ARCHITECTURE: THE QUEST FOR CULTURAL IDENTITY

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Abstract. *Despite the modern and grandiose appearance of most architectural projects, closer examinations cast doubts on their sensitivity to the cultural and traditional past of the societies for which they were intended. Space for human habitation and interaction is one of the primary aspects of man's culture, and is basic to any architectural discussion. For a long time, architecture in most developing nations was shaped by colonial contexts and ideologies. The architects seemed more committed to revitalizing the civilization of other advanced countries within a new world setting. The focus of this paper is on the interplay between architecture and culture. The relationship between spaces created by architects and the local culture is examined within the context of place – the house, the community, the region, as well as the nation. The study identifies ties that bind groups together. It also explores the components that constitute spatial character. Physical and intangible aspects of materials in achieving environmental character are evaluated. Key questions regarding the professional and ideological inclination of architects are addressed. Finally, the impact of emerging global trends occasioned by contact of cultures is analyzed.*

Key words: *architectural planning, culture, cultural symbolism, identity, place, space.*

1. INTRODUCTION

From medieval to modern times, works of architecture have played prominent roles in the civilization of several societies. In ancient Egypt, architecture was employed as a means of glorifying the gods and pharaohs [1]; [2]. The Greeks utilized architecture in pursuit of virtue and perfection. In some other nations, architecture has helped in recording man's aspirations and in expressing the most sublime of his feelings. Architectural monuments stand as timeless representations of tradition and culture. They also carry a historical message about the connection between human beings and the built environment.

Culture as a concept represents the way of life of a human group, motivated by the urge to interpret its world and organize the means and methods of being accommodated in it [3]. Culture is a major behaviour modifier. [4] views culture as the totality of a people's way of life, which provides society with inherited transmissible code of conduct as an integral part of the total system of ideas, values, knowledge, philosophy, law, moral, and belief systems which combine to form the content of life of the particular society. Buildings are generally perceived as products of social and cultural conditions. This probably explains why architecture is used to pursue cultural identity. For example, the Romans used their buildings to express their power and prosperity.

For a long time, architects of most developing nations operated within frames of reference of other advanced countries within a new world setting [5]. Some of the grandiose mega structures that dot the landscape of countries in Southeast Asia have little meaning to the hungry masses. The collaboration of planners and architects from different parts of the world has resulted in the importation of alien styles into the traditional fabric without adequate consideration for the site, culture or climate. The consequence is the emergence of architecture for unknown users, an architecture without personality and spirit, which exists for sales purposes only [6]. This situation attracted global attention during HABITAT II conference in Turkey in 1996. The conference conceded that the implemented strategies and policies for housing delivery failed to take into account, economic, political and socio-cultural conditions of each country. A similar situation was reported regarding the first International Conference on Architecture and Design in Kuwait. The challenge at that conference was to determine when the people of Kuwait and other Gulf countries could have modern architecture that suits their community, environment and heritage. These are indications that our surroundings have failed to establish who we are and where we are. Grand symbolic state buildings need to be rationalized along political and cultural bearings. Most of what has been built have no message for those who use them.

Le Corbusier expressed his generations disgust with the tradition of the past in his famous pronouncement that a house is a machine to live in. It can be argued, however, that the preservation of historical buildings and monuments makes it possible for the present and future generations to experience and appreciate the splendour of past works [2]. The attention of Le Corbusier and his colleagues was focused on providing spaces for the present and future functional requirements of machines. Today, it is widely accepted that space is one of the major aspects of man's culture and is basic to any architectural discussion. Architectural spaces affect the way in which people carry out their daily lives and how they exhibit their perceptions, attitudes and values. For example the norms and value of privacy, personal space and territoriality vary with different groups. These are also reflected in the expressed attitudes and behaviours of individuals specific to their socio-cultural characteristics [6].

This paper aims at analyzing the dialectical relationship between architecture and culture. Specifically, the relationship between spaces created by architects and the local culture is examined. The paper starts with an overview of cultural responsiveness of architecture. Spatial and territorial concepts of space, place and identity are discussed. The paper further takes a look at architectural works that are considered as cultural intrusions in the environment where they are located. Other issues discussed are: the cultural context of spatial experience, materials and cultural symbolism; professional and ideological inclination of architects; contact of cultures and emerging global consciousness.

