
The Framing of Architectural History in the Nigerian Context

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ABSTRACT

This essay is about how the historical content of African architecture, with focus on Nigeria as a typology in the continent, is organized. This effort also aims at interrogating existing literature to further highlight issues and challenges which perhaps, may lead to the end goal of achieving a workable frame for the re – definition of architectural history, explicitly in Nigeria and implicitly to the other countries within the continent. The rationale is first based on the fact that history is central to the enterprise of architecture because it offers the opportunity to deciphering meanings held as caches in buildings. And upon the counsel that *the dots* – prints our histories creates on the pages of time, can only be connected looking backwards, not in hasty and unprepared quest for advancement that has been sought for decades, by looking forward. Also, that for establishment of our identity, its continuity and sustainability to be achieved in the theory and practice of architecture in Nigeria and Africa at large, originality – being true to our cultural styles in every dimension of approach, especially in the teaching of architectural education, is basic among other considerations. This essay discusses how that past is organized in the light of existing literature, exposing existing gaps in aspect of theoretical research activities in Africa. This further justifies and explicate the need for afro – centric frameworks that will aid the description of Nigerian architecture. It concludes by opining, according to conventional notion, that sometimes the hard way might be the only way. However cumbersome and slow it seem, having to deal with histories of cultures – some of which have never been charted, numbering in fifties, the novelty and integrity of the new discoveries will solely rely on the empiricism of the data. Furthermore, to corroborate the optimism expressed in the literature, that present challenges of architectural history in Africa are surmountable. There is an ardent need for more historical, critical and theoretical research efforts into the areas of culture because the understanding of our culture is directly proportional to the appropriate description of our native architecture.

Keywords: Architectural History, Culture, Framework

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1. INTRODUCTION

In a bit to discussing the ‘how’ of organizing the past, framework and a regional context will be necessary, as an elemental unit, to keep the issues within grasp. This will be ‘useful’ as opined by (Amole, 2015), considering the vast scope of the matter; culture, religion, politics, perhaps in a broader term, the ethnography of Africa.

More precisely, that of the most populous black – nation¹ – the chosen regional context. Discussing the organized past of architecture in the Nigerian context, in historiographical terms, refers to drawing cues from historicism – approaching the present in connection with an ideological knowledge of the past (Tournikiotis, 1999). Literature reveals how it is been done by the earlier civilizations. Several literature, conferences and articles have discussed issues about appropriateness, development of relevant programmes (AARCHES, 2000, EAAE, 1983, NIA, 1988).

Some also expressed the state of dilemma in which architectural education and practice are in the country (Olotuah, 2006). Aradeon (1998); Okoye (2012) posed questions as motifs relating to identity, content, scope and context. Others took bold step to highlight the challenges, pointing out the dysfunctional attitude to the teaching, (and perhaps the attitude to learning) of architectural history (Amole, 2015). In his essays, he suggested that towards achieving a culturally responsive architectural practice, architectural education must focus on the Nigerian built environment.

This essay further supports the assertion that the focus in the teaching of architectural history be redirected towards Nigerian built environment by creating a workable framework. But in furtherance, to also suggest that the scope of the same be dredged based on these rationales. First, as (Humboldt, 1967) posited, it is the job of the historian to present what actually happened. It therefore explicitly mean that the responsibility of this refocusing depends on how well architectural historians are schooled, able to retell by identifying and documenting more culturally rich archival examples that are architectural and in the originality of the meanings that is drawn of the events from the cultural past of Nigeria.

Secondly, as (Arnold, 2002) that the past does leave traces of itself in the present, the architectural challenges in Nigeria and African diaspora is surmountable as long as we take advantage of this historical niche by salvaging what is left of our fast depleting cultural past. The first section briefly discusses architectural history and enumerates the existing suggestion that addressed the organization of its past. The following section is a reaction to the challenges of architectural history, as highlighted from literature. The questions, motifs and suggestions geared towards redefining the boundaries of architectural history and architectural education at large. Unearthing the need for multiplicity in the number of architectural historians if the overwhelming cultural grounds will be covered.

The concluding section expresses optimism about the possibility of surmounting the challenges by suggesting that frameworks to be created should focus on connecting the dot from the rear by exploring culture through remains of vernacular buildings. Seeking to learn from the past of the western world is not out of place, however we only have to distinguish between learning from the historic past in architecture and what we are borrowing from the culturally different past of the same into local context.

