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The Waterfront Community Land Trust: An Architect's Governance Instrument for Anti-displacement Regeneration in Port Harcourt

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Abstract: Nigeria's estuarine waterfronts illustrate a persistent governance failure in which regeneration is pursued through demolition rather than negotiated upgrading. At Port Harcourt's Abonnema Wharf, colonial-era mercantile warehouses coexist with a dense informal economy of traders excluded from statutory master plans, both routinely threatened with clearance. While architects have proposed adaptive reuse as a technical solution to decaying heritage stock, the institutional and tenurial conditions required to secure such interventions against future displacement remain under-theorised within Nigerian architectural practice. This paper examines the institutional bottlenecks obstructing sustainable waterfront regeneration and proposes the WCLT (Waterfront Community Land Trust) as a practical governance instrument through which architects can operationalise spatial justice. Drawing on a mixed-methods study combining a structured survey (n = 364) and key informant interviews (n = 26) with traders, planners, and state officials at Abonnema Wharf, the research identifies four principal barriers to regeneration: overlapping federal, state, and local jurisdictions; contested land titles; the absence of statutory heritage protection for industrial mercantile buildings; and fiscal disincentives favouring demolition over reuse. Despite this, 70.3% of respondents expressed strong support for collaborative, negotiated partnerships between state and community. The paper details the WCLT model, a tripartite state, community, and technical governance structure that guarantees un-evictable vendor tenure, caps ground rents, and ring-fences maintenance revenues, translating the abstract principles of the Right to the City into an implementable institutional framework. It argues that architects, as spatial technicians uniquely positioned at the interface of design and governance, have a professional obligation to advance such instruments rather than confining their practice to building-level intervention. The paper concludes that statutory adoption of the WCLT, gazetted under Rivers State law, is the necessary precondition for translating adaptive reuse proposals from architectural aspiration into durable, anti-gentrification urban policy.

Key words: Community Land Trust, waterfront regeneration, adaptive reuse, spatial justice, urban governance, informal economy.

1. Introduction

Port Harcourt's estuarine waterfront has been rebuilt by government decree more often than it has been rebuilt by design. In a single weekend in 2012, the demolition of Abonnema Wharf displaced an estimated 63,000 people and destroyed over 600 structures [1], the latest instance of a pattern that the Greater Port Harcourt Master Plan of 2009 had already set in motion when it designated the city's waterfront settlements, indiscriminately, as "open space" [2]. Watson [3] has named this pattern precisely: a statutory preference for tabula rasa clearance over negotiated upgrading, in which the planned city, quite literally, sweeps the poor away. Port Harcourt's waterfront has absorbed this violence repeatedly, and nothing in its current institutional architecture prevents it from absorbing it again.

Two assets stand in the way of further demolition, potentially, and neither is currently protected by statute. The first is a fabric of colonial-era mercantile warehouses, built by the United Africa Company, the Union Trading Company, and Equip from 1912 onward as the logistics infrastructure of an extractive break-

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bulk economy, and now standing decayed but, as this author's prior doctoral fieldwork established, structurally salvageable [4]. The second is the informal economy of traders, fish smokers, and timber processors who work the adjacent waterside at Bundu and Marine Base, whose spatial requirements the same fieldwork found align closely with what the old warehouses can offer [5]. The origin of this arrangement is itself a governance failure: cartographic analysis undertaken in that fieldwork confirmed that a 1974 town planning survey and the Nigerian Ports Authority's undelivered circa-1970 development plan together produced a 50-acre statutory void along the Creek Road waterfront, a deliberate administrative "planning bypass" that left the estuarine edge unmapped and, consequently, available for informal occupation. The mercantile buildings and the traders around them are thus bound together by a shared history of exclusion from the formal city, not merely by geographic proximity.

That shared history has not produced a shared remedy. Prior work arising from this same doctoral research has established the technical case for adaptive reuse of Abonnema Wharf's mercantile stock [4] and the case for that reuse as a formalisation strategy for the informal waterfront economy [5]. Neither, however, asks the institutional question directly: what specific governance mechanism would prevent a rebuilt, reoccupied Abonnema Wharf from being demolished a second time? A physical proposition, however well designed, offers no protection against a state that has already demonstrated its willingness to clear the site twice. The missing element is tenure a legal and institutional arrangement robust enough to survive the next change of government, the next master plan review, and the next commercial pressure to convert waterfront land to higher-value use.

