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Art as a Tool in the Built Environment

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Igbaro, Joe - Fine Arts Department, Adeyemi College of Education, Ondo

Akinbileje, Thessy Y. - Department of fine and Applied Arts, Obafemi

Awolowo University, Ile-Ife

E-mail: akinbilejethessy@yahoo.com

Umoru- Oke, Nanashaitu - Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Obafemi

Awolowo University, Ile-Ife

Abstract

Man's interaction with the environment dates back to creation. The interaction of man with its environment has been crucial to the continuous existence of man in relation to solving the fundamental or basic needs of food, shelter and clothing. This has been woven into a web of different cultural environment. This type of cultural environment includes palaces, shrines, markets, malevolent forest and places of social interaction. Man retreated into the protective warmth of cave while the environment threatened his survival (wild animals and weather condition). It was at this period that attempt was made at artistic creation. From this natural habitat developed the more comfortable houses that have been built up till today. Basically, traditional African society operates in environments that advance healthy living, moral values and steady communal growth. They built many houses that are architectural master pieces and decorated them aesthetically

without architects and professional designers. The cities and villages were set up according to the dictates of the environment within which they lived without town planners, yet, some of them can be likened to streets in Amsterdam (Denyer 1978). The absence of the architects and town planners were adequately catered for by artists (carvers, moulders, painters and other craftsmen). Today, many of our towns and cities are reflections of great wealth without commensurate aesthetic value, while some others portray signs of poverty of ideas and skilled men because art has been neglected. The thrust of this paper is to access the invaluable role that art plays in nation-building through the built environment that we can call our own. It also emphasized the significance of the role of professional artists in the support of a reliable and conducive environment, which was very prominent among the traditional people.

Introduction

An aesthetic, healthy and well built environment is the creative yawning of every man. This is based on his desire to live a full and fulfilling life. The built environment include houses, roads and bridges, streets, planted trees, shrubs and grasses as well as art works in parks, gardens and civic centers. Osuntogun (2005:2) observes that the built environment goes beyond the physical improvement of structures and infrastructures. It includes materials, technologies and finance used, and encompasses issues such as urban transportation, urban arts, aesthetics and graphics. Every society in traditional Africa sought after this ideal of human development. This they did to enhance the physical, emotional as well as the spiritual well being of their members. They among others ensured that every man had a befitting place of abode for himself and his family, through communal work force.

Among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria, a system of cooperative work force which is known as *owe* was used both in sourcing for materials and the execution of the building projects. Those that were less privileged were assisted morally and financially by members of their family and relations both far and near.

The traditional African societies through art made the best use of the available materials that were peculiar to their localities to enhance a well built environment. The materials they made use of included wood- timber and poles, bamboo, corn stalks, grasses, palm fronts and leaves, raffia, creepers, mud and stones. With skillful and painstaking artistic knowledge,

they produced master pieces of architecture without architects. (Denyer 1978).

Houses were built according to the prevailing environmental circumstances such as weather, land location and the availability of materials. Stones were meticulously arranged where stones were in abundance (Plate 1), the high and dry lands attracted the use of mud with linear decorative motives, mouldings and paintings in the exterior as well as the interior of buildings (plate 2). The Interior were painted and decorated with local materials, such as Kaolin (clay), limestone (chalk) and other materials as well as periwinkle seeds, animal waste, and from various leaves, roots, wood and seeds. Charcoal and soot were also other sources of getting natural pigments for the decoration of the built environment.

The grassland communities had intimately woven huts with the use of bamboo, palm/grass reeds and creepers with thatched roofs which produced objects of great aesthetic appeal (Plate 3). In locations where timbers were in abundance, such as the rain forest regions, beautifully carved poles and statuettes were used for house posts, lintels and door panels (plates 4 & 5). Among the Yoruba, city centers were built for various outdoor activities to enhance healthy communal living. Folarin (1993:203) observes that the courtyard, with its overhung roof of ten supported by beautifully carved wooden columns served as a stage for theatrical performance, dance, troubadours, concerts, poetic and chanted recitals, also for birth, marriage, funeral and memorial ceremonies.

The palace of kings and chiefs which were the first point of call in any Yoruba community, and those of the affluent in the society were cynosure of eyes as they were decked in artistic rendition by artists who skillfully turned otherwise simple structures to edifices of all times with many of them turned to national monuments (the Deji of Akure's palace is a national monument). Among the Hausa, the exterior of important buildings were decorated with low relief designs which include modern elements such as clocks, cars and bicycles. The interior of typical houses were decorated with paints and brightly coloured enamel and ceramic wares that are artistically set into the walls and ceiling. Heathcote (1976:75) observes that the established Hausa ornamental motifs and techniques such as the embedding of coloured enamel wares into the wall or ceiling was a foreign influence. This decoration according to Willet (1971:120) had been from East Africa where it spread to Northern Nubia and thence Western ward through Muslim Sudan to West

Africa. Nonetheless, the extensive display of this artistic splendor is the hallmark of these cultural heritages.

