

ARTISTIC WASTE REUSE: A STRATEGY FOR REDUCING YOUTH'S UNEMPLOYMENT IN LAGOS, NIGERIA.

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Abstract

This paper advocates the conscious repurposing of waste like plastic bottles, cardboard (cartons), unused textile materials, cans, and papers into artworks and projects in Lagos. Lagosians considers Lagos as Nigeria's economic hub and Africa's largest megacity. The city is home to over twenty million people and a global centre for finance, tech, fashion, and entertainment. As an urban setting in a developing landscape, Lagos faces systemic challenges, including flooding and waste management; its low-lying geography has led to several seasonal floods. A major cause is the careless disposal of plastics and other single-use waste, which is indiscriminately dumped into drainage structures. Lagos also contends with youth unemployment and security issues. Reusing waste can engage the youths to benefit financially and provide creative, eco-friendly ways to beautify the environment, homes, and offices. The paper adopted the Grounded-Theory model, a non-numerical method that treats artistic practice and the environment as data to articulate a paradigm, coupled with literature reviews and an appraisal of three artists who engages waste as materials for art constructions. The non-numerical data proposes a strategy of creative waste recycling as a useful tool for employment, research, decoration, intervention, advocacy nudging, and waste management. Creative waste reuse is further proposed as a potent means to mitigate unemployment and insecurity. The approach is exhibited as a strategy to engage Lagosians' cultural convictions, reduce pollution, and curb youth's violence in Lagos, identifies as the "Centre of Excellence".

Keywords: Developing landscape, Single-use, Strategy, pollution, Restlessness.

Introduction

Lagos is the commercial hub of Nigeria. The city serves not only as a centre for commerce but also as a melting pot for business and trade across the nation. As noted by Obi and Adebayo (2023), "The presence of visible business activities in Lagos acts as a catalyst for the bustling vibrant energy that often leads to uncoordinated environments and attracts illicit activities." Additionally, as the former capital of Nigeria, Lagos has drawn visitors from across the country and neighbouring West African countries, all seeking better opportunities. This attraction is fuelled by the city's abundant ocean resources and the relative serenity of its environment compared to other regions of Nigeria.

However, the influx of people into Lagos contributes to a significant population increase, which unfortunately results in challenges related to unplanned waste management in its environment. According to the World Population Review (2026), the population of Lagos is estimated to be 14,881,843. In contrast, data from 1991 indicates that the city had a population of only 5,725,116. The World Population Review (2026) noted that Lagos has grown by 360, 447 in 2026, which represents a 2.48 per cent annual change.

Waste Challenge in Lagos City

Managing waste in Lagos, especially the Mainland axis, reveals that single-use items are discarded carelessly, rather than being reused or recycled. This happens because the discarded



Fig.1. 20 Local Government in Lagos State. Opodo @<https://www.opodo.com>

items are throwaway, cheap, and are also perceived as useless. Besides, there are limited reliable facilities and opportunities to reprocess waste for other valuable purposes.

disposal of waste. It is important to highlight that litter is a more common sight throughout the Lagos mainland, this is due to inadequate infrastructure, poor urban planning, and the



Fig. 2 “Oke Afa market” - gross environmental issues. (2025) <https://www.bing.com/images/search>

Meanwhile, the indiscriminate dumping of waste in Lagos leads to unsightly environments, damage to canals, and pollution of waterways. These adverse effect poses a significant threat to both human health and the surrounding ecosystem. Moreover, the sheer volume and debris from the waste can lead to illnesses such as malaria, typhoid, and cholera. Discarded materials decompose into microorganisms that transform into harmful bacteria, creating breeding grounds for preventable diseases. In addition, vehicular congestion and pedestrian bottlenecks in the city contributes to the careless

lifestyle choices of the mainland residents. This area of the city has become challenging to manage regarding waste oversight and disposal for the Lagos Waste Management Authority (LAWMA).

Ultimately, the waste crisis in Lagos arises primarily from the city's generation of waste exceeding the capacity of current collection and processing systems. This imbalance adversely affects the health of Lagosians, contributes to flooding, and exacerbates the city's economic difficulties. The Lagos Waste Management

Authority (LAWMA) seems to be overwhelmed by the volume of waste generated in the city. Additionally, the “Private Sector Participant (PSP) system appears to have faltered, with residents in many hard-to-reach areas resorting to alternative means of waste disposal. Cart pushers instead of the government-approved waste collectors...” Salau, J and Athekame K. (2026).

