

**FROM TRADITIONAL RESIDENTIAL  
ARCHITECTURE TO THE VERNACULAR:  
THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE**

**By**

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## ABSTRACT

The African continent is extremely diverse in culture – despite its comparatively small geographical size. Correspondingly, its indigenous architecture is far from homogeneous, and even though, all over the continent there are outstanding examples of what may be termed international-style architecture, for that very reason, they are far from being representative of the people’s folk building culture.

Most of the literature available to a global reading public on the subject-matter, has been produced by non-Africans, and from frequently non-architectural perspectives; as such, they may not fully capture the socio-cultural/ socio-spatial import of African builtform. African architects are yet to convincingly define what constitutes architecture in their own contemporary local contexts, and showcase it.

The paper focuses on Nigeria’s residential building culture. It examines the influences of British colonial architectural practices and the Afro-Brazilian style (which they facilitated), on the traditional architecture of the south. It sets forth the transition to vernacular practices and the transformations engendered – particularly in the light of rural, semi-urban and highly-urbanized variants. It is submitted that what comes closest to a vernacular prototype, is a floor-plan comprising four rooms or more, directly opening out on to an exaggerated centrally-positioned corridor, with conveniences and utilities to the back of the house. Architectural embellishment, initially highly ornate in the original Afro-Brazilian stylistic prototype, has become extremely minimal. “Meaning”, both in its functional and symbolic contexts, is presented as being inherent in both the traditional and vernacular expressions of Nigerian architecture, north and south of the country. Of necessity, such meanings are also undergoing transformation, and are culturally-determined.

The paper queries the rationale behind expecting there to be an “African architecture” – as there are no other continental parallels. Rather, where stereotypes do exist, they are either culture-based, or pertain to a *limited* geographical location – *not* a continental sprawl. As such, the paper submits that African architecture should be appraised from the view-point of such pre-disposing phenomena as cultural background, or/ and socio-physical factors generating such – as is the case with the architecture of other regions of the world.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The traditional architecture of much of the African continent has been critiqued and fairly well-documented. Such records have been put together from interest perspectives as diversified as those of explorers, missionaries and anthropologists, to mention some. Necessarily, such compilations have been the handiwork of non-Africans. Works on the folk architecture of the continent – as understood and interpreted by indigenous specialists from the various sub-regions – post-date these early records, and are very few indeed, when compared with their western counterparts. In this context, the works of Hassan Fathy stand out. Studies dealing with symbolism and general meaning inherent in form, material and construction techniques of various contemporary African builtform, are even more difficult to come by; again, they are largely the products of non-indigenes, and mostly from research perspectives peripheral to mainstream architecture.

Cumulatively, it is discovered that there is a sad dearth of documentation accessible to a global reading public, at the level of individual African states, of issues regarding the generation of their own brands of architecture, and their peculiar interpretations of space. What records exist are mostly of a governmental, policy-informing nature, and are often “classified” material. In Nigeria, every single one of the foregoing posits, holds true.

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

### **Ethnographic Background**

The Nigerian nation-state is far from homogeneous in both its socio-cultural structure and ideological orientation. With projections from the 1993 census, giving a population figure of over 120 million people, the nation comprises 36 states (and a Federal Capital Territory), and is further sub-divided into six geo-political zones. Along religious lines, it is roughly structured into a predominantly Muslim north, and a predominantly Christian south; in both sub-regions, traditional religious practices also go on, side by side. There are about 400 ethnic groupings, speaking over 300 local dialects and upholding highly-varied social practices and concepts. However, the dominant ethnic groups are Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. The country was under British colonial rule, essentially between 1861 and 1960, when it gained independence. Traditionally, the local people are farmers, specializing in food-crops, until the advent of the colonialists, who introduced such cash crops as cocoa, rubber and palm produce. Today, the nation’s foreign revenue is largely derived from petroleum.

### **Nigerian Traditional Architecture**

Given the great diversity of ethnic groups (and the attendant multiplicity of cultural practices), a comprehensive study of the traditional builtform in Nigeria is obviously outside the scope of this paper. An attempt will, however, be made to give an overview of materials, forms and techniques generating the traditional forms of architecture – especially with respect to the three major ethnic groups previously mentioned.

The Hausa, in the north, constitute the largest cultural group in that part of the country. Traditionally, they are characterized by large social aggregations (as evidenced by such cities as Zaria and Kano), and are arable farmers (growing cotton, groundnuts

and food crops), as well as big-time traders (trading in agricultural produce, textiles, leather-work and basketry). They are predominantly Muslims, with religious dictates conditioning mode of dressing, social interactions, and even affecting spatial disposition in their traditional architecture.

Hausa indigenous architecture is famed for its ribbed vaulting, doming and sculpted and painted external murals. The buildings are composed of individual egg-shaped units of adobe (locally termed *tubali*) which have been earth-plastered, presenting a monolithic appearance. A typical homestead comprises both rectilinear and circular spatial units, linked together by wall segments constituting a perimeter wall. Roofing, essentially, consists of linking shallow domes and vaults (evolved from an intricate arrangement of lengths of palm-tree timber, termed *azara*, overlaid by processed laterite) together by small stretches of earth, laid relatively flat; rain-water run-off is led out of corrugated metal spouts fitted into the framing parapet wall. (Dmochowski, 1990 (1)).

The essentially agrarian Yoruba, in the southwest, have traditionally lived in large urban social groupings, even before colonization (Ferguson, 1970; Eades, 1980; Laitin, 1986). They are famous for their art – particularly bronze-casting, terracotta and wood sculpting. Traditionally animists, they have largely embraced Christianity; however, the practice of traditional religions and Islam is amicably accommodated alongside. Since the southern parts of Nigeria were readily penetrated by the British colonialists, Yorubaland profited early by western imports such as formal education and trade in cash crops.

