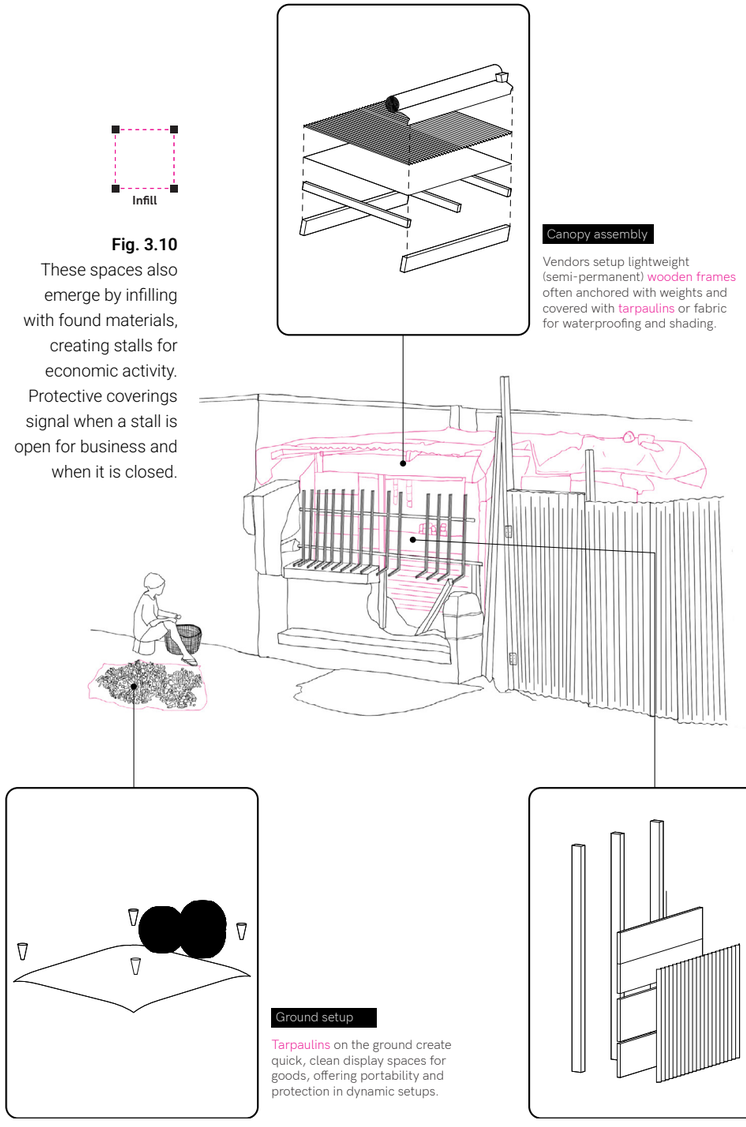


Fig. 3.10
These spaces also emerge by infilling with found materials, creating stalls for economic activity. Protective coverings signal when a stall is open for business and when it is closed.

that disadvantage people with limited mobility or other impairments. Spaces such as Wuse market or Utako market in Abuja , NIgeria, illustrate how informal arrangements provide opportunities while also generating conditions that restrict movement and reinforce uneven access.[62] The operation of these markets depends on informal codes and unwritten understandings about stall frontage, passage rights, or visibility that regulate how space is shared. These practices can foster cooperation but also reproduce hierarchies when prime locations are secured by a few while others are displaced to the margins.[63] Addressing these tensions requires not replacing incremental adaptation with rigid planning, but coupling it with basic infrastructure such as walkways, drainage, and utilities (power and water) that supports safe and equitable use without suppressing the adaptive practices through which these marketspaces evolve.

Barriers and support systems

physical barriers

Physical access is a major limitation. In their study of Warwick Market (Durban, South Africa), Naidoo et al. observe that despite the presence of progressive disability legislation in South Africa, traders and customers with mobility impairments still encounter uneven surfaces, hazardous walkways, and a lack of ramps or rest points.[64] These infrastructural barriers are not only inconvenient but actively harmful, preventing many from entering or operating within the market. Similarly, in Lagos, the layout of stalls, narrow passages, and poor surface continuity make it nearly impossible for wheelchair users or individuals with joint pain to navigate the space safely or with dignity.[65] Despite the importance of informal markets as sources of both employment and essential goods, their organization rarely accommodates

62 Grossman, The Politics of Order in Informal Markets, 72–74.
63 Kamalipour and Dovey, "Incremental Production of Urban Space," 6.
64 Naidoo et al., "Accessibility for Persons with Mobility Impairments within an Informal Trading Site," 2–4.
65 Ikioda, "Limits to Communities of Practice in an Open Air Market - The Case of the Alaba-Suru Market, Lagos, Nigeria," 43–48.

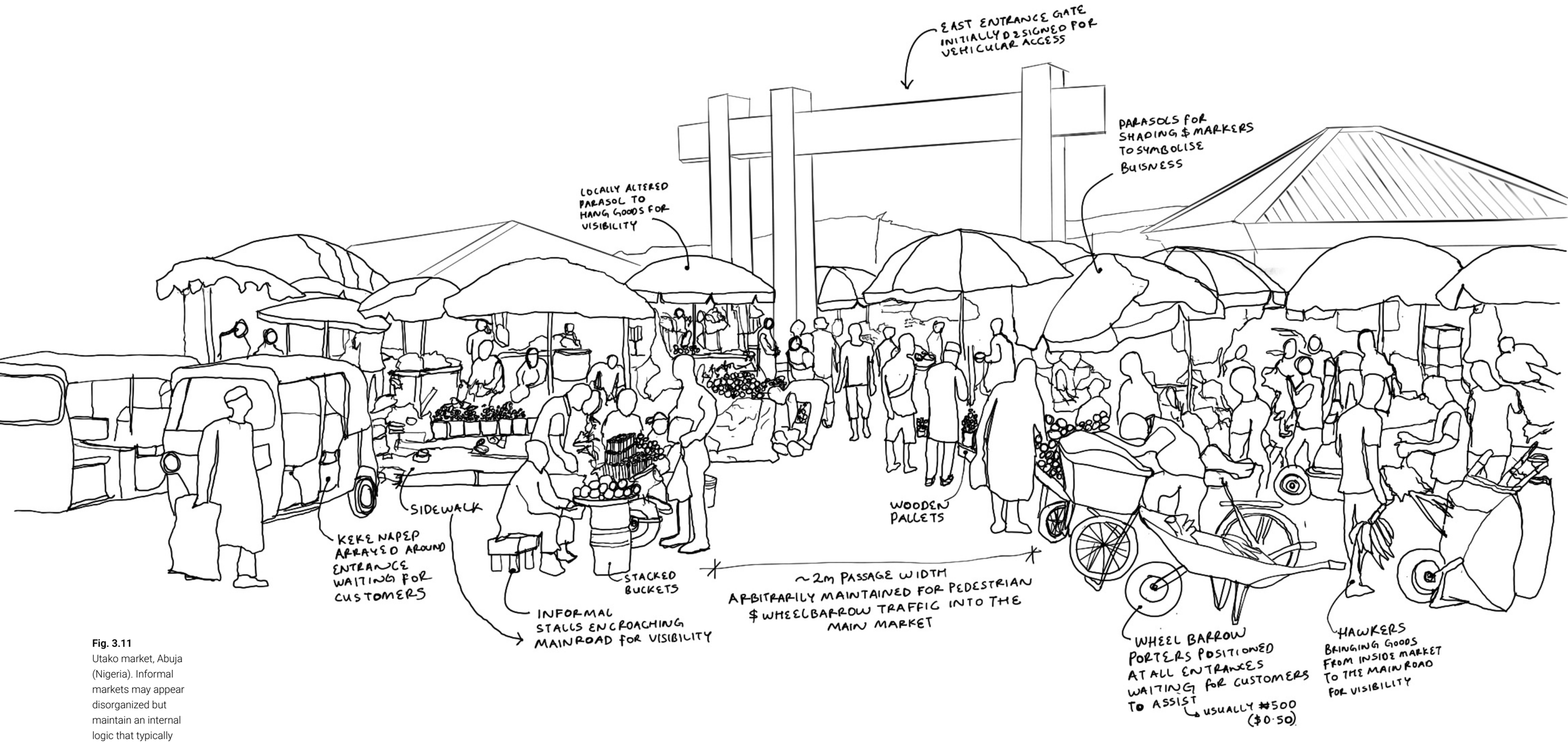


Fig. 3.11
Utako market, Abuja (Nigeria). Informal markets may appear disorganized but maintain an internal logic that typically allows mentally and physically "abled users" and goods to easily navigate.

Fig 3.12 Wuse Market, Abuja (Nigeria). A notation exercise mapping physical mobility in a municipal market, highlighting how vehicle dominance and inadequate infrastructure shape movement; and showing areas where support services such as porter boys (mai-barrow) step in assist navigation.



people with limited mobility, in ways that enable independent navigation.

sensory and cognitive barriers

Sensory and Cognitive challenges are equally present. The absence of intentional spatial planning or infrastructure in these spaces compounds this difficulty. Open space studies reveal that weak monitoring, poor site planning, and unregulated encroachment undermine orderly development, resulting in chaotic environments that heighten disorientation for individuals who depend on clear spatial cues for navigation.[66] Users frequently rely on memory or assistance, rather than coherent spatial markers or signage. The high-stimulus environment marked by noise, movement, and overlapping sensory demands can induce disorientation or fatigue in individuals with sensory or neurodiverse differences. Wayfinding is typically anchored in social knowledge (knowing who sells what and where), which advantages regular visitors over newcomers or those who cannot easily access such information.[67] Within this context, people with cognitive disabilities often face exclusion not merely due to their impairments but because of socially and spatially produced barriers. The stigmatization of disability, deeply rooted in cultural and religious attitudes, exacerbates these challenges, as families may internalize shame and fail to advocate for supportive environments.[68] Fortunately, education, both formal and community-based offers a pathway to resist stigma. By reframing disability through inclusive curricula and public awareness, education can cultivate empathy, reduce cultural misconceptions, and empower disabled individuals to claim their rights.[69] This intersection of spatial disorder and cultural stigma shows how informal markets, while essential to daily livelihoods, can either exacerbate or ease psychological distress and social exclusion. Introducing spatial interventions such as signage, quiet zones, and clearer pathways alongside educational initiatives like disability awareness programs, has the potential to affirm dignity and enable fuller participation for people with cognitive and sensory differences.

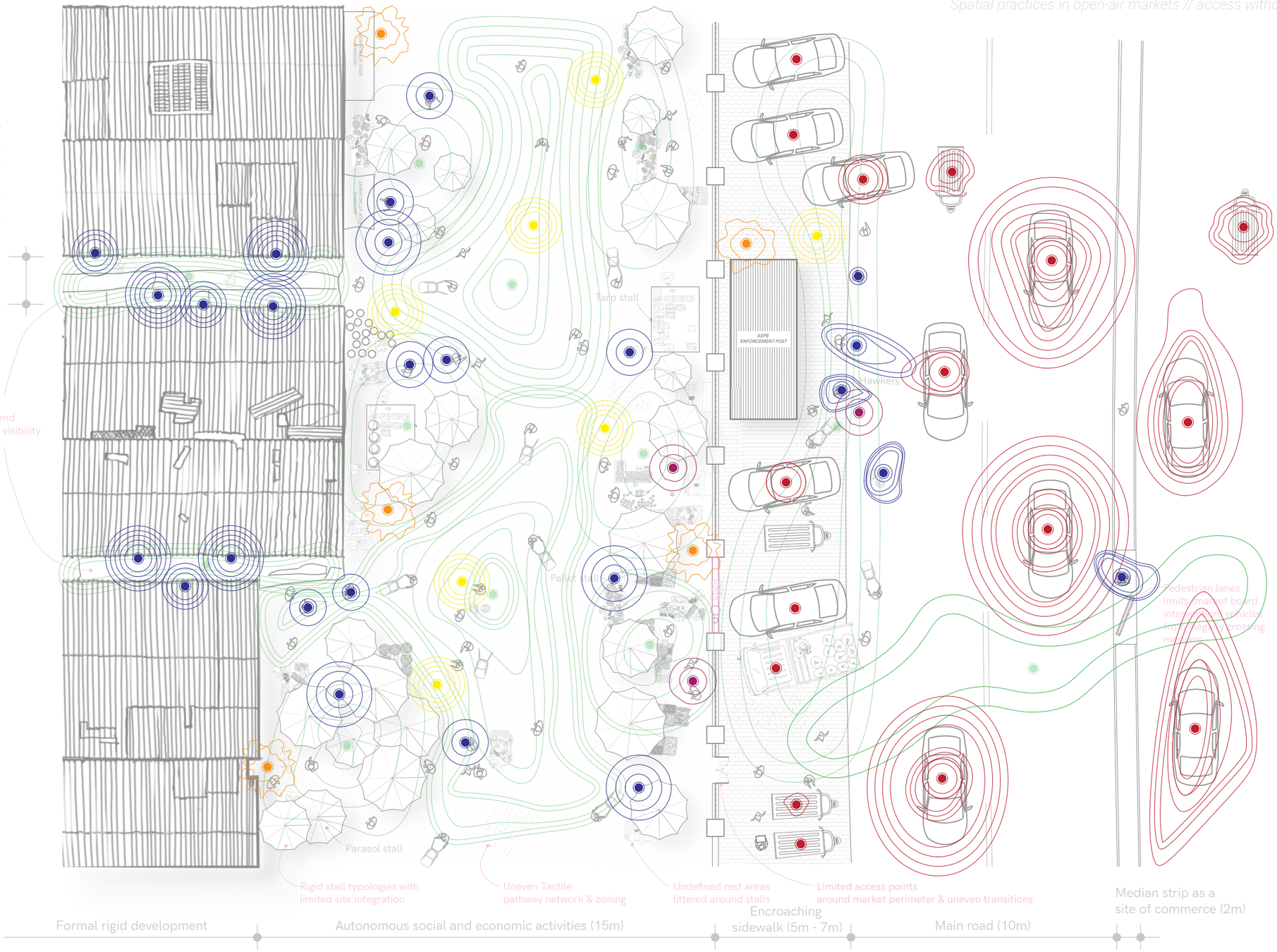
66 Daodu Afeosemobo Sunday et al., "A Systematic Review of Open Space Implementation in Nigeria," International Journal of Social Science and Human Research 04, no. 11 (2021): 3258–61, https://doi.org/10.47191/ijsshr/v4-i11-26.