This is an architectural problem as much as a legal one, and this paper argues that it should be treated as such. Architects who propose adaptive reuse without also proposing the governance structure that would secure it against displacement are, in effect, designing buildings for a client whose right to occupy them is not guaranteed. The NIA (Nigerian Institute of Architects), and the profession it represents, have a stake in closing this gap: a regeneration proposal that does not survive contact with the next demolition order is not a durable contribution to nation-building, however sounds its architecture.

The stakes of closing this gap extend beyond Abonnema Wharf itself. The 66th NIA Annual General Meeting convenes under the theme "Architects as Agents of Social Transformation", a theme that carries a specific institutional challenge for waterfront practice in particular: transformation that cannot survive the state's next demolition order is not transformation at all, merely a temporary rearrangement pending the next clearance. If Nigerian architects are to claim a genuine agency in social transformation, that agency must extend to the governance instruments that determine whether a design proposal endures, and not stop at the drawing board.

This paper addresses that gap by proposing the WCLT (Waterfront Community Land Trust), a tripartite governance instrument developed from doctoral fieldwork at Abonnema Wharf, that secures un-evictable tenure, caps ground rents, and ring-fences maintenance revenue for the traders and heritage buildings it protects. The argument proceeds in five further parts. Section 2 situates the WCLT within the Right to the City literature and the emerging tradition of African Community Land Trusts, and states precisely what is, and is not, original about the contribution. Section 3 outlines the mixed-methods fieldwork from which the paper's governance findings are drawn. Section 4 presents the institutional bottlenecks that fieldwork identified as obstructing regeneration at Abonnema Wharf. Section 5 details the WCLT model itself: its tripartite structure, its three tenure and financial mechanisms, and the statutory pathway required for its adoption. Section 6 discusses the implications for architectural practice and for the

wider Nigerian and West African waterfront context, before Section 7 closes with concrete recommendations for Rivers State and for the profession.

2. Literature and Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Right to the City, and Its Southern Limits

Lefebvre's [6, 7] right to the city begins from a refusal: the city is not a static commodity to be zoned, bought, and sold by technocratic authority, but a work produced continuously by its inhabitants, who retain an irreducible claim to participate in and appropriate that production. Harvey [8] translates this claim for the twenty-first century as a right not merely to access existing urban resources but to shape the very process of urbanisation, and to share in the surplus value that process generates. Applied to Port Harcourt, the right to the city offers an immediate diagnostic: the traders of Bundu and Marine Base produce the economic and social value of the waterfront through their daily labour, yet share none of the decision-making authority over its future, and stand to receive none of the value created should that waterfront ever be formally redeveloped.

Yet Lefebvre and Harvey formulated their theories from within a formal, Western industrial urban context, and scholars of Southern urbanism have argued that the theory requires adaptation before it can do useful work in African cities. Watson [9, 10] describes African urban governance as characterised by a "clash of rationalities" between the formal, technocratic logic that planning instruments assume and the survivalist, informal logic through which most African urban residents actually occupy and produce space. Roy [11] extends this by arguing that informality is not a discrete sector or an aberration from formal planning but a mode of urbanisation in its own right, one that the state itself frequently deploys selectively, formalising some claims to land and criminalising others as a technique of rule. Read together, this literature cautions against importing the right to the city wholesale: the right being claimed at Abonnema Wharf is not primarily a right to participate in a functioning formal planning apparatus, but a right to be recognised by an apparatus that has, to date, defined the traders and the warehouses alike as absent from its maps.

2.2 Planning Violence and the Colonial Inheritance

Watson's [3] influential account of the "planned city" sweeping the poor away identifies demolition-first governance as a structural feature of urban planning under conditions of rapid, under-resourced urbanisation, rather than an occasional policy failure. Njoh [12] traces this structural feature to its colonial origins, arguing that urban planning in colonial Africa functioned explicitly as an instrument of social control and spatial segregation, a function that, this paper contends, has proven remarkably durable in post-colonial Rivers State: the same 1974 planning bypass that excluded Abonnema Wharf from the formal city grid has never been corrected, and the 2009 and 2012 demolitions represent not a departure from that colonial spatial logic but its continuation by other means. Kamete [13] offers a complementary account of how planning power is actually exercised in African cities, arguing that the authority to designate land as "illegal" or "open space" operates as a durable technology of control, deployed episodically rather than continuously, which is precisely the pattern Abonnema Wharf has experienced: long periods of official indifference punctuated by sudden, forceful clearance.

