

The Return of the Saints: Indigenous Traditional Buildings in Urban Areas in Nigeria

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Abstract

Huts which were hitherto viewed as artefacts meant for museums and the use of the poorest “uncivilized” rural communities are staging a forceful re-entry into the built environment in our cities. One remarkable return of the huts in city architecture is its choice of entry point- the hospitality facilities and the low density residential quarters of elites. This paper discusses the strange development and resilience of the hut. It argues for a mass return of housing to the era where houses meant more than a house for the owner.

Introduction

The Nigerian urban landscape has witnessed a resurgence of indigenous traditional buildings at a scale that is unprecedented in the history of post-independence Nigeria. It is no longer strange to have traditional huts in their poise splendour dotting open spaces in some homes and in most top hotels and hospitality spots across the country. This development is paradoxical given Nigerians' appetite for western ideas, values and materials.

This development is strange for two reasons. The first strangeness of this development has to do with the history of the emergence of Nigeria as a nation. Through the forty six years of colonial rule, many Nigerians came to believe that all they had -culture, tradition, craft, architecture, language, religion, food, medicine and even skin colour were to a large extent not beautiful, "very crude" and "uncivilized" as such, many struggled to distance themselves from these attributes. Those that could not afford to adopt these foreign manners, language, food, life styles, buildings among other imports were derided and as such overtly or covertly made to abandon them (Uchegbu, 2007:462). One sure sign of "modernisation" to those that saw nothing good about indigenous ways of life was the choice of names, language, dressing, food, religion, and art forms. Many newspapers were/are awash with change of personal/family as well as community names advertisements, while young and old persons strived to outdo each other in trying to adopt foreign accent. The disdain for most things indigenous was surprisingly not touched by the fervent desire for political independence from the colonial rule nor the wave of nationalisation of public institutions and enterprises common with military rulers in Nigeria and other developing countries.

The forceful resurgence of the huts into the cityscape is also strange on the grounds that the closing years of the 20th century that was dubbed the century of knowledge which witnessed technological revolution at a scale that remains unprecedented in the history of mankind and the commencement of the 21st century- the era of globalization has not been able to lay to rest the ghost of the so called "crude" indigenous arts forms of the peoples of Nigeria. The resilience of the hut in these epochs has even become subject of historical discourse especially given the effects of the technological revolution on all fields of human endeavour. The impact of technological revolution in our every day lives have gone beyond the predictions of the best fortune tellers and seers. For instance, modern transportation has made nonsense of distance as man can now travel at the speed of light. Similarly, modern medicine has prolonged life expectancy- man's life is no longer extremely short and brutish. Through modern agriculture, food is being provided to a fast-growing world population which has enabled the world escape the Malthusian population trap. Modern communication and transportation for sure has turned the planet into a global village.

As if these previous developments were a child's play, new technology which became the new religion of the 20th century and remain so into the 21st century changed how we think, speak, eat, sleep, do business, build, and live. As noted by Schocken (2003), modern city planning could not withstand the force of technology and so was equally strongly influenced by technological utopia. According to him, electric power plants were even designed as temples. Russian Constructivists added radio aerials on the roof of many buildings. The car, train and airplane appear in Frank Lloyd Wright's drawings of Broad Acre City and in LeCorbusier's images of the Ville Radieuse and the Ville Contemporaine. The fascination with technology went further in the 1970's with the utopia of Archigram and further still with its latest manifestation the virtual city (Schocken, 2003).

While we can view these developments overall as positive, we cannot however escape their negative effects. The use of energy and natural resources by a burgeoning population, for instance, threaten the life supporting eco-systems of the planet. These include the automobiles, trains,

manufacturing plants that use fossil fuels, the refrigerators, car/homes/offices air conditioners that release heat trapping gases into the atmosphere. Modern communication and transportation has facilitated the movement and convergence of a hitherto dispersed population into population centres (urban centres). The need to house the large concentration of population in often limited space coupled with European influence resulted in the construction of different types of state of the art houses most of which required constant electricity, water and technical skills to serve the purpose for which they were built. After the initial fanfare of commissioning these wonderful edifices (homes or offices), owners/users are confronted with the problem of power outage, heat, unflushed water closets, inability to repair leaking roofs etc that many now wonder if they were not hood winked into shopping, blind folded.