2. OVERVIEW OF CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS OF ARCHITECTURE

Throughout history, architecture has remained a dominant form of representation of cultural and traditional norms of various groups of people. Culture finds expression in the architecture of a people, as a repository of their tradition and way of life [4]. Monuments and historical buildings stand as testimonies to the existence of any group of people. It is in this context that [7] sees architecture as an active component of culture which can be manipulated to create a system of settings within which human life takes place. It should be people-specific and should also represent the way of life of such people [4].

Humanity is in dire need of responsible architecture that responds to different dimensions of cultural and traditional patterns of existence. This anticipation requires an acknowledgement of the difference between core of a culture and its periphery, especially in the face of rapid changes. Peripherals of a culture are those aspects that are given up willing and eagerly for new ones, whereas the core or imperatives of a culture are those aspects that are retained until bitter end [7]; [3].

A responsive design can therefore be described as any purposeful physical expression of space, time, meaning and communication in such a way that their implications for any given culture are clearly understood. Such designs usually incorporate two components: (a) the contextual content that makes place legible to the user; (b) the experience and motivation for using the space

The colonial townships in Nigeria negated these principles, as they exhibit remarkable departure from the spatial organization of the traditional city compounds of the nation [8]. The designs produced might have been functional and suitable for western cultures, but they were inadequate for Nigerian cultural environment.

The idea of cultural responsiveness does not have a universal acclaim as it was rejected by the modern movement. The modern movement emphasized universality on the basis of the existence of plurality of groups and subcultures.

3. SPACE, PLACE AND IDENTITY

As noted by [7] design of the environment involves the organization of four things – space, time, meaning and communication. Space is crucial in shaping the consciousness of human beings. The meaning of architectural space can be interpreted by analyzing its physical structure and its psychological character. Architecture makes spaces tangible. The human factor ranks high among the criteria for shaping a space. Space is a product of socio-cultural practices. [9] asserts that the importance of space in human life is not only in its usage but that its symbolic and ideological meanings contribute in shaping human relations. Space is a place that directs and facilitates life. Space assumes its character from where individuals live and define their necessities.

The value conferred on any space is derived from the relationship of the space with its environment. In fact, man dwells when he experiences the environment as meaningful [10]. It is life in the space that gives space its value. The environment is interpreted to mean spaces within the building, urban space as well as close and distant spaces that surround man. [7] views environmental design as being enmeshed in culture. It is therefore seen as playing a critical role in the preservation of specific components of culture. Space organization, shape and form possess qualities which vary from culture to culture in terms

of identity, religion, cosmology, family, tradition and continuity. [7] suggests that a major step is the identification of culture core and how certain elements of the environment support particular cultural mechanisms that connect people and environments. Genius Loci or Spirit of place is the term that Noberg-Schulz assigns to the concept of creating meaningful places [10]. [5] describes place as space to which meaning has been ascribed.

Therefore, the creation of a culturally appropriate place relies on the preservation of local features that make a specific area unique. [10] used the term "place-making" to describe this situation, while [5] perceives "place-making" as occurring within particular spatial scales such as the space of a house, the space of the community and the space of the nation state. The concept of place can also be examined from the perspective of the components that constitute spatial character such that personality, structure, community, appropriateness and identity can be identified. Individuals and groups conceptualise their identity within the context of place. In fact identity develops as people engage in the process of transformation of places of existence into places of living.

Identity has been explained by [6] as a process that can be obtained through tracking the roots of civilization and culture in history. As a concept, identity is intangible; but as a process identity can only be created by referring to the historical background and the cultural aspects of a locale or region. At individual level, questions of identity are bound up with the spaces we inhabit and assign meaning to the places with which we identity. The term self-identity describes this situation and it is strongly linked to territoriality. This distinctiveness is explained by [11] as it manifests in Hausa and Yoruba traditions in Nigeria. In a typical Yoruba setting, nuclear households are clustered around a common open space that defines the compound. The same display of communality is seen in the Hausa tradition except that the open spaces (court yards) are organized to promote the privacy of the women, in line with Islamic practices. This corroborates the view that built forms should be culture-specific and that some qualities will vary for different cultures, particularly those core elements that remain relatively constant [7]. For identity in architecture to be meaningful, it must be approached from two levels of cultural existence:

(a) Culture core, or cultural imperatives or ethos which represent the critical elements of predominant values that give the culture its distinctive character. Failures are more catastrophic in this sense.