The traditional Yoruba compound (*agbo'le*<sup>1</sup>) comprises individual units (*oju'le*<sup>2</sup>) brought together in a cohesive whole, guaranteeing appropriate spatial relations which have implications for social interaction. Each of these traditional basic units of the homestead was derived by pacing a standard 10 feet (*ese bata mewa*), lengthwise and breadth-wise. A major feature of this aggregation of spaces is the courtyard – an essential component for environmental control and socio-cultural exchanges. A typical compound is angular in its disposition, generally approximating a rectangle, but could be very irregular in outline. As with Hausa architecture, there is a clearly-defined entrance into the homestead, but with the Yoruba, there is invariably another (back) entrance, leading to ancillary facilities such as lean-to sheds used as kitchens and conveniences. Generally, these dwellings are constructed monolithically as cob structures; more northerly Yoruba, however, also have recourse to the wattle-and-daub construction technique. In both instances, properly cured earth is used as wall fabric, while *gbodogi* (sarcophrynium) leaves in the south, and elephant grass fibre to the north, are used for roofing, over hardy, termite-resistant timber (such as various palms). Roofs are invariably high-pitched hipped, or hip-and-gable.

The Igbo, in the south-east of the country, are well-known for their industry, and for being particularly enterprising in the area of trade and general business. Traditionally, they live in small, clan-based settlements, with political administration necessarily decentralized. (However, since the colonial intervention, very large commercial towns have evolved, such as Aba, Onitsha and Enugu). Though the system of “indirect rule” the British applied elsewhere in the country did not work with them (Laitin, 1986), the same immediate benefits generally enjoyed by the south, were available to them. Apart from trading, they are prolific farmers, producing yams, cassava and palm-oil in large quantities.

Igbo architecture is very similar to that of the Yoruba, in terms of material options and construction techniques. However, in terms of spatial configuration, there are marked differences. Where the Yoruba traditional compound favors massing, a typical Igbo homestead is composed of discrete units, ranked in importance based on their relative disposition to the *obi*, the compound head's hut. Also, as is to be expected (based on very dissimilar cultures), symbolism and general meaning attaching to the archetypes, greatly differ. This shall be further explained, later.

## **MODIFYING INFLUENCES**

In the foregoing, reference has frequently been made to a colonial presence, at some period of Nigeria's history. The issues and events leading up to the phenomenon, need not be expatiated here. Suffice it to say that the country was irreversibly impacted (both positively and negatively) by the experience. Apart from intangibles, impossible to measure (such as an attitude some refer to as "colonial mentality"), there are quantifiable and visible legacies dotting the nation's landscape. These include physical infrastructure – on both a planning and architectural scale – as well as various institutions.

### **Direct Colonial Intervention**

To underpin their administration, the British colonialists needed various institutional and physical infrastructure. As such, warehouses, banks, schools, hospitals, residences, etc, were built; these were serviced by rail, roads, bridges, piped water, electricity and other amenities. The architectural forms – completely different from what was on ground – were variously expressed as timber-framed buildings, masonry structures (employing either fired brick or stone), or composite construction. Based on the misconception about the cause of malaria (Okpako, 2005, 4-5; Osasona, 2006, 13, 14, 19), even single-storey buildings (bungalows) were raised above the ground, and residential buildings were well-serviced by porches and verandas, catering to the preferred forms of leisure, social exchanges, and even daily domestic routine (Osasona, 2006). Two-storey construction was also an innovation promoted by the colonial building culture, producing the first of the archetype in Badagry, Lagos, in 1852 (ibid. 5).

Of necessity, building materials were imported from Britain (consisting of cement, slate roofing tiles, corrugated metal roofing sheets, processed timber and synthetic paints, among others); local unskilled labour was harnessed to expatriate expertise, to effect these building forms. The resultant acquisition of building skills, coupled with readily-available prototypes to copy from, gradually produced a crop of local interpretations of the colonial archetypes – particularly with respect to residences. In effect, traditional building practices became "refined" by more durable building materials and techniques, and more "sophisticated" formal expressions.

### **Colonially-aided Modifiers**

Apart from the direct intervention of the British on the Nigerian built-scape in terms of imposing their own archetypes, they were also responsible for creating the enabling environment for other influences to come into play. Of particular note are the building activities of the *Agudas* (also termed *emancipados*) and the *Saros* of Lagos – two distinct socio-cultural groups of returnee slaves to Nigeria – whose advent was

facilitated by the British, in the wake of their abolition of the Slave Trade. Both these groups had distinct “quarters” in Lagos (Akinsemoyin and Vaughan-Richards, 1976, 17).

The Agudas, repatriates from South America (notably Brazil), were “master craftsmen who used their creative abilities to proliferate the ornate Afro-Brazilian style, of Portuguese antecedents” (Osasona, 2006, 14). The so-called Afro-Brazilian architectural style is characterized by multiple storeys (could be as many as three main), an attic, a double-loaded, exaggerated corridor (*passagio*), porches/ loggias and copious sculpted ornamentation (Marafatto, 1983). The architectural embellishment affects stucco-work (expressed as mouldings around window-openings and portals, quoins, plinths, column capitals, shafts and bases, and relief murals), as well as woodwork (generating carved balusters and door panels). They were mostly Catholics (*aguda* being colloquial Yoruba for Catholic), and a lot of their creative energy was directed at the construction of churches, in the Gothic revival style, as well as stately mansions for well-to-do merchants in Lagos.

The Saros were former slaves who had been repatriated to Freetown in Sierra Leone, and whose emigration to Lagos had been facilitated by the British. They were renowned merchants, specializing in two-storey structures with living quarters on the first floor, and retail/ wholesale outlets and administrative spaces on the ground floor (Osasona, 2006, 21). They were particularly adept at framed timber construction, with carved fascias and fretwork linking the tops of columns framing verandas. Both these classes of externally-conditioned African builders, in their own turn, influenced the local building practices of the Nigerian populace.