The impact of the traditional potters in the built environment was of great significance in the past among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria. As early as around the first millennium B.C., their technology had advanced to the extent that pottery products were used in building pavements (kalilu et.al. 2006:41) Potshards were used to pave roads, a technology that later developed into tiles making and recently interlocking blocks or paving blocks that are used to tile façade. There are quite examples of such potshards pavement in and around Ile-Ife town. Of a particular reference is the potshard pavement at the National Museum, Enuwa Ile -Ife which was named after the first and the only female Ooni of Ife. Other areas include Lafogido compound also in Ile – Ife, Owo and Imesi- Lasigidi in Ondo and Ekiti States respectively.

However, the advent of industrial revolution in Europe of the late 19th century witnessed mass-production of industrial goods. This led to the quest for marketing the goods which necessitated the flooding of Africa with cheap building materials. These materials include corrugated roofing sheets, nails, harmer, sawing tools, cement and colourful decorative materials, which outwitted weather conditions that had hitherto determined the type of houses, built in a particular geographic location and the type of decorations used for the interior and exterior parts of the buildings.

Gradually, concrete pillars replaced wooden house posts which subsequently undermined the activities of wood carvers. However, Yoruba in their insatiable quest for aesthetic expression turned to other set of artists who emerged on the scene when the Brazilian slave returnees brought with them a new form of architectural embellishments (the Afro-Brazilian architecture). Mouldings that were meticulously done on door posts and pilasters as well as balustrades were introduced (Plate: 6).

But then, old habits die hard says the English maxim, hence door panels and frames are still beautifully carved with great symbolic representations while wrought iron grills and gates with traditional concepts were introduced (plate:7). Folarin (1993:204) observes that traditionally, the Yoruba of Western Nigeria have been interesting assimilator of foreign influence. Rather than let an invading force create a successful attrition of their culture, they have until recently, consistently woven that intrusive element into a *mélange* of cultural innovations, thereby, under the right conditions,

revitalizing their own culture and enriching it further. These mingling of ideas led to the emergence of three major types of architecture in our cities, towns and villages (the traditional, the Afro-Brazilian as well as the Afro-colonial) until recent times when ideas are blended with modern concepts.

Art and Built Environment in Contemporary Times.

The fast moving events of our times no longer make it easy to have a straight jacket classification of contemporary buildings found in most of our cities. There are diversifications of materials, designs and techniques of execution due to wide contacts by individuals and corporate bodies, which led to borrowing and mixing of cultural ideas and ethos.

However, there is something curious about many of the houses built in our cities, towns and villages today; art has been neglected to our cultural disadvantage as it seems that most of our local architects and town planners have lost touch with our cultural past, as they seems to have abandoned the peculiar roles that art plays in the built environment.

Roles of Art in the Built Environment

The peculiar roles that art plays in the community cannot be over emphasized. This is exemplified in the fact that our fore-bears lived with art for centuries (Adejumo 1998: 5) before the advent of Islam and Christianity which sought to wipe out our traditional past. However, Christianity and Islam have been with us also for centuries, yet, our traditional arts have survived the onslaught of these religions because of undeniable but noble roles that art plays in our lives. Art is now being better understood to be a cheer vehicle for the promotion of every religion just as it has today enhanced the promotion of Christianity and Islam.

When the built environment witnesses artistically embellished architecture with symbolic meanings, built city centers are lined with statues of heroes and heroines, articulately well laid cityscapes with monumental structures, the society will reap the dividends of cultural emancipation and live in peace and harmony with nature. These benefits include healthy living, educational advancement, tourism for economic advantage and what have you.

Art as Enhancement to Healthy Living

A sound reasoning is the product of a sound mind; a sound mind is the product of a relaxed mind while a relaxed mind enhances a sound body and healthy living. Art in the built environment enhances healthy living through a positive engagement of the mind with creative works and artistic symbols.

These artistic representations are meant to beautify the environment and to be enjoyed as leisure that produces a relaxed atmosphere for the individual after a very hectic day.

The mind under a calm atmosphere enjoys a moment of profitable intellectual discuss with the art piece that engages his attention. This may invariably develop in him a transitory moment of recovery from an illness, develop a sound mind and healthy living habits (pers com. with Dr Adejumo, 2008). The Obafemi Awolowo University campus for example has beautiful sceneries of the built and natural environment that are capable of promoting sound mind and facilitate sound academic development. Fajuyigbe (2007:224) observes that creative arts (if given a chance) could be used to restore and enhance the beauty of O.A.U. campus, thus making it aesthetically sustainable indeed. Art works are produced and displayed to provide a stress-free intellectual engagement for the viewers, to which they can constantly resort to without exhaustion. This could be the case with the massive production of wood, bronze and brass works of African descents that are found in various European museums and art galleries. The visual arts have been there for over a century yet; they are more relevant and meaningful each passing day.

