



Changing the color of the Elephant:

How Design thinking can Curb White Elephant Projects in Nigeria



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Elephants are the largest land mammals on earth hence their large bodies make them to be very intimidating and expensive to maintain. In the heydays of the military rule in Africa one of the common excuse for overthrowing a democratically elected civilian administration is the presence of white elephant's projects. How did the term get into our dictionary and what does a white elephant symbolize?

The term "White Elephant" originated from south-east Asian countries particularly Thailand and Burma, where Monarchs are reputed to keep white elephant as a sign of power, peace opulence, and justice. These elephants are usually seen as sacred hence by the laws of the land they cannot be subjected to any form of labor. However, to receive a gift of white elephant from the monarch in the ancient times is a sign of both favor and curse from the monarch. It was a favor because the animal was sacred and a sign of the King's blessings to the receiver.

On the other hand, it was a curse and a useless gift, and a sign of displeasure from the King because the elephant will incur huge maintenance cost to keep it alive without creating any corresponding value for such cost. The expenses come in the form of large housing and meeting its expensive gargantuan appetite an average elephant feed up to 18hours and consume about 150kilogram of plant material per day. Since the recipient can't get rid of the elephant or put it to any productive use or derive any economic value from it, the continuous spendings on the white elephant is expected to bankrupt the recipient.,. Over time the term white elephant became a nomenclature to describe

projects gulping huge financial investment without delivering on its functions and expectations. In addition, this projects are usually very costly to maintain if at all they are completed.

Penchant For White Elephants

Nigeria seems to have it fair share of project that have become white elephants, where money is continuously thrown at projects whose viability are questionable. Several climes of the African extraction viewed societal challenges purely from monetary perspectives, hence projects are ill-conceived without recourse to users' needs or the view of the stakeholders in the conceptual stage. Project seems to be validated on the basis of good intention or as a show case for monetary and political might of the proponents. White elephants project is a wicked problem that the society is bedeviled with. When projects are conceived without proper definition of the problem from the perspectives of those it meant to serve such project will yield less desirable outcome. This pattern of viewing and defining social challenges is the underlining reason for arrays of uncompleted and projects that serve no meaningful socio-economic purpose.

The political class rather seek to understand and empathize with the plight of the people and develop workable solutions from the perspective of the users, are mostly fond of throwing money at project for self-glorification and preservation and also as a conduit for corrupt practices. For instance, the insecurity crisis in Nigeria in the last decade saw a consistent bloating federal government budget allocation to the defense ministry. Between 2008 and 2018

the federal allocation for defense was a whopping average of 10.51% of her total budget of #58.001 trillion for those past 11 years, yet insecurity have raged on unabated and proven intractable to successive governments. Several social analyst have also pointed the attention of the government to other possible variables in the equation of security which can only be properly ascertain through a human-centric approach to the issues. Otherwise, all attempt at proffering solutions would be but an exercise in arbitrariness and uncertainty.

Indeed, it would amount to seeking a cure for the symptoms of the sickness, rather than the root cause of the hailing malady.

Again, some reputed but now moribund project worth millions of dollars litters our landscapes, they stand tall as a stark reminder of either a dearth of Design Thinkers or failure to utilize the Design thinking principles in the development of such projects. More often than not, these project are for the purpose of scoring cheap political points, raising an army of praise-singers and courting the favors of political benefactors. These projects are usually either abandoned without completion or abandoned after completion because the problems were purely defined and solution wrongly conceived.

Every innovative project must be appraised from the view lens of viability, desirability, and feasibility, to achieve this the challenge must be properly defined. The first step in the design thinking approach is to empathize with the users, to walk in the shoes of the users, to feel what they feel.

To make this happen, proponents of various government projects need to constitute a team of design thinking practitioners either internally or externally or a combination of both. The responsibility of the team is to connect with the users and various stakeholders in an unbiased way. When stakeholders are properly mapped, the government will understand the real problem and also leverage on the stakeholder's level of influence and interest in defining the problem. The end-users pain-points is crucial in designing meaningful project, when a shortcut approach is taken wherein all that matters is the ego and the bias of project proponents then white elephant projects becomes unavoidable, unfortunately the end-users or the community where such project resides bears the brunt of the consequence, as the project may turn out to become criminals hideout.

Let's take a look at some of the resource gulping projects as follows:

The \$450million Tinapa project despite good intention, has since turned to a monumental waste and national embarrassment, 15years after it was opened to the public with lots of fanfare. The 12km monorail project in River state conceived by the administration of Rotimi Amaechi for the sum of N50billion was abandoned in 2008 at only 2.6km, having spent N33.9billion. The Ebonyi Airport is a mammoth white elephant worth multi-billion naira situated in Abakaliki, the capital city of Ebonyi state, a state currently ranks as the fourth poorest state in Nigeria, with

about 73.6% of her citizen living in poverty. The aim of the project when completed is to enable the citizen of the state to export “made in Ebonyi” goods to other countries and states.

The Dutse International Airport in Jigawa state was said to have recorded a zero-passenger traffic in a whole calendar month. The 600 million Minna Airport City Project is currently moribund as the current administration chose to channel the state meagre resources into a more viable project. In its quest to rid Oyo state capital, Ibadan of urchins, beggars and the homeless, the state government of Oyo created the Akinyele Resettlement Centre.

The evacuation of these folks began and was concluded in June 2021. But they were back on the street by September of the same year. This was a classic example of failure to “design with” but “designing for” approach in conceptualizing the project. The resettlement center was built without mapping out what exactly was responsible for putting these folks in the street in the first place. No ethnographic studies was conducted to determine their way of life and how the center would help in addressing it. Indeed, Design Thinking principles was lacking in this project development.

Changing the Elephant’s Color

“In order to get to new solutions, you have to get to know different people, different scenarios, different places.”

**Emi Kolawole, Editor-in-Chief,
Stanford University Business School Review**

The lack of design thinking in the process of developing public project have exacerbated the culture of waste in our country. This is because the project does not exactly meet the pain points of the end-users. Design thinking in project implementation would help policy makers in analyzing wicked problems, developing ideas, and co-creating a solution with the end-users and diverse stakeholders. This principle involves understanding their personas, their

journey, innovating around the identified roadblocks and prototyping a solution before deploring it. Design Thinking evaluates project to make sure they pass the desirability, viability and feasibility criterion before they are implemented. As long as human-centric principles are not imbibed by policy makers, the culture of waste will continue unhinged.



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