## **VERNACULAR NIGERIAN ARCHITECTURE**

Stated simply, “vernacular architecture” is that brand of architecture resulting from the traditional being conditioned by external forces. Very often, such influences – of a socio-political/ socio-economic nature – constitute diffusions from a “more advanced” to a “less developed” culture. According to Amole (Amole, 2000, 17), it is “post-traditional” – what comes after the traditional (or what the traditional progresses to be). A major point of departure between the two brands of architecture is that, whereas the traditional was essentially spontaneous (with designs and construction techniques “inherited” i.e. carried over from one generation to the next), and the actual building process a community enterprise devoid of specialists, with the vernacular, there is greater individuality, more conscious decision-making, and specialization resulting in division of labour (Osasona, 2005, 16-17).

Other salient characteristics of vernacular architecture - or “folk architecture”, as it is alternatively called – includes the fact of its having evolved from a process of selective borrowing: the traditional becomes exposed to other stylistic influences, and over time, certain features, certain dispositions, become subtly imbibed and “communalized”, while others are rejected. Also, because the process is gradual, communally-generated and so, participatory, the architectural brand evolved is spontaneously identified with, and enjoys wide acceptability. In the words of Rapoport, it is “more closely related to the culture of the majority, and life as it is really lived, than is the grand design tradition” (Rapoport, 1969, 2). Additionally, it “shows an instinctive command of particular materials” (Hitchcock, 1963, 11), and generally fosters

spontaneous socio-cultural interactions – as opposed to producing alienation in its users (Rudofsky, 1961, 1; Osasona, 1989, 87).

As previously stated, colonial architecture, as well as the building practices of the Saros and Agudas (especially), greatly influenced the architecture of Nigeria, particularly in the south. The colonial presence was of course, more widespread, as their administrative machinery, supported by physical structures, was established nation-wide. Over time, even the activities of the classy Aguda builders penetrated the hinterland to such other Yoruba towns as Ijebu-Ode, Abeokuta, Ibadan, Ile-Ife and Ilesha, to mention some (Osasona, 2005, 17). Because of the high-level craftsmanship required to effect certain aspects of the construction (particularly the ornamental ones), only the wealthy could afford to engage the services of these building specialists; hence, their clientele was necessarily exclusive, and though commissions were well-paid for, they came few and far between.



*An example of the Afro-Brazilian. Though it features an attic and stucco ornamentation, in its general configuration, it is a-typical of the Brazilian. Lagos.*





*Brazilian Style: several generations down, with less decoration and no attics.  
Tenement housing, Ibadan.*





Gradually, a trend became noticeable: less ornate – and consequently more affordable – examples of the Brazilian style came to be developed. With this lowering of costs, the appeal (which had always been there but could not be backed up by financial means) became even greater. The original Aguda master craftsmen had passed on their skills to a crop of local apprentices who, on attaining their ‘freedom’, began to popularize their trade, and took up commissions farther and farther from Lagos, moving deep into the hinterland, and progressively introducing the Brazilian Style farther from base. A second-generation version of the Brazilian Style (“the Afro-Brazilian”), featuring less ornamentation, and eliminating the attic – gradually came on the scene.



*Afro-Brazilian two-storey, multi-family (rooming) house. Ile-Ife.*

Local artisans in the hinterland now had models to directly copy from, and over many years, they eventually generated an even further watered-down version: a derivative of the traditional massed compound prototype – broken down into distinct housing units – in which the traditional courtyard was replaced by an extra-large central corridor, and consciously integrating ornamentation. (The model that has become most recognizable as a substitute for the traditional compound is single-storey



*Most popular variants of the Afro-Brazilian, featuring mural moulding at eaves and at plinths; also on column capitals and balustrades. Ipetumodu.*



It should be remembered that the bulk of the activities of the Emancipados and the Saros took place in Lagos and its immediate hinterland i.e. significantly in Yorubaland; also, that Yoruba traditional architecture has been described as an arrangement of various rectilinear spaces, linked together, resulting in a compact mass punctured by one or more courtyards (Osasona 2002a, 1; 2002b, 123). See fig. 1. Again, the description of the Afro-Brazilian architectural prototype (as having a spatial layout predicated on an exaggerated central passage way) should be recalled. Juxtaposing all these important factors, it becomes obvious that for Yoruba traditional architecture to “progress” to a vernacular state, more radical transformations than a cosmetic application of moulding and murals, have had to occur. In the first place, the compact mass of the typical compound has given way to a loose aggregation of discrete units. This progression has produced certain morphological transformations even at the level of the new discrete units: instead of spaces looking inward to the courtyard(s) and being ranked from there in increasing levels of privacy, spaces now open out on to the central corridor (ranked semi-private), which in turn, connects with front and back verandas, ranked semi-public (See fig. 2). In both the traditional and vernacular schemes, the bedrooms are the most private spaces. Occasionally (particularly in tenement schemes in the vernacular context), some rooms inter-connect; however, commonly, each room still opens out onto the corridor (figs. 7 & 11). Fig. 2 represents a schematic of the popular version, while figures 5-11 show actual building schemes.