Given some of the avoidable problems associated with modern buildings, there appears to be a rethink and a rediscovery of self in Nigeria in one area-building form. This paper examines this new fad, explores the reasons, the acceptability of the huts by users in private homes and costumers of hospitality industry and examines the character of the huts that have made them resilient and enabled them to gain increasing attention even in a highly globalized world where the best only survives

Huts in the Traditional Setting

Buildings in real life are meant to serve a purpose. To many, the house is a home, a shield and protection from the elements and predators, a resting place, a play ground, a mini temple and a work place. Therefore houses are built in such forms that combine all or most of these attributes. Traditional building forms in Nigeria is a direct evolution of the physical environment: buildings do not merely take their style from abstract aesthetic notions but rather derive their stylish forms from the fundamental need for the building in the first place, and the image the building hopes to convey. Traditional houses express strong elements of anthromorphisim-the house not only houses its owner (who may perhaps be the maker), but expresses his stage of life and status. For instance, the house of a chief was/is not just large, but also had a large courtyard. Besides, it was replete with decorations, designs and even war exploits. Provisions were specially made for the kitchen, goat penn, pit toilet, yam barn and most importantly the reception (called *obi*, or *afe* by the Ibos and Annangs of south eastern and south –south Nigeria respectively). The entire compound was in most cases fenced with mud and a gate for regulating entry and exit. Gates to some of the compounds were fitted with bells such that any entry or exit attracted attention. The average member of the society (whether bachelor or married) equally built the house that befitted their status but whose functionality was not too different. Apart from providing a home the house form was also made to support the occupation of the owner. In riverine fishing communities for instance, adequate provisions were/are made for fish preservation, while those into such trades as blacksmithing or cloth weaving would ensure that their house was not without the work space.

The House as a Home

The most important function of a house is to provide a home for its occupants. A house is a home when it can offer security, comfort, privacy and an enabling environment for the occupant(s) to engage in his/her economic, social and religious life with minimum effort. The home is different from a nest, the hollow of a tree, or the dense cover of vegetation in the forest. This is because the building of a house requires skills and cognitive abilities of the builder while taking shelter in the hollow of a tree or dense vegetation cover does not require skills. Should there be need for a man to take shelter in the hollow of a tree he may have to fight or chase away other occupants (animals) as well as being crammed into the tiny space that the tree trunk can offer. Besides the house offers more security from the wild beasts, elements and above all allows social interactions of occupants with minimum disturbance and need for air circulation to be supported artificially. Whereas the hollow of the tree may not be created by the user, the home needs to be built. This does not mean that every user of the house must be the builder. The house is

also relatively a more permanent structure than say a nest. In building a traditional hut it is often easier to use materials that the surrounding environment provides. By so doing, nature is being complemented by adding to nature what it lacks to provide human needs (Bitzer, 2007).

The materials used in building traditional houses vary depending on what is available in the locality and most importantly following the requirements of the climate of the area as well as the prevalent societal norms. Buildings in the swamps of the Niger delta are, therefore, the grassland and the much drier regions of northern Nigeria are expectedly different.

House Forms and Identity

Though primitive wandering societies may not have been taught how to build houses, there was yet the need for them to be sheltered. And so they would readily take shelter under the shade of trees or dense vegetation covers and even caves. The realization that the available shelter did not serve the expected purpose adequately and that better shelters could be “manufactured” made man put in practice what was conceived in the mind. As noted by Bitzer (2007:554), the moment an individual uses his mind to gain what nature does not provide, he is acting on a creative impulse s/he possesses. The ability to build a coherent structure shows that he has engaged his analytical capacity. For simple practical considerations the easiest way to build is often to use the materials (opportunities offered by the immediate environment) and the challenges from the environment (threats posed by the environment) in building.

As noted by Bitzer(2007), the use of materials that are available in the environment derives from the fact that these materials has/can survive(d) the climate of the area. Such materials are thus uniquely suited as they have been prepared by the weather, geography, geology and hydrology of the place. Nigeria with her wide spectrum of climatic belts, geography, geology and hydrology therefore parade a large array of house forms.

In the rainforest belt of southern Nigeria, mud is generally used for making walls of the buildings while the roofs are made of mats. Rafters are also neatly weaved unto the sticks to strengthen the sticks and ensure that when mud is applied they do not fall off. The roofing materials are also locally sourced. The mats are specially woven from raffia palm leaves. Houses are mostly rectangular in shape with inclined roofs to allow for quick run down of rain water from the roofs. While the building heights are tall, they are not so tall that the local Indian bamboo ladder will not reach the top. Thus when the roofs leak, they are easily mended.

Though the use of mud in making walls may have certain technical deficiencies, mud has been shown to be probably the most expressive of materials. It not only lends itself brilliantly to surface decorations but allows the building to express its ideology (Prussin, 1974; Dmochowski, 1990).