2.3 Community Land Trusts as a Governance Instrument

If the problem is the state's episodic and unilateral exercise of demolition power, the literature on CLTs (Community Land Trusts) offers the most developed institutional answer available. A CLT removes land from the speculative market by vesting its title in a non-profit or statutory trust, which then leases it back to residents or users under terms that guarantee long-term, often perpetual, occupancy while capping the resale or rental value that can be extracted from it. Bassett's [14] account of the Voi experiment in Kenya remains the foundational African case, documenting both the trust's

success in securing tenure for low-income households and the administrative fragility of an arrangement that lacked full statutory backing. Midheme and Moulaert [15], examining CLTs in urban Kenya more broadly, refine this finding into a precise institutional lesson: the durability of a CLT depends on statutory recognition rather than administrative arrangement, since an informally constituted trust remains vulnerable to exactly the kind of unilateral state action it was designed to prevent. Basile and Ehlenz [16] generalise this further, proposing the CLT as a transferable framework for responding to informality across the Global South, provided it is adapted to local land-tenure regimes rather than imported wholesale.

The closest comparable case internationally is the Caño Martín Peña Community Land Trust in San Juan, Puerto Rico, documented by Algoed and Hernández-Torrales [17]. Like Abonnema Wharf, Caño Martín Peña is a waterfront community whose informal tenure made it acutely vulnerable to displacement through environmental improvement: a flood-mitigation and ecological restoration project threatened to raise land values and displace the very residents the project was nominally intended to protect. The CLT there was established specifically to break that link, guaranteeing residents the right to remain and to benefit from the improvement rather than be priced out by it. This is the precise mechanism this paper proposes for Abonnema Wharf: a WCLT that ensures flood-resilience infrastructure and heritage-building regeneration raise the traders' security of occupancy rather than their exposure to eviction.

2.4 Blue Gentrification and the Urgency of Sequencing

A further, more recent theoretical development sharpens the urgency of establishing tenure protection before, rather than after, physical regeneration begins. Willems, van Gent, and Boterman's [18] concept of blue gentrification identifies waterfronts specifically as the terrain where resource formation and risk mitigation collide to produce displacement, through a mechanism they term the blue value gap: a waterfront whose land value has been artificially suppressed by environmental risk and institutional neglect becomes, precisely because of that suppressed value, an attractive site for speculative capitalisation once flood-resilience infrastructure or heritage regeneration begins to raise it. The community that absorbed the risk while the land was cheap is not the community positioned to capture the value once the land is improved, unless a tenure instrument has already fixed their claim to it.

This mechanism describes the Abonnema Wharf corridor with some precision. Its land value is currently suppressed by exactly the conditions Willems and colleagues identify: tidal flooding, structural dereliction, and the fifty-acre statutory void documented in Section 1. These are also, precisely, the conditions that would make the site attractive to speculative investment the moment flood-resilience infrastructure and heritage-building regeneration begin to raise its value, which is why this paper insists that the WCLT's governance and tenure mechanisms must be constituted before the first warehouse is retrofitted, rather than negotiated afterward as a remedial measure once displacement pressure has already begun to build. Blue gentrification theory thus supplies the sequencing argument on which Section 5's implementation model depends.

2.5 The Local Antecedent, and the Precise Gap

The closest antecedent in the Nigerian literature is Obinna, Owei, and Mark's [19] study of Port Harcourt's informal settlements, which documents forty-nine squatter settlements occupying marginal waterfront land and traces their formation, in part, to resistance to the 1978 Land Use Act, which vested land rights in the state and displaced customary tenure arrangements that might otherwise have supported orderly land banking. Their central, and at the time unexpected, finding was that these settlements hold potential to yield land for the city's planned expansion while simultaneously guaranteeing security of tenure to existing residents. This is the closest local precedent to

the argument advanced here, and the point of departure is specifically architectural: Obinna and colleagues identify the tenure and land-supply opportunity in the abstract but do not connect it to any adjacent stock of physical infrastructure, mercantile or otherwise, that could house the displaced economic functions their proposed reorganisation would require.