(b) Peripheral elements, which refer to cultural imperatives at the general level where changes can be accommodated with minimal or no consequences.

This is probably why [7] concludes that what is important needs to be discovered, not assumed. The impact of Western colonization in Asia and Africa can hence be assessed by discerning the core and peripheral elements that were affected. Such components can then be evaluated and related to architecture and the built environment. The peripheral perspective of culture justifies why identity is seen as a problematic concept. It is heavily contextual, difficult to measure, differs from place to place and changes overtime. Identity can be achieved if architectural designs aim at utilizing specific components of culture for specific parts of the environment e.g. family and kinship groups, family structures, institutions, status etc.

4. REMINDERS OF ALIEN INTRUSIONS ИN WORKS OF ARCHITECTURE

A significant part of the exposure which Africa and other developing nations received from their colonial masters was on architecture as a symbol of civilization. Most public buildings in Nigeria reflect colonial perceptions of the traditional activities of Nigerians. The message of culture transmitted through those buildings does not adequately represent Nigeria's common heritage. [1] describes such buildings as aberrations in the country's national monument and concludes that they are not architecture for Nigerian society. He cites Murtala Mohammed International Airport, Lagos; National Theatre, Lagos; International Conference Centre, Abuja; and national Stadium, Abuja as examples.

It has also been demonstrated that the single family home designed to accommodate nuclear families in the English or American sense is an alien culture from Nigeria's colonial past. The traditional American family is generally associated with living in a detached single family home that is owned privately. Such homes are sanctified and celebrated. However, the Public Housing Policy practised in America created an ideological problem between the American dream house and what public housing offered. The walk-up or high rise configuration also ran contrary to the America's housing mentality.

[12] reported that a complex of workers' houses in Pessac, near Bordeaux was designed by Le Corbusier for unknown inhabitants. It was later discovered that the inhabitants were worried that some features of conventional houses in the region were absent. Consequently majority of the houses were adjusted to accommodate the traditional pattern.

In India, Chandigarh was designed by Le Corbusier to create a modern urban environment amid immense poverty. The appearance of the city took an aesthetic form of an American suburb, and this was adjudged to be contrary to the Indian life style. The designers of Chandigarh disregarded the existing traditions of the people, and attempted to change or alter them through what was regarded as an aggressive act of Western Cultural Imperialism. Chandigarh is therefore seen as one of the reminders of the failures of architecture.

In Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia and Sierra Leone, the colonial buildings stand as prototypes. This is probably why [4] concluded that climate and not culture of the people was the major design parameter in these former British Colonies during the colonial period.

5. CULTURAL CONTEXT OF SPATIAL EXPERIENCE AND BEHAVIOUR

Architecture essentially reflects the habits, modes of life and traditions as basic determinants of human activities. Therefore the architecture of a people is an expression of the elements of their culture that are sustainable [4]. In this context culture is the distinctive means by which specific populations relate to their environment. Culture specific design is a logical consequence of cultural responsiveness.

Design process creates spaces that serve as emotional ties between human beings and their past as well as their future. Spatial experiences take on different meanings which have come to be associated with the cultural and traditional dimensions of the home as a sacred social unit of space. Since space is interpreted differently in different cultures, it follows that any meaningful evaluation of spatial quality should be from the users' perspective. [7] advises that the users must not all be grouped together because they are vari-

able in most present day situations. He therefore emphasizes the need to define explicitly those groups which are relevant for the design.

The custom, culture and traditions of a people represent the social and anthropological peculiarity of the people. [4] sees these peculiarities as the contents that give form to the design. These peculiarities are the characteristics which should provide a guide in defining and identifying groups whose culture the environment is supposed to be responsive to.

For architecture to be meaningful, it should develop organically and logically from preceding traditions in response to changing situations. In Kuwait, for example, the prosperity that followed the discovery of oil in 1938 resulted in the creation of a new architectural identity that is foreign to its traditional and cultural heritage. The cultural and social aspects regarding Kuwaiti design identity were transformed and distorted [6].