67 Naidoo et al., "Accessibility for Persons with Mobility Impairments within an Informal Trading Site," 3–4.

68 Imade, Awakening Hope, 8–10.

69 Falola and Hamel, Disability in Africa, 112–14.

Fig. 3.13
Utako Market, Abuja (Nigeria). The diagram maps overlapping sound intensities from vehicles, vendors, hawkers, pedestrians, livestock, solicitors, and street performers across different market zones, showing how navigation relies not on visual signage but on memory, markers, and interpersonal inquiries.



a a a
b

a= sound intensity
b= sound range

- 5 Vehicle and auto-tricycle traffic
- 3 Vendor/Hawker calls
- 2 Pedestrian and wheelbarrow traffic
- 6 Mobile power generators
- 3 Street performers
- 2 Livestock noises

culture and religion

Despite these barriers, open-air markets sustain vibrant care practices that soften the harshness of urban exclusion. These practices range from religious observance to informal welfare and are woven into the daily rhythms of trade. In Alaba-Suru market (Lagos, Nigeria), Ikioda describes how traders temporarily pause business on Fridays to accommodate communal prayer, adjusting stall boundaries and using ambient noise as a signal for spiritual gathering. Similar adjustments occur during religious celebrations, where participants within the market collectively distribute food, weaving ritual into the everyday fabric of exchange and social life.[70] These rituals offer moments of collective reflection, spiritual care, and social bonding, reinforcing a shared moral community. Such practices are not interruptions to commerce; they are integral to the ethics of the space.

rest/pause

load support

way-finding

Just as spiritual rituals embed care within the flow of exchange, so too do everyday acts of physical support. In the dense alleys of Warwick, traders create makeshift rest points from wooden benches, stacked crates, or shaded corners where elderly customers, exhausted vendors, or people in distress can pause and recover. As Naidoo et al. document, these improvised areas reflect community recognition of fatigue and impairment, even in the absence of state-provided rest zones or accessible facilities.[71] Traders frequently allow others to share their seating, offer water, or simply create quiet moments in otherwise chaotic environments. Another form of support is evident in the roles of hawkers and load carriers (mai-barrow/kaya-kaya), who provide services that make the market easier to navigate with goods. Hawkers circulate items ranging from snacks to toiletries, often on behalf of elderly traders or as part of kinship obligations, reinforcing networks of reciprocity and interdependence. They also frequently guide visitors toward specific stalls or facilities, offering informal wayfinding assistance. Load carriers, or mai-barrow,

70 Ikioda, "Limits to Communities of Practice in an Open Air Market - The Case of the Alaba-Suru Market, Lagos, Nigeria," 122–25.

71 Naidoo et al., "Accessibility for Persons with Mobility Impairments within an Informal Trading Site," 5–6.

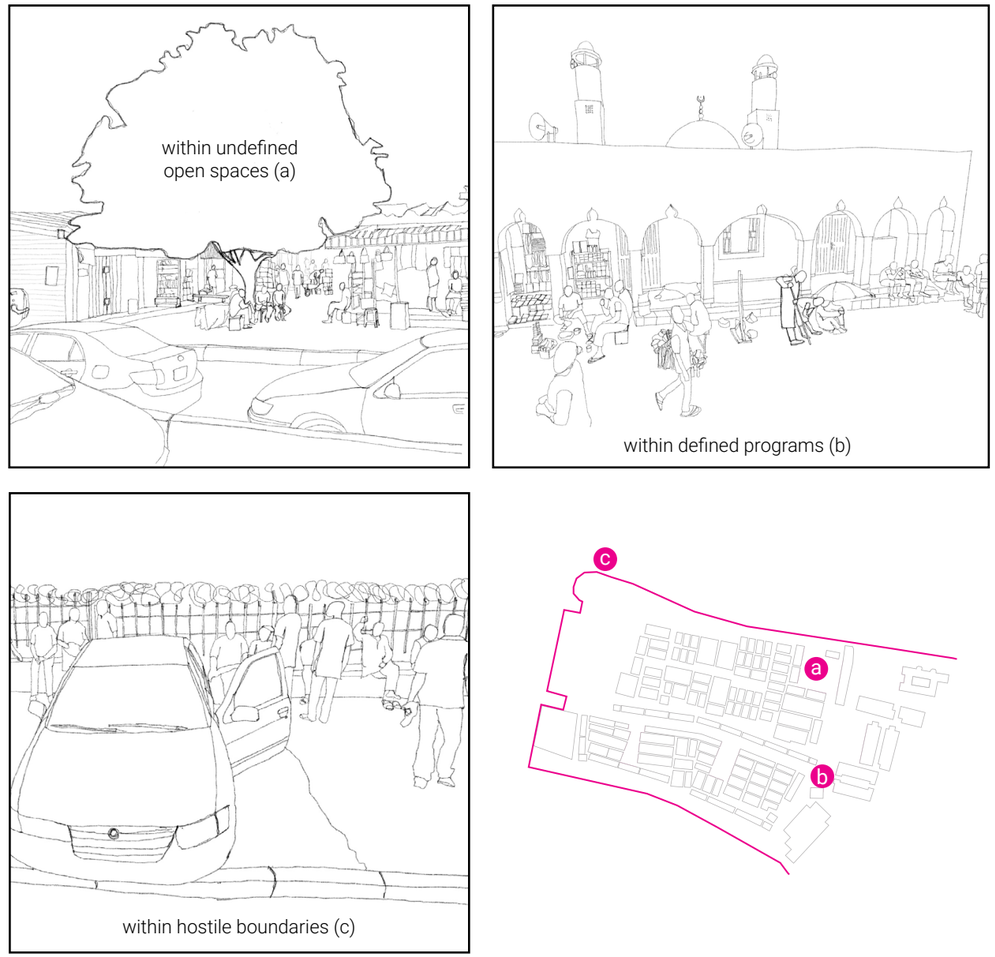


Fig 3.14 Wuse market, Abuja (NIgeria). Areas for rest and pause within a municipal market setting.



Fig. 3.15
Mai-barrow (load carriers). A support service found across most market typologies (except shopping arcades), assisting with the movement of goods, either by helping traders offload goods or by supporting people with limited mobility.



Fig. 3.16
Gwanjo market, Gombe (NIgeria). Okrika thrift market, Nigeria. Piles of second-hand clothing displayed on tarpaulins under makeshift canopies, where vendors and buyers gather in an open-air setting. These markets provide affordable access to clothing while fostering practices of reuse, bargaining, and informal exchange.

assist both customers and vendors with moving heavy goods, offering physical support for those unable to navigate the space on their own. Though operating outside formal associations, these workers follow consistent, affordable pricing and offer dependable, person-to-person assistance.[72] Their labor sustains the market's rhythms while making it more navigable and inclusive for all. These ethics of mutual support operates within what Grossman calls a "moral economy," where solidarity and obligation often override competitive logic.[73]

thrift and reuse (okrika)

Thrift and reuse further characterizes the social dimensions of market life. Clothes are exchanged or gifted, unsold produce is shared with neighbors, and broken items are repurposed. These practices reflect both economic necessity and ecological awareness, but also perform a form of everyday solidarity, ensuring that even those unable to purchase still access basic needs. Women often serve as stewards of this informal welfare system. In both Grossman and Ikioda's accounts, female traders not only lead commodity associations but also mediate disputes, mentor newcomers, and organize collective responses to crises.[74] Their labor, though rarely recognized by policy or infrastructure, is central to the reproduction of both economic and social life in these markets.

women collective

Insights from the Market Analysis

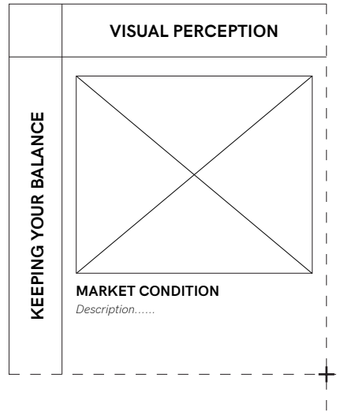
Crucially, these care practices operate alongside, and often in spite of, state neglect or active repression. Government-led modernization projects, such as Lagos's Mega City initiative or municipal upgrades in Durban, have frequently resulted in the demolition of informal markets without viable relocation plans.[75] As

72 Ikioda, "Limits to Communities of Practice in an Open Air Market - The Case of the Alaba-Suru Market, Lagos, Nigeria," 48.
73 Grossman, The Politics of Order in Informal Markets, 142–44.
74 Ikioda, "Limits to Communities of Practice in an Open Air Market - The Case of the Alaba-Suru Market, Lagos, Nigeria," 137–43.
75 Grossman, The Politics of Order in Informal Markets, 165–70.

a result, communities are displaced, networks fractured, and access made more precarious, especially for marginalized groups, who rely on established routines and familiar spatial cues. Naidoo et al. note that such dispersals can sever not only economic ties but also emotional and practical support systems, compounding the marginalization of vulnerable groups.[76] In light of these patterns, it becomes clear that addressing accessibility in informal markets requires more than infrastructural reform. It demands a shift in epistemology: from viewing informal spaces as failed versions of formality to recognizing them as legitimate, if improvised, systems of governance and social support.

Recognizing informal markets as systems of care and support also demands attention to how design itself encodes exclusions; an issue that Jos Boys highlights in her chapter "Diagramming for a Dis/Ordinary Architecture." She argues that most spatial design is predicated on an ideal, able-bodied user; one who can see, hear, move, and interpret space with ease.[77] To counter this model, she proposes a diagrammatic framework called "Having a Body," which maps out how diverse bodies encounter and experience space. Rather than taking an abstract average body as the norm, Boys advocates beginning with lived variation, considering, for example, how a person who fatigues easily might engage with distance, or how someone with partial sight might navigate texture and light.[78] This approach is especially useful in analyzing informal markets, where no two paths, stalls, or elevations are alike. Boys' framework allows for a layered understanding of spatial barriers and supports. For instance, a step that may seem negligible to most can become an absolute barrier for a wheelchair user, while a shaded bench may serve not just as a convenience but as a critical support for someone managing chronic illness.[79]

76 Naidoo et al., "Accessibility for Persons with Mobility Impairments within an Informal Trading Site," 5–6.
77 Boys, Disability, Space, Architecture, 149.
78 Boys, Disability, Space, Architecture, 150–51.
79 Boys, Disability, Space, Architecture, 152–54.



P1 - MATRIX STUDY

RELATIONAL ACCESS

This study maps how people with different body/mind abilities navigate the market. Through Jos Boys's framework for "how a body experiences space"; this matrix highlights spatial inequities and points of overlap for relational access, informing design strategies that are generous to wider audience within the marketspace.

Fig 3.17 Template for matrix study.

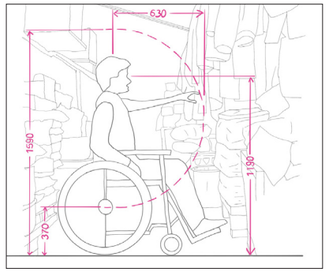
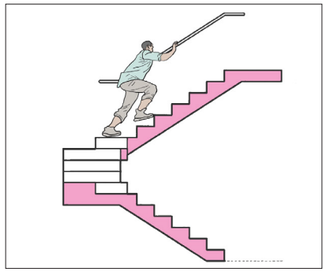
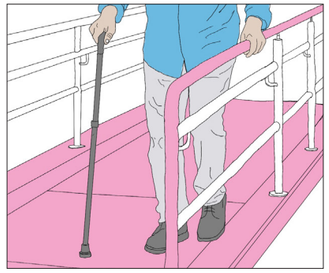
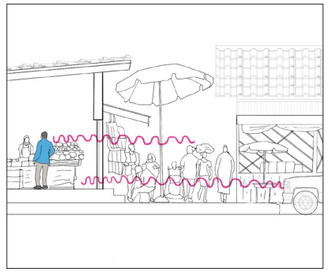
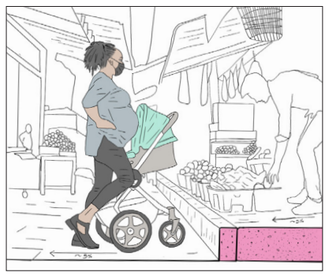
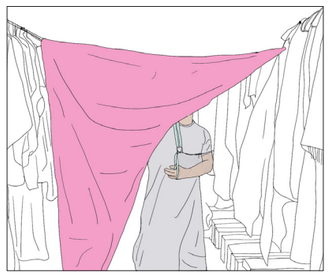
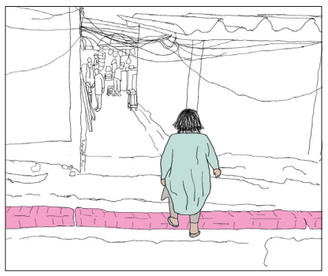
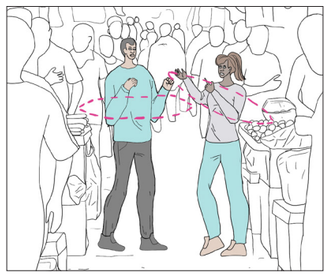
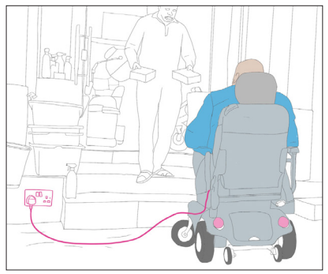
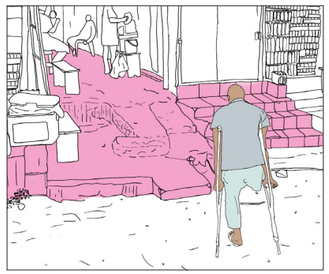
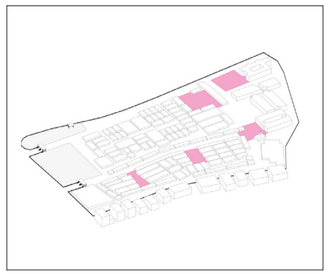
	VISUAL PERCEPTION	WHEELED MOBILITY DEVICE	CHRONIC & EMERGENCY BASED	NON-WHEEL MOBILITY DEVICE	AGE RELATED CONDITIONS	DEAF AND NONVERBAL
KEEPING YOUR BALANCE	 **INCONSISTENT CANE FEEDBACK** *High or irregular steps are difficult to anticipate. Adhoc interventions made to assist able bodied people can also be extended to people with differing abilities.*	 **REACH DIFFICULTY** *Market stalls and counters are often designed for average height individuals, making reaching essential goods and interacting with vendors difficult.*	 **TRIPPING HAZARD** *Building codes still allow continuous stairs without breaks or landings make it difficult for users to rest or regain stability, leading to increased strain and fatigue.*	 **LONG RAMPS** *Cane users depend on upper-body strength and precise footing for stability. A long ramp increases strain causing faster fatigue and difficult pauses without resting points.*	 **CARRYING HEAVY LOADS** *Without trolleys or carts, elderly shoppers must rely on porters (Mai Barrow), which is inconvenient in narrow, crowded pathways.*	 **ACOUSTICS** *People experience varying levels of hearing and may use assistive devices. To reduce discomfort from reverberation, spaces can be designed to reduce reflected sound.*
NEGOTIATING OBSTACLES	 **GROUND HAZARDS** *Open drainage channels and makeshift ramps (designed specifically for able-bodied wheelbarrow users) make cane navigation unreliable, increasing the risk of falls.*	 **HIGH CURBS** *High curbs, steps, and narrow aisles limit access, often forcing the individual to rely on a support companion or store associate.*	 **DELAYED MEDICAL ASSISTANCE** *In markets with few or obstructed exits, emergency responders may struggle to reach individuals who require immediate assistance, increasing health risks.*	 **HANGING ITEMS** *Many markets have hanging goods, low awnings, or makeshift setups. Normally, you'd use your arms to gently push things aside, but with a sling, you might struggle.*	 **REDUCED STABILITY** *Some people are constantly scanning for stable structure support while navigating uneven spaces. Absence of sturdy surfaces can make movement precarious.*	 **PROXIMITY** *While together, signers will tend to maintain wide distance for clear visual communication. This basic dimension of the space between people impacts the basic layout of building spaces.*
MAINTAINING ENERGY	 **CIRCULATION - SHADED AREAS** *Poor airflow in enclosed stalls creates disorienting heat pockets. Blind individuals may struggle to find rest stops in sheltered areas away from crowd congestion.*	 **UTILITY OUTLETS** *Insufficient utility outlets (electricity & Data) around the market. Without reliable power sources, users with motorized support devices must carefully conserve battery life.*	 **POTABLE WATER OUTLETS** *This lack of readily accessible drinking water and water for hygiene purposes can lead to challenges in maintaining health and potentially impacting the comfort of market-goers.*	 **EXHAUSTING TERRAIN NAVIGATION** *Walking with a prosthetic limb, especially on difficult terrain, requires more energy than natural gait, leading to faster fatigue.*	 **CHILD CARE** *Market sellers are often compelled to carry babies in slings or wraps while attending to customers, which puts the baby at risk in busy environments due to the seller's divided attention.*	 **CROWDED SPACES** *Crowded spaces are harder for some people to maintain personal space. More threshold spaces would provide areas for pause and help them navigate safely in busy areas.*

Fig. 3.18a
Matrix study of different visible and marginal practices within open-air market typologies (1). The vertical axis (top-down) draws on Jos Boys' categories of how bodies experience space, while the horizontal axis (left-right) outlines selected profiles.