It is important to state precisely what this paper does, and does not, claim as original. The CLT is a tested instrument, not a novel one, and this paper does not claim to have invented it. Its contribution lies in three other places. First, in the contextual adaptation of the CLT mechanism to a Nigerian estuarine mercantile waterfront specifically, and in identifying, following Midheme and Moulaert [15], that statutory recognition rather than administrative arrangement is the necessary condition for its durability in this setting, which is why this paper recommends the WCLT as an instrument of Rivers State statute rather than an informally negotiated agreement. Second, in the architectural integration of that governance instrument with a physical adaptive-reuse proposition, an integration that neither the tenure literature (which is written largely without reference to buildings) nor the adaptive-reuse literature (which is written largely without reference to tenure) attempts. Third, in extending Obinna et al.'s [19] land-supply logic specifically to the mercantile warehouse stock, closing the gap their study left open between tenure opportunity and physical infrastructure.

3. Methodology

This paper draws on data collected under a pragmatist, mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, in which a structured quantitative survey established the scale and pattern of community perception, followed by qualitative interviews that explained and contextualised those patterns (Creswell, 2014, as applied in the author's doctoral fieldwork). The structured survey (n = 364) was administered across the three interconnected waterfront nodes examined in this research: the UTC (Union Trading Company) Road/Abonnema Wharf axis, where the colonial mercantile warehouses stand; the Marine Base waterfront, the primary site of contemporary informal maritime trade; and the Bundu waterside, where trader settlement and environmental precarity are most acute. Twenty-six semi-structured key informant interviews were conducted with traders, community leaders, urban planners, practising architects, and state officials, selected purposively to represent the full range of actors with a stake in waterfront governance.

While the wider doctoral study from which this paper is drawn addressed the physical condition of the mercantile buildings through a Building Condition Assessment Matrix, that instrument and its findings are reported in full elsewhere [4] and are referenced only briefly here. This paper isolates and reports specifically the governance-relevant items from the same fieldwork: survey questions concerning respondents' perception of demolition threat, their assessment of whether statutory master plans include or exclude the informal waterfront economy, and their preference for collaborative versus unilateral approaches to any future regeneration; and interview questions directed at planners and state officials concerning the specific institutional and jurisdictional obstacles they encounter in attempting, or declining to attempt, waterfront regeneration.

Consistent with the purposive, three-node case design, findings here are intended to support analytic rather than statistical generalisation [20]: the aim is not to claim that 71% of Nigerian waterfront traders nationally perceive demolition as destabilising, but to establish, through triangulated survey and interview evidence within a bounded and well-understood case, an institutional pattern whose logic is transferable to comparable Nigerian and West African port-city contexts.

The governance-specific interview data were analysed thematically, following an approach consistent with Miles and Huberman's [21] framework for qualitative data reduction and display: transcripts from planner,

architect, and state-official interviews were coded independently for references to jurisdictional responsibility, land title, heritage status, and fiscal or budgetary constraint, with the four bottlenecks reported in Section 4.3 emerging as the recurring categories across the coded set, rather than being specified in advance by the interview instrument. This inductive derivation strengthens confidence that the four bottlenecks reflect the officials' own operative understanding of the obstacles they face, rather than categories imposed by the research design.

Access to institutional actors was that, it must be acknowledged, uneven: several state officials approached for interview were unable, or declined, to grant them, and some planning documents referenced by interviewees could not be independently verified against a public archival record. This unevenness is itself analytically informative, consistent with the jurisdictional-overlap and fiscal-disincentive bottlenecks reported below, insofar as institutional reticence to discuss waterfront governance openly is itself a symptom of the administrative paralysis this paper describes, rather than merely a methodological limitation to be regretted.

Ethical clearance and informed consent procedures followed the protocols of the author's doctoral supervising institution, and all quantitative results reported below are drawn directly from that cleared dataset.

4. Findings: Institutional Bottlenecks to Regeneration

The 364 surveyed respondents are drawn predominantly from the working population of the three study nodes: a youthful, economically active group, with the informal sector, traders and artisans together, forming the clear majority of respondents, and a near-even gender balance across the sample. This is, in other words, not a marginal or transient population but the settled economic core of the waterfront, whose relationship to the institutional environment described below is a daily, working relationship rather than an occasional or incidental one.