In the swamps of the Niger delta, stilt huts are built. The props are mostly the red mangrove trees that abound in the area. Beside, these materials (red mangrove props) can stand the weakening effect of water longer than other tree species even when stucked in the water logged mud. Raffia palm mats are equally used in making roofs in this area. The floor of stilt huts are made from timber planks.

In the hotter areas of northern Nigeria with fewer months of rainfall and less intensity of rain, traditional house roofs are made of mud. They serve to regulate the excessive heat of the sun during the day while at night it conserves heat.

Among the pastoral Fulanis, tents made from available grass and leaves are common. The tents are as a rule domed-shaped and lighter perhaps for ease of conveyance when there is the need to move or simply a reflection of their very temporary nature. No matter the shape of the hut and geographical location, very serious efforts are made to ensure that rain does not pass through the mat or grass roof to the discomfort of the user.

Why the Saints are Back

The post-industrial society is basically a plural society. This heterogeneity is particularly an important factor in urban design and the field of architecture and landscape design especially with regards to the design of public buildings. This is because these places are today used by a range of people with very different tastes and cultural preferences. The desire to appeal to a broad public has thus led postmodernist architects and designers to combine scholarly references to earlier architectural styles with more obviously enjoyable decorative features. The element of populism in such buildings can be compared with the narrow appeal of modernism, whose austere structures were, according to some post-modernists, enjoyed only by cultural elite.

We may also be tempted to make analogy with the rising taste for and demand for huts that must be included by landscape designers today to make their work complete with scarce art forms(paintings, sculptures etc) that are highly priced that many may even question the enormous amounts used in purchasing these items of antiquity. That is to say that these huts are valued because they are rare.

Yet one should not lose sight of the need for unencumbered social interaction possibilities that huts offer. Beside, freeing the user and letting him/her loose in nature, the ventilation of the hut is natural. The hut allows you to see others (the sense of community) while they do their thing and you do your own which users of enclosed apartments (rooms or halls) may not have. Though the huts seem simple, they still remain the most inclusive form of accommodation. Simply put the builders of the hut builds for the young, physically fit, as well as persons with physical disabilities (challenges), the elderly and weak persons. In contrast builders of modern structures and the structures they build appear to exclude people with disabilities, as well as the elderly and frail. To include them, very special and expensive provisions have to be made. Huts in traditional settings are also built with nature and not against nature. For instance, as much as possible available trees near the hut are allowed whereas in modern buildings trees are often required to be uprooted (see plates 1, 2 and 3).



Photo Researchers, Inc./Jane Schreibman

Plate1: A typical Hut in an arid rural setting
Source: Microsoft ® Encarta ® Encyclopedia, 2005.



Plate2: Dome-Shaped hut

Source: Microsoft ® Encarta ® Encyclopedia, 2005.



**Plate 3: A Round-Shaped Hut (With mud wall and grass thatch)
Farming Village, Nigeria**

Source: Microsoft ® Encarta ® Encyclopedia, 2005.



Plate:4A: A typical sit out in Enugu



Plate 4B: Sit-out huts in a recreation centre, Enugu.
Source: Fieldwork, 2008.



Plate5:Djenne Mosque in Mali built from mud(in the 13th Century)

Source: BBC(2006)

Little wonder that many buildings have come to be jungles of bricks and concrete. Some modern buildings are not jungles of bricks and concretes but can go for prisons (c.f. Godwin, 1998). There is also the problem associated with rusty aluminum roofing sheets which rather than reflect heat away transmit heat to the interior building up oven like atmosphere in apartments.

In this discussion, one is not oblivious of the many advantages of modern buildings among which include their durability resulting from superior quality materials, available engineering skills, use of technology, possibility of housing more persons, resistance to vagaries of weather especially those that are built with sound scientific and engineering considerations among others.

Conclusion

Our culture is something that we are enmeshed in. It is part of us and is inextricably linked with the locality in which we have lived for several centuries. Our culture has a past, and it is that past as we find embodied in what our elders do that we need to preserve. It also has a present that threatens our culture. We need to promote our culture especially among young people, to ensure that they will identify themselves as Nigerians in the full meaning of the terms. In terms of building designs and forms there could surely be a revival in indigenous building forms in the country, especially taking into account the spectrum of the great palaces of old Benin kingdom and Emirs palaces in the north well as the elegant huts coming up in the hospitality spots as well as the ubiquitous hut in the villages across the country. But it's going to require a culture that is proud enough to become more articulate on its own terms.

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