¹ Nigeria, is typology chosen upon several premises as a case fit for study. Premises as highlighted by literature: The most populous black nation, accounting for over two hundred and fifty ethnic groups, (Amole, 2015); Of the over forty departments of architecture in the continent, Nigeria accounts for more than a quarter of them, also having a large cache of solid, raw, and extractable minerals (Okoye, 2012); Apart from the Northern African nations, Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, just to mention a few that had experience full formation, of the west – central development experienced, those in Nigeria are not mistakable, Nok cultures in Northern Nigeria, Ile – Ife and Benin – city in the west central part of the country, with Ile – Ife being compared to ancient Rome, (Folkers, 2010); Among other African nations. Urbanization reached Nigeria, perhaps first, with the Yoruba communities having over 5000 in – dwellers as at 1931, in more than sixty percent of the towns. Plus having statistical correlation with regions like France, although not in the category of London, Germany and United States which at the time had larger urban populations, (Folkers, 2010)

Although, having to look into all known Nigerian cultures seem clumsy, hopeless and time wasting backward voyage. It is perhaps the way to present an empirically objective narrative that will guaranty credible and meaningful bases for generating a wholesome framework.

2. THE ORGANIZED PAST

The knowledge of architectural history gives a comprehensive overview of the cultural past. Dietrich, (2005) explains that it provides understanding of the cultural force that shaped architectural development. It is perhaps appropriate to begin this section by stressing that in the discussion of architecture it is necessary to consider context as a type of architectural boundary within which we interrogate history. Context, as a basic variable, determines methods and originality of architectural products, either in practice or in theory, in basic terms, the set of buildings deemed fundamental to an architect's historical education (Leach, 2010). In the same vein, historical narratives in architecture is strongly affected by context and method (Arnold, 2002). It is the basis upon which coherence is measured, the distinction between myth and reality. Architecture is different from history, however, there are overlaps between the two (Arnold, 2002). She explained that the tangible evidence that comes through time – *history*, are the buildings – *architecture*.

In definite terms, buildings are objects of history. They are the embodied theories of history, possessing physical and artistic functions that offers explanation (Lorenz, (2016) Whyte, (2006)). William's argument was based on three assumptions; that architecture, like every human actions can be understood as text. That architectural interpretations involve variety of media and genre.

Lastly, which seem more closest to this discuss, that as a structure evolves from conception to construction and then to interpretation, both the intention of the creator and the meaning comprehended by the interpreter may change, hence, the need for proper orientation in the area of architectural education that only architectural history covers. As part of the challenges faced in the attempt to clearly define and organize the past, (Amole, 2015) explained that like the global community architectural history encounters similar bottle – neck. He explained that the most critical of these bottle – necks is in the defining of which buildings may or may not be included because of their disparate forms. Forms ranging from traditional to modern and sub – categories in between such are popular, spontaneous, vernacular and primitive.

Having attempted to earmark the boundaries of architectural history, it is perhaps convenient to briefly highlight the suggested approaches as literature reveals. To start with on a broad note, the endeavour in architectural history is synonymous to that in historic research. They are both interested, chiefly, with the latent meaning of history (Leedy, 2010)². Rightly suggesting the two possibility concepts in historic research; the chronological ordering of events with facts and quest for meaning, the later he referred to as historiography and opined that it should be the focus of every historic researcher. He further presented history as a dimensional phenomenon which should or perhaps be measured by time and space, thus, his approach; historical time and historical space.

² Paul D. Leedy, Professor Emeritus of Education, is the author of Practical Research: Planning and Design. He explained that events do crystallize into meaningful clusters. As there are cause effect in the physical world, (like Newton's Third Law), so cause and effect are present in the historical world, pg 87. Architectural history, like historical research seeks to interact with objects; buildings and the builders – as archival evidences, from the past with the aim to interpret.

Dietrich, (2005) presented a section which reflected a societal and cultural periods (dimension) of development. An overview approach which chronicled the guilds and formal education that forged the profession of architectural practice, principally, of the western world. His work operationalized the time and space dimension of historical organization, however, with detailed socio – cultural consciousness. The description covered areas of influencing condition of time and space, needs, forms, expressions as the categories.

Leach, (2010) presented a cast of architectural history as a study that draws on the widespread general interest and investment³ in architecture, monuments and cities while being subject, at a professional and academic level, to disciplinary rigours. The catholic nature of his scope, range of approaches and examples through which he considered the intellectual limits that affected previous architectural historians further lends credence to his work. In the second chapter of his book, he discussed the several strategies by which historians have narrated the past and systematize them according to critical categories. The approaches, as he described them are; style and periods, biography, geography and culture, types, techniques and theme and analogy.