4.1 A Community Braced for the Next Demolition

The survey data confirm that the threat of demolition is not a historical memory at Abonnema Wharf but a live, present anxiety shaping how residents and traders relate to the site. Some 71.4% of respondents perceived demolition threats as actively destabilising to their livelihoods and investment decisions, a figure consistent with the pattern of repeated, unannounced clearance the site has experienced since at least 2009. Interview testimony reinforced this: traders described withholding investment in even modest structural improvements to their stalls, reasoning that any improvement made under conditions of insecure tenure represented capital that the next demolition order would simply destroy. This is a rational, not merely anxious, response: it describes a population whose economic behaviour is being actively distorted by institutional insecurity, in ways that ordinary economic development interventions, credit access, skills training, market linkage, cannot correct so long as the insecurity itself remains unaddressed.

4.2 Exclusion from the Formal City

A closely related 70.9% of respondents agreed that statutory master plans exclude the informal waterfront economy from formal consideration altogether, rather than regulating or reforming it. This perception is well founded in the planning record. The 1974 town planning survey and the Nigerian Ports Authority's undelivered circa-1970 development plan together produced a 50-acre statutory void along the Creek Road waterfront: a deliberate administrative decision to leave the estuarine edge unmapped, which this paper, following the theoretical framing established in Section 2, reads as an instance of Njoh's [12] colonial planning-as-social-control logic persisting well into the post-colonial period. The consequence is that the mercantile warehouses and the informal traders around them have

shared, for half a century, the status of a planning absence: neither protected as heritage, nor regulated as commerce, nor consulted as residents, but simply left off the map until the state finds it administratively convenient to notice them, typically in order to clear them.

4.3 Four Institutional Bottlenecks

Key informant interviews with planners, architects, and state officials converged on four specific institutional bottlenecks obstructing any coherent regeneration strategy for the site, beyond the general pattern of demolition-first governance described above.

The first is jurisdictional overlap. Federal authority, through agencies with responsibility for ports and waterways, state authority, through the Rivers State Ministry of Urban Development and its planning agencies, and local government authority over aspects of market and trade regulation all claim partial jurisdiction over the Abonnema Wharf site, with no single body possessing, or willing to exercise, comprehensive authority to approve a regeneration scheme. Officials interviewed for this study repeatedly cited this overlap as a reason for administrative paralysis: any proposal risks veto or indefinite delay from whichever tier of government was not consulted first.

The second is contested land title. Decades of informal occupation, overlapping colonial-era leasehold records, and the unresolved legacy of the 1978 Land Use Act's vesting of land rights in the state have together produced what this paper terms a juridical grey zone, in which no actor, state or private, can produce an uncontested title sufficient to underwrite formal investment. This finding directly extends Obinna et al.'s [19] observation that resistance to the 1978 Act shaped the formation of Port Harcourt's waterfront settlements in the first instance; four decades later, the same unresolved tenure question continues to obstruct their regularisation.

The third is the absence of statutory heritage protection. Despite their evident historical and architectural significance, the UAC (United Africa Company), UTC, and Equip warehouses at Abonnema Wharf hold no protected heritage status under Nigerian law. This leaves them exposed to demolition on ordinary planning or security grounds, with none of the additional statutory scrutiny that a heritage designation would require.

The fourth is a fiscal disincentive structure that positively favours demolition over reuse. Officials described clearance as administratively simpler and more immediately consistent with prevailing "urban renewal" performance metrics than negotiated, phased adaptive reuse, which requires sustained institutional attention, cross-agency cooperation, and a longer time horizon for measurable results than most political and budget cycles accommodate.

4.4 An Appetite for an Alternative

Set against this bleak institutional picture, the survey data reveal a striking and, this paper argues, under-exploited resource: 70.3% of respondents expressed strong support for collaborative, negotiated partnerships between state and community as an alternative to unilateral state action. This is not a community resigned to demolition, nor one demanding the state's complete withdrawal from waterfront governance; it is a community expressing a clear preference for a specific institutional form, negotiated partnership, that current Nigerian planning practice at Abonnema Wharf has never actually offered it. This finding is the empirical hinge on which the remainder of this paper turns: it establishes that the constituency for a governance alternative such as the WCLT already exists, and that the task facing architects and policymakers is not to manufacture community buy-in but to design an institutional form capable of receiving it.

4.5 Synthesis: Why Existing Instruments Cannot Resolve These Bottlenecks

Read together, these findings establish a specific and demanding brief for any proposed governance instrument. It must resolve jurisdictional overlap

without waiting for federal, state, and local authorities to voluntarily harmonise their competing claims, a harmonisation this fieldwork found no evidence of any actor currently pursuing. It must resolve contested land title without requiring the prior, and likely protracted, resolution of Nigeria's wider Land Use Act tenure questions. It must supply heritage protection and maintenance funding in the continued absence of a national industrial-heritage listing regime. And it must do all of this in a form the community itself has already indicated it will actively support, rather than merely tolerate. No instrument currently available within ordinary Nigerian planning practice, master plan revision, heritage listing application, or conventional public-private partnership, satisfies this brief in full. Section 5 argues that the Waterfront Community Land Trust does.

