

Towards an Architectural Identity: Learning from the Communication Method of Contemporary Nigerian Art

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Abstract: In a period such as now where there is a rapid rate of urbanization into different cultures, cultural identity is under the threat of being erased in the process. However, if architecture is for people, then it should be able to reflect, respect, as well as protect society's respective identities. The Nigerian society being a culturally diverse one would greatly be affected by this change, but this paper seeks to redress that by providing solutions learnt from Contemporary Art in Nigeria. A study on prominent Contemporary artists in Nigeria reveals their use of culture as a strong design lexicon – a method used to effectively communicate the messages in their works. How would this change the way architecture is practiced and perceived? The theory that declares art and architecture as having interdisciplinary connections is the foundation upon which this paper stands, which also allows the researcher to relate certain principles from contemporary Nigerian art into how architecture is created. However, the line that separates art and architecture becomes visible when it comes to aspects such as freedom of expression, finance as well as creativity. In addition to this, the architect's training develops him more rationally than expressively and vice versa for the artist. Therefore, it is rare to have an architect or an artist who spontaneously taps into both sides of the brain. However, this possibility could exist if the architect embraces the artist as a comrade-in-arms, in the art of designing buildings. This fusion would undoubtedly strengthen the diversity in terms of architecture within the country and would bring about the creation of buildings that Nigerians can relate with.

Keywords: Architecture and Culture, Communication Methods, Contemporary Nigerian Art, Cultural Identity, Yoruba Culture

1. Introduction

The Nigerian society is one that has a strong historical relationship with art and craft, and this can be seen in early accounts of explorers from Portugal who visited the great Benin Empire (present day Edo State) in the 15th century [1]. Similarly, the numerous Nok artifacts that were discovered in Nok (town in present day Kaduna, Northern Nigeria) to the Ori Olokun brass artifacts that were discovered in the wake of the 20th century at the Wunmonije Compound in the ancient city of Ilé-Ife, South Western Nigeria [2]. From these accounts and many more, one understands that art and craft plays a major role in the identity of the numerous ethnic groups in Nigeria, and this can be seen today in the society's appetite for art; and admiration for activities as well as local content that encourage cultural awareness and identity.

In recent years, Nigerian art has begun to appeal to the

local and international market more than ever before, and this could be attributed to the originality of the works produced by the artists. It is the unifying factor that sells the country to the rest of the world [3]. The originality of the works intrigues the people, stirring their emotions in unique ways. This phenomenon on the other hand should be present in architecture if we consider that the same principles which guide architecture such as balance, scale, rhythm are also inherent in art. Adolf Loos, the influential theorist of the modern architectural era postulated that architecture aroused moods [feelings] in people, and the architect's task was to give concrete expressions to those moods [feelings] [4].

Unfortunately this is not the tale of architecture in Nigeria, as majority of the buildings do not appeal to the interests of the people, except those who are stakeholders in the building. Architecture is one of the voices a nation has; it speaks loud about what a country thinks of itself, its people and the

values it places on certain things. Hence, it would be a shame if the only sound it produces is babbles.

So then, if we fall back on the counsel of Loos, from what language do we derive the vocabulary of our expressions from? Available to the architect is the vast architectonic world from which he borrows the forms which are deemed appropriate to suit the requirements of his design. This is referred to as his vocabulary and other factors in addition to this differentiate the design of one architect from the other. This research proposes to explore architecture through the eyes of a Nigerian artist, adopting some of their fundamental ideologies into its creation.

2. Traditional Art & Culture in Nigeria

Art is more than an activity in Nigeria; it is a tradition, culture and a way of life. In spite of the colonial presence which ushered in an European lifestyle, the Nigerian art remained undiluted unlike other aspects of society, and this according to Gerald Chukwuma [5] could be because the Europeans themselves were not able to understand the art neither were they able to properly interpret it. Nonetheless, they found great interest in it and eventually became patrons of some of the foremost Nigerian artists and sculptors who eventually made a mark in the international art market.