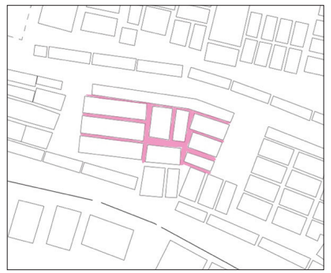
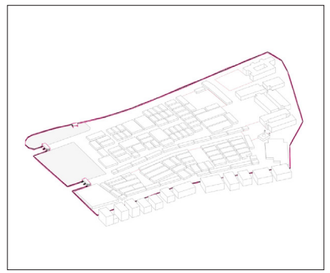
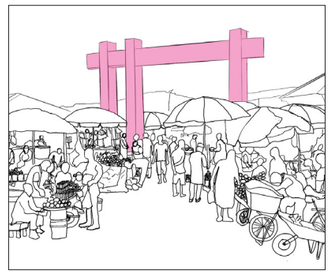
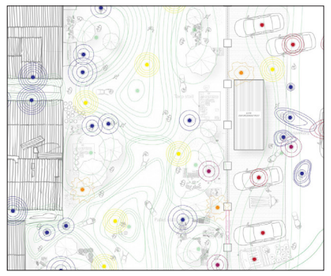
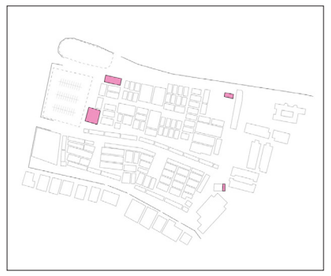
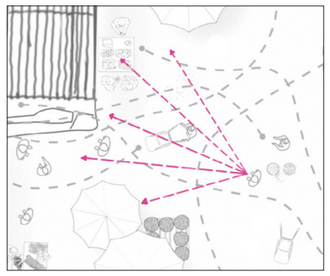
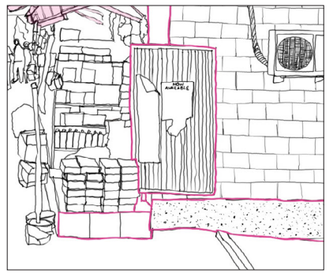
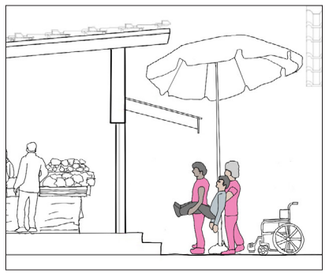
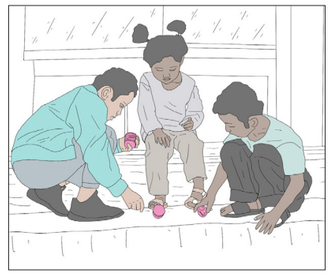
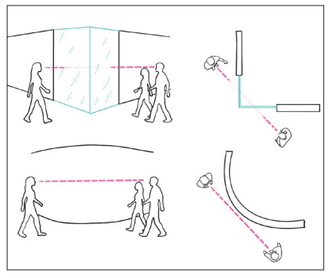
	VISUAL PERCEPTION	WHEELED MOBILITY DEVICE	CHRONIC & EMERGENCY BASED	NON-WHEEL MOBILITY DEVICE	AGE RELATED CONDITIONS	DEAF AND NONVERBAL
WAY-FINDING	 **IRREGULAR AISLE WIDTH** *Some people rely on consistent and unobstructed pathways to move safely, and irregular aisle widths can cause confusion and disorientation.*	 **MERCHANDISE CLUTTER** *Narrow passageways with a baby stroller force awkward maneuvering , increasing discomfort and potential strain on joints.*	 **MAPPING SYSTEM** *Without designated spaces for market guides or assistants, people unfamiliar with the market may struggle to locate and purchase essential items.*	 **VEHICLE HAZARD** *Vehicles infiltrating pedestrian zones pose significant dangers to people with limited hearing, forcing them to navigate narrow paths or detour to avoid potential collisions.*	 **LANDMARKS** *People with alzheimer's who have trouble reading signs or following visual cues may rely on familiar landmarks, sounds, or the help of others to find their way*	 **SIGNAGE** *Poor lighting conditions can cause eye fatigue. Color should also be used to contrast skin tone to highlight sign language and promote navigation.*
DEALING WITH SENSORY OVERLOAD	 **ECHO AND DISTORTION** *Heightened reliance on non-visual cues could become overwhelming in semi-enclosed spaces where sound reflections can make it hard to pinpoint where sounds orignate.*	 **SOCIAL ANXIETY** *Markets often lack defined buffer spaces where individuals can pause, adjust to sensory conditions, or plan their route before entering busy areas.*	 **OLFACTORY TRIGGER** *Poor air circulation in confined areas worsens discomfort and increases the risk of disorientation. Intense smells from mobile generators can cause loss of balance.*	 **LIMITED ACCESS TO CONVENIENCES** *Restrooms need to be clean and accessible. Long distance to washrooms or lack of privacy can add to discomfort when visiting these markets.*	 **SHADING SYSTEMS** *Inconsistent shading such as makeshift tarps or gaps between structures can create stark contrast between sunlight and deep shadows that can be disorienting*	 **VISUAL REACH** *Deaf individuals rely on visual and tactile cues like shadows, vibrations, and movements, which the environment can enhance for better orientation and wayfinding.*
MANAGING ENCOUNTERS	 **MATERIAL AMBIGUITY** *Textured surfaces that don't indicate wayfinding but exist as decorative elements, misleading tactile navigation and making it difficult to identify obstacles.*	 **INTERDEPENDENCY** *For many wheelchair users, access is heavily dependent on the availability and willingness of others rather than on inclusive spaces that allow a degree of independent navigation.*	 **UNWANTED ATTENTION** *Women in crowded markets often struggle to find safe, private spaces to breastfeed, facing discomfort, social stigma, when attending to their child's needs in public.*	 **REST AREAS** *Fatigue may hinder the ability to follow a planned path. Well-placed resting areas would provide opportunities for breaks, helping to manage energy and reduce strain.*	 **ENGAGEMENT / INTERACTION** *Markets can sometimes feel like adult spaces, with little for children to do besides tagging along. This can result in children feeling disengaged and bored during long shopping trips*	 **CORNERS** *Deaf people rely more on sight for awareness. Sharp or obstructed corners in markets can lead to unexpected physical encounters, as they may not hear approaching people or verbal warnings.*

Fig. 3.18b
Matrix study of different visible and marginal practices within open-air market typologies (1). The vertical axis (top-down) draws on Jos Boys' categories of how bodies experience space, while the horizontal axis (left-right) outlines selected profiles.

When applied to the market typologies examined in this thesis research, the matrix shows that barriers to access arise less from explicit design standards than from the implicit assumption of a uniform, able body and mind oriented solely toward commerce. Making such marketspaces inclusive therefore requires engaging with the lived realities of non-normative bodies and minds, as well as the social support systems that shape their experiences.

Findings from the matrix highlight the need for an approach to planning that foregrounds embodied difference and contextual supports rather than defaulting to abstract standards. In this light, markets are not zones to be “formalized” or cleared but civic spaces where accessibility is negotiated through social relations as much as regulatory frameworks. Addressing accessibility thus means not only rethinking design assumptions but also strengthening the practices already embedded in informal systems. Recognizing the knowledge carried in everyday market routines and supporting them with targeted upgrades that enhance rather than erase their character, allows markets to evolve without losing their social function. Retracing experiences from open-air markets shows that accessibility is not a fixed outcome but an ongoing practice of adaptation and shared responsibility. These spaces already demonstrate resilience, and with strategic programming and infrastructural support, they hold significant potential for advancing spatial justice in a grounded, contextually responsive way.

relational access

access without erasure

04 | Relational Access

The Jos Main Terminal Market

Building on these insights, this chapter extends the argument into practice by situating disability inclusion not within institutional systems but within civic spaces that hold particular significance for vulnerable groups in the Global South. It focuses specifically on open-air marketspaces such as Jos Main Terminus Market and outlines a design intervention that tests relational access as a framework for more equitable participation.

geographical setting

Jos, the capital of Plateau State, lies on Nigeria's central plateau at an altitude of over 1,000 meters above sea level. This location gives it a relatively temperate climate, with average monthly temperatures ranging from 21°C to 25°C. The city occupies a key position in Nigeria's North Central zone, acting as a transit point between the predominantly Muslim North and Christian South. Historically, this centrality has made Jos a site of convergence for diverse ethnic groups, migrants, and traders. The Jos metropolitan area consists of Jos North and Jos South Local Government Areas, and has expanded into Bassa and Jos East LGAs. Jos Main Market, also known as Terminus Market, is located at the commercial heart of the city in Jos North, within the central area bounded by Dodo Street, Challenge Bookshop, Constitution Hill, and Bauchi Road. This location was historically chosen for its accessibility and proximity to major transport corridors, including the railway terminus.[80]

tin mining

Jos was originally established in 1915 as a tin transportation camp during British colonial rule. The city's early growth was tied to tin mining and administration, leading to a steady influx of migrants from different parts of Nigeria. Over time, Jos

80 Japheth Musa and John Dung-Gwom, "Analysis of Land Use Changes in the Central Area of Jos Town, Nigeria," ResearchGate 14, no. 12 (2020): 11–12, https://doi.org/10.9790/2402-1412021123.



Fig. 4.1
Mining site in Jos, Plateau State (Nigeria). Founded in 1915 as a tin transport camp, Jos grew into an industrious city whose Main Market remains its economic hub, though now strained by congestion and weak planning enforcement.

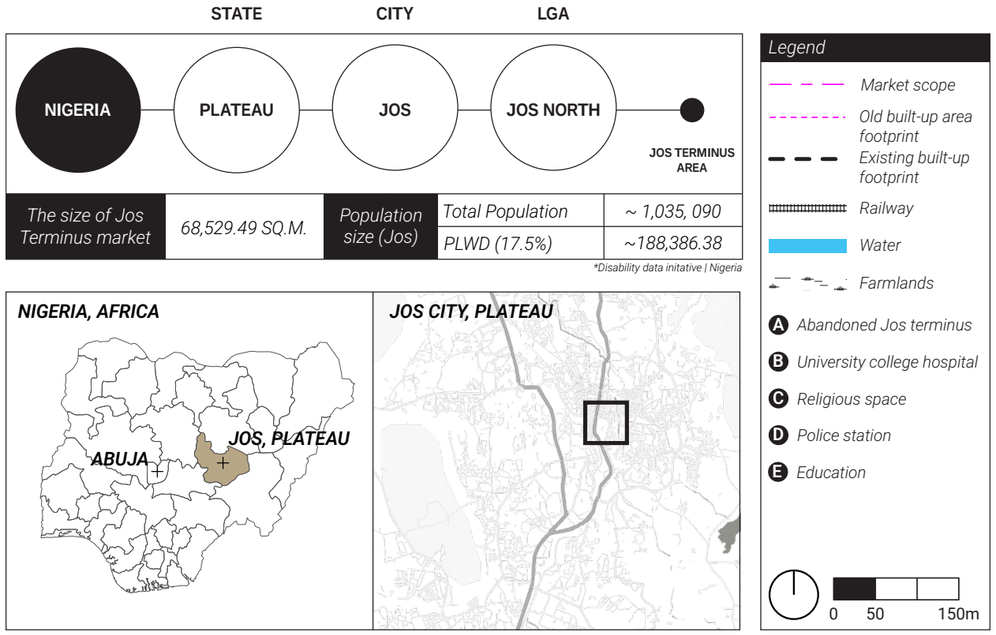
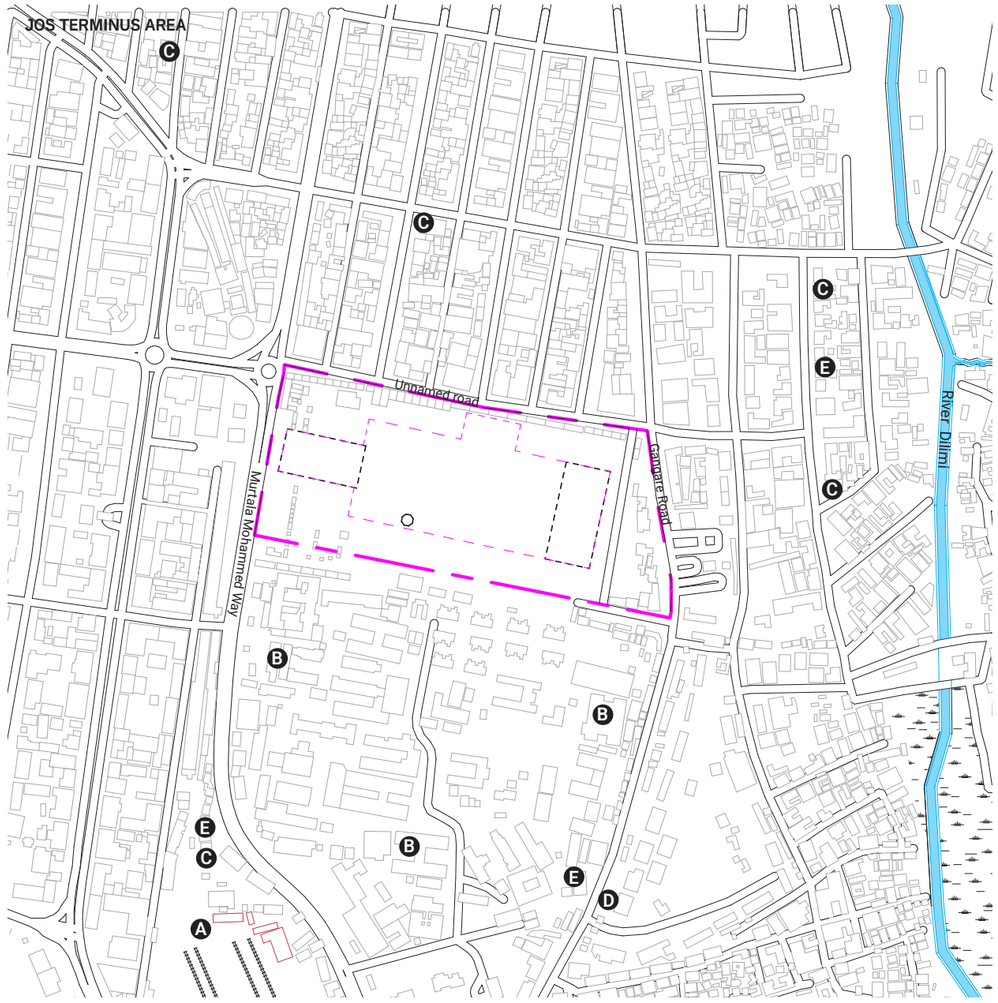


