

Language and Identity: engendering a Fifth Age in (West) African architecture

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Introduction

This paper concerns the political importance of establishing one's own environment. It is an unremitting assault on what the author views as a fundamental lack of confidence. It seeks to redress the balance by suggesting a way of looking at our environments and in short to produce a more honest and appropriate approach to the built environment. In the context of a rapidly changing world there is a need for self-knowledge/ presentation; defining oneself honestly and truthfully; not as a poor imitation of somebody else; half-learned lessons gleaned from films and magazines; a constant striving towards the 'other', the 'new', which in too many cases means the 'foreign'. It is crucial that Africa's architectural youth tackle this problem so that their explorations might engender the self-confidence required in this fast changing world.

The ultimate objective of this particular line of enquiry is to develop a tool or framework of tools that will aid the production of authentic, culture-specific solutions to the built environment. The resultant architecture we call 'The Fifth Age of African Architecture'. Whilst the Futurists built little, their forethought indirectly shapes the way we build cities today, not just in Europe, but across the world; the city of Barcelona evolved a unique way of seeing itself and presenting itself to the world in the context of cultural and political separation from the Castillian centre. So must we, in the age of African political and social evolution.

Preamble

A traveller in 1500 would have remarked on the basic similarities existing between cities across the civilised world. Of course, there would have been marked regional and cultural differences, but the level of technological advances would have been roughly equal, whether one was in Mexico, Antioch, or Turin.

At the dawn of the 21st Century, we find that these similarities have all but vanished. It would be difficult to find cities more different than Paris and Lagos; Delhi and New York; London and Bridgetown. Evidently, much has changed in the intervening six hundred years. Nations and empires have risen and fallen; the very definition of nation has changed; new technologies have provided opportunities beyond the reach and indeed the comprehension of our forefathers; some nations have sped ahead in development, whilst others still languish in medieval poverty. Our traveller would be astonished at the differing lifestyle of say, a Frankfurt banker and a Guangdong rice farmer. The differences are such that it would be difficult to envisage a situation where all nations attain similar levels of prosperity. Unfortunately, in the haste to join the wealthy nations, we are only too happy

to equate anything that is local as inefficient, poor quality or just shameful. Eastern Nigerians have a term, 'Igboti', which is used to describe any person or thing that is not westernised or foreign. It is a derisory term, whose root is the word 'Igbo', the name of a numerous West African ethnic group. Travelling in the area recently, a decrepit tin-roofed structure was pointed out to me with pride: the first house in the area to have a tin roof. The tin roof may have provided superior (if noisy) performance in the rainy season, but its main advantage was that it signified that the owner was of the first rank (after all, did the white men who rule us not have tin roofs?). The insulating qualities and low cost of the traditional thatch were forfeited in this race toward 'modernisation'. A trip to the business districts of any developing capital would reveal highly glazed buildings that fight the effects of the sun with a battalion of energy-guzzling plant, and pump out tonnes of noxious fumes and effluents that poison the people and the land. The desire to gain the accoutrements of modern life is proving very costly, in ecological and cultural terms.

In broad terms, I feel there is a need to develop a site-specific approach to design in these contexts; one that doesn't necessarily ape the international modern style visible in cities from New York to Kuala Lumpur. There is a need to devise strategies for working, living and building that are peculiar to each location; that are not capital intensive; that are based on an environmental/ cultural harmony; that make the best use of available resources; that have at their root local culture and tradition as opposed to international blandness (although it must be remembered that aspiring people tend not to like being reminded of where they have come from, i.e. a village dweller from Burkina Faso would probably choose a modern-looking concrete and glass house to one that was constructed from mud bricks: our task is to at least present him with an up-to-date and much-improved version of what he already has).

In response to the question: is there such a thing as 'African architecture'?, the answer is emphatically, 'yes'. But is this architecture fulfilling its purpose? Is it harmonious? Is it meaningful? Does it accommodate the aspirations of the people it is meant to serve? Is it legible to those who use and see it on a daily basis? Does it project the power and individuality of the constituency it is meant to serve? Is it specific to its location? Does it trace a link between ancestral time and the modern world? Is it indigenous or is it alien? Is it imposed from above or does it emerge from real trends and requirements and usages? Is it honest? Does it engender self confidence? In short, is it appropriate?

At the risk of making a crass generalisation (and with apologies to the handful of exceptions), the answer to the questions posed is, 'no'. So we might now ask ourselves, what must we do to turn these negatives into affirmations? What must we do to create this appropriate African architecture?