#### SCHEMATIC LAYOUTS OF TRADITIONAL / VERNACULAR HOUSE-TYPES

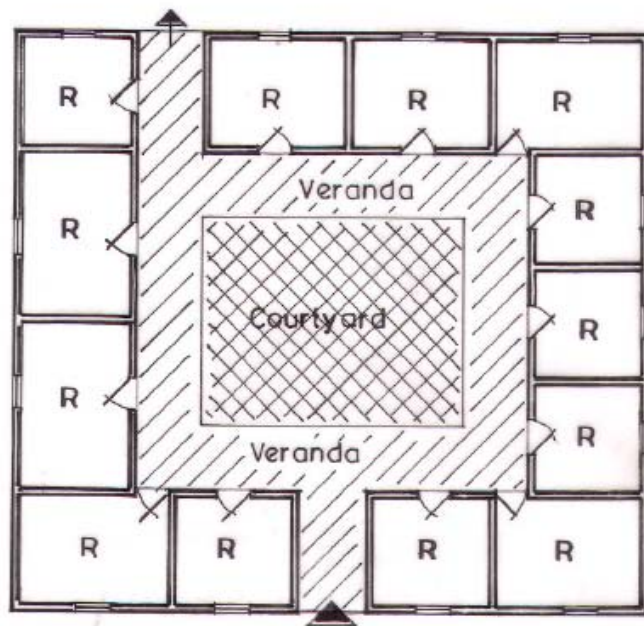


Fig. 1  
Schematic Of Typical Yoruba Compound Layout



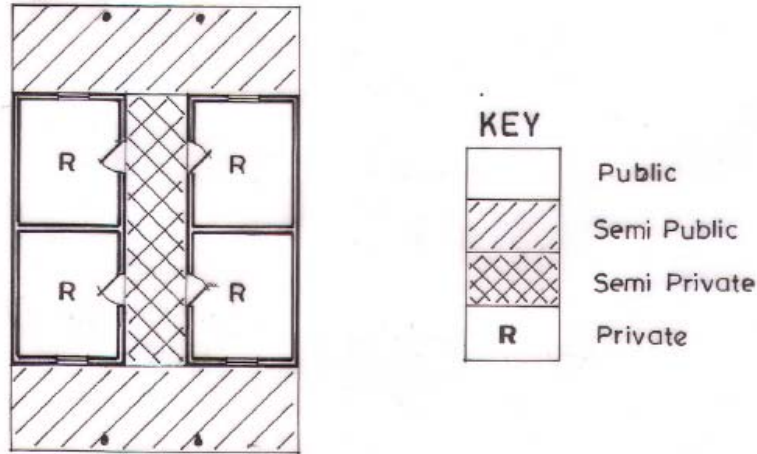


Fig. 2  
Schematic Of Basic Vernacular House-Type Layout

In parts of Nigeria other than Yorubaland, vernacular architecture, more in the spirit of the colonial bungalow, is predominant. In addition to being raised about 4feet (1.2 metres) from the ground, there is the inevitable front porch, connecting to the living-room. However, harking back to the Afro-Brazilian, the “face-me-I-face-you”<sup>3</sup> buildings of Lagos and other Yoruba towns have gained such great popularity, as to be proliferated in other major cities, all over the country. Even in more rural settings where surveys have been conducted on more contemporary buildings in the traditional mould, interesting variants of the basic scheme have been discovered. These variants basically cater to a bringing under the same roof of household functions hitherto relegated to the back of the house, such as storage and cooking spaces – Igwe, 2002. In some instances, even bathing is accommodated; the line is firmly drawn at integrating toilets into the main building, however. (Figs.3 & 4).

### COMPOUND HOUSE TYPES

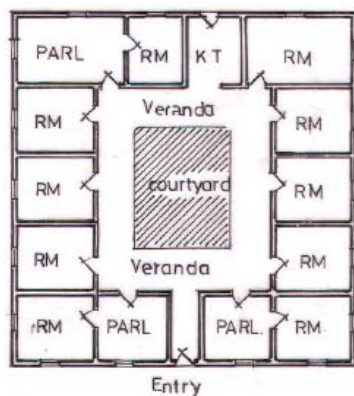


Fig. 3  
COURTYARD PLAN TYPE  
1: 200 Akinmoorin (Oyo)

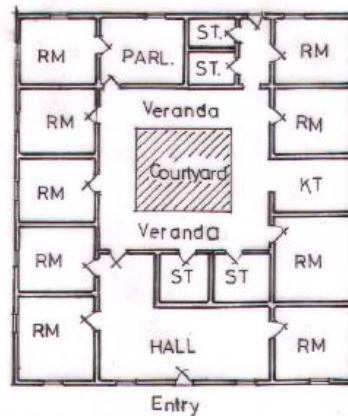


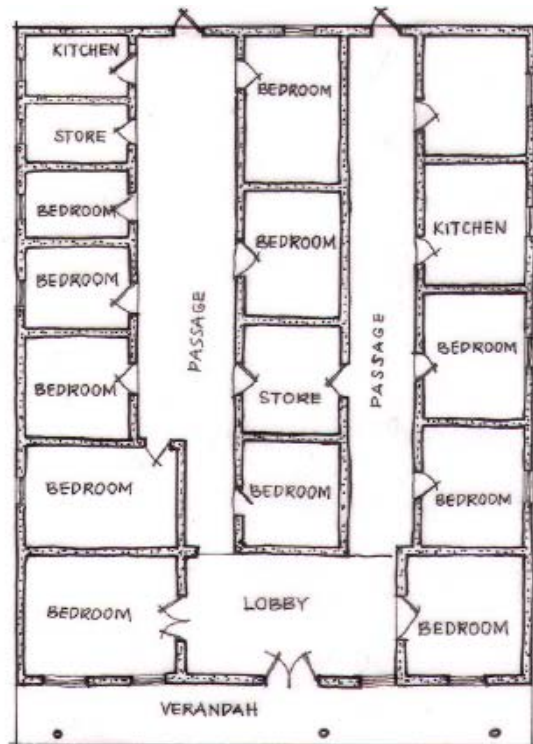
Fig. 4  
COURTYARD PLAN TYPE  
1: 200 Iworoko (Ekiti)

Source : Igwe ( 2002 )



**Fig. 5**  
**BASIC CENTRAL CORRIDOR PLAN TYPE**  
 1: 200 Ejirin (Lagos)

With the perennial housing problem in the nation's urban centres, the basic, modestly-ornamented single-storey vernacular prototype is also undergoing metamorphosis. (Even in less urbanized settings - like Ile-Ife - variants have sprung up, sporting parallel, double-loaded corridors (figs. 6 & 9), catering to the living-trading habits of the average Nigerian (fig. 7), or mimicking the "flat" layout of rentable accommodation in larger cities; fig.8 (Osasona, 2002a).