Fig. 4.2
Geographical location of Jos main market (Terminus market) and important points around the site

transformed into a major urban center with diverse functions such as administrative, educational, and commercial, serving not only Plateau State but the surrounding northern regions. The central area of Jos, including the Main Market, remains the nucleus of economic activity. It houses not only markets but also banks, shops, political offices, and recreational centers. However, due to uncoordinated urban growth and weak enforcement of planning regulations, this area has become congested, with increasing pressure on land use and services.[81]

81 Musa and Dung-Gwom, "Analysis of Land Use Changes in the Central Area of Jos Town, Nigeria," 11–13.



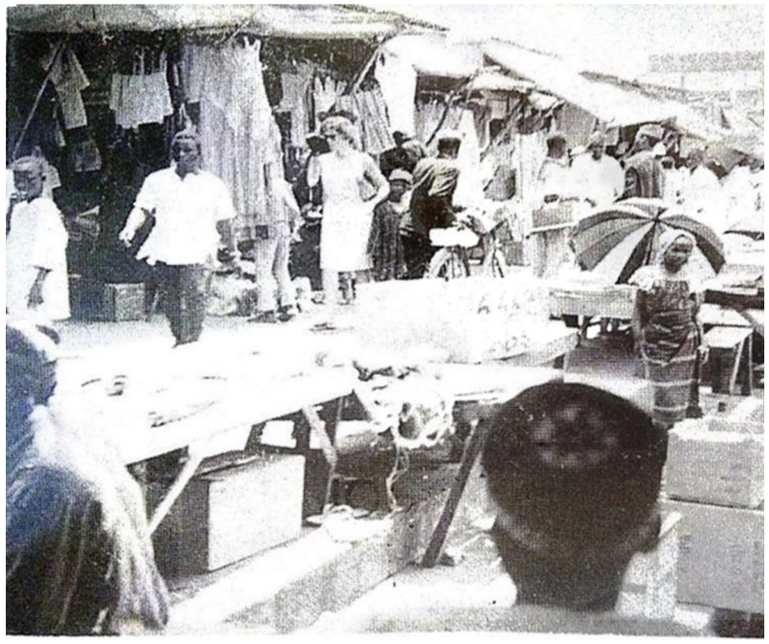


Fig. 4.3
Jos Main Market, early 20th century. Emerging from colonial mining settlements, the market became a central hub where diverse ethnic groups such as migrants, clerks, traders, and local communities interacted, shaping the city's economic and social life.

colonial industrialism

The Jos Main Market grew from the spatial logic of colonial industrialism and post-independence urban planning. British colonialists established Jos as a tin transport and administrative hub during the early part of the 20th century. The ensuing mining boom drew thousands of Hausa-Fulani laborers, Igbo and Yoruba clerks and traders, and local Plateau ethnic groups such as the Berom, Afizere, and Anaguta. Urban planning followed racial and ethnic lines: Europeans were housed in Government Reserved Areas (GRAs); Southern Nigerians settled in township clusters; and Northern Hausa migrants dominated the "native" quarters. Markets first emerged informally in mining settlements, military barracks, and along transit routes. These early markets were makeshift but vital, facilitating interdependence between colonial



Fig. 4.4
Jos Main Market, Plateau State (Nigeria). Built and commissioned in the 1970s–80s, it was envisioned as a model of commercial infrastructure until its decline following the 2002 fire.

emergence of the built marketspace

administrators, tin miners, and indigenous farmers.[82] In the 1970s, the government of Plateau State, under Police Commissioner Joseph Gomwalk, initiated a plan to centralize Jos's dispersed and informal market activities. Construction of the Jos Main Market began in 1975 and was completed in 1985. It was commissioned by then Head of State General Muhammadu Buhari and the new market was designed to be a model for commercial infrastructure in West Africa designed to

82 Mohammed Barira, "Markets and Social Conflicts on the Jos Plateau, 1945–2011" (University of Johannesburg, 2018), 78–83, https://ujcontent.uj.ac.za/esploro/outputs/doctoral/Markets-and-social-conflicts-on-the/9910316807691.

accommodate over 3,500 traders, with dedicated spaces for other administrative services.[83] This spatial consolidation was intended to modernize trade and improve economic regulation in the capital. The market quickly became the primary hub for Plateau State's retail economy.

The Jos main market - spatial practices

Ethnic diversity was a defining feature of the market from its inception. Traders from various ethnic and religious backgrounds operated side by side, engaging in daily transactions and cooperative practices. Market associations regulated behavior, prices, and tenancy arrangements, contributing to relatively peaceful inter-group relations. Hausa and Igbo traders, for example, shared stalls and learned one another's languages to facilitate business.[84] Beyond commercial exchange, the market functioned as a space of mutual support and everyday governance. Women-led associations provided micro-loans, informal savings groups (esusu), and mutual aid to members. Vulnerable populations, including the elderly, disabled people, and economically disenfranchised found support through informal networks. These practices exemplified a grassroots system of care and economic inclusion, particularly important in the absence of comprehensive social welfare programs.

political unrest and regional instability

However, the market's symbolic centrality also made it vulnerable to political unrest and targeted violence. In 2002, a massive fire destroyed the market. Investigations found evidence of planted tyres, suggesting arson, though no arrests were made.[85] The incident was widely perceived as politically motivated and coincided with heightened ethnic and religious tensions in the city. The destruction affected thousands of traders, many of whom lost their livelihoods. Among those most affected by the violence were informal vendors, beggars, and marginalized groups

83 Dele John Olu et al., "MARKET TRADERS AND INTER-GROUP RELATIONS IN JOS MAIN MARKET, 1975-2023," Wukari International Studies Journal 7, no. 3 (2023): 71–72, 3.

84 Olu et al., "MARKET TRADERS AND INTER-GROUP RELATIONS IN JOS MAIN MARKET, 1975-2023," 74–77.

85 Barira, "Markets and Social Conflicts on the Jos Plateau, 1945–2011," 145–47.



Fig. 4.5
Jos Main Market, Plateau State (Nigeria). After the attack on the site, large portions were destroyed and left unrepaired. With government inaction, the site became a refuse dump, while displaced traders expanded into surrounding streets, intensifying congestion.

who lacked official stall allocations and were therefore excluded from compensation or resettlement plans.[86] As government promises to rebuild the market stalled, these groups reoccupied the ruins and began constructing makeshift kiosks using repurposed/found-objects such as wood, zinc sheets, and plastic tarpaulins, etc. This post-destruction phase marked a transformation in the market's spatial character. The formal, regulated structure gave way to an improvised open-air market defined by density, mobility, and informality. Umbrella-covered stalls, wheelbarrows, and

86 Barira, "Markets and Social Conflicts on the Jos Plateau, 1945–2011," 150.

Fig 4.6 Available google satellite images from 2001 (pre-fire) to 2025 trace the changing condition of Jos Main Market, revealing how people persist in inhabiting and using the site despite cycles of neglect, government attempts to disrupt existing networks, and abandoned reconstruction plans for shopping arcades.



Fig. 4.7
Jos Main Market, Plateau State (Nigeria). A 2025 aerial view of the site in ongoing disrepair and decline. Despite the absence of government intervention, social and economic spatial practices continue to persist within the ruins.

pedestrian congestion became its dominant features.[87] Despite infrastructural collapse, the market's social and economic life persisted, driven by necessity and self-organization.

the aftermath

Informal rebuilding efforts reflected a form of spatial resistance and collective care. Traders created their own allocation systems, prioritized access for displaced colleagues, and established security groups to protect the area. In the absence of state intervention, care for vulnerable populations maintained through peer support. However, the market also became a flashpoint for political contestation. Disputes emerged over stall allocations, access roads, and ethnic representation within market leadership. Hausa traders expressed concern over marginalization, while indigenous Plateau groups argued for greater control over local economic infrastructure.[88] These tensions were heightened during subsequent citywide crises, particularly in 2008 and 2010, when several markets, including Bukuru (Plateau, Nigeria) were destroyed under suspicious circumstances.[89]

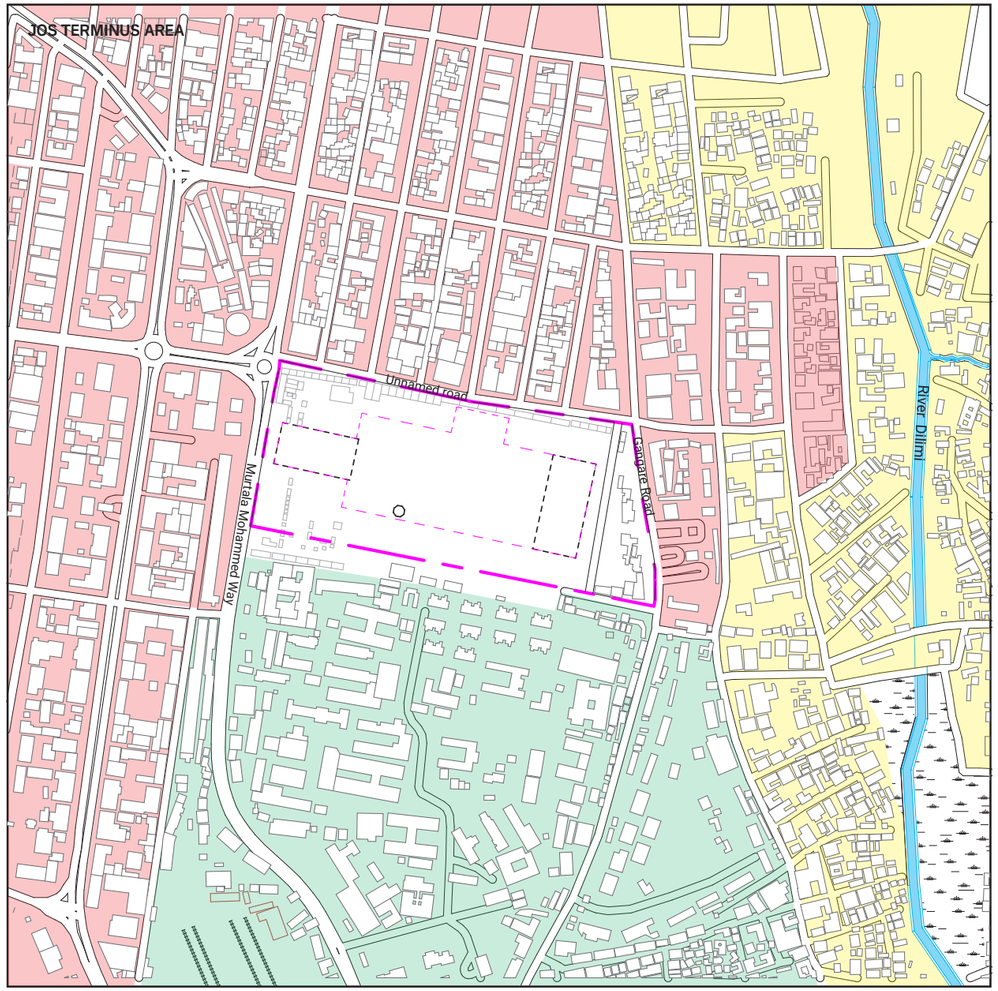
land-use rapid change

From a spatial planning perspective, the post-2002 period saw significant shifts in land use patterns around the market. Between 2005 and 2014, commercial land use in Jos central area increased from 34.4% to 38.2%. This growth was driven largely by informal expansions in and around the market ruins. Residential and recreational spaces declined during the same period, indicating a commercial densification of the urban core.[90]

These changes occurred in the absence of coordinated urban policy and were instead guided by everyday spatial negotiations among traders, transporters, and

87 Olu et al., "MARKET TRADERS AND INTER-GROUP RELATIONS IN JOS MAIN MARKET, 1975-2023," 72–73.
88 Barira, "Markets and Social Conflicts on the Jos Plateau, 1945–2011," 218–23.
89 Barira, "Markets and Social Conflicts on the Jos Plateau, 1945–2011," 148.
90 Musa and Dung-Gwom, "Analysis of Land Use Changes in the Central Area of Jos Town, Nigeria," 13–14.

Fig 4.8 Jos main market. Current land-use zoning around the market area (2025).





Public transport terminal at the front of the Jos Main Market site. Serving as a key entry point, it connects surrounding communities with the city center, enabling the movement of people, goods, and economic activities into the urban core.



Economic and religious activities continue beneath the remnants of the market structure, amid neglect.



View of the market from across the road, beneath the pedestrian bridge that connects both sides of the site.



Food stall beneath the charred stairwell, a reminder of the site's collapse and continued human presence



Remnant tower structure from the main market complex built in the 1980s.



Aerial view of ongoing commercial activity within the ruins of Jos Main Market, where traders adapt the space despite disrepair.



Improvised stalls built with corrugated metal sheets and wood within the ruins of Jos Main Market



Abandoned stalls and service structures around the site, many of which have turned into refuse dumps or shelters for criminal groups at night.



Police presence and enforcement within the market space.



Street-level view of vendors and resting areas around the market, where displaced activities spill into surrounding roads.



Fig. 4.9
Image on the left is a collage depicting different spatial practices unfolding within and around the Jos Main Market, Plateau State (Nigeria)

market associations. Relocation attempts by the government to Bukuru and Farin Gada satellite markets were largely resisted. Traders cited lower customer traffic, weak infrastructure, and the loss of established social networks as key reasons for staying in the area.[91] Despite the historical significance of Jos Main Market and its former status as one of Nigeria's premier trading complexes, renewed efforts at reconstruction have generated mixed reactions. Given the market's former contribution to state revenue and its prominence on national and regional commercial maps, expectations were high that Plateau State would prioritize its restoration. However, successive administrations have consistently failed to deliver on these promises, and more than a decade after the 2002 fire, the site remains largely undeveloped. In the absence of much needed infrastructure, traders returned to the ruins, building makeshift kiosks and expanding into surrounding streets, creating congestion and safety hazards.[92] For many people, the market was not just a site of economic activity but of cultural memory, social recognition, and territorial belonging.