To answer these questions, I intend to run a brief overview of the sources of the various manifestations of African architecture. The overview is necessarily over-simplified for the purposes of this discussion. (Now, it goes without saying that Africa is a large and diverse continent, and what holds true in one part may not in another. Therefore, I will confine the current study to a part of west Africa, as a touchstone for the continent. The part in question is Lagos, Nigeria.) It may be possible to view the historical development of west African architecture in four distinct phases which, for reasons both of ease and the dramatic effect, are outlined below.

The Four Ages

Of these four distinct stages, examples from each category will be suggested, and the lessons that may be derived, extrapolated. This might give pointers as to the future direction an African architecture might take.

- 1 The first age: traditional pre-industrial.
Characterised by low technology; local materials and cultural references; derogatorily called, the 'mud hut'
See figures 1 and 2 below.
- 2 The second age: colonial.
Whether imposed as a new way of building to show the power of the colonisers; or as a badge of urbanity by those Africans returning from the New World.
Characterised by the Brazilian-style houses on Lagos Island and Badagry
See figure 3 below.
- 3 The third age: post-colonial international modern
The heroic age of African modernism. Modernist architects, mostly European but consisting of some excellent Africans, offering modernist solutions. These are generally handsome, exciting and functional buildings, and to date have formed some of Nigeria's finest architecture.
See figures 4 and 5 below.
- 4 The fourth age: post-independence home grown architecture
This age saw a decline in the overall standard of architectural quality, as the schools of architecture were run down. There are but a handful of noteworthy buildings of this era; including works by Demas Nwoko. The lack of direction and indeed confidence has led to a situation where imitation and mimicry is common: the Rivers State governor's lodge being built (in 2004) in a 'European cubist' fashion, according to a boastful press release; the Minister for Energy erecting a copy of a Richard Meier building in the heart of metropolitan Lagos. (Although Africa is not alone in this apparent lack of imagination and self esteem: I have just heard of the recent construction of a seventeenth century French chateau in China.)
See figures 6 and 7 below.

So what then, is this Fifth Age of African Architecture?

The Fifth Age

We are now on the threshold of the Fifth Age of African Architecture. What does this entail? What must it entail? The honest answer is, I don't know yet. But it is clear that at least part of the answer lies in the preceding 'ages'.

The first age represents a sort of purity, in that it is an authentic architecture, built by and for Africans. It is the synthesis of concerns about dealing with the local environment and

social and cultural mores; within its very fabric are locked a repository of traditions, myths and legends. The people knew it, knew what it meant and knew where it came from.

The second age brought with it a new sense of the possible. The returning Brazilians and Sierra Leonians introduced new concepts that the Africans were able to grasp, adapt and modify. The colonial power could bring to bear a centralised approach to planning and an industrial approach to building. It also added to the canon of environmental responses available to the African constructor.

The third age, the post-colonial international modern, has produced undoubtedly the finest buildings in West Africa to date, and this fact is something that subsequent generations of West African architects should be extremely ashamed of. But they should also take instruction from these buildings in aesthetics, in monumentality, in solidity, in craftsmanship, in architectural consistency, and above all in originality. The major criticism of this type of architecture was its imposition from above; from its general failure to study, understand and accommodate the way people actually live. But the expatriate architects cannot be blamed for that. In fact, their compatriots were making much the same mistakes across Europe and America.

The fourth age, with limited exception, has little to offer. Characterised as it is by poor mimicry and clumsy and inappropriate copying, this has merely added to the urban blight many of our cities currently suffer from. But there are exceptions. Demas Nwoko has already been mentioned; and there are also instances of the development of a bottom-up vernacular based on a fusion of first and second age architectures.

Whilst not every building constitutes 'architecture', buildings should tell a story, and that story must be legible to the society in which it is located. If motifs are to be used, then let them be understandable and familiar.

In addition to this, the key to the future of African architecture lies in the adoption of what amounts to more than a common sense approach to architecture. The Fifth Age should accommodate cultural patterns; use local materials; based on and incorporating local land use and tenure mores; buildable using local knowledge and skills base; local climate; local political conditions; local availability of capital; cultural patterns; local municipal infrastructure (or its lack) and environmental concerns. addresses the traditions as well as the aspirations of the local population; Stuff that takes into account the status quo, and not some idealised utopian condition

Fela Kuti once said,

"In 1969 I was completely almost unintelligent because I had no original African contribution to make.....An African meeting an Englishman should have something to offer. He shouldn't be offering a English thing to an Englishman....Africans should be taught to be able to contribute their own mind, their own culture, their own philosophy."