Nerves are soothed; emotions are calmed when exposed to exquisite art works and moulded decorations of domestic architecture (Plate 8). Lawal (1982:8) observes that art has continued to enrich the quality of living not only through the creation of basic necessities of life such as shelter, utensils and clothing but also in making them more pleasant in appearance and use.

Art as Motivation of the Mind to Educational Development

A skillful and articulate artistic embellishment on display in the built environment would elicit the mind to educational discuss as viewers attempts to answer questions that prods the mind about the works. Some works are for historic documentations and may be for cultural preservation. Further inquiries to resolve generated issues with experts may ensue, which may lead to a robust dialogue that will further expand the frontier of knowledge and ultimately enhance the capacity for nation building.

Promotion of Tourism for Economic Viability

The impact of tourism on national economy is non- negotiable, therefore the localization of art work(s) in a particular environment attracts visitors regularly from within and particularly from outside the environment. This not

only enhances public recognition of the community or state, it also promotes the economic viability of such communities. Many tourists have over the years been attracted to Washington D.C. by the statue of Liberty. The stone figures in Esie, Kwara State, for example, has been upgraded to a standard tourist centre, that attracts inter-continental, intra-regional and domestic tourists to the town. The importance of the visual arts for economic vitality as suggested by Aniakor, (1999: 147- 160), if well packaged would be a viable tool for nation building.

Tourists have to pay certain prescribed fee to enter such venues as the National Museum Lagos, National Gallery of arts Lagos and Abuja, and Sculpture gardens in other places in Nigeria. They would also have to pay for hotel accommodation when they have to keep the night. The Oke Maria in Oka Akoko, Ondo State, where the statue of Maria attracts Catholic faithful and other fun lovers is a good example. The Renaissance artists literarily turned the city of Florence to a cynosure of art and a world tourist centre of their time. (Igbano 2007: 40).

Oyewole et al (2006: 34) observes that in tourism, art seems to be more effective than other industries in generating employment and income in the less privileged economy. It is therefore time for Nigeria to diversify from a monolithic economy. Art and tourism are viable alternatives.

Promotion of Cultural Heritage

Every generation of people all over the world cherished cultural mementoes. Art is the most potent tool for the promotion of cultural heritage and the preservation of family values. It is heartwarming to note that Nigeria through art has contributed a lot to the world cultural heritage. It is however sad to note that Nigerian youths are fast becoming cultural imbeciles addicted to foreign tastes (Nwoko 1998).

A man who has lost touch with his past would definitely lose sight of, as well as loose bearing with his future. No wonder, our youths seem to be drifting away from societal values and fast into vices. Art is our cultural tool to national renaissance, we must value it. Olurode and Olusanya (1994:1) observes that in several respects, the West have had to rely on its past to further advance the course of progress. They stated further that if the realization of human development is to be sustainable, then it cannot afford to ignore or relegate cultural heritage to the background, which has now dawn on the global community and its key functionaries.

Our cultural past has to be harnessed in order to project into the future of prosperity that is devoid of Western manipulations. Visual art is the means. However, this is still far from being the situation in Nigeria as we seem to be making more efforts to be Western in our cultural approach, thereby delineating ourselves and especially generations after us from inherent peace and satisfaction derivable from our cultural practices. Herein lay the call for the resuscitation of artistic elements in architectural designs which are crucial aspects that we relate with daily, both at the conscious and sub conscious levels. Art in Africa is a true reflector and magnifier of the social as well as the spiritual essence of man which are all embedded in traditional architecture.

Heroes and Heroines are honored.

Excellent deeds of the citizenry must be excellently recognized, rewarded and documented. Statues of our past leaders who played noble roles and soldiers who lost their lives for national survival adorn our cities as a mark of national recognition and appreciation of the invaluable roles they played in national development. The statues of Moremi in Ile-Ife, Chief Obafemi Awolowo in Lagos, Ahmadu Bello in A.B.U. Sculpture Garden Zaria, Queen Amina of Zaria, Emotan of Benin, the unknown Soldiers, and the portraits of our past Heads of State in the National Gallery of Art in Lagos, and Brigadier Ademulegun in Ondo, are a few examples to mention.

