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Art in traditional African domestic architecture: its place in modern housing and implications for the training of architects

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Abstract

Over the years, art in its various forms has played a vital role in the lives of African people. It served as a major form of communicative expression of religious beliefs and socio-cultural norms of the people. Its form, presentation and significance however, varied from one cultural setting to another. This paper examines art in the context of domestic architecture of indigenous people of South West Nigeria and its relevance in contemporary housing as well as what it portends for architectural education in that cultural zone. The paper notes the disappearance of the rich traditional motifs and symbols from contemporary housing and their replacement with more contemporary art forms influenced by globalisation and industrial mass production. It concludes that the current trend presents an architecture that is devoid of cultural architectural uniqueness and identity. One of the implications identified is for architectural curricula to incorporate indigenous themes that will help architects produce domestic architecture that have contextual relevance. Data for the paper was collected through literature review and the qualitative research method using interviews and observations of houses in the zone. Those interviewed include architects and residents in the zone. Data was content analysed to highlight common themes.

Keywords: Art, Domestic architecture, Yorubaland

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1. Introduction

African creative tradition as noted by Appiah (Appiah, 1996) is both various and particular, reflecting the cultural setting of its origin. What is common, however, is that art played a very important role in the everyday life of traditional African people. Many of what is known of Africa's rich heritage today can be attributed to information gathered from archaeological findings traceable to Africa. One major medium of such artistic expressions are the dwellings which housed the people. Unlike other media of expression which have received wide publicity, buildings are fixed to location and therefore not very mobile. Due to their construction materials and level of maintenance over the years, many of these buildings have deteriorated and been destroyed. Today, it is very rare to see traditional buildings in Africa. Thus a rich component of the African rich creative tradition and cultural heritage is at the brink of extinction as the African identity is seriously threatened. This paper thus examines the artistic expression in domestic buildings of the people of South West Nigeria.

2. Literature Review

It was initially believed that Africa had no art. Thus, whatever was considered African art was termed 'primitive' (Gates, 1996). However, archaeological discoveries and existing traditional communities have proved such assumptions untrue. Today, many museums all over the world are enriched with art works of African origin. Ample evidence suggests that the life of the traditional African is intrinsically interwoven with art. It played a vital role in the political, social, economic and religious life of the people (Appiah, 1996). Aside from its aesthetic value, art was also a medium of communication of values, events, status, aspirations and allegiance to tribal roots. African art is highly symbolic and the meanings were tenaciously passed from generation to generation. Media of artistic expression included the human body, textiles, artefacts and buildings.

Though less reported, traditional domestic houses were rich examples of traditional African art. The interiors were often richly adorned with elaborately finished and furnishings, fittings and artefacts. These included furniture, mats, fabrics, decorations, cooking utensils and cutlery. Aside from meeting their functional requirements, these items were aesthetically formed and decorated in pleasing colours. The walls (both external and internal) perhaps provided more elaborate media for artistic expression in traditional homes. The elaborateness however varied depending on the socio-economic class of the house owner. Elements of decorative designs found in traditional African homes include form, colour, lines, texture, shape and space. These constitute the motifs which were repeated to produce rhythm and flow. In many traditional African societies, house decoration was done by women.

Domestic African art has metamorphosed over the years under the influence of several forces. These forces include trade including slavery, colonisation, religion, returning slaves and globalisation. Urbanisation resulting from these forces has created 'a distinct urban class of consumers whose tastes and aspirations are different from those in the rural areas and are often shaped by ideas and goods from the West' as observed by (Kasfir, 1999). He argues that such situation has undermined local industry and made 'global consumers' of Africans. Contemporary buildings thus have very little regard to local context. Such architecture and resulting built environment have been described as 'bland', 'anonymous' and devoid of symbolism (Crowe, 2000).

3. Methodology

Qualitative research method was adopted for this paper. In addition to the authors' recollections of traditional domestic buildings in the area, data for the paper was obtained by interviewing 12 other persons knowledgeable in history of traditional architecture by virtue of their profession, age and length of residence who were purposively selected. These included architects and residents in the area. Additional data was obtained from secondary sources limited by poor record keeping. The near extinction of such buildings also limited the use of observation.