3. CHALLENGES TO ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY

Of a truth, the architecture of a society is the direct reflection of the architectural education of the same. Since independence, Nigerian education, in general, has steadfastly concurred to the colonial format, even to its peril and unforeseen lack of continuity and loss of identity. It questions the very essence of clamour for sovereignty. If after so many years of discussion, at least 25 years of deliberation on matters of reviewing architectural education (Amole, 2015), there are still several pointers at lots of alienated products in the teaching and practice of architecture. Students' view of mastery and competence is in the euphoria of designing skyscrapers and superfluous composition.

Things, there are no affordable materials and technology available to achieve. And in practice, designers' sole concern – circle are about, financial returns, societal status, materials, finishes and mere looks without minding weightier matters of space – function details and user in the passage of time. All therefore points at the fact that architectural education in Nigeria, is still in its stage of infancy and needs strict guides and principles to attain maturation particularly because its resultant effect will be seen on the societal urban imagery.

Although the European and American influence on the architecture of Nigeria is strong. So far, the view had been Eurocentric (Folkers, 2010). A view so strong that it is perceived as the benchmark for measuring the appropriateness of our architecture without any effort to acclimatize the ideals to suit the African context. Learning from civilizations that have gone ahead is not out of place, rather we ought to reconfigure the ideals to suit the local context. Modern architecture started out as a style in response to cultural issues that emerged after the wars in the western world. It however gained acceptance because Bauhaus school⁴, with the help of industrial technology, came up with design methods that were pragmatic. Designs that enhanced mass production as against the previous lavish decorations the previous era supported. It will therefore be paramount to take a critical look at history, not mere looks at the archival evidences – buildings..., but at the events and how those building responded.

³ Andrew Leach, Professor of Architecture, in the introduction chapter of the book, described architectural history as a popular subject, therefore receiving a great deal of non – specialist attention and wide spectrum of audience patronage. He therefore suggested two categorisations for its practice; academic and non – academic.

⁴ Bauhaus

Like (Amole, 2015) expressed, 'framework will come in handy if history is to take its place in practice, theory and teaching'. Then we have to look back with the aim to reevaluate the cultural happenings of the times to find meanings which perhaps will help in coining out a workable framework. From the questions; how did we get to this point? What are the main reasons for the agitation? And what are the issues in the debate on what to do about architecture and architectural education? It can be suggested that Nigerian architecture is where it is today because we have neglected the issues of culture, relegated vernacular buildings and related idea to the rear thereby losing our identity. Acting as though history is a plague to be avoided.

Of the several departments of architecture in the country and practicing architects of renowned achievement, it is still a fact that the Nigerian (African)⁵ community have not made any global significance (Folkers, 2010) in terms of theoretical style and identity. Perhaps because we have often produced clones of western ideas. The reason for the agitation(s) is therefore that recent events, on both the professional and educational platforms, have revealed that if nothing is done to redefine and dredge the boundaries of architectural education and practice, the encroachment by the allied bodies will continue till the discipline is reduced to crumbs, losing its societal place and value. The main issues in the debate therefore should be of historicity – having historical properties, theories – principles and criticism – link, both in education and in practice. Historicity because as literature suggests, history is an important to the enterprise of architecture (Amole, 2015) and architectural history provides the understanding of cultural forces that shaped architectural development (Dietrich, 2005) Nigerian architecture should be thought with sound historical properties

Theory because with it clear delineation is made between history as the object and the knowledge of that object. In simpler terms, legitimizes history in practice (methodology) and knowledge (epistemology) (Lorenz, 2016). Criticism, because it is what links history to theory and the bridge between architecture and the user. The right blend of these three will be pivotal⁶ in the creation of the appropriate version of the architecture that will be Afrocentric and culturally reflective of our identity.

Of the foregoing challenges elicited from the literature about defining a workable conceptual framework, an amalgam of few were chosen. For the issues they addressed were theoretically similar and basic, thus, a better stance for argument. First is that Folkers, (2010); Okoye, (2012) who both addressed issues of identity. In his introductory chapter, Antonio basically expressed, that the circumstance of African architecture lies in the fact that African thinkers have not taken bold leaps into serious research works relating to global issue that concern (the identity of) African architecture, especially after the Second World War.

He submitted that till mid twentieth century, the current trend of historical writings on Africa is still largely based on the Eurocentric view of the continent. Further stressing that a written Afrocentric history has long been lacking⁷.

⁵ Nigeria is at the center of this discussion as (Amole, 2015) suggested that it holds lots of cases that lessons can be drawn from which will be relevant in the overview of Africa as context, especially in terms of culture.

⁶ Literature had posited that architectural history is the platform upon which issues of identity, culture and the refocusing of the architecture of the third world country can be (constructively) addressed (Amole, 2015).