Similarly the current and future generations of architects practising in Africa should strive to achieve the true manifestation of a great architecture and urbanism.

The Egyptian architectural pioneer Hassan Fathy said of tradition,

"Let (the architect) not suppose that this tradition will hamper him. When the full power of a human imagination is backed by the weight of a living tradition, the resulting work of art is far greater than any that an artist can achieve when he has no tradition to work in or when he wilfully abandons his tradition."

And,

"If the architect walks soberly in the tradition of his culture, then he must not suppose that his artistry will be stifled. Far from it; it will express itself in relevant contributions to the tradition and contribute to the advance of his society's culture."

Hassan Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor*, University of Chicago Press, 1973

Zbigniew Dmochowski, in his excellent volume, 'An Introduction to Nigerian Traditional Architecture', implores the architectural youth of Nigeria to

"...seek inspiration from the glorious past of their building art. Through the intense study of the functional planning, remarkable construction and splendid form created by their ancestors, they will develop an instinct, an almost subconscious capacity for shaping space in a way that would be their own continuation of the work done by their forbears."

They should not repeat the ancient patterns, nor copy them in any revivalist attempt. They should act as did the courageous designers of the Italian Quattrocento, inspired by the old national achievement, yet fully aware of being in the service of their contemporaries. In the same way the present day Nigerian architects should fulfil their duties to the 20th century Nigerian society which is their own. Accepting tradition as the starting point of their creative, independent thinking, they should evolve in steel and concrete, glass and aluminium, a modern school of Nigerian Architecture."

Zbigniew Dmochowski, *An Introduction to Nigerian Traditional Architecture*, The National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1990

Conclusion

This then is a clarion call to the architectural youth. Why try to look like London or New York when our buildings and cities – imbued with a new sense of self - can be better than either? As a point of honour we must create a vibrant home grown modernism. Fluid and expressive, it must on the one hand unlock tales of the antics of our forefathers; and on the other stride with vigour toward its pre-ordained destiny. In short, it must draw a line (by no means a straight one; perhaps a spiral or nautilus, but a line nonetheless) between the unsullied 'authenticity' of the ancients, and the tangible requirements and aspirations of current and future generations. We must remake our buildings, our furniture, our art and our cities with these notions underlined. It will only be then that we will achieve the

maturity that will allow Africans to stand shoulder to shoulder with all comers, secure in the knowledge that they have full and honest ownership of their environment.

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Figure 1: The First Age: Afin Akure, plan