4. Results and discussions

4.1 *The domestic Architecture of South West Nigeria*

South Western Nigeria is home to the Yoruba speaking people of Nigeria. This geographical zone consists of the states of Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Oyo and Osun. Legend has it that indigenes of this zone originated from a common ancestor, Oduduwa, who settled in Ile-Ife from where the Yoruba people expanded to other areas. Traditional domestic architecture of these people consists of buildings constructed from locally abundant materials. Such houses evolved to suit the socio-cultural and climatic demands of their locality. Walls were often made of mud or clay, roofs were thatched while doors, windows and supports were constructed of wood.

Domestic Yoruba architecture can be divided into three major categories. These are the palaces (afins) which served as residences for the kings (obas) in addition to other political, administrative and social functions; the residences of chiefs and titled men and the more humble dwellings of the ordinary people. The various categories were easily distinguished by their scale. Another salient differentiating factor was the extent and quality of artistic expression found in the houses. As Dmochowski, 1990 documented, 'the royal palaces (afins) in their size as well as their functional planning and rich interior decorations and furnishings were the most impressive buildings in Yorubaland'. Areas where art featured in these buildings include exterior and internal walls, posts, beams, lintels, ceiling boards, furnishings, furniture, decorations and artefacts used in domestic activities including traditional altars located within the houses.

The mud walls were often plastered with mud plaster and thereafter polished with juice extracts from either locust bean pods or oil seed leaves. More elaborate artistic treatments on walls were achieved via paintings or mouldings. Some of these were not mainly for aesthetic reasons. For instance, polishing of walls as described earlier was mainly to protect the walls from erosion, though it also provided a rich glossy finish to building facades. Expansive verandah roofs which characterised Yoruba architecture were supported by carved wooden posts. In houses of ordinary people, who could not afford sculptured posts, less expensive joinery was adopted or the posts were built of mud. However, in the house of the more affluent and highly placed citizens, like chiefs and kings, posts consisted of elaborately carved caryatids. Similarly, beams, lintels, ceiling boards and doors received detailed treatment by experienced carvers using carefully selected wood. The richness of carvings found in traditional buildings in South West, Nigeria is a testimony of the artistic traditions and prowess of the people. It was also found that artistic expression found in domestic houses was very symbolic in meaning. Art was not only for decoration. It was functional and often a means of communication as is common in other African societies. However, the finding that the application of art in domestic buildings was carried out by men is contrary to several African societies where women featured more prominently.

4.2 *Art in contemporary domestic architecture and its implication for training architects*

Over the years, traditional domestic architecture of the South West, Nigeria has transformed conditioned by several factors. Traces of colonisation, Brazilian architecture (introduced by returning slaves) can be seen in South-West Nigeria. However the major determinant of contemporary architecture in this region is perhaps globalisation. Unlike traditional dwellings, contemporary dwellings are defined by their new materials, designs and global trends in architecture. Initially there was little or no consideration for climate and socio-cultural context. These are however moderated by available skills, economy and the comodification of housing. Thus, in order to minimize cost and maximize gains, houses are built devoid of embellishments. Resulting domestic architecture has therefore been described as monotonous and uninspiring. Unfortunately, it is in such environments that students of architecture live and are trained. Students are known to be influenced by what they see. We also know that architecture is defined as both a science and an art. When therefore students are trained to focus on meeting basic requirements with little or no drive towards artistic expression, we end up breeding what may be referred to as “scientific architects” with limited artistic skills. This will no doubt hinder the creativity of architects and engender the cycle of creating and recreating uninspiring built environments. Architecture as it were should reflect the culture of the people it serves. However what we have today are dwellings which have no bearings to their cultural context and thus have no cultural identity.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the place of arts in domestic architecture in south-west Nigeria. The results reveal that evolving contemporary domestic architecture is markedly different from traditional architecture especially in the area of artistic expression. The need to satisfy economic, affordability, energy efficiency and other requirements for contemporary building design and construction results in built environments, which do not stimulate creativity and artistic skills of student architects. Focus of training architects on technical issues alone to the detriment of the art component of architecture raises a vital question as to the definition of architecture. There is need to emphasize the place of arts in the training of architecture students particularly to reflect the climatic and cultural values of the areas that domestic architecture is found.

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