5. The Waterfront Community Land Trust Model

The WCLT (Waterfront Community Land Trust) proposed here responds directly to the four bottlenecks identified in Section 4, translating each into a specific structural or mechanical feature of the trust rather than leaving it as an unaddressed background condition.

The WCLT is deliberately conceived as a governance layer that sits alongside, rather than duplicates, the physical Resilient Mercantile Hub framework developed elsewhere from the same fieldwork [4], which specifies the flood-resilient landing platform, adaptive-reuse market halls, and elevated promenade proposed for the site. This paper does not restate that physical design in detail; it specifies instead the institutional structure required to ensure that design, once built, remains in the hands of the community it was designed for.

5.1 Tripartite Governance

The WCLT is governed by a single tripartite board comprising state, community, and technical representation. The state seat, ideally held jointly by relevant state and local government representatives under a pre-agreed protocol, is designed to resolve rather than reproduce the jurisdictional overlap identified in Section 4.3: rather than requiring separate approval from multiple uncoordinated agencies, the WCLT board becomes the single body through which state authority over the site is exercised, with the pre-agreed protocol determining how federal, state, and local interests are represented within that one seat. The community seat, held by elected representatives of the trader associations and resident groups at Bundu, Marine Base, and Abonnema Wharf, ensures that the negotiated-partnership preference expressed by 70.3% of survey respondents is institutionalised rather than merely consulted on an ad hoc basis. The technical seat, held by architects, planners, and heritage professionals, provides the design and conservation expertise necessary to manage the mercantile buildings as a heritage and infrastructure asset, and is the seat through which the Nigerian Institute of Architects and its members are structurally positioned to participate in the trust's ongoing governance, not merely its initial design.

5.2 Three Tenure and Financial Mechanisms

The WCLT operationalises spatial justice through three specific mechanisms, each addressing a distinct dimension of the precarity documented in Section 4.

Un-evictable vendor tenure directly answers the demolition anxiety documented in Section 4.1. By vesting title to the site in the trust rather than in any individual, corporate, or state actor capable of unilaterally revoking occupancy, and by issuing long-term, renewable occupancy agreements to traders and building users rather than short-term or informal arrangements, the WCLT removes the single lever, unilateral state reclamation, that has produced every demolition at Abonnema Wharf to date. This mechanism does not require the state to relinquish underlying ownership of the land; it requires the state to agree, through the trust's statutory constitution, that occupancy decisions will be made by the tripartite

board rather than by unilateral executive action.

Capped ground rents address the fiscal disincentive structure documented in Section 4.3, converting the site from one whose highest-value use to the state is speculative clearance into one whose value to the state is a predictable, if modest, long-term revenue stream, while guaranteeing traders that rents cannot be raised to extract the value their own labour and investment create. The cap is set and periodically reviewed by the tripartite board rather than by unilateral landlord or state discretion, ensuring the mechanism remains responsive to economic conditions without becoming a renewed vector for displacement.

Ring-fenced maintenance revenue ensures that a defined proportion of ground rent and any commercial income generated within the WCLT's boundary is legally restricted to funding the ongoing maintenance of the mercantile buildings and shared infrastructure, rather than being absorbed into general state revenue or dissipated through informal collection. This directly addresses the absence of statutory heritage protection documented in Section 4.3: while formal heritage designation remains a separate and necessary statutory step (see Section 5.3), ring-fenced maintenance revenue provides the mercantile buildings with a sustainable funding mechanism regardless of whether or when that designation is achieved.