Traditional Strategies of Tackling Waste by the Lagos Government

According to Salau (2026), “Governor Babajide Sanwo-Olu's order for refuse evacuation is being largely disregarded, leading to waste accumulation on major roads.” The environment correspondent for the Nigerian Guardian Newspaper highlighted that “One week after the Lagos State Governor directed the evacuation of accumulated waste across various parts of the state, there has been no significant change as streets and roads have turned into illegal dumpsites.” The source confirmed that the state government is aware of residents' concerns about the refuse build-up in certain areas and reassures Lagosians that “this issue is being addressed with utmost priority.” Unfortunately, the realization of this promise still remains elusive.

On a different note, the Lagos State Government (2025) introduced the “Trash for Cash” initiative, stating, “State officials are visiting neighbourhoods every Thursday to either provide cash to residents in exchange for waste or to collect waste directly.” The government emphasized that, once this initiative is expanded, a permanent location will be established where residents can exchange trash for a reasonable amount of money. However, the sustainability of this initiative is questionable due to the considerable waste management logistic and financial commitment's challenges faced by the Lagos Waste Management Authority (LAWMA). As a concerned Lagosian, one might argue that instead of offering 'cash for trash', managing waste would be more effective with an increase in the number of waste bins available for citizens to dispose of their refuse properly. Additionally, encouragement in form of grants could be given to artists to creatively engage with single-use items through recycling

and upcycling. The initiative promises to transform single use matters into artworks and aesthetics that will contribute to environmental beautification.

Additional strategy engaged by Lagos government to clean the city as documented by Adeyemi (2023), include the designation of every Thursday of the week as an environmental sanitation day. The period is allocated for cleaning from 7 am to 10 am. The primary goal is to foster a culture of consistence cleanliness within all communities. During this period, shops and markets are required to close to allow participation in the clean-up efforts. Sanitation officials are tasked with overseeing the activities to ensure effectiveness. However, a significant issue arises after the clean-up exercises, when sanitation officials often delay or fail to remove the cleared waste gathered on the road and beside the drains, gutters, and surrounding areas. This leads to the unfortunate return of rubbish to drains and littered the environment.

As a consequence of this unprofessional service, and the effect of continuous presence of environmental waste problems, this paper concurs with Adeyemi (2023) that “uncleared waste serves as a breeding ground for mosquitoes, whose bites can lead to malaria, typhoid, and cholera.” These diseases contributes significantly to the rising infant mortality rates and the high death toll among vulnerable populations, including children, the elderly, and pregnant women in Africa.

Conscious Creative Repurposing of Waste in Lagos

To tackle the rampant issue of indiscriminate waste dumping and to advance strategies for alleviating unemployment, insecurity, and youth violence in Lagos, the concept of artistic recycling is being promoted. This initiative focuses on the creative and intentional reuse of waste that would otherwise contribute to clogged drains and overflowing dumpsites, transforming it into art, fashion, and marketable products. The proposed strategy for the innovative repurposing of waste holds the potential to significantly enhance waste management efforts in Lagos while also addressing unemployment, insecurity, and

youth violence in Nigeria. By fostering environmental awareness, creative waste repurposing can serve as both an inspiration and a catalyst for positive change.

Artists and organized community groups are thus encouraged to transform single-use items and discarded materials into unique artworks, installations, and functional objects. This would emphasise the importance of recycling and sustainability. Utilizing waste as an artistic medium can also alleviate the reliance on traditional or customary art materials for trainees and professionals, promoting broader participation in creative endeavours. Additionally, this approach can help mitigate the scarcity of conventional materials commonly needed by artisans and visual artists, providing trainees who cannot afford standard supplies with viable alternatives for continued art production.

As a waste researcher, it is noteworthy to highlight the significant role of creative recycling, particularly in the reuse of plastic waste, which is gaining traction in Lagos. Through this strategy, artists are using upcycling process in repurposing plastics and other single-use materials to craft sculptures, murals, and fashion items that raise awareness about plastic pollution. Furthermore, artisans involved in recycling are incorporating scrap metals, wood, and textiles into their works. The

process has successfully merged traditional craftsmanship with contemporary arts.

Further, apart from Lagos, cities such as Ibadan, and Ife in the south-west Nigeria have experienced innovative artists that are transforming waste into valuable products. The result has effectively turned the cities' environmental challenges into remarkable opportunities for creative expression. Their mission is to showcase that the waste of Lagos can be a veritable goldmine for artistic endeavours.