In Nigeria, the characteristic compound reveals hierarchical organization of spaces such that their mutual positioning and sizes are deeply rooted in the culture of the people. In almost all the cultures, the traditional mode of living is expressed through a conglomeration of residential units. It has been found out that the self (or individual) is not emphasized in the architecture of most Nigerian traditional societies. Rather, prominence is given to the community, communal life and group activities [4]. It is this communal mode of living that propels the characteristic compound.

In Kuwait, a significant consideration that featured in the design of older houses was providing security and privacy in the light of the separation of men and women as a cultural concept. Moreover houses were zoned into two sections: one facing the street for men, the other is set back and isolated for women [6]. Like in Nigeria, the courtyard was regarded as an important social and environmental element in Kuwaiti traditional houses. The courtyards play a role in the house form through its functionality in the cultural context. [6]; [13]; [14]; [15]. The implementation of the courtyard which was seen as a symbol of architectural ingenuity in sustainable design has been abandoned in Kuwait since the 1950s in preference for international styles.

Therefore, in providing the settings within which human life takes place, architecture attracts meanings that are highly variable culturally. It is important to specify which features or elements of the environment are important. Such important elements must be discovered, not assumed [7].

6. MATERIALS AND CULTURAL SYMBOLISM

It is presumptuous to tell designers what aesthetics should be adopted. The relationship between materials, culture and the architect cannot be interpreted in a rigid mechanical way. Symbols lie at the core of culture, but they have to be created and communicated to others. Space becomes place when it is given contextual meaning derived from cultural or regional content. The creation of symbols and space requires application and interpretation of materials. The identity and symbolism of a place is therefore enhanced by physical aspects of material substance, shape, texture and colour.

The emotional content of place is fuelled by the social lives of people, the cultural content and the nature of the defining edges and planes of the environment. The place experience is achieved by the articulation of surfaces, indigenous materials and natural features so that they become sympathetic to the feelings, needs and traditions of the people.

Emotional characteristics are often intangible and difficult to identify. The character of an environment is therefore defined by the totality of the texture forms, shapes and colours of materials. These are the ingredients of what spaces communicate to the users.

Symbols help us to interpret who we are, what we are or what we can be. Myths are also considered important because they transform secular history into sacred legends. There is a preponderance of colonial symbols in the Nigerian architectural scene. Efforts should therefore be made by Nigerian architects to develop indigenous symbols, myths and themes in their works.

7. PROFESSIONAL AND IDEOLOGICAL INCLINATION OF ARCHITECTS

What most professionally designed environments communicate to the users is a product of the education, office practice and aspirations of its designers. Most prominent architects in the developing world today were either trained in the West or have received a Western influenced architectural education closer to home. The nature of such training did not equip recipients with capability for developing and communicating native ideas, interpretations and symbols. This and many other issues that affect the architect are beyond his or her control, for example, technological change, the dynamics of urbanization and economy.

Unlike any other arts, architecture requires a commissioner before it can be performed. In other words, the architect cannot readily produce a building and then try to find a buyer. Some have argued that the architectural profession serves only itself. The architect, they claim, works to feed his own ego; and to serve only those who can pay the bills – the ruling elite of our capitalist society. Therefore architecture is under the control of the class which controls the means of production, and the ruling class. A great number of architects in the developing nations are in paid employment either in the public sector or in the private sector as technical staff. In both cases, they are largely excluded from the decision-making process as architects, hence cannot influence the drive for cultural identity.

Some projects, particularly symbolic buildings are hardly left to architects alone. Location of parliament buildings, for instance, is a product of social and cultural forces. The siting and placement of such a building is influenced by political considerations [16].

Another significant aspect of the international culture is that the demands of many large-scale projects in developing nations usually exceed the capability of indigenous firms to implement. Thus even where a local architect is commissioned, additional technical and managerial expertise is imported. Large European and American architectural firms have continued to benefit from this exportation of "Americanisms" to places like the Middle East and the third word. The persistence of this kind of situation inevitably results in the people's loss of their material identity, their culture, their customs and especially their natural environment.