5.3 Positioning against Precedent

The Caño Martín Peña case [17] transfers to Abonnema Wharf with unusual directness: both are waterfront communities facing displacement risk specifically through environmental improvement, and both require a CLT capable of guaranteeing that flood-resilience infrastructure benefits, rather than displaces, existing occupants. What requires adaptation is the underlying land tenure regime within which the trust operates. Puerto Rico's CLT operates within a US-influenced property law tradition; the Kenyan experiments documented by Bassett [14] and Midheme and Moulaert [15] operate within a tenure regime shaped by post-independence land reform quite distinct from Nigeria's. The WCLT proposed here must instead operate within the framework of the Land Use Act of 1978, which vests radical title to all land in the state Governor and grants individuals and organisations only a right of occupancy. This is a materially different starting point from either precedent, and it is the specific reason this paper follows Midheme and Moulaert's [15] finding that statutory recognition, rather than administrative arrangement, is the necessary condition for durability: an informally negotiated WCLT would possess no security against the Governor's existing statutory power to revoke a right of occupancy, whereas a WCLT established by Rivers State statute, and operating in explicit, gazetted relationship to the Land Use Act's right-of-occupancy provisions, would constrain that power rather than merely hoping it is not exercised.

How, precisely, a state-level WCLT statute should be drafted to sit compatibly alongside a federal Land Use Act which is a substantial question in its own right, one this paper flags honestly as requiring dedicated socio-legal research rather than claiming to resolve here. What this paper does establish is the architectural and institutional case for why that socio-legal work is worth undertaking: the WCLT is the only governance form identified in this research capable of simultaneously satisfying the community's demonstrated preference for negotiated partnership (Section 4.4), addressing all four institutional bottlenecks identified through fieldwork (Section 4.3), and securing the physical adaptive-reuse proposition already established for the site [4] against the demolition risk that has defeated every previous regeneration effort at Abonnema Wharf.

5.4 Implementation Sequencing

Consistent with the sequencing urgency established by blue gentrification theory in Section 2.4, this paper proposes a specific order of operations rather than a simultaneous, all-at-once establishment of the trust. The first step is legal gazetting: securing Rivers State

statutory recognition of the WCLT's tripartite board and its authority over occupancy decisions at Abonnema Wharf, before any physical retrofit work begins, precisely so that the tenure guarantee precedes rather than follows the land-value increase that retrofit work would otherwise trigger. The second step is board formation, seating the initial state, community, and technical representatives and formally ratifying the ground-rent cap and maintenance ring-fencing formulas. Only at the third step should physical implementation begin, starting with a single pilot warehouse, allowing construction cost, occupancy stability, and governance function to be monitored under real conditions before the model is extended across the remaining mercantile stock. This sequence inverts the order in which waterfront interventions have conventionally proceeded in Port Harcourt, where physical or infrastructural improvement has typically preceded, and thereby triggered, the displacement pressure this paper is designed to prevent.

The financial sustainability of the trust depends on the ring-fenced maintenance mechanism described in Section 5.2 achieving a scale sufficient to fund ongoing building conservation without continued dependence on discretionary state budget allocation, the same discretionary dependence that has historically left the mercantile stock vulnerable to neglect between political cycles. Modelling the precise ground-rent level required to achieve this self-sufficiency, while remaining affordable to the trader incomes documented in this fieldwork, is identified here as a necessary next step for the socio-legal and financial research recommended in Section 6, rather than a question this paper resolves definitively.

6. Discussion: Implications for Architectural Practice and Policy

The case made here has a direct implication for how architects understand the boundaries of their own professional competence. Architects are, by training and by daily practice, spatial technicians uniquely positioned at the interface of physical design and institutional governance: the same drawing conventions and site-analysis skills used to document a building's structural condition can be, and in this research were, extended to document the institutional condition of the site around it. An architectural practice that proposes adaptive reuse without also engaging the tenure question has not failed technically; it has simply stopped short of the point at which its proposal becomes durable. Confining professional practice to building-level intervention, in a context where the state has already demonstrated its willingness to clear a site twice within a single professional generation, cedes the tenure question to actors, typically lawyers and planners operating without architectural or heritage expertise, less equipped to integrate it with the specific physical and spatial logic of adaptive reuse.

For the Nigerian Institute of Architects and its members, this suggests several concrete lines of action. The Institute could formally advocate, as a professional body, for Rivers State to gazette the WCLT model as a recognised tenure instrument, lending the proposal an institutional weight that a single doctoral study cannot generate alone. Individual practices and chapters could offer pro-bono or reduced-fee technical-board participation in a pilot WCLT, providing the design and conservation expertise the tripartite structure requires while building institutional experience with a governance form likely to recur across other Nigerian heritage-adjacent informal settlements. More broadly, architectural education and continuing professional development could incorporate governance and tenure literacy as a recognised component of urban regeneration practice, rather than treating it as work that belongs exclusively to other professions.