The presence of art guilds within various traditional societies in Nigeria ensured the continuity of indigenous art within the society, and most times these guilds were built around family structures. In the Benin kingdom, there were guilds such as the Brass, Ivory, and terracotta groups that were all responsible for creating works of art that were not limited to decorative purposes but also for spiritual, cultural and functional uses. Most times, messages were often communicated intricately on these artworks with symbolic characters which were well understood by the people. These artworks helped to reflect the nature of the people, their achievements, way of life, and their identity. Symbolism as we may call it played a major role in the art of many cultures in Nigeria and it is being perfected today by rising Contemporary artists in the country who are using it for their trade.



Figure 1. Emir's Palace, Kaduna.

The traditional use of symbolism was common even in the way houses were built and decorated; for example, the lizard outline imprinted on the house of an Igbo man signified that he was one of the strong men in the village and similarly, the fish outline depicted that the house belonged to a very wealthy man [5]. This same symbolism is present in Northern Nigeria where a rich man in Kano decorates his house with colorful Hausa motifs to depict his wealth. For the Yoruba and the Benin tribes, it was also easy to identify the wealthy men from the size of the compound and the number of courtyards within their house. The wealthy, having the ability to marry many wives had to use numerous courtyards as a way to draw light and provide ventilation into the various rooms in the house.

Unfortunately, this practice is no longer common and the colonial presence in Nigeria may be responsible for this, as it ushered in a new way of building and as a result, there wasn't a further development on the vernacular method of building. Nigeria in 1960 became an independent nation, but 58 years down the line, not much has been done to rediscover the way of designing. The African society, inclusive of the Nigerian, has always lived communally with individuals being influenced by the other. The effect of this influence reflected in day to day activities, such as dressing, poetry, or craft. In the architecture of the Yoruba palace, one sees how art and architecture unites. For example, the use of reliefs and motifs on wooden doors, columns and staircases are symbolic and communicate various meanings. These ornaments not only enhance the aesthetics of the building but also serve as a documentation of events that happened at a given time in the peoples' history [6]. Another interesting thing one learns from the culture, especially in the architecture of the palace is the way in which architecture is used as a manipulative tool. Within the palace are certain unconventional doors with passages too small to accommodate the average human height, and in order to go through them, one is forced to bend over in the process. In this moment of bending, an unintentionally obeisance is being made – either to a certain deity present in the room or to the individual that resides in the room. Such is an example of how the architectural elements in a building can influence the actions of a person. Colors are also very important in the Yoruba tradition. The white color is seen as being divine and carries with it the highest level of purity. It is being revered and worn by traditional leaders and traditional priests. Indigo is another popular color which is associated with popular tie-and-dye cloth-making process of the “Adire”. These colours are significant elements that can be used subtly to infer the place of identity within a space.

3. Architecture in Nigeria

The development of architecture in Nigeria was interrupted by the colonial presence of the British in Nigeria. The earliest and purest form of architecture before then was the vernacular architecture which was basically suited to respond to the cultural and climatic needs of the people.

Certain similarities existed in the way buildings were designed within and across the entire region now called Nigeria; an example is visible within the Yoruba and Benin spatial distribution and in their courtyard and impluvia system. Later in the 19th century, the Afro-Brazilian style -a newly coined word -found its way into the architectural vocabulary. It was a blend of the Portuguese aesthetics with cultural needs and aesthetics of the Yorubas. This style was introduced by the “Amaros” and “Saaros” who were repatriated slaves and descendants of former slaves from Brazil, Cuba and other parts of Latin America [7].

The end of the 19th century brought the arrival of the British colonial architecture which later became the model for the vast majority of buildings in Nigeria- including those designed after independence. During the period of the British occupancy in Nigeria, there were various architectural movements that were experimented upon by young British and foreign architects. Some include; Modernism, International Style, Brutalism and Postmodernism. Nigeria like other previous colonies was a testing ground for some of these architects; it gave them an opportunity to be recognized - through their buildings - in the global architectural discussions that were ongoing [8].

Names like Jane Drew, Maxwell Fry, Arie Sharon, John Godwin, Gillian Hopwood, James Cubitt, Leo De Syllas were prominent architects who worked in Nigeria during and after the British occupancy. There were also indigenous architects that were trained outside of Nigeria in the United Kingdom during this period, but they also promoted the same ideals of these foreign architects. The architectural debates were big at the time, and one of the ways to be recognized was either to submit to a popular school of thought, or to make a strong contradictory statement. Little attention was paid to the development of local architecture including how the people related with it. However, the first contemporary building to be identified as looking “West-African” is the University College Ibadan, which was started in 1951 and designed by British architects, Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew [9].