91 Barira, "Markets and Social Conflicts on the Jos Plateau, 1945–2011," 176.
92 Seriki Adinoyi, "Once a Jewel, Now in Ruins," THISDAYLIVE, December 11, 2017, https://www.thisdaylive.com/2017/12/12/once-a-jewel-now-in-ruins/.

Conceptual Framework

Disability, as Jasbir Puar argues is not a fixed or stable identity but rather one pole in a shifting assemblage alongside “capacity” and “debility.” This understanding offers critical potential for design: rather than addressing disability as a singular deficit to be corrected, it can be engaged as a generative condition that reveals how bodies interact with environments under uneven conditions of risk, care, and access. In design terms, this means recognizing that user needs are not static but fluctuating and overlapping, often shaped by political, infrastructural, and environmental precarity. Designing with this framework reorients access away from just compliance towards spatial justice responding not only to what bodies lack, but what these market spaces offer, limit, or enable.[93]

This project approaches infrastructure not as a neutral technical layer, but as a condition that enables, access and economic activity. The informal market is understood here as more than a site of transaction; it is a dynamic social environment shaped by interdependence, uneven rhythms of work and rest, and the daily negotiation of space and survival. Within this context, a central support channel (the spine) has been introduced, embedding key programs that sustain the social and economic practices typically unfolding around the marketspace.

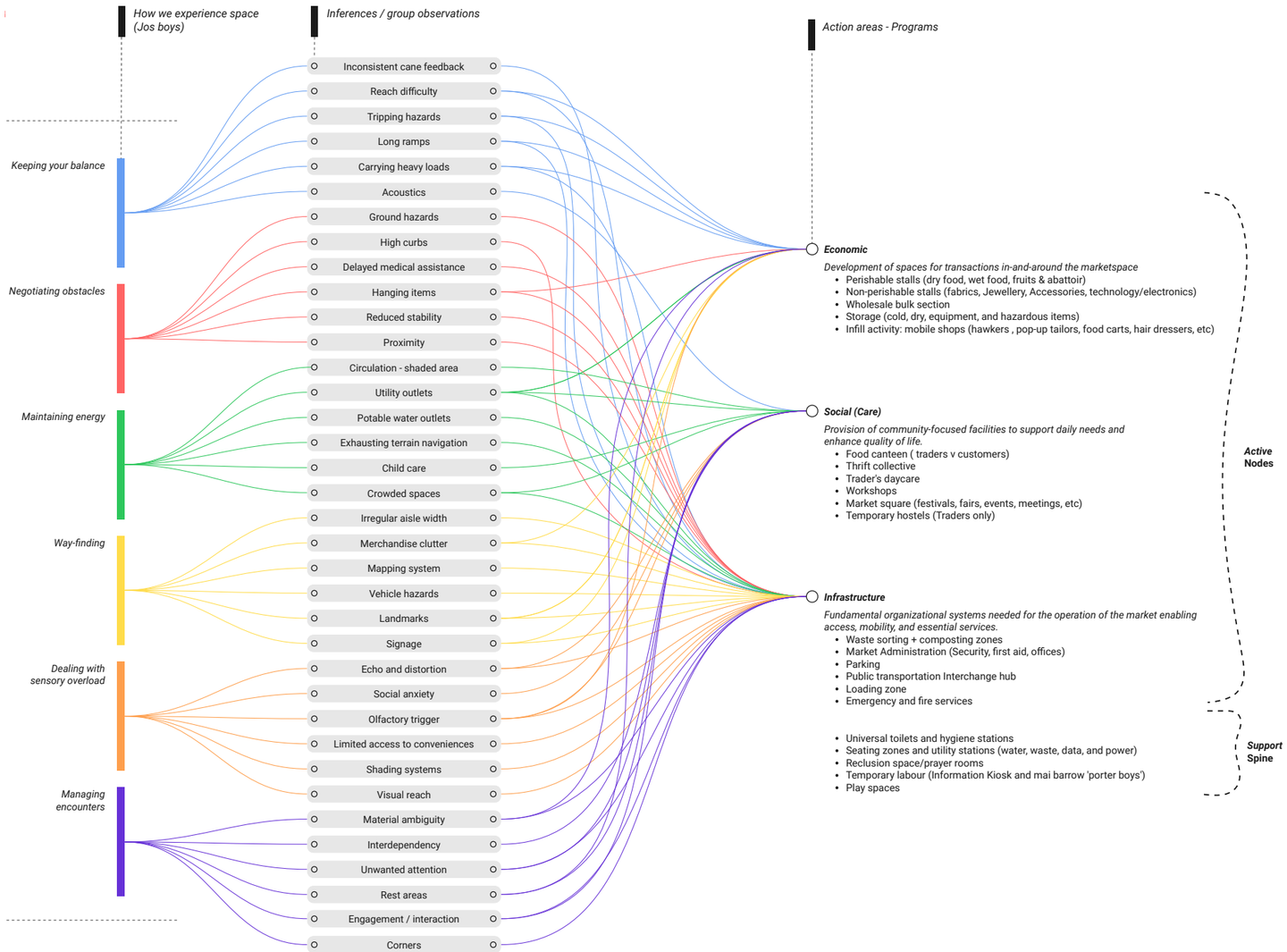
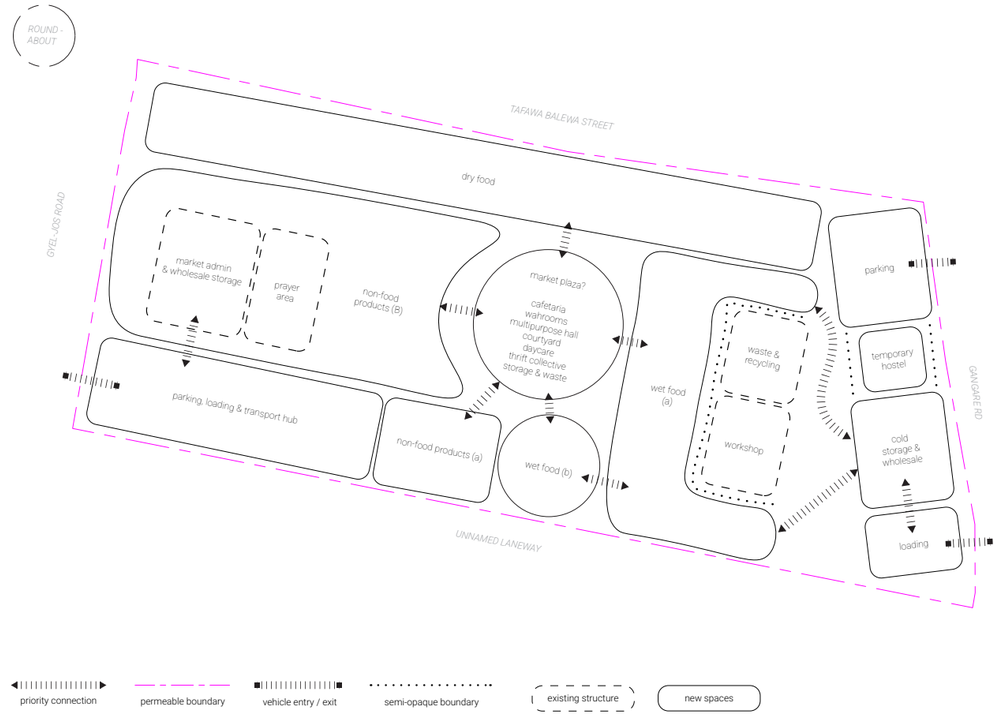


Fig. 4.10
User needs as a generative driver for program design, developed from inferences drawn from the matrix in earlier sections.

93 Jasbir K. Puar, The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability (Duke University Press, 2017), xiv–xv.

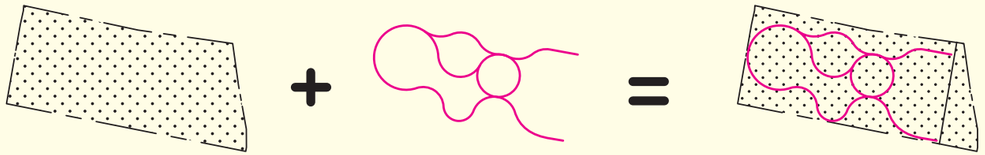


Fig. 4.11 Jos Main Market. Illustration showing the current physical state of the site, with annotations of road types and areas of high traffic concentration.



In approaching the site, attention was given to existing conditions; looking at how traffic flows in and out of the market, where entrances and paths naturally converge, and which built elements could be retained to anchor continuity. This reading of movement and structure informed the placement of programs and interventions, ensuring that new layers of design respond to rather than erase established practices.One of the ways I have envisioned the role of infrastructure in this project is to position the core of this system as a thread (the spine), that links the market to the larger urban fabric while supporting the internal rhythms, patterns of movement, and spatial relationships within the site.

Fig. 4.12
Early schematic program mapping key functions. This diagram illustrates how spatial organization begins to shape the framework for an infrastructural network across the market.



market elements *Support spine*

navigation

visibility

connectivity

Rather than dictating how movement should occur, the spine works as a co-navigator, encouraging visitors to interact with the people, surfaces, and conditions that make up the market. The spine is shaped to loop in ways that increase visibility, opening up as many vendor fronts as possible and reducing hidden corners to encourage participation. It ties together all parts of the market, allowing goods, people, and information to move easily from one area to another. Along its length, the spine is supported by nodes located within and around the density of stalls. These nodes provide spaces for pause, care, logistics, and mobile economic practices, treating productivity and rest as interdependent rather than separate goals.

utility distribution

The spine also acts as a service corridor, carrying electricity, water, waste channels, and shading so that all areas remain functional and comfortable. Its path responds to the natural activity patterns of the market, bending toward busier areas and narrowing in quieter spots to reflect changing levels of intensity. Support programs, such as prayer or reclusion rooms, caregiving spaces, sanitation blocks and points for assistance, are located along the route so that care is part of the everyday functioning of the market. At its edges, the spine reaches out toward busy surrounding streets to connect with fringe stalls and pedestrian flows. This helps to spread access points more evenly and reduce congestion in any single part of the market. Through a responsive infrastructure, the design aims to sustain participation for a wide range of people and needs, positioning the marketspace not only as a site of movement and visibility but as an active space of mutual support and social exchange.[94]

programs

edge engagement

94 Boys, Disability, Space, Architecture, 2–3.

Fig 4.13 Illustration of the conceptual framework guiding the proposed design intervention.

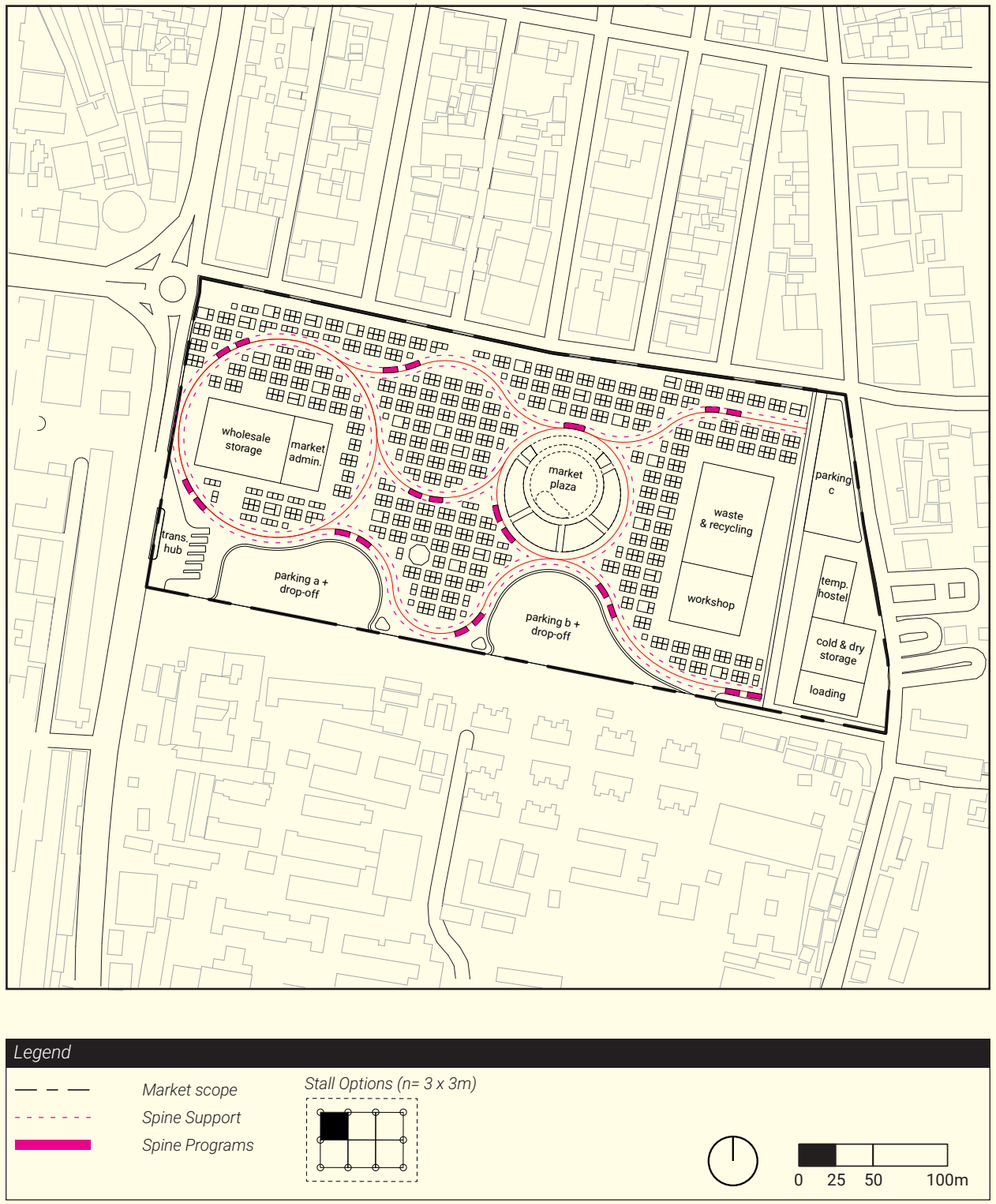
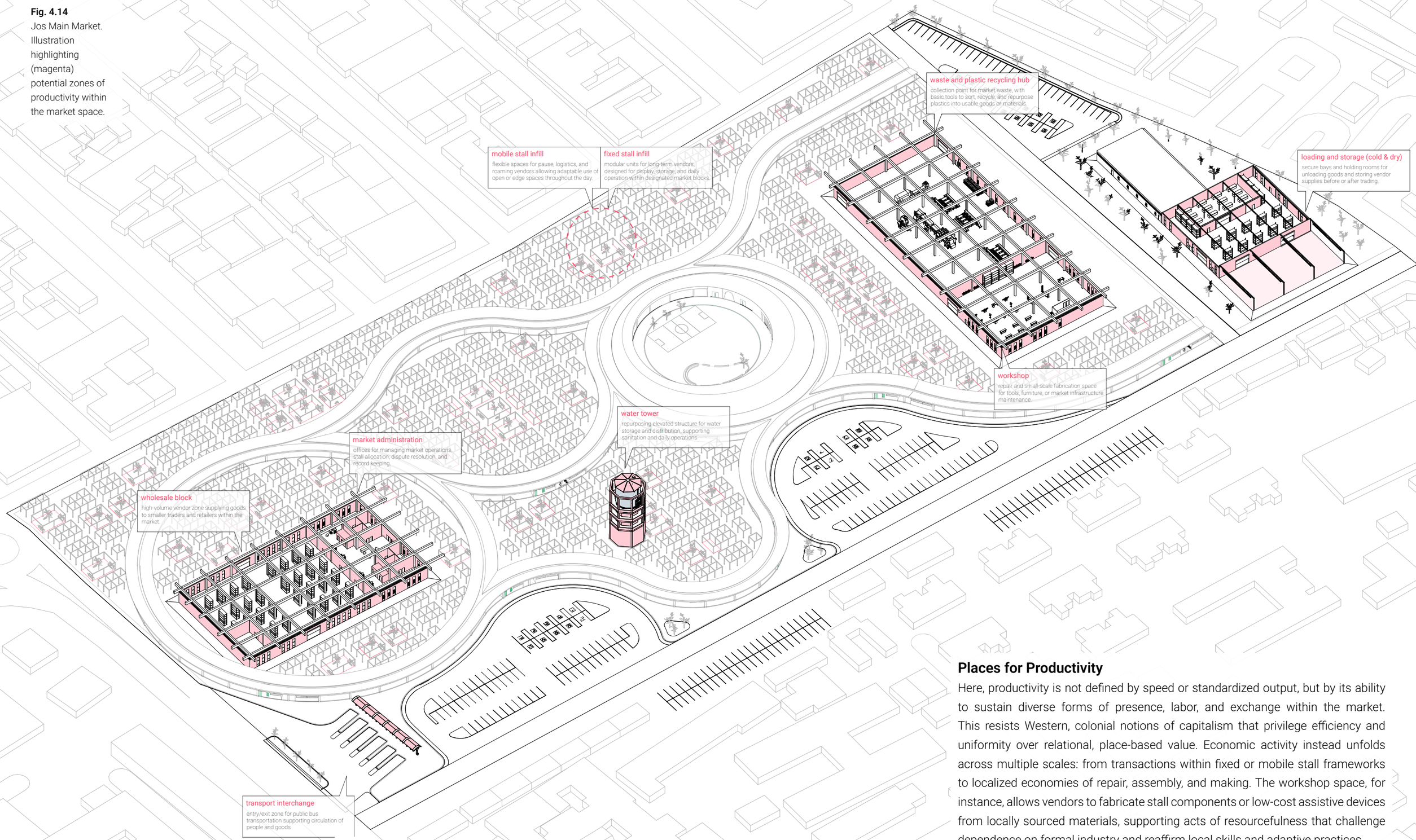