**Fig. 6 : Ile Aguro; "Double-Corridor Layout" 1: 200**  
**(Ile-Ife)**

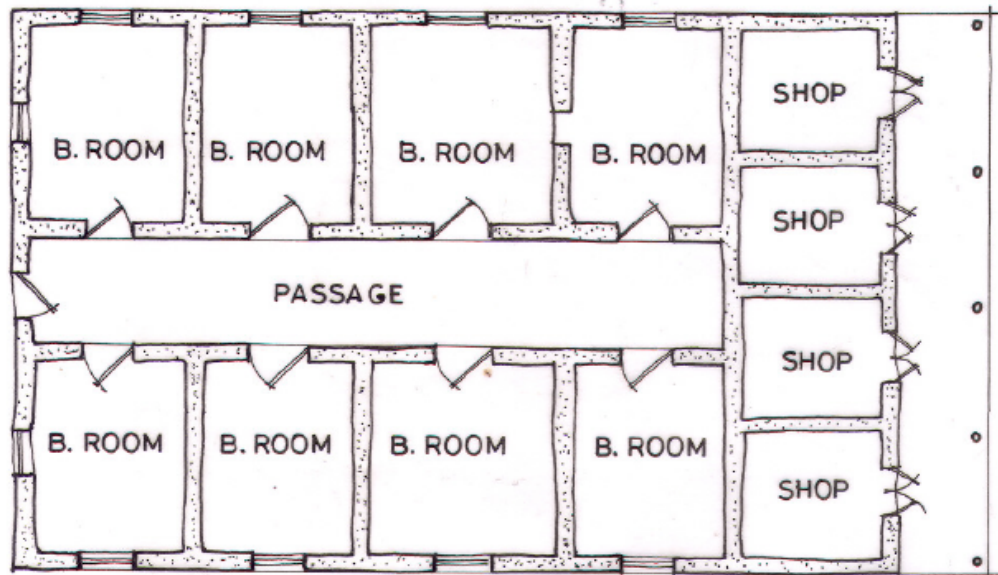


Fig. 7: Mixed-use Layout.  
ALIKIN COMPOUND  
(Ile-Ife)

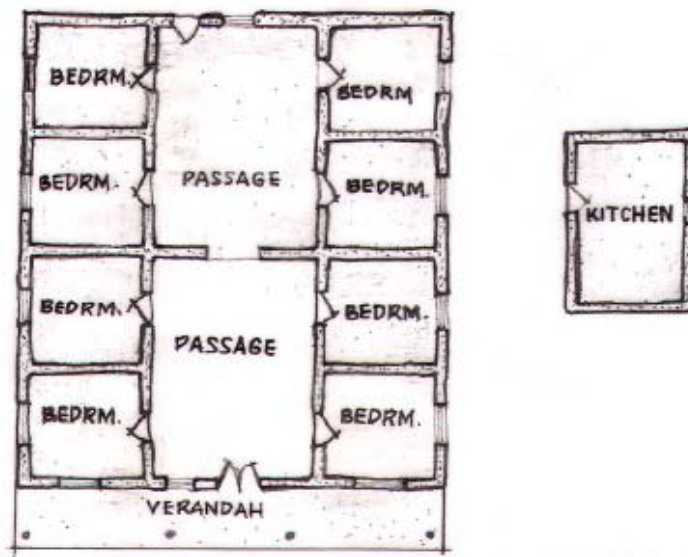


Fig. 8: Ile Aguro : "Flat" Layout (Ile-Ife)  
1: 200

Figure 11 also typifies this pseudo-flat, to some extent. In the major cities of the country, these transformations are more dramatic: from a multiplicity of parallel corridors in tenement apartments (which invariably lead to now semi-detached kitchens and conveniences in the back regions), innovations range through "room-and-parlour"

arrangements (still indirectly related to the central corridor) to a progressive elimination of the corridor, generating, in some instances, row-housing. (See fig. 10).

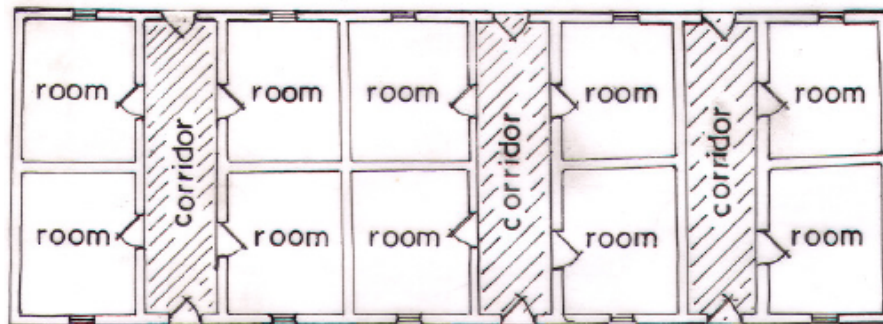


Fig. 9 ;     MULTIPLE CORRIDOR PLAN TYPE  
1: 200     Ejinrin (Lagos).  
Source: Igwe (2002)

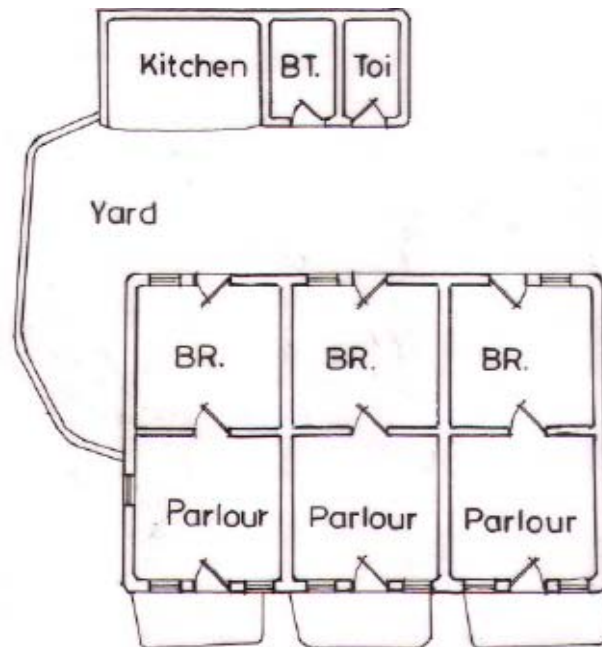


Fig. 10: ROWHOUSE PLAN TYPE  
1: 200     Topo (Lagos)

Under the intense pressure to meet the housing needs of the teeming urban populace, the vernacular archetype is fast dispensing with architectural embellishments, and beginning to be austere and overtly utilitarian. Multi-storey (two- to three-floor) variants in cities



like Lagos, Aba, Onitsha, Owerri, Ibadan, Ilorin and Kaduna have become increasingly popular, with utilities (and alternative staircases) relegated and tenuously attached to the back of such buildings.