Figure 2. The Ilojo bar in the mid 20th century – one of the many examples of the Afro-Brazilian architectural style on Lagos Island.

4. Contemporary Art in Nigeria

The Zaria art society was fundamental in the spread of

Contemporary Nigerian art across Nigeria and to the world at large. These were pioneer art students at the Zaria art school who rejected the Eurocentric syllabus of art being taught to them. Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, and Bruce Onobrakpeya were pioneers who made resolute decisions to create art that had meaning. This was art that embodied the local cultures that they were representing, and soon other students joined. Bruce, one of the founding members gave the portfolio of who the Contemporary African artist was:

“The contemporary African artists should aim at the development of the total man through creating artistic awareness, appreciation and skill by a process of natural synthesis which combines the best of our value with those from outside” [10].

This without doubt was a profound statement which placed a huge responsibility upon the upcoming artists. Interestingly, this is the way majority of artists in Nigeria see themselves: they believe they have been called to a higher responsibility, like oracles that must teleguide the people into understanding the realities around them. By harnessing various forms of abstractions and symbolism, the artists tell the story of the people.

The evolution of these new artists came along with modernization, which also questioned the various ways by which art was being produced. Communication method is an important aspect of their work; their choice of materials as well as the narratives they choose to focus on is diverse and manifests itself through a wide spectrum of creativity. Their works have been keys to good sources of information, and instrumental in the enlightenment of cultural identity. In addition to this is the dynamic flavor that is generated as a result of the uniqueness of each artists, which is usually made up of personal experiences, cultural background, as well as the school of thought the artist belongs to. This uniqueness allows the artist echo the cultural world in their unique way.

A number of contemporary artists were studied, including young architects who already have a foresight into the wonders that this collaboration could create. Tosin Osinowo, one of the young generation architects in Nigeria has been exploring this route brilliantly; she approaches her designs as an architect, but also leans strongly towards the Nigerian artistic realm. Apart from the artistic roots she has, she positions herself around some of the most brilliant artists in Lagos, and this influence speaks through her works, especially in the way she incorporates cultural and traditional elements into her designs. Prime elements which are easy ingredients for this “food of art” could include the soft elements encompassed in the overall interior design scheme which also echoes the culture through the various installations from furniture, and floor design. The other aspect could be classified as the non-structural elements of the building which includes the burglar bars, brise-soleils, Façade design, window elements etc. This undoubtedly extends the role and services of the architect, as well as his commitment to the input of the other professionals that would be involved.

Among the artists studied, two have been highlighted and

their design philosophies have been summarized into short sentences. Peju Alatise, a young female artist focuses her interests in echoing the societal struggles of the female gender. She uses strong materials such as wood, iron and cement together with a very contrasting color theme – a practice which she has mastered – which automatically provokes sympathy from the depths of an individual. Gerald Chukwuma, another young male artist thinks with wood, applying proportions and impressions to reflect his cultural experiences among the Igbo people of Nigeria. He re-enacts the past traditions in the *Uli*, an intelligent and important sign language and communication method which his own people have forgotten over the years. Apart from this, he thinks in a global point of view by choosing to recycle waste materials and using them in his art. He shows an example of a professional who is trying from the corner of his studio to add to the global discussion on environmental sustainability.



Figure 3. Artwork by Gerald Chukwuma.

5. The Way Forward

The Nigerian artist and Nigerian architect need to form a relationship which both can benefit from. The artists in their own right are excellent, but the reality is that in a population of over 180million people, there are equally as many other unique and talented artists who are also seeking to be discovered as they are largely under-patronized. The architect on the other hand has more chances of being seen as he would always be called upon to respond to the demands of a growing population; however, he is limited with his ability to think outside his rational mind. This kind of partnership was very common during the 50s to 60s in Nigeria. The artist was involved in the design process as he would be given a generous part of the façade to create a remarkable impression such as mosaic or wall murals, and this would usually be done with various mediums from stone to crushed glass, colored tiles, paint etc. Such commissions were not only limited to public or cultural buildings but also to private clients in residential, commercial and religious buildings. This form of collaboration allowed architecture to be infused with art, and it allowed the architect to step back to let the irrational mind of the artist supply a form of creativity that could adorn the architecture with a distinct identity. Such example can be seen in the design of some of the early missionary churches in the country where the artist was actively involved in the design process. One very notable

example is Suzanne Wenger, who was Austrian by birth and eventually naturalized into the Nigerian society. As an artist she worked in collaboration with the architects of the Bristol Hotel (1961) in Lagos in the creation of the wall murals [11]. According to Ola Uduku, she among other artists such as Ben Enwonwu and Demas Nwoko are important individuals which albeit so often unmentioned, played important roles in the creation of the West Africa's modernist architecture [11].