Fig. 4.14
Jos Main Market. Illustration highlighting (magenta) potential zones of productivity within the market space.



Places for Productivity

Here, productivity is not defined by speed or standardized output, but by its ability to sustain diverse forms of presence, labor, and exchange within the market. This resists Western, colonial notions of capitalism that privilege efficiency and uniformity over relational, place-based value. Economic activity instead unfolds across multiple scales: from transactions within fixed or mobile stall frameworks to localized economies of repair, assembly, and making. The workshop space, for instance, allows vendors to fabricate stall components or low-cost assistive devices from locally sourced materials, supporting acts of resourcefulness that challenge dependence on formal industry and reaffirm local skills and adaptive practices.



Fig. 4.15
Jos Main Market – Workshop intervention. Illustration showing how the workshop space can repurpose reusable materials such as plastics, while also supporting the fabrication of stall parts and assistive devices from local resources, fostering practical solutions rooted in shared skills and community participation.

circular systems

To support the broader functioning of the market, additional spaces dedicated to market administration, loading bays, dry and cold storage, a wholesale distribution block, and small-scale facilities for processing organic waste and recycling plastics into reusable goods. These elements form an infrastructural backbone that prioritizes circular systems over extractive ones.

transportation and utilities

A key threshold into the market is the transport interchange, which is a dedicated area where public buses and shared vehicles can drop off and receive passengers. This zone includes slightly elevated platforms for level boarding, improving access for people with mobility devices or carts. Shaded structures with integrated seating provide shelter from sun and rain, creating a moment of pause and orientation before entering the main market flow. Above, the spine's inverted roof is designed to channel rainwater inward, efficiently directing it into ground-level tanks and toward a water tower repurposed from an existing on-site structure. Altogether, this assemblage supports both human and ecological systems, actively participating in cycles of resource care and reuse.

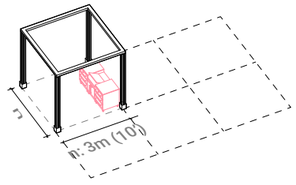
water distribution

Stall framework: Extending the market stall typology to other sites

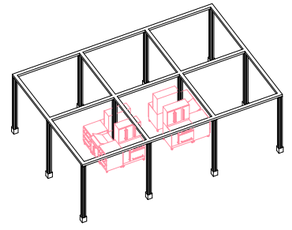
This system is designed to support multiple modes of commerce within the market, accommodating both fixed and mobile forms of trading. Each stall is composed of four metal sections anchored to a pre-cast concrete block, with a central PVC pipe that houses electrical and data connections. This assembly can be configured in two primary ways: as a fixed infill unit or as an open-format layout.

layouts for exchange

Along the metal sections are pre-drilled openings designed to receive adjustable "knobs," enabling traders to customize their setups. These can be used to hang signage, install shelves, define spatial boundaries, or adapt the stall to specific needs over time. The "anchor-exchange" layout, features a series of columns are arranged in a grid with a central storage unit that allows traders to temporarily store their equipment or goods and easily set up each day. The "mobile-exchange" layout provides greater spatial flexibility, supporting various uses such as informal pauses, temporary logistics stations, or roaming vendors who require open space to display their products. Altogether, the framework promotes adaptability, enabling traders to shape their environment according to shifting rhythms of work, display, and interaction.

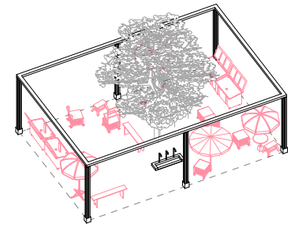


n_1 single unit



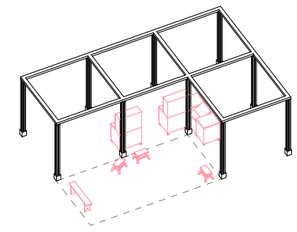
A_6 anchored exchange

For livelihoods requiring a fixed location, these arrangements provide electricity, data, and infrastructure for both trade and rest, serving market traders who depend on stable utilities and a recognizable presence.

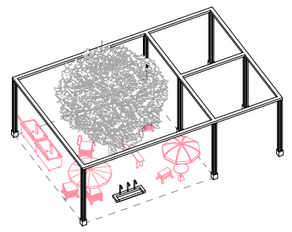


M_6 mobile exchange

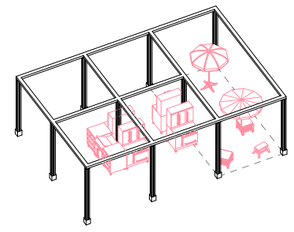
This layout supports mobile and transitory exchange by providing a space for unpacking/disposing goods, and easing congestion in dense areas. It can also host temporary gatherings (e.g. morning prayer) and provide visibility for solicitors and vulnerable groups during peak hours.



AM_5 anchor + mobile

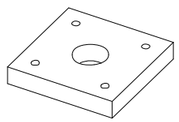


AM_3 anchor + mobile



AM_5 anchor + mobile

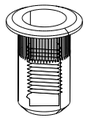
Fig 4.16 Exploring frameworks of exchange and the diverse ways they unfold to align with practices in the market space.



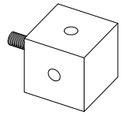
top and bottom cap (150 x 150mm)



drop-in anchor (M10)



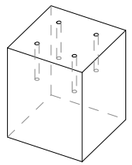
threaded rivet insert (M10)



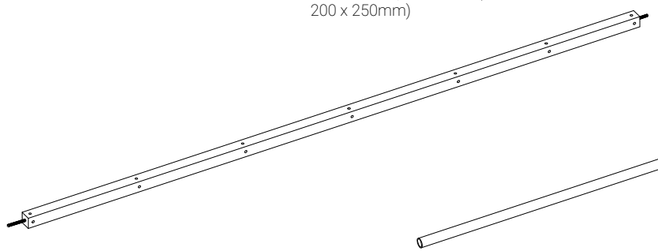
roam knob (M10)



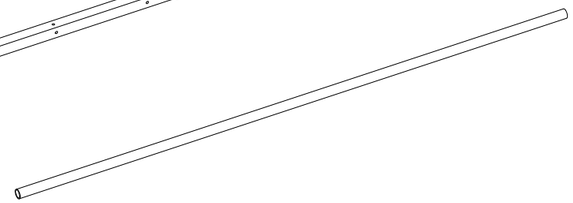
4-way gang extension box + data



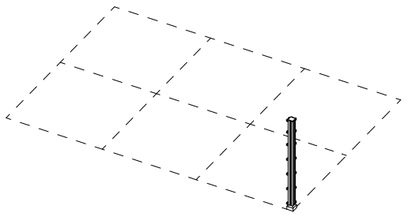
precast concrete with pre-drilled holes for drop-in anchor (200 x 200 x 250mm)



steel section with predrilled holes (50 x 50mm x 3m)



pvc pipe sections for cables (45mm dia.)



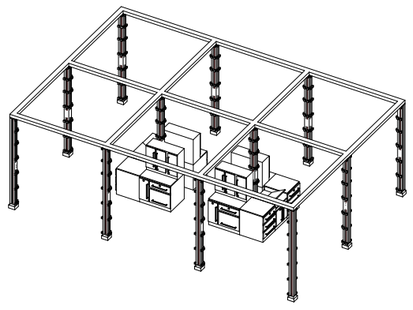
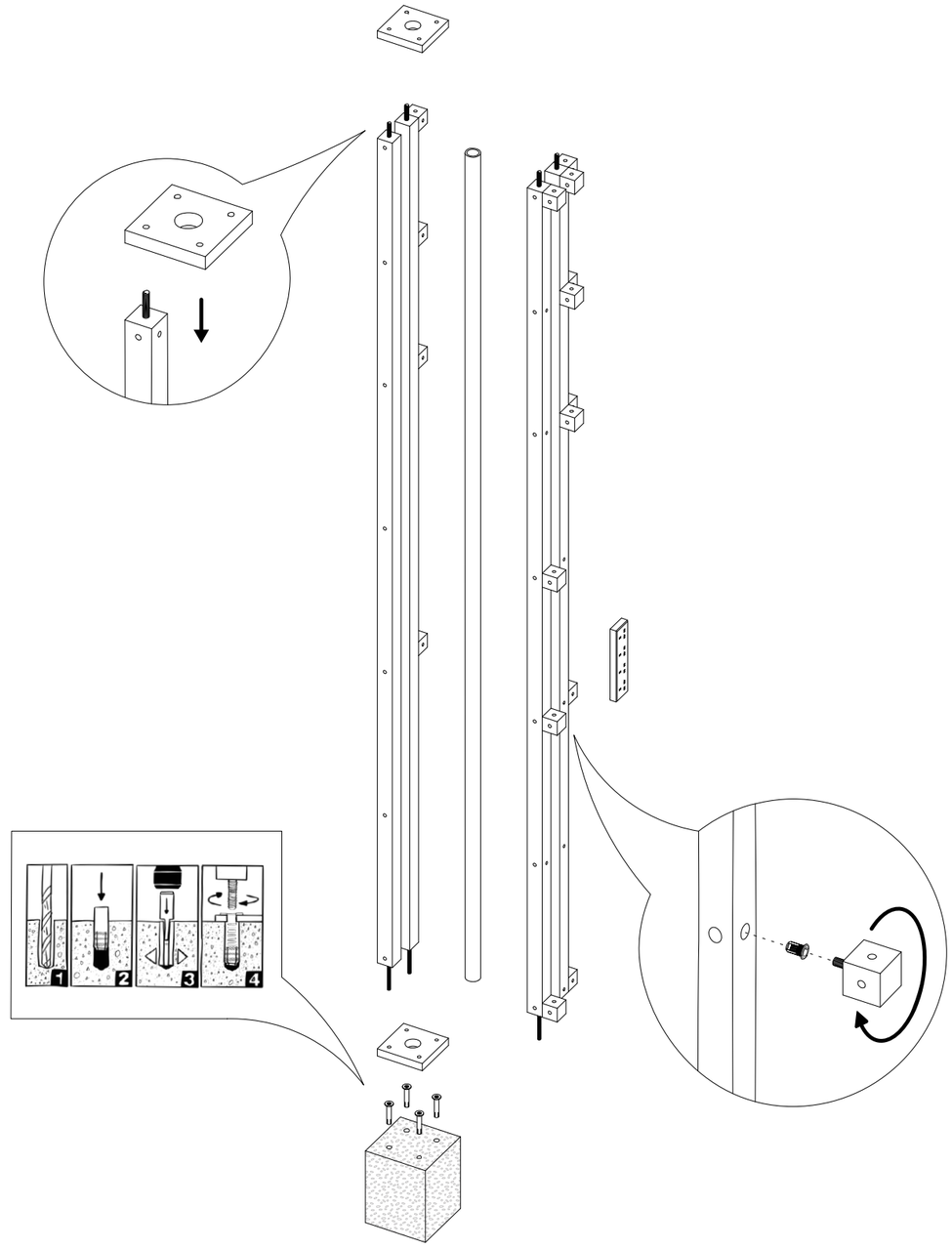


Fig 4.17 Stall system for fixed or mobile activities. Each unit anchors four steel sections to a precast concrete base, with a central PVC pipe for electrical and data connections. Pre-drilled openings accept “roam knobs” for attaching hanging items, sheathing, signage, or extensions, allowing flexible configurations and easy assembly.



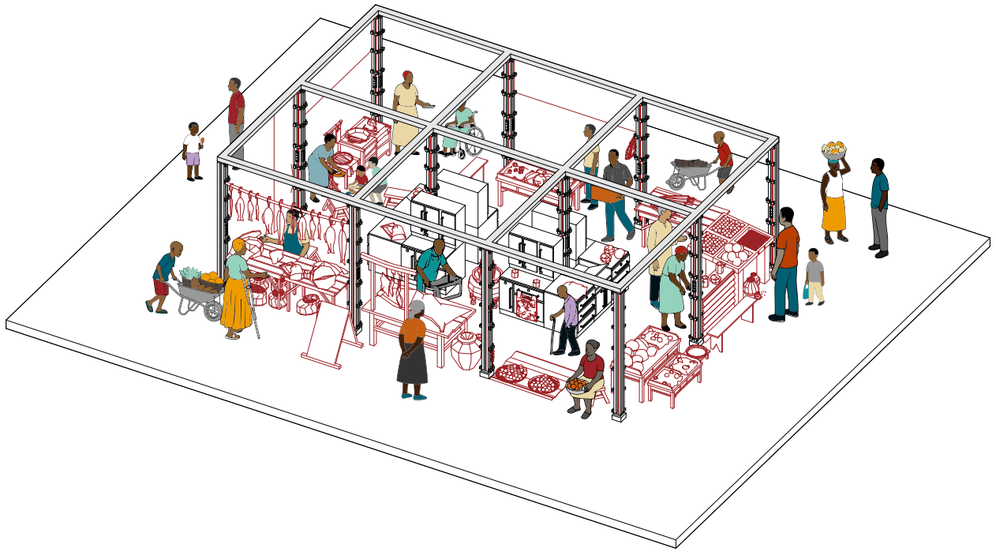


Fig. 4.18 Illustration of the stall system within the market. The black lines represent the stall framework, while maroon-red elements indicate user-driven infill, showing how traders adapt and customize the structure for different activities.