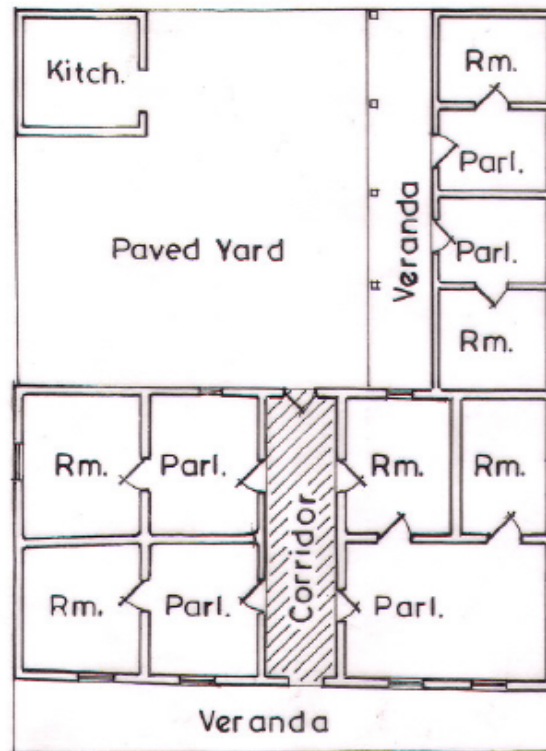


Fig. II : CENTRAL CORRIDOR PLAN TYPE  
1: 200 Ikoya (Ondo)  
Source: Igwe (2002)

What meanings have come to be infused into (or be inferred from) these brands of architecture, within the respective cultural settings, are still unfolding.

## MEANING IN NIGERIAN RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE

More often than not, the “meaning” of a thing (or phenomenon) is embedded in the function it serves, or the need it meets. In this context, function may be rated as being synonymous with explicit meaning. However, when “meaning” becomes less related to perceived function – that is, when it becomes obscure – this covert (or implicit) meaning takes on the significance of symbolism. Environmental psychologists have been convincing in their posits concerning such phenomena as the effect of the use of colour, disposition of space, and the incorporation of light and other natural elements, into the built environment, on the human psyche. Speaking specifically with respect to architecture (and more generally, to the built environment), perhaps the most significant issue is the meaning attached to personalized space – whether personalized at the level of

the individual or community. Conclusively, inherent in what every culture builds for itself, is meaning – both functional and symbolic.

### **Meaning in Traditional/ Vernacular Builtform**

From a line of research pursued several years ago by the author, it was discovered that, in the context of traditional archetypes, meaning attaches essentially to form, materials and techniques, among certain ethnic groups in Nigeria. As such, meaning, in the light of spatial configuration, material preferences, and modes of construction, with respect to specific cultures, will be discussed here.

Among the Ifes of Yorubaland, the *akodi* is socio-culturally significant. In spatial terms, traditionally, it was a commodious area adjoining the major courtyard (impluvium) of the residence of the family head, and innocuously serving as the visitors' reception. However, to the indigenes, "the *akodi* is the rallying-point for all descendents of the compound head, for the discussion of family matters, and for major family festivities" (Osasona, 2002b, 123); no self-respecting lineage grouping did without it. Despite the breakdown of the builtform traditionally accommodating it, the *akodi* has retained its socio-cultural relevance among the Ifes, and has been transformed in the vernacular context, to a "family hall" – part of an independent structure that could also accommodate shops and other retail outlets, and which could even be articulated on two floors (Mills-Tettey, 1992; Osasona, 2002b).

The Bini (or Edo) of the mid-west belt, have a traditional houseform very similar to that of the Yoruba, consisting of many rectilinear spaces disposed around several courtyards serving essentially as impluvia. The main impluvium (termed *eghodo*), traditionally served as a unifying space to which family members had recourse for the performance of religious rituals, marriage and other ceremonies, evening entertainment, the settlement of family disputes, as well as the planning of war offensives (Osasona, 2002b, 124). According to Agbontaen et al (1996), it was traditionally believed (and commonly boasted) that if a family could muster enough men to fill the *eghodo*, they had enough to win a battle. In a subtle, less quantifiable way, the *eghodo* also symbolized protection: a fugitive, once he took refuge in the *eghodo* of his home, was considered safe; hence the Edo adage "missiles cannot kill someone who takes refuge in an *eghodo*" (Agbontaen et al, 1996, 60).

The *obi* of the Igbo, apart from being the personal space of the family head, could be several other socio-culturally significant things, as well. If the family head also happened to be the oldest male direct descendant of a common ancestor, he was also the clan head, and his *obi* automatically became a rallying-point for representatives of the whole clan (Umeukeje, 1972). According to Cole and Aniakor (1984), the *obi* is both an idea and a physical structure. There are invariably several shrines within the *obi*, as well as ornamentation, consisting of open-work wood panelling (particularly if the compound head is titled). With the perforations in such decorative screens believed to represent the benevolent, all-seeing eyes of revered ancestors, and the compound head's priestly role at the various family shrines, a synergy is produced that imbues activities conducted within the *obi* (including copulation) with spiritual symbolism: the *obi* thus becomes the physical expression of an esoteric link between departed ancestors and yet-to-be-born generations.

The Tiv of the Middle Belt, have three traditional expressions of builtform: a reception-hut (*ate*), a sleeping hut and a grain-storage facility. Covert symbolism, however, attaches only to the disposition of the *ate* and is inherent in its ability to portray the genealogical set-up within a compound (as distinct from its roles as daytime lounge, reception, workspace and overnight guest quarters, among others). The *ate* invariably adjoins the sleeping hut of a compound head. Where only one is visible, it attests to the sociological structure being simple, and the family itself, relatively young and limited in size. However, in an older, more complex family set-up, a dumb-bell arrangement (featuring two sleeping huts linked by an *ate*) testifies to maternal brothers having the space in common i.e. the disposition of multiple *ates* signifies the presence of siblings from different mothers, and an enduring polygamous set-up.