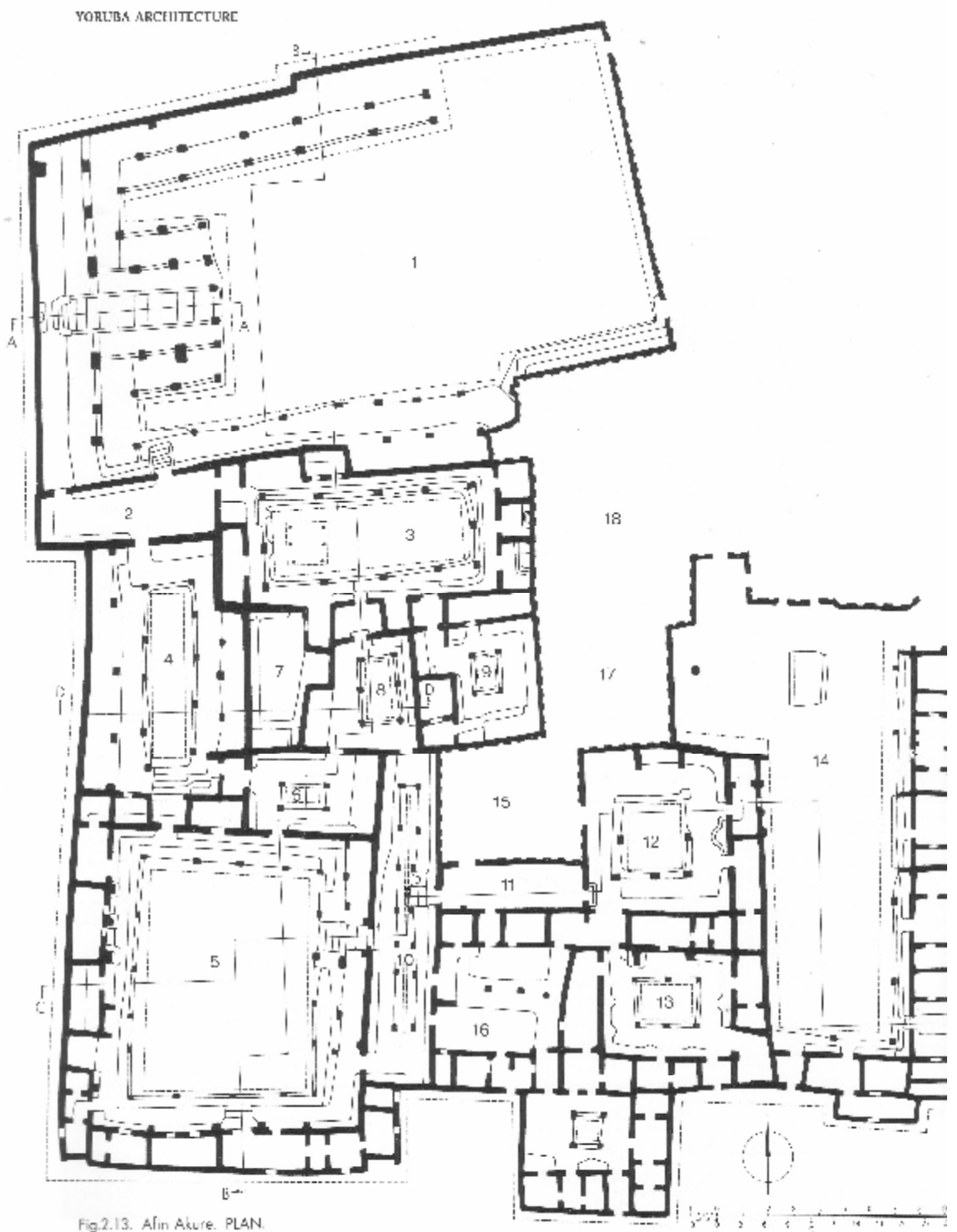


Fig.2.13. Afin Akure. PLAN.

Figure 2: The First Age: Afin Akure, courtyard

YORUBA ARCHITECTURE



PL2.17. AKURE. Afin. Courtyard 5, S. side

PL2.18. AKURE. Afin. Courtyard 3.

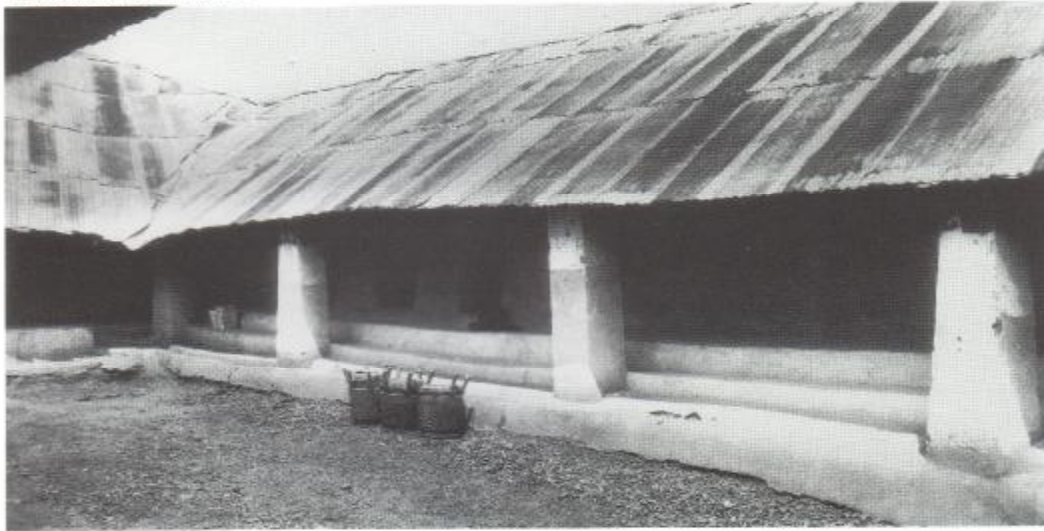


Figure 3: The Second Age: Brazilian style houses, Badagry, Lagos

*Pls 24. to 26. BADAGRY.
Brazilian style houses.*



Figure 4: The Third Age: Alan Vaughan-Richards, Housing, University of Lagos



Figure 5: The Third Age: A Ifeanyi Ekwueme, Laboratory Building, St Gregory's College, Lagos



Figure 6: The Fourth Age: Demas Nwoko, Dominican Institute, Ibadan



Figure 7: The Fourth Age: Demas Nwoko, Demas Nwoko House, Asaba