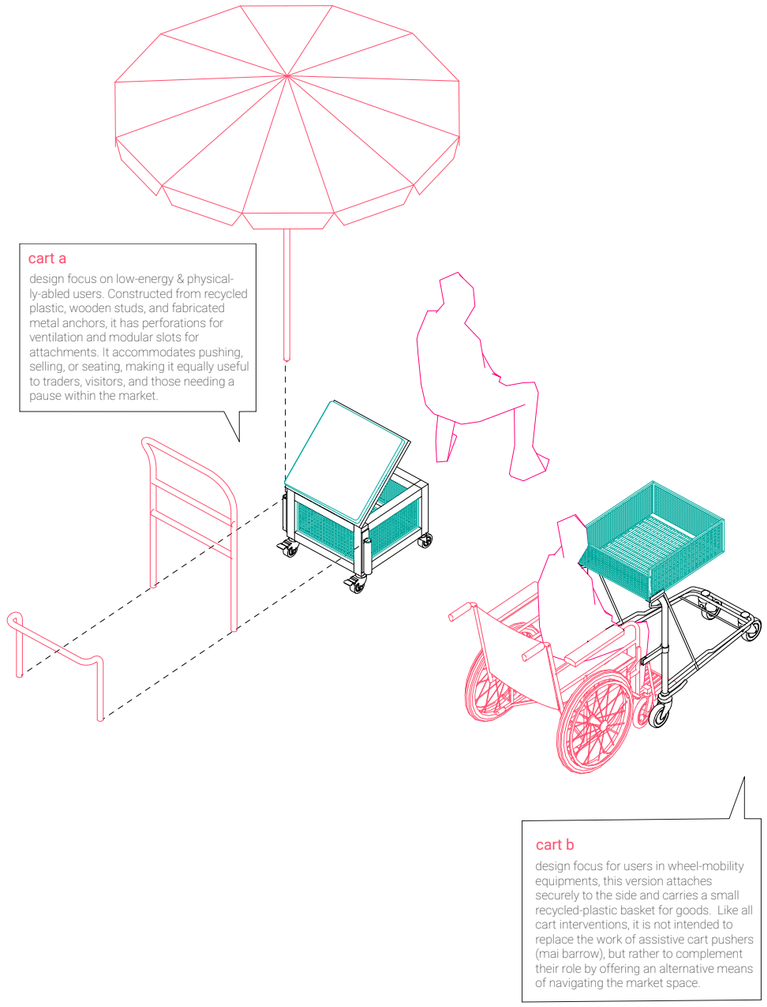
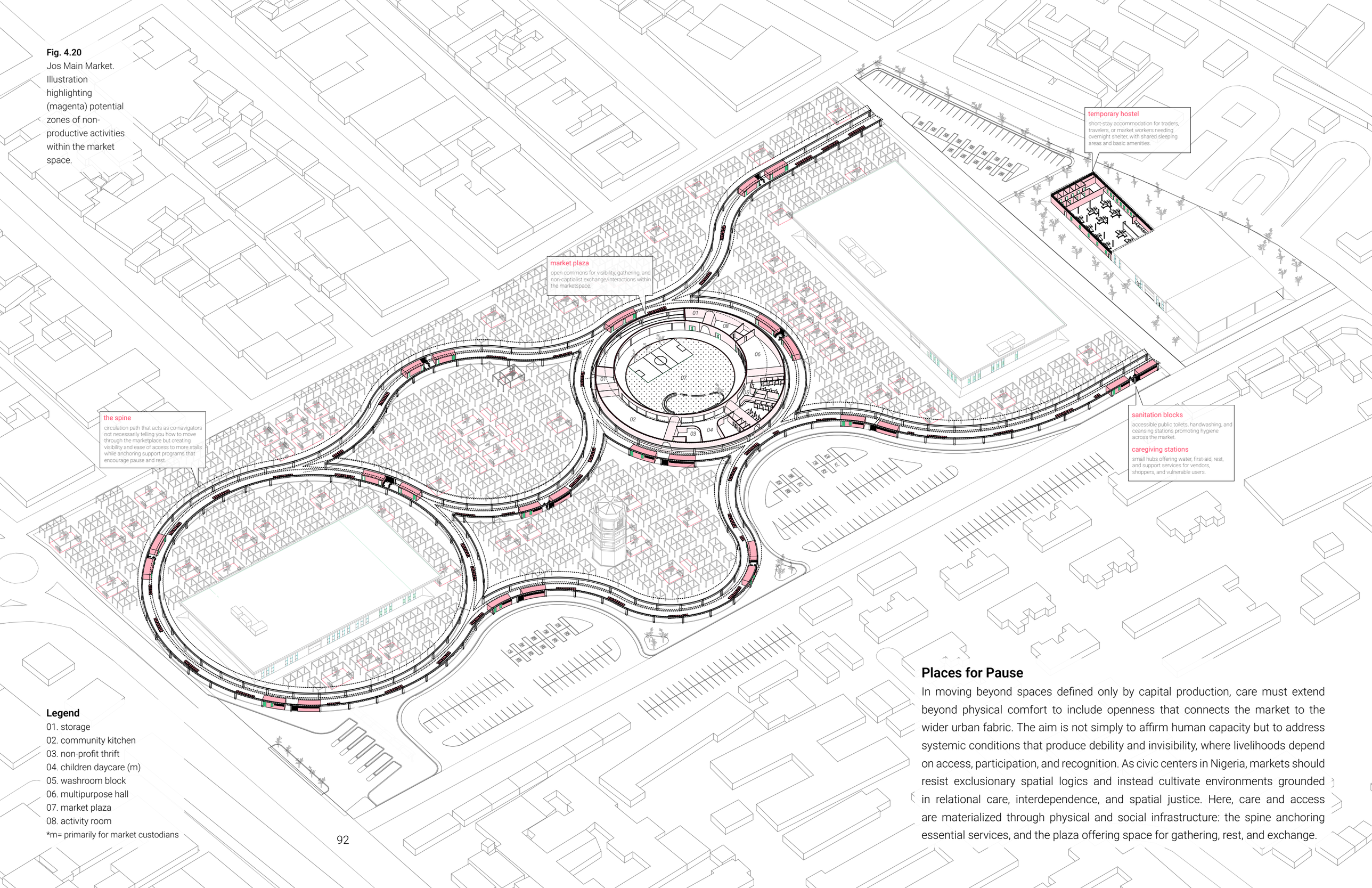


Fig. 4.19
Proposed mobile seating-storage unit for markets, built from lightweight recycled plastic. It complements existing load-carrier systems (mai-barrow), offering rest, storage, and adaptability within the fluid dynamics of market life.

body-scale interventions

While an established economy of load carriers (mai-barrow/Kaya-Kaya) already facilitates the movement of goods, this additional intervention proposes a mobile seating-storage unit that can be easily repositioned throughout the market. Constructed from lightweight, molded plastic, ideally using recycled materials, these modular structures allow vendors and visitors to install parasols or attach backrests, offering flexible moments of comfort and relief. Designed to align with the fluid dynamics of market life, they support both rest and utility within the ever-shifting landscape of trade.

Fig. 4.20
Jos Main Market. Illustration highlighting (magenta) potential zones of non-productive activities within the market space.



Legend
01. storage
02. community kitchen
03. non-profit thrift
04. children daycare (m)
05. washroom block
06. multipurpose hall
07. market plaza
08. activity room
*m= primarily for market custodians

Places for Pause

In moving beyond spaces defined only by capital production, care must extend beyond physical comfort to include openness that connects the market to the wider urban fabric. The aim is not simply to affirm human capacity but to address systemic conditions that produce debility and invisibility, where livelihoods depend on access, participation, and recognition. As civic centers in Nigeria, markets should resist exclusionary spatial logics and instead cultivate environments grounded in relational care, interdependence, and spatial justice. Here, care and access are materialized through physical and social infrastructure: the spine anchoring essential services, and the plaza offering space for gathering, rest, and exchange.

blending home and commercial typologies

Building on this framework, the design also recognizes that markets support more than commerce; they often provide forms of shelter and continuity for those who rely on them. At the eastern edge of the site, a short-stay hostel offers transitional accommodation for traders unable to afford transport home. Together with other spatial supports, this intervention reinforces the market as a place of dignity and belonging within everyday life.

the spine + nodes

Extending this approach inward, the spine hosts key service networks and utilities that are distributed equitably across the site. Along its path, support spaces such as rest areas, sanitation blocks, and caregiving stations act as intervals that break up the density of stalls and circulation paths. These stations are intended as reclusion spaces that can respond to different needs: prayer rooms where women can step aside in privacy, small cubicles for breastfeeding or childcare, or first aid points for minor emergencies. Sanitation blocks allow people not only to relieve themselves but also to cleanse before prayer, while water stations provide both drinking water and non-drinkable supply for washing and upkeep. These intervals allow people to step aside without leaving the market entirely, helping to relieve pressure on crowded passages and maintaining circulation through the site. By dispersing activity across multiple nodes, the spine reduces bottlenecks and makes participation more manageable for people with varying needs. In this sense, the spine provides utilities for privacy, support, and sanitation while allowing traders and visitors to shape the surrounding space in ways that suit their work and social life.

market plaza

At the heart of the site is the market plaza, a space that resists rigid zoning in favor of overlapping, shifting intensities of use. Rather than prescribing fixed functions, the plaza is designed to accommodate a range of activities, including informal gatherings, meetings, and spaces for collective support such as childcare services, community kitchens, multipurpose rooms, thrift collectives, and shared storage. Its core purpose is to legitimize and reinforce everyday acts of care within the market while serving as a third-place commons; an open, adaptable environment that fosters social life and connection within the city.

Materiality and Wayfinding

The market is structured into distinct zones, each defined by shifts in surface materials and finishes that also serve as orientation tools. Changes in paving patterns, and textures provide intuitive cues that support d/Deaf and hard of hearing visitors, older users, and those with visual or cognitive impairments in moving confidently through the site. Even the drainage channels are designed with raised tactile bumps that not only manage stormwater but also provide haptic feedback, helping users track direction and pace.

fig. 4.21

Accessibility is understood here in broader terms. It extends beyond disability inclusion to the larger aim of drawing as many people as possible into systems of livelihood and exchange. Access means the ability to participate whether through trade, employment, or social interaction and the design of the market is intended to enable that participation. Material strategies directly support this ethic. Locally available resources such as earth (used in reinforced wall construction and block making), bamboo, straw thatch, concrete, and metal are combined to sustain nearby industries, reduce costs, and keep construction adaptable. Metal sections are particularly important in the stall framework: their bolted or slotted connections allow quick assembly and disassembly, making it possible to reconfigure stalls in different sizes and layouts. Traders can adjust their spaces as needs change, while components remain durable and reusable across cycles of building, repair, and expansion.

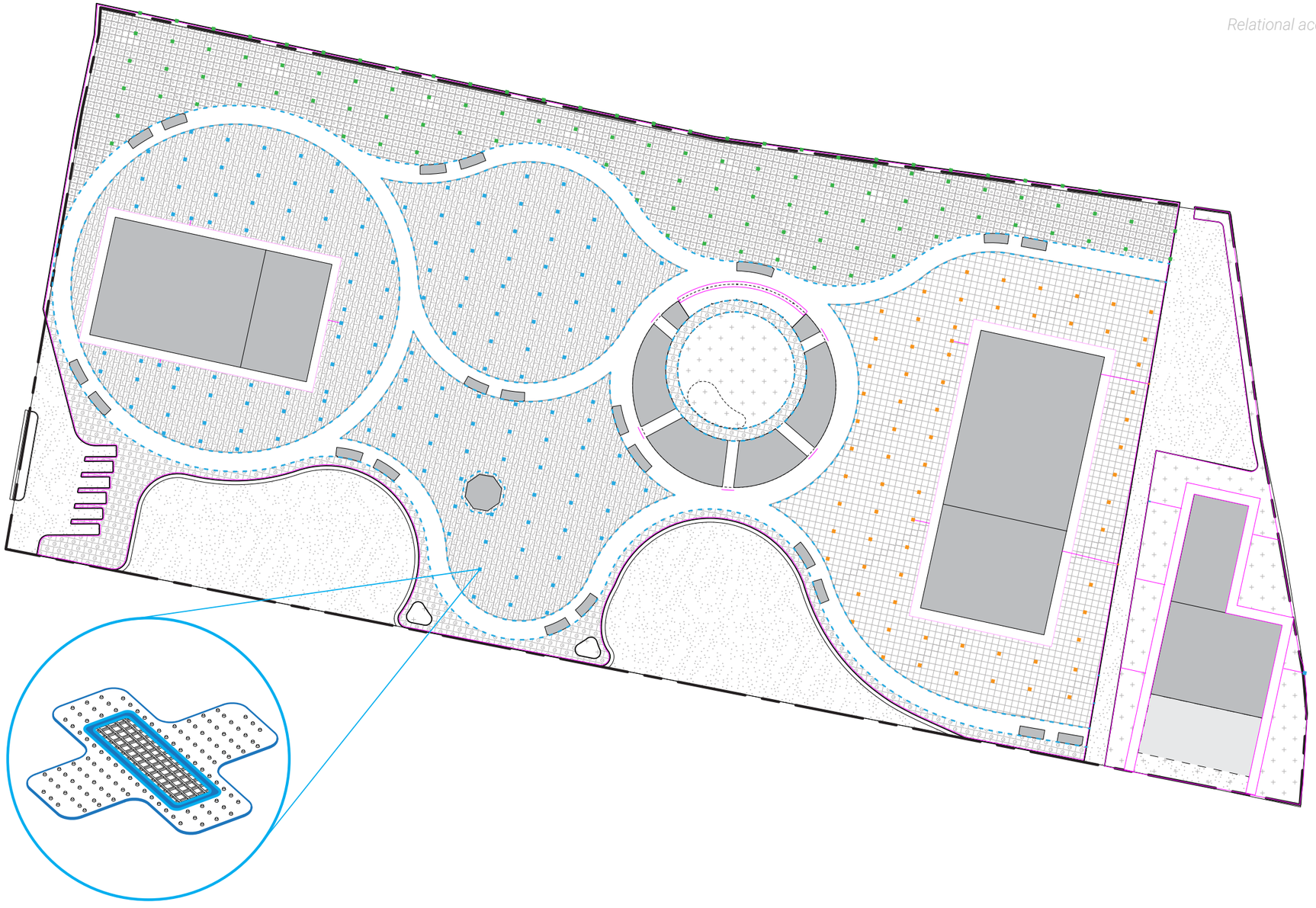
materiality

Wayfinding is also supported by programmatic clustering. Stalls are organized by activity: dry goods, wet foods, or non-food items, so that users can navigate through the familiar rhythms of trade. Prominent vertical markers such as the water tower and central market plaza rise above the canopy to act as visual anchors, giving people orientation points within the larger site. Taken together, these material and spatial strategies highlight possibilities for clarity and continuity, yet they also invite reflection on how the market's civic character may be reshaped over time by everyday use and the body-scale interventions of its participants.