The *zaure* of the traditional Hausa homestead (like the Tivvi *ate*), to all intents and purposes, is a multi-purpose space. It is the first port of call in the compound, and is the particular haunt of the *maigida* (the compound head), who receives callers, and executes whatever his home-based craft, there. With stringent Islamic injunctions forbidding casual interactions between the sexes (particularly with married women and those in “*purdah*”), it has subtly become the homestead security-post, where callers are screened. With non-alignment of outer and inner doors, visual continuity is broken – further guaranteeing utmost privacy of the inhabitants within the compound. Only highly-favoured males, or those who constitute family, ever get to go beyond the *zaure*. Rather than be just a space for social interactions, the *zaure* is thus a socio-religiously symbolic space, defining level of social acceptance (Osasona, 2002b, 126).

So far, architectural meaning, as defined by space, has been the theme of the discussion. The case-study of the Kamberi of the New Busa area of the Middle Belt, however, exemplifies the phenomenon in the context of both material and construction techniques. A specific mandate of the Kainji Dam resettlement scheme was to provide only what was acceptable to the various cultural groups affected by the exercise. Unfortunately, in the case of the Kamberi, the architect’s interpretation of this, and their own expectations, were at variance. Traditionally, the Kamberi houseform consists of a rectangular dwelling covered by a thatch roof, with a well-compacted earth floor. They habitually sleep on the bare floor, keeping a wood-fire burning all night, to keep warm. Smoke from such a fire escapes through the porous thatch, as well as from the eaves. In the wake of the dam construction project, the Kamberi were re-located, with each family being provided with a brand-new, architect-designed dwelling, consisting of a circular hut with a cement-screeded concrete floor and a self-supporting asbestos-cement roof. The concrete floor proved too cold for comfort, with the traditional fire, rather than help the situation, threatening to be a health hazard (as the smoke could no longer escape either through the roof or the now non-existent space under the eaves). Also, because the brittle material of the roof could not provide the sound-absorption they were used to, coupled with the unfamiliar circular form of the new building, there was psychological disorientation. (Oyedipe, 1983). Also, the unconventional utility of the thatch roof was sadly missed. (The roof had been the repository of fetishes, money and other valuables, kept out of the reach of children, by suspending them from the rafters, or hiding them in the thatch; both rafters and thatch had been dispensed with). Eventually, as a result of utter frustration, the Kamberi abandoned their “model” settlement, and re-located to re-house themselves.

In more contemporary vernacular architectural practices, “meaning” still subsists – though necessarily contextually different. Among the Yoruba, for example, the meaning attaching to the traditional courtyard (i.e. a rallying-point for social exchanges), has been progressively transferred to the extra-wide central corridor, and both front and back verandas. The enclosed passage also conveniently accommodates such other activities as temporary storage, cooking, hair-plaiting and other domestic activities – particularly in the event of unfavourable weather conditions (Osasona, 2002a, 4, 6).

In the bustling commercial cities of the country, where “face-me-I-face-you” (or more radical/ innovative) folk tenement housing has been popularized, meaning in spatial terms has interestingly become a time-related phenomenon. Let us consider a typical, low-income family set-up in Lagos, as a case in point: the family accommodation consists of a “room-and-parlour” rented apartment (see figs. 10 & 11). The inner room serves as sleeping space for the parents, and storage for clothing, prized family possessions, and what foodstuffs the family can afford to buy ahead. The outer chamber is the living-room – the general family lounge, dining and visitors’ reception area. At night, however, this “parlour” becomes the children’s bedroom, with furniture moved against the walls, and breakables moved into the inner room; the amount of stowage is a function of family size. In the morning, this procedure is reversed before the children leave for school, and parents head for work (or otherwise go about their daily routine). So, depending on time of day, in Nigerian folk architecture, the same space could be either a bedroom, or a multi-purpose day-room.

## CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES IN RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE

The contemporary building terrain in Nigeria is extremely conducive to experimentation. Nigerian architectural pluralism – not just with respect to archetypes, but also to the multiplicity of “styles” in which they are expressed – can rightly be said to date back to the early ‘70s, the onset of the nation’s “Oil Boom”. Today, on the same streetscape in most of the nation’s major cities, samples of architectural productivism and general slick-tech, echoes of neo-Classical revivalism and the Afro-Brazilian style, can be seen, side by side, jostling for space and authentication. However, the concern of this paper is with the activities on the contemporary *residential* architectural scene.

### Lower-class Residential Architecture

In discussing vernacular Nigerian architecture, and the meaning inherent in the various expressions, much has already been said about what obtains among the lower classes. The salient innovative activities revolve essentially around re-configuring the popularized prototype for mixed-use tenancy (see fig. 7), and increasingly attempting the multi-space compactness of the urban flat – but without its convenience (as kitchens, toilets and bathrooms are still invariably shared, and deployed as semi-detached utilities). Nonetheless, the basic prototype is still extremely popular, being the “common man’s” first choice. Earth is still the favoured material, but moulded into rectangular building units that are much larger than the conventional brick, but smaller than a sandcrete block. These days, even the so-called man-on-the-streets, cement-plasters his house. As with strictly traditional homesteads, such vernacular compounds are serviced by the digging of a well from which the household (and occasionally, neighbours) draw water.

### **Other Folk Architectural Practices**

Among the generality of common people who build their own homes (as opposed to renting accommodation), there is a noticeable move away from a layout predicated on a central passageway. At one end of the spectrum, disposition of space is still very simple, and the corridor is still very prominent; however, it need not bisect the building totally through. At the other end, more cosmopolitan layouts are attempted, but invariably, these still retain the socio-cultural values traditionally attaching to spatial relationships e.g. the progression from indoor kitchen to outdoor cooking area, and the integration of the “boys quarters”, a colonial legacy, into the overall premises (Osasona, 2006, 21). Today, the symbolism of the boys’ quarters has been re-crafted. Whereas, initially, even though it was a benevolent provision of the colonial administrators to their retainers (*ibid.*), it was nevertheless a symbol of condescension, relegation and marked segregation; today, many house-building projects take off with the boys’ quarters, and even where this is not so, they provide additional accommodation (for members of the extended family), additional family income (as they can be rented out), and regulated company that provides psychological security (in the event of the “landlord” and his family being away from home).