⁷ Antonio Folker's highlighted that African believed in oral history. Which is logically and generally agreed to be primitive and backward, especially in the western world.

He buttressed his claim a rephrased African proverb *'The hunter will remain the hero of the chase, if the lions do not tell the tale.'*⁸ Ikem approached, as he described it, his motif was to clearly elucidate what architecture actually is in practice, having compared it to art, science or medicine. However, as (Amole, 2015) retorted that the embodiment of precedence is history. The (sound) knowledge of it is basic for students and practitioners, both for the understanding of existing forms and formation of new ones. And indeed in the conception of future forms of architecture.

The second basic challenge is the issue of content and scope. Okoye, (2012) in his paper, debated on the identity of architectural history in selected countries⁹ in Africa. He examined motifs presented as attendant questions which, according to the article, were caused by the major influences on architectural history of the African continent.

Modern architecture as a movement began theoretically as architects and engineers harnessed emerging technology to respond to the societal needs. The world, particularly Western Europe, had to recoup from the war, North America from the great fire¹⁰. All of these created a longing for divergent design philosophy. This successful epoch is what we celebrate as an architectural style. Unlike the western world, who learnt by diligence and study through the process of history, picked up cues and inspiration for advancement from the ashes of the societal plague. Africa seem to be too growth driven that she ignores the process of documenting and interpreting her own defining events¹¹ by obviously assuming that modern styles can be directly superimposed into her culture as consolation and evidence of advancement at no cost. African's challenge, perhaps, is in the inconsequential disposition to the understanding of time and the information cached therein. A possible light to grey area can be drawn from (Amole, 2015).

He posited that conscious effort to create identity or interpret architecture in context is dependent on the understanding of local (events and culturally informed) architectural histories.

As part of reaction to the issues on scope and context as challenges to architectural history raised from the literature. Amole, (2015); Okoye, (2012) presented the situation of disparate and numerousness of the existing forms respectively. However, this are realities that cannot be avoided primarily because demographic balance is dynamic. A constantly increasing variable and a challenge that must be handled. For the challenges to be surmounted as the optimism expressed by Amole, (2015), pragmatic step ought to be taken in the aspect of identifying the various forms and documentation made as preludes for the subsequent historical processes. It should be noted also that for this effort to gain scientific credibility and genuineness to the culture they are to represent, empirical procedures have to be followed. This therefore suggests that the hard and long way, perhaps might be the only way.

⁸ The original proverb shared by Chinua Achebe; Nigerian – born novelist, poet, historian and novel – laureate, in an interview with 'Parish Review' in 1994. *"There is that great proverb – that until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter"*. Excerpt from Annalisa Quinn's article on *Chinua Achebe and the Bravery of Lions*, March 22, 2013.

⁹ Ikem Okoye, 2012, discussed the debates using Nigeria, Ethiopia, Ghana and South – Africa as countries of study

¹⁰ Chicago fire in 1871, which left a flourishing civilization desolate, creating a platform for a fresh and perhaps, better start. And the two great wars; 1914 and 1939

¹¹ Okoye highlighted World War II as a major influence on Africa as a continent. Leading to nations insisting on independence and the collapse of colonial administration.

4. CONCLUSION

The framing of architectural history in the Nigerian context should be perceived as a voyage, suggesting a long, hard but goal achievable adventure to the past to cross the dots. Although literature present evidences of a lingering period of theoretical discuss with little implementation. The dynamic nature of history to accumulate physical evidences as time passes makes it a sensitive endeavor requiring prompt attention. The sooner we theorize a workable framework, the sooner we cross unto the path to regaining our cultural identity and continuity. Literature¹² reveals that traditional architecture has always been sustainable and the concept seems not to be a new discovery as recent Eurocentric history suggest.

This essay therefore presents that the portfolio of schemes taught in architectural history be broadened to include more studies and criticisms on theoretical issues about buildings of native construction – vernacular architecture, in direct relation to the local culture that produced them. Frameworks to be conceptualized to focus on culturally informed buildings such as palace, religious buildings, markets, domestic buildings. All at the first tier of architectural education at the University such that local culture can be understood as a distinguishable ensemble – style, early. Culture is an issue of the heart and mind, therefore it is expressed in behavior and attitude. In art as material and science as method, all of which are functions within architectural operations. The more we understand our culture, the more we will understand our architecture and the presentation thereof.

¹² In the book foreword of *Modern Architecture in Africa* by Antonio Folkers, Nnamdi Elleh, highlighted that Folkers evidenced the assertion. Although the term sustainability had not been coined then, African builders were evidently much more advanced and responsive with / to the realities of our geographical location than we are today

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