zoning

landmarks

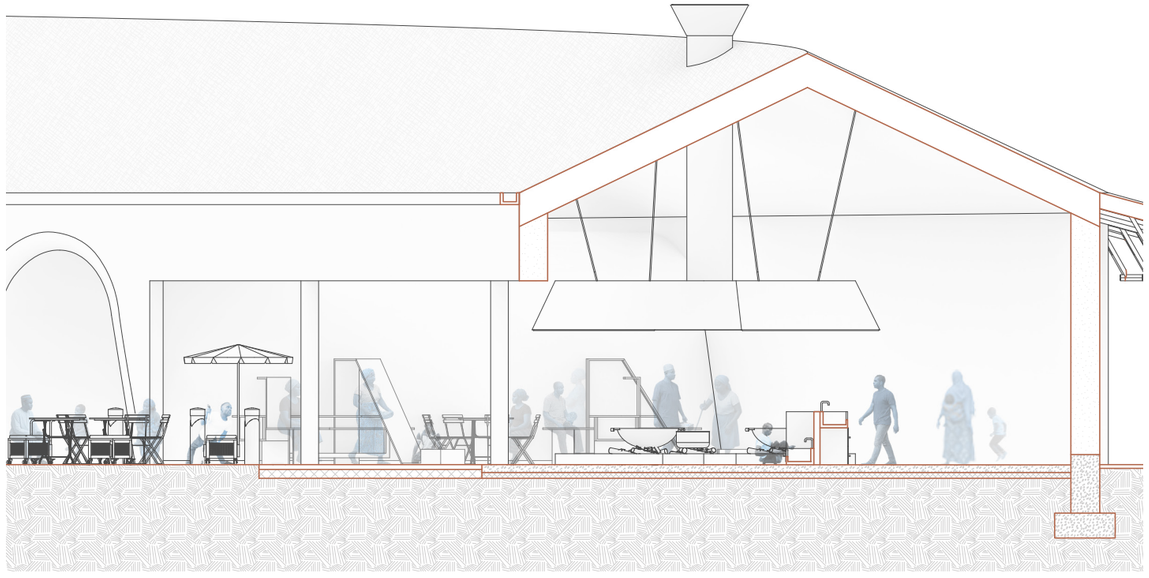
Fig. 4.21
Plan of Jos Main Market showing surface materials and drainage channels. Variations in material qualities function as landmarks and wayfinding cues, guiding circulation while shaping the relationship between built structures, open plazas, and stall arrangements. The cross-drainage pattern is intentionally irregular in both directions, providing orientation markers that assist users in navigating the market.



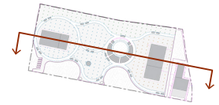
Legend

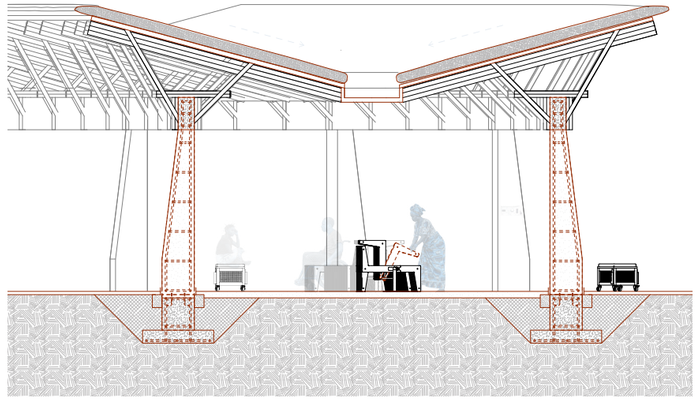
market scope
tactile strip (tiles)
drainage + tactile strip
asphalt
grass
earthen floor (surface treated)
earthen blocks (typ. 1)
earthen blocks (typ. 2)
earthen blocks (typ. 3)
earthen blocks (typ. 4)
0 12.5 25 50m

Fig 4.2 Section drawings showing the relationship between key market programs; illustrating how spaces for gathering, care, and utility (water, data and energy distribution) are integrated into the larger circulation.



⊕ **Market plaza - Community kitchen**





⊕ **Support spine**



⊕ **Loading + Temporary hostel**

Loading zones with adjacent short-stay hostel offering basic shelter for market staff.

⊕ **Market plaza**

Open commons for visibility, gathering, rest and community exchange.

⊕ **Water Tower**

Repurposed tower for water storage and distribution, supporting sanitation and daily use

⊕ **Support spine**

⊕ **Workshop + Waste/recycling block**

Sustains cycles of making and repair, offering shared space for personal and collective needs.

⊕ **Support Spine**

Circulation thread that ties stalls together, distributing utilities and care nodes.

⊕ **Market Administration**

Fig. 4.23
View along a circulation corridor, illustrating how users engage with tactile surface qualities between stalls and how "mobile" and "anchored" stall frameworks can support different economic realities while integrating vital utilities such as signage, electricity, storage and water.

Fig. 4.24
Isometric drawing showing how the market plaza could function as a third-place commons, connecting the market to the wider urban fabric while offering visibility and social services for vulnerable groups.

01. storage
02. community kitchen
03. non-profit thrift
04. children daycare
05. washroom block
06. multipurpose hall
07. market plaza
08. activity room

Fig. 4.25
Without impeding pre-existing activities, the market spine provides rest, sanitation, caregiving, and prayer nodes that ease congestion and offer privacy, enabling participation without entirely leaving the market space.

conclusion

05 | Conclusion

This thesis has argued that disability should not be understood as an individual limitation to be corrected, but as a condition shaped by relationships between bodies, environments, and social arrangements. When reframed this way, Nigerian open-air markets are often described as disorganized, temporary, or non-compliant, begin to look different. They are spaces where access is negotiated continuously, through small acts of cooperation, recognition, and care. In order to examine this more closely, the research set out three interlinked goals: first, to rethink disability through critical and decolonial frameworks that place interdependence at the center; second, to analyze barriers and supports in market environments by mapping embodied differences; and third, to propose a design framework expressed as a central spine with supporting nodes, adaptable stall systems, and legible material cues that allows participation to remain open and flexible rather than fixed in advance. Each of these aims shaped the others. Conceptual arguments informed the mapping; the mapping sharpened the design questions; and the design proposals fed back into the theory by demonstrating how ideas might be materialized.

introduction and research objectives

The findings that emerged from this approach suggest that markets are already functioning as networks of care, even in the absence of formal provision. Traders share seating, load-carriers guide and assist, rituals of prayer create collective pauses, and kinship or association ties provide informal welfare and mutual support. These practices reveal that access is not simply a matter of ramps, signage, or circulation standards; it is something woven into the social fabric of a place. Yet the same research also showed how the language of accessibility can be misused. In the context of Nigerian urban redevelopment, “modernization” projects have repeatedly promised more accessible facilities while displacing traders and destroying support networks. This dynamic, described by disability activists as “access washing,” illustrates how accessibility can be reduced to a technical justification for exclusion if it is detached from questions of social justice and belonging.

summary of key findings

Closer examination of market space, using Jos Boys' framework of "Having a Body," made it possible to highlight the everyday conditions where inclusion succeeds or fails. A single step, a narrow passage, or a corner filled with glare or noise may be negligible for some users but can function as complete barriers for others. Conversely, relatively modest supports sucha as shade, tactile markers, a quiet bench, or informal guidance can open participation for many. This is why universal or average models of the user fail: they flatten variation and ignore how small spatial details shape lived experiences differently. Open-air markets are themselves produced incrementally, through attachments, extensions, and temporary displays. These practices allow users to adapt spaces to their needs, allow vulnerable collectives to exist in public space and are generally more affordable than many other market typologies, but they also generate congestion, uneven surfaces, and fragile circulation routes. The challenge for design is not to suppress these incremental practices but to support them with basic shared infrastructure such as drainage, shade, sanitation, electricity, and storage, so that adaptation can continue while reducing the risks it currently entails.

design framework

The design framework proposed in this thesis is a response to these conditions. A central spine threads through the site, bending with existing rhythms of movement and trade. It carries services such as power, water, waste channels, and shading, while connecting entrances, loading zones, and programmatic spaces. Along this spine, nodes provide intervals of rest, care, and orientation, whether through prayer and reclusion rooms, caregiving stations, sanitation blocks, or storage and distribution points. This allows people to pause, care for themselves or others, and rejoin circulation without leaving the market entirely. Stall systems are imagined as both anchored and mobile, using modular assemblies that traders can customize, repair, or expand over time. Lightweight mobile seating and storage units extend adaptability to areas of congestion, queuing, or informal gathering, aligning with the shifting tempos of market life. Wayfinding is reinforced through a layered system of landmarks and materials: vertical anchors like the water tower and plaza, clusters of related programs, and tactile surface markers such as drainage channels with bumps or textured paving. This layered legibility is designed for users who navigate through sound, touch, or memory, not only through sight or signage. The intention is not to transform markets into orderly grids but to give more people the tools to stay, work, and participate in ways that feel dignified.

implications for a decolonial theory on disability

These findings carry implications beyond the single site. For architectural practice, they suggest that accessibility should be understood less as a code to comply with and more as an intelligence distributed across details, infrastructure, and program. This means prototyping with traders, iterating based on feedback, and embedding design proposals within local economies of repair, reuse, and adaptation. For governance, accessibility cannot be separated from questions of displacement and tenure. Any so-called upgrade that excludes those who built and sustain a market cannot be called inclusive. Protecting the right to return, capping rents, and recognizing utilities as entitlements are part of what genuine accessibility requires. For scholarship, critical and decolonial disability studies need to stay connected to practice, showing how concepts such as interdependence or debility translate into dimensions, joints, thresholds, and tolerances. Evaluation, likewise, should expand beyond throughput or efficiency. Success can be measured in how long people are able to remain in the space comfortably, how often resources are shared, or how safe and recognized people feel while participating.

At the same time, the study has clear limitations. It relied on secondary accounts, imagery, and textual sources rather than long-term fieldwork or co-design with market users. While graphical anthropology provided a way to slow down and interpret material, it cannot replace firsthand engagement. Future research should build on this by convening participatory mapping, diaries, and sensory walks with traders and visitors; by prototyping and testing design elements across different contexts and seasons; and by examining policy scenarios to see how changes in rent, governance, or infrastructure shape spatial outcomes. Comparative work across other Nigerian cities, or in other civic spaces such as bus terminals, worship

grounds, and riverfronts, could also help clarify which elements of the spine-and-nodes approach are widely transferable and which are unique to a given place.

In closing, the central argument of this thesis is that access is not a one-time solution or a static checklist. It is a relationship maintained and adjusted every day through the ways people support each other, adapt their surroundings, and negotiate the use of shared space. Nigerian open-air markets demonstrate this clearly: they show that inclusion is often sustained by ordinary acts of cooperation, improvisation, and care. The role of design, then, is not to impose order or to celebrate inclusion as an achievement, but to provide tools, infrastructures, and frameworks that make it easier for these practices to continue. The spine, the nodes, the stall system, and the material cues proposed here are not meant to replace what the market already does, but to support it and to redistribute conditions so that more people can participate with dignity. Designing with markets in this way is a reminder that accessibility is not just about compliance or efficiency but also about collective lived experiences. It flourishes not when difference is smoothed away, but when difference is recognized and sustained as part of the everyday.

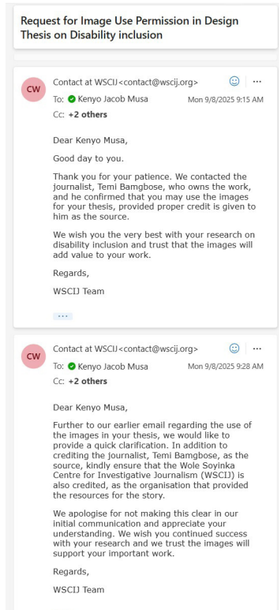
access as a relationship

Letters of copyright permission





fig. 3.2 & fig. 3.3



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We wish you the very best with your research on disability inclusion and trust that the images will add value to your work.

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We apologise for not making this clear in our initial communication and appreciate your understanding. We wish you continued success with your research and we trust the images will support your important work.

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fig. 3.12



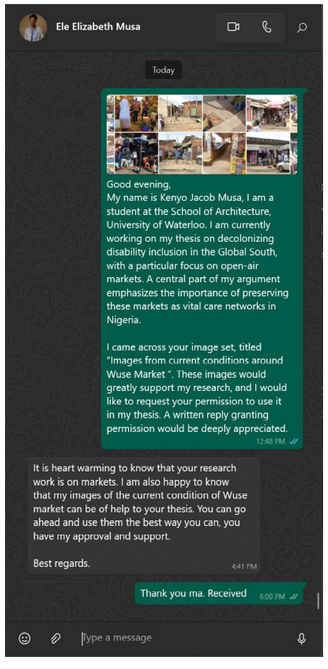
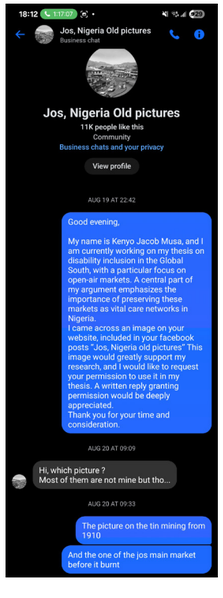


fig. 4.1 & fig. 4.4







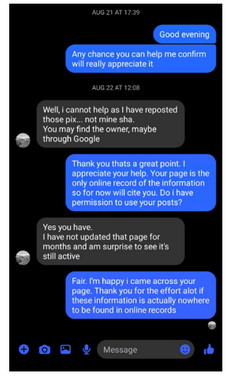
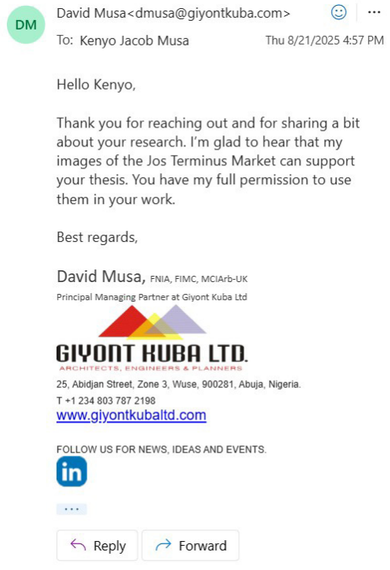


fig. 4.9





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