Popular building materials in vernacular expressions are also being refined. Since the 1970s, research into locally-sourced building materials has been ongoing by the Nigerian Building and Road Research Institute (NBRRI), Sango-Otta – among other research institutions – with a view to optimizing their structural capacities, lowering cost of production, and generally popularizing them as alternatives to imported building materials. In the same vein, since the ‘80s, the French Centre for Teaching and Documentation (CFTD), Jos, has been concerned with popularizing the use of cement-stabilized earth bricks. As this technique does not require either plaster or paint render, significant savings can be made in building construction costs. Local industries producing fired “bricks” and other components (such as decorative blocks for screen-walling), are not left out in contributing to giving alternatives to boost vernacular building. Again, as with stabilized units, the “truth-to-materials” approach of factory-produced units is not an attempt to re-echo rationalist “brutalism”, but rather, an economic expedient.

Part of the ongoing vernacular experimentation involves a romance between traditional forms and materials, and a cosmopolitan internal morphology. Examples include some private houses, schools, restaurants and even a church (the Chapel of Perpetual Adoration), all in Makurdi, Benue State. Here, fired bricks are used for walls, while the traditional thatch constitutes roof-cover. Unlike what obtains in the strictly traditional (or “post-traditional”), all conveniences and utilities are accommodated under the same roof as the conventional living spaces. In other contexts, traditional materials are juxtaposed with more modern ones – a situation re-echoing a major characteristic of post-modernism, but in a totally different context. By and large, these trends have created another level of vernacular practice that can be termed “folk cosmopolitan”.

### **DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVES**

From all indications, the vernacular archiculture will continue to thrive; the enabling environment (in terms of widespread acceptance, based on locally-available materials, socio-cultural relevance and reasonable affordability) guarantees this. Also,

where the various governments demonstrate the political will to make housing a priority, through the funding of appropriate research and, where necessary, subsidizing on relevant imports to facilitate local production of materials, the situation can only be further enhanced.

With trends favouring the gradual elimination of the subtle divide between the “prototype vernacular” and the “folk cosmopolitan”, it is envisaged that (even though it may never be possible to talk of a “Nigerian house” or standard “Nigerian architecture”), more interpretations of socio-culturally relevant architecture – possibly on a regional basis – will continue to manifest.

## CONCLUSION

Nigerian residential architecture has been discussed, tracing its evolution from pre-colonial times to the present, and highlighting modifying influences that have produced the contemporary folk architecture. Meanings inherent in the use of some materials and techniques employed, and the forms generated, have also been explained. The prominent role socio-cultural considerations have played in the scheme of things, has been highlighted, and the upholding of such considerations – despite ongoing morphological transformations – has been held up as the source of the success of vernacular architecture, and the chief strength of its continuity.

The ongoing debate is to discover if there is any such thing as “African architecture”, and if there is, to convincingly define it. The debate is interesting. Is there “European architecture”? – or “Asian architecture”? Is there not rather “North European architecture”, “South European (or Mediterranean) architecture”, Chinese or Japanese architecture, etc? – in a subtle way alluding to the fundamentality of the place of both climate and culture as determinants of builtform. Even with respect to North America, one does not presume to talk of “American architecture”, per se; architecture of the prairies, architecture of the Gulf Coast, etc, is a more likely way to want to consider the phenomenon. The sheer geographical sprawl of these continents – necessarily dictating pronounced climatic differences and cutting across various shades of ethnicity – militates against such broad-based architectural stereotyping. Even though the African continent is relatively small, it is a geographical entity well-known for its great cultural diversity; Nigeria has been used as a case in point.

Advances in technology (particularly Information and Communication Technology, ICT), have brought the world closer together (in terms of travel, convenience of transacting business, immigration possibilities, access to general information, etc), giving rise to the clichés “global village” and “globalization”. “Culture shock” – a state of temporary psycho-social disorientation deriving from acute differences between one’s expectations of another culture, and the actual reality experienced – is now mostly a feature of movies, and possibly also a product of willful ignorance (as virtually all one needs to know about the various peoples of the world – to forestall such – is available, online and on the television screen). Based on this enhanced intellectual (and physical) mobility, there appears to be a global predisposition to readily adapt to settings not one’s native domain.

The International Style – the forerunner of what one may be tempted to call “architectural globalization” – never directly impacted on the majority of the world’s population i.e. by any stretch of the imagination, it can never be considered “folk

architecture” or architecture of the masses (even though it did produce mass-housing). For that reason, it could be regarded as “official” architecture – and this is generally not a good yardstick to measure a people’s architecture by. Invariably, truly authentic and representative architecture is what a people *choose* to build for themselves. Hotel architecture (among other institutional typologies) – closest to residential architecture, and rated and standardized according to international conventions – appears to be about the most widespread typology that may suggest architectural globalization; however, it is extremely unlikely that in itself, it can ever be held up as genuinely representative of the local building culture of a particular part of the world.

On the African scene, like elsewhere in the world, there is a lot of building activity. Much of it is government (“official”) housing, but the bulk of it is still folk architecture. Because of the strong cultural content of this vernacular practice, a more authentic approach to identifying architecture as practiced today in Africa, may be to scrutinize, on broad ethnic bases, building activities and conventions across the continent. Any approach that attempts to view the continent as culturally homogeneous – and hence envisages a continental stereotype – would be far from realistic, and likely to misrepresent the facts.

## END-NOTES

1. Literally, “the fold of dwelling units” (as in a shepherd and his fold).
2. Literally, “the eye of a dwelling unit”, (or “the eye of the house”), making reference to the entrance to a single room, or homestead.
3. A term locally used to refer to the typology that features rooms facing each other across a corridor.

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