Among these remarkable practitioners is **Dotun Popoola**, an MFA graduate from Obafemi Awolowo University, who specializes in sculpture and painting. His artistic repertoire includes synergetic metal sculpting, hyper-realistic coloration, and large-scale figures crafted from scrap materials. Dotun's work focuses on converting trash into treasures and rubbish into rubies. He creates captivating animal sculptures, human figures, and culturally significant pieces, often in the form of expansive installations that can require up to two years to complete. In addition to his artistic accomplishments, Dotun actively mentors aspiring artists from universities in Nigeria, Kenya, and Uganda. His contributions as a waste-repurposing artist have gained him recognition both in Nigeria and on the international stage.



Fig. 3. The Bull by Dotun Popoola Metal scraps. (2018) 1024" x 576" thedotunpopoola.com <https://thedotunpopoola.com>



Fig. 4. "Female face" (2025) by Yusuf Durodola. 534 x 305 (Scrap materials) <https://www.businessday.ng>

Yusuf Durodola is another multimedia visual artist based in Lagos, Nigeria. He is an alumnus of the Federal College of Education Akoka-Lagos, the University of Lagos, and Obafemi Awolowo University. His artistic creations leverage recycled materials, blending installations and performances to highlight the transformative power of mindset in promoting environmental sustainability. Yusuf believes that waste not only provides

artists with contemporary materials for crafting distinctive artworks but also plays a crucial role in environmental clean-up efforts, ultimately protecting humanity from the adverse effects of climate change.

Festus Iranlade Adeyemi (PhD), a multifaceted artist, lecturer, multimedia creator, administrator, and researcher, is another accomplished artistic waste recycler. He earned his Degrees from Delta State University in Abraka, the University of Ibadan, and Coventry University in the UK, where he obtained his second Masters in Contemporary Arts Practice. He completed his PhD at Loughborough University in the UK. Festus views art as a powerful medium for communicating insights about people, the environment, and waste management. His work explores themes of waste, ecology, recycling, and societal expectations. He creatively incorporates a variety of discarded materials into his artwork, including polystyrene, plastics, serviettes, used supermarket receipts, cartons, newspapers, and Ghana-Must-Go bags.

Conclusion

The paper underscores that artistic waste reuse transcends mere environmental practice; it serves as a tangible economic strategy capable



Fig. 5. Waste Panorama (2022) 75" x 58" Festus Iranlade Adeyemi <https://vanguardngr.com/2021/09/from-recycling-adeyemi-creates-art-of-waste-panorama/amp>

of addressing youth unemployment and mitigating youth violence. As a mega-city, Lagos produces an immense volume of waste daily from markets, industries, construction sites, and households. Traditionally viewed as a nuisance, however this waste stream harbours raw materials, that can be transformed through art and design into valuable products, including sculptures, fashion items, accessories, interior decor, and public installations. The findings indicate that equipping and empowering young people to convert waste into art yields several key benefits:

1. **Economic Empowerment:** Transforming waste into artwork generates direct jobs and fosters micro-enterprises in collection, processing, design, fabrication, and marketing.
2. **Environmental Impact:** This practice alleviates pressure on landfills and promotes a circular economy, aligning with Lagos State Waste Management goals.
3. **Cultural Values:** It positions the youth of Lagos as contemporary innovators who can turn waste into wealth, thus imbuing the city with a distinctive creative identity on both local and global stages.

However, for artistic waste reuse to expand beyond individual artists and artisans, there is a critical need for structured support. Therefore, collaboration among government educational agencies, such as NCCE and NBTE, vocational institutions, NGOs, and the private sector is essential to provide skills training, access to tools, start-up funding, market linkages, and designated creative hubs. Besides, policies encouraging single-use waste sorting and the utilization of recycled materials by corporate entities will further accelerate growth in this sector.

Conclusively, artistic waste reuse as exhibited in this paper represents a vibrant opportunity for the youths of Lagos to tap into its benefits. It redefines waste from being a liability to assets and an opportunity. By marrying creativity with the community's waste challenges, Lagos has the potential to reduce unemployment, diminish environmental waste, curtail youth's violence, and showcase Nigerian artistry to the world.

Engaging in waste recycling is not only promising but attainable. The paper envisions that implementing waste repurposing strategies in Lagos can alleviate the challenges posed by the lack of traditional materials and talents. The effective support achievable and attainable is dependent on the provision of consistent and conscious support from governmental bodies, NGOs, and relevant ministries. With the right investment, Lagos youths can spearhead the African creative and circular economy.

Stakeholders are encouraged to recognize artistic waste reuse as a legitimate vocational pathway. To support this initiative, incubation centres can be integrated into technical curricula, promoting sustainability, and ensuring that this approach is both practical and impactful. By formalizing artistic waste reuse, we can foster innovation and environmental responsibility within the community.

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