While the architect worked on the functional and rational aspect of the design, the artists were allowed to express their creativity on the building elements, such as the column design, window configuration, doors, burglar bars, wall screens and murals. The buildings were constantly interacting with the people. Demas Nwoko in his lifetime, has also built habitable structures despite not being an architect. In his early years before studying art, he made a brief foray into architecture, working as an apprentice in the Public works department – the ministry responsible for housing infrastructure – where he picked up basic skills that would later guide him in his building designs [12]. Although the trained architect may not totally agree with his methods of design, his buildings arouse so much curiosity and allowed one to interact with it closely. His personality is a rare example, and it gives an insight into the uniqueness that lies in such a mixture of art and architecture.



Figure 4. Dominican Church by Demas Nwoko, Ibadan.

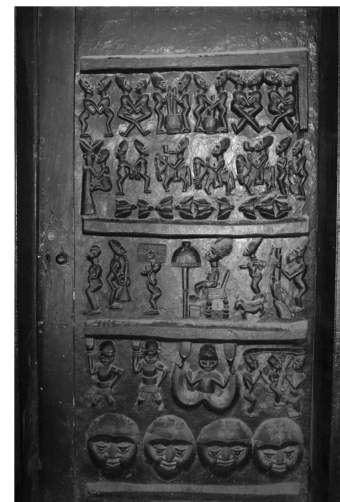


Figure 5. Carved door at the Ooni's palace in Ife. On the door is a story that has been captured in reliefs.

6. Conclusion

The result of the study and interviews with the Nigerian artists reveals that there is a lot the architect could learn from the artists. A major reality which draws a line between art and Architecture is that artists undertake their works independently and as such do not face the challenge of back and forth with clients who in most cases control the work of the architect. This independence which the artist has is a very significant factor that one must consider when making comparisons with architecture. The artist in his training is exposed to culture and its various forms of expressions, which as a result enables him to express himself culturally with ease. Art as well as craft is a way by which different cultures all over the world express their view of the world and the Nigerian artist goes through the art school mastering this [13]. The architect on the other hand isn't exposed to this; hence it becomes difficult for him to create architecture that pays homage to culture. A major reason for this inability is the failure in transmission of the cultural knowledge from those who possess them - who are often uneducated - to students in the classrooms. This wide gap exists between skilled workmen from the various art guilds and the educational walls. These individuals are dying out with their wealth of knowledge, while the Universities which are supposed to be custodians of knowledge are not engaging them as they should. This would also add to the ongoing discussions on the educational curriculum for Nigerian architects in training; one which is seen to be out of touch with its multi-cultural society [14]. On the other hand, the Schools of architecture within the country have not done their best in ensuring the students' all-round development especially in aspects that inform him on his identity, while on the contrary, a great deal of the study focuses on foreign architects who are not so helpful to the cultural context of the continent. In order to bridge this gap, a solution would be the collaboration between members from the art societies and various art guilds to join in raising the future architects. This type of training would be similar to that of the Bauhaus, which had the goal of uniting art and crafts together with architecture into one synthesis of art [15].

In executing a piece of "*art-architecture*", there must be a perfect balance between the input of the architect and that of the artist, and this may not necessarily be a 50-50 affair whereby both parties play equal parts in the production. As a matter of fact, every project is special, and creates the circumstances that dictate where the balance swings to. While this could result to longer design time, it could also increase the cost of services, as the client would have to pay for the service of the artist, unless the architect decides to bear the cost, which would be unlikely. As a

recommendation, more similar research should be done in the aspect of cultural appreciation as it is intended that this would start discussions that could bring about a paradigm shift in architectural design in Nigeria.

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