The commissioning and display of these works is to inculcate in our younger generations the value of selfless service to the nation, and that they would likewise be honored if they serve the nation creditably (Plate 9). Most of these heroes and heroines statue also serve as a paradigm upon which the basic identity of the society is based (Ononeme, 2001)

Promotion of Personal Dignity

A feeling of self worth is an insatiable desire in every human being; therefore, a man could sacrifice many things in order to establish a sense of self worth and acceptability in the community. A person who's house or compound is enhanced with a good landscape and artistic representation(s) would enjoy a high sense of dignity and self worth in the community, his house would be a cynosure of the eyes of passersby as well as those who come from distant lands on educational tours, to appreciate the beauty and freshness of the environment which art has provided.

Trager L. (2000:5a) observes that a lecturer at Obafemi Awolowo University once described to him how in the 1990s he would travel to Ijebu-Jesa simply to view a house that had recently been built there, at the time, he did not know who the owner was but was impressed with the design and beauty of the structure that he would take visitors to see it.

The little contributions here and there ultimately enhance national development, as individual efforts is adding value to the environment through art, which builds up the nation.

Promotion of Spiritual Life

Man is inherently desirous of spiritual fulfillment hence; he is attached to one form of worship or the other. Man has since being using art to enhance his mode of worship and communion with the spirit beings in order to establish in him a state of spiritual well being. Shrines, church buildings and mosques in our cities and villages are enhanced with one form of artistic design or the other having symbolic meanings that are reference points today. Sculpture, ceramic wares, textiles or any other form of art rather than being antithetic to Christianity or Islam has turned out to be a strong vehicle for the propagation of these religious tenets. The Oye Ekiti workshop experiment of Father Kelvin Carol has led to the revolution of church architecture, particularly the carved door panels in Yoruba community (Plate 10).

Conclusion

The concept of nation building can reside only in a healthy and sound mind. The little contributions of every individual add up to collective efforts that lead to national monuments. A well built environment is the collective efforts of town planners, architects, builders, decorators a other artists and artisans. These collaborative efforts could promote healthy living. In traditional past, the affluence of a man is exemplified in his ability to give artistic value to his residence and the environment according to his financial capability. This invariably adds value to the community.

Today, the affluent most often display their wealth by the number of houses they have, the number of cars parked in their compounds and their voluminous flowing *agbadas* and *babanrigas*.

The houses in our urban centers which are attractive enough to command attention are just for a while as they are cheer display of modern technology that is totally devoid of cultural values. Technological feats as we know come daily in passing phases, each may not live through our time. Such is a

mansion in Ile-Oluji built in the 1970s by a business mogul which today has lost every sense of relevance as new technologies has over taken it. In the 1970s, it was the talk of the town, but then, it has since lost out of reckoning. However, if it has been replenished in artistic build-up that is commensurate with the financial clout of the owner, it would have probably been declared a national monument or viewed at educational level as an element for cultural studies, bearing in mind the gigantic size of the building. No wonder, Dmochowski (1990: VI) observes that every architecture must grow out of its root.

It is therefore imperative for our architects to be encouraged and motivated by their creative instincts to incorporate our cultural values in designing domestic architecture and the planning of our cities to give art her place to thrive in order to add value to our national life, as more and more architects all over the world are turning to vernacular architecture for inspiration. A true and acceptable architecture must originate from one's own culture even though it may assimilate materials from other cultures.

Plate 1: A church built with stones at Igede Ekiti (2008)



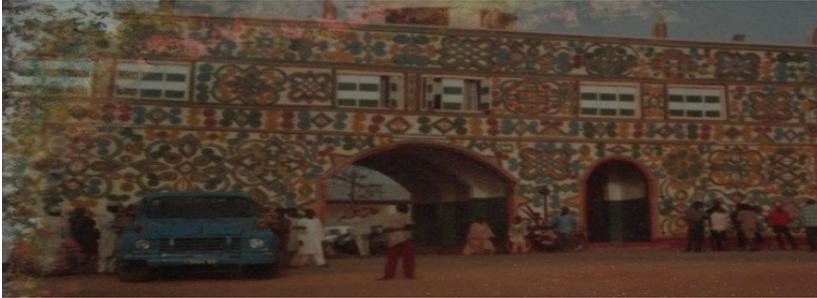


Plate 2: The Façade of Emir of Zaria's palace with moulded designs (1997)



Plate 3: House built with raffia Palm (Courtesy, Susan Denyer)



Plate 4: Carved house post, Owa palace Ilesa (2007)



Plate 5: Carved door, Akure (2008)



Plate 6: Afro-Brazilian designs, Ilesa (2007) Plate 7: Afro-Brazilian design, Ilesa (2007)



Plate 8: A house with moulded decorations, Akure (2008)



Moremi Statue, Ile-Ife, (2007)
(2008)



Plate 9b: Brigadier Ademulegun, Ondo



Plate 10: Carved door, Anglican Church Idiaagba-Titun Akure (2007)

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