8. CONTACT OF CULTURE AND EMERGING GLOBAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Cultural responsiveness retains minority position in architecture because it is politically difficult to advocate and implement. The heterogeneity which characterizes geo-sociological environments all over the world suggests that cultural differentiation must be acknowledged.

However, the emergence of the satellite dish and the internet has provided the society with limitless access. Spaces are becoming less important while boundaries are dissolving. Places, people, ideas and institutions are no longer precise indicators of identities.

In this world of expanding horizons, the elements of identity are mobile; they begin from somewhere else and move across borders. A convergence is taking place and regional identities are vanishing in the face of homogeneous economic forces and a global culture which promotes simplification and universality. Such global consciousness makes purely local design solutions unlikely.

9. DISCUSSION

People are central to any architectural planning and design. Buildings and equipment should support users rather than alienate or frustrate them. Humans identify with spaces and symbols created for them by relating such spaces and symbols to the core of traditions or culture. The architect requires a deep understanding of the people, their culture and a reverence of their traditional past, because cultural identity is location-specific.

A greater proportion of urban and housing designs that dominate the developing countries portray images of the cultural patterns of colonial planners and architects. The assimilation of these cultures through contacts triggered incompatibilities, while at the same time reduced cultural differentiation. The challenge then is in locating an equilibrium point in the quest for cultural survival or progress. This situation is aggravated by the emergence of cyberspace and radicalized trend whist the world is no longer bound by space.

The education of the architect bears striking similarities in many parts of the world. He is confronted by a paradox occasioned by his professional training and ideological inclination which predisposes him to choose the west as his model, while simultaneously attempting to define a national culture.

For cultures to survive or progress there must be contact of cultures, which naturally generates new relationships and this increases possibilities of compatibilities while at the same time reduces cultural differentiation.

10. CONCLUSION

Works of architecture, especially spaces for human habitation and interaction are not merely physical mapable things but products of social activity. This study looked at different ways in which architecture and the built environment represent an abstraction of the culture and aspirations of users. Culture is recognized as a major determinant of most human spatial behaviour. Individuals and groups conceptualize their identity within the context of the components that constitute spatial character, such as personality, structure, community, materials, and identity.

For architecture to be meaningful, it should originate organically and logically from preceding traditions in response to changing situations. Identity can only be created by referring to the historical background and the cultural aspects of a person, group or region. Therefore cultural compatibility should be included among the many concerns influencing the design of buildings. However, in the context of prevailing cultural pluralism, specifics are crucial in any discussion of identity whether about culture or the environment. This is

one reason why identity is regarded as a problematic concept as it is heavily contextual, difficult to measure, differs from place to place and changes over time. Regional differences are fast disappearing in the face of global contact of cultures, which increases possibilities of compatibilities.

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ARHITEKTURA: POTRAGA ZA KULTURNIM IDENTITETOM

Uprkos modernom i grandioznom izgledu mnogih arhitektonskih projekata, bliži uvid stvara sumnju u njihovu osetljivost na kulturnu i tradicionalnu prošlost društuva kojima su namenjeni. Prostor gde ljudi žive i gde se odvija njihova interakcija je jedan primarnih aspekata ljudske kulture i osnova svake arhitektonske diskusije. Veoma dugo, arhitektura zemalja u razvoju je bila oblikovana kolonijalističkim kontekstima i ideologijama. Arhitekte su više bile posvećene revitalizaciji civilizacije drugih naprednih društava u novom okruženju. Ovaj rad prvenstveno tretira interakciju arhitekture i kulture. Ondos između prostora koje su kreirali arhitekti i lokalnih kultura se ispituje u kontekstu mesta – kuće, zajednice, regiona kao i zemlje. Proučavanje prepoznaje veze koje povezuju grupe. Takođe istražuje komponente koje tvore karakter prostora. Procenjuju se fizički i nefizički aspekti materijal u kreiranju karaktera okoline. Govori se o glavnim pitanjima koja se tiču profesionalne i ideološke naklonosti arhitekata. Konačno, analizira se uticaj globalnih trendova u nastajanju, koji se javljaju usled kontakta kultura.

Ključne reči: *arhitektonsko planiranje, kultura, kulturni simbolizam, identitet, mesto, prostor.*