There is also a transparency function architects are well placed to serve within the WCLT structure once established. Systematic, photographically and dimensionally documented condition surveys of the kind used elsewhere in this research to assess the mercantile warehouses [4] could, if repeated at intervals under the trust's technical seat, provide the

tripartite board with an independent, professionally verified record of building condition and maintenance-fund utilisation, reducing the scope for the kind of unaccountable discretionary decision-making that has characterised waterfront governance at Abonnema Wharf to date. This is a modest but concrete way in which the profession's existing technical competence, rather than any newly acquired legal expertise, directly strengthens the trust's day-to-day accountability.

The problem this paper addresses is not unique to Port Harcourt. Lagos's Makoko waterfront settlement has experienced a closely parallel pattern of demolition-driven governance, documented by Amakihe [22] and, more recently, by Ali and Idowu [23], whose account of demolition-driven urbanism and the associated loss of coastal heritage in Makoko reads, in its institutional logic, almost as a twin case to Abonnema Wharf. Warri and Calabar, both Nigerian port cities with comparable colonial mercantile heritage and adjacent informal waterfront economies, present plausible further sites for the WCLT model's transfer, though such transfer should proceed, consistent with the analytic rather than statistical generalisation logic set out in Section 3, through careful case-by-case adaptation rather than wholesale replication. In each case, the specific configuration of jurisdictional overlap, land-title history, and heritage-stock condition would need to be independently established before assuming the Abonnema Wharf model transfers unmodified; what should transfer is the underlying argument, that tenure security must precede rather than follow physical improvement, not the specific institutional detail of the Rivers State case.

This paper's limitations should be stated plainly. The WCLT proposed here is a design and governance proposition validated through community endorsement and expert testimony; it has not yet been tested through statutory adoption, construction, or post-occupancy governance. Its projected capacity to withstand the specific pressures, political, commercial, and administrative, that produced the 2009 and 2012 demolitions remains, until piloted, propositional rather than demonstrated. This is not a reason to withhold the proposal, but a reason to pursue its statutory adoption as a matter of empirical urgency: only implementation will convert the WCLT from a plausible architectural and institutional argument into verified urban policy.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

Demolition-driven governance, not the physical condition of its mercantile buildings or the economic viability of its informal traders, is the primary obstacle to sustainable waterfront regeneration at Abonnema Wharf. The mercantile warehouses are structurally salvageable; the traders' spatial requirements align closely with what those warehouses could offer; and 70.3% of the community affected actively prefers a negotiated, collaborative alternative to the unilateral state action that has twice cleared the site. What has been missing is not technical feasibility or community will but a governance instrument capable of binding the state to a negotiated outcome. The Waterfront Community Land Trust, adapted specifically to Nigeria's Land Use Act framework and gazetted under Rivers State statute rather than left as an informal arrangement, is proposed here as that instrument.

Three recommendations follow directly from this argument. First, the Rivers State House of Assembly should be approached, through coordinated advocacy from the Nigerian Institute of Architects and allied professional and civil society bodies, to gazette the WCLT as a recognised tenure and governance instrument, with Abonnema Wharf as its founding site. Second, the Institute should formally resolve to advocate for guaranteed architect representation on the technical seat of any future waterfront regeneration governance board, ensuring the profession's design and heritage expertise is institutionally embedded rather than periodically consulted. Third, a pilot WCLT encompassing a single warehouse at Abonnema Wharf should be pursued as the immediate next empirical step, generating the implementation evidence, on

construction cost, trader income, occupancy stability, and governance function, that this pre-implementation study could not itself produce.

These recommendations are deliberately sequenced to respect the sequencing logic established in Section 5.4: statutory gazetting first, board formation second, physical pilot third. Reversing this order, beginning construction before tenure is secured, would recreate precisely the blue value gap dynamic identified in Section 2.4, in which physical improvement itself becomes the trigger for the displacement it was meant to prevent. The discipline of that sequence, more than any single architectural feature of the pilot warehouse, is what will determine whether Abonnema Wharf's traders experience regeneration as security or as the prelude to a third demolition.

Architects have a professional obligation, this paper has argued, to advance governance instruments and not only building designs, wherever displacement is the realistic alternative to their proposals. At Abonnema Wharf, that alternative is not hypothetical. It has already happened twice. The Waterfront Community Land Trust offers a specific, precedented, and statutorily achievable means of ensuring it does not happen a third time.

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