

Towards The Development of a Relevant Conceptual Framework for the History of Architecture in Africa: Lessons from Nigeria

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to discuss the essential features of a relevant conceptual framework for the history of architecture in Nigeria. The rationale is first of all that history is central to the enterprise of architecture as a whole and as such a framework is useful if history of architecture is to take its proper place in the practice, theory and teaching of architecture, particularly in relation to the cultural relevance of history. Secondly there are lessons to be learnt, from the Nigerian situation, which have wider application in the African context in part because of some of the historical precedents and cultural conditions that are common to African nations. First the essay discusses the significance of history to the theory, practice and teaching of architecture in general. Second, the current condition of history of architecture in Nigeria is analyzed, especially in relation to the education of the architect. It is thus concluded that the current condition is over westernized and does not account for the local context within which architecture is practiced. In order to redeem this situation, it is suggested that a new framework is needed to account for the local, as the main focus of the history of architecture, while engaging the links to other histories including the western history of architecture. In other words a refocusing of the current approach, on the local history, is essential if history is to be relevant in a context, which yearns for architecture that is culturally relevant. Finally the sketch of a framework is presented and discussed, highlighting the qualities associated with it and how it may be applied to the general African context.

Introduction

Architectural education mirrors the condition of architecture in any society. The schools seek to create products that are acceptable to a society by creating programmes through which students acquire skills and knowledge based on some acceptable philosophies of architecture. The society, in the first place, normally sets standards for the education of the architects. It is therefore the case that architectural education ought to be culturally context specific. In Nigeria however a cursory examination of the curricular of the departments of architecture would reveal that the social, cultural and economic conditions have had very little influence on architectural education. Architecture in the country, the architecture of architects, appears to be for another development and in many instances these buildings stand as testimonies to some other ideology. This is why Adeyemi (????) has suggested that Modern Architecture in Nigeria ‘alienates’ the people. Aradeon, 1981, also acknowledged this by declaring that a gap exists in architectural education in Nigeria, which needs to be filled by teaching ‘cultural significance’ to architecture students. And in his inaugural lecture, Aradeon, 1998, associates architecture with identity and continuity.

The appropriateness of the education that students of architecture from the developing countries received in Europe and North America was the subject of a conference organized by the European Association for Architectural Education (EAAE) in 1983. The rationale for this was the consideration that it would appear at the time that many students from these countries wanted something that they could not receive from their own countries for which they came to Europe. The feeling was also that it was morally

important that the schools of architecture in Europe and North America considered creating 'lines of studies' within existing programmes that would address the needs of these students particularly in relation to the cultural and development needs of the countries from which these students came.(Habraken 1983) In the same year, the RIBA magazines Ltd published the second edition of its now defunct journal, 'Architectural Education', on the theme, 'Architecture for developing countries', with half of the articles from the earlier conference of the EAAE. Still on the same subject in 1988 the Nigerian Institute of Architects (NIA) in association with the Commonwealth Association of Architects (CAA) organized a symposium in Lagos, Nigeria with a theme, which focused on the search for an appropriate programme for the education of architects in the developing economies of the third world. Again in 2000, the Association of Architectural Educators in Nigeria, (AARCHES) an umbrella organization of architecture teachers in Nigeria, turned to the theme of architectural education for its annual conference. The main papers at this conference focused on developing relevant programmes and approaches to education for architecture schools in Nigeria that would be relevant in relation to development and culture. Olotuah, 2006 presented the dilemma facing architecture and talked about architecture in Nigeria being 'at the crossroads', an indication of a point at which decisions must be made on how to go forward. These occasions simply highlighted what had gone on for more than 25 years especially since the down turn in the Nigerian economy began in the eighties and has led to a prolonged period of reflection. How did we get to this point and what are the main reasons for the agitation and indeed what are the main issues in the debate on what to do about architecture and architectural education in Nigeria? Attempts continue to be made to

answer these questions at different forums within the academia and the professional circles in Nigeria.

In this essay, I present the view that in order to infuse some cultural values into architecture, the schools must teach architectural history with a focus on the Nigerian built environment. To achieve this, a relevant conceptual framework must be developed. It is this framework that I examine by unearthing three representative frameworks in the literature, which have implicitly or explicitly suggested the way forward to discussing a comprehensive history of the built environment of Africa.

While I do not intend to address all the issues in the wider context of architectural education in Nigeria, in this paper, it is useful as a prelude to the discussion of architectural history as an aspect of the programme of architecture to examine the main issues associated with the structure of architectural curricula in Nigeria. This is not because these issues are not important, especially in trying to gain understanding of the complex problems of African architecture. Indeed examining the entire curriculum or the educational programmes of the schools of architecture in Nigeria is a useful way of gaining insight into the philosophies, which rule architectural education and the practice of the profession. Instead of this broad overview however, I focus on the representation of architectural history in the departments of architecture in Nigerian schools because of what I consider the relative importance of history especially in relation to cultural identity and continuity.

First a brief history of architectural education in Nigeria is presented. Second I discuss the importance of history to the architectural enterprise after which I discuss the current condition of architectural history in the schools of architecture in Nigeria. Finally, I discuss three broad frameworks that have been posited in the literature whether explicitly or implicitly and reach some conclusion about a framework most relevant to the Nigerian or African context.

A Brief History

The British colonial administrators set up the first school of architecture in 1954 in Zaria Northern Nigeria, a few years before independence in 1960. As would be expected, it followed a tradition of the RIBA concept of the profession. Its programme was inspired more by a British tradition than any local condition, culture or development perspective. This attitude may be appreciated from the words of Maxwell Fry in response to an interviewer's question, '*A Nigerian aesthetic?*' he said, '*On what would it be based that is as solid as that on which Aalto's Finnish tradition or Tange's on the Japanese tradition was?*'

Quite apparently the colonial modernist attitude was one that did not acknowledge the local tradition apart from the fact that it did not also associate architecture with factors related to development issues. In addition, this first programme of architecture seemed to have neglected the emerging urban and rural problems associated with Nigerian cities and did not engage with any debate on the question of a 'Nigerian aesthetic'. The aspect of the programme, which came closest to acknowledging some local conditions, was one, which dealt with the exposition of students to bio-climatic studies and in the tradition of

‘modernist tropical architecture’. Design was focused on high profile modern buildings typical of the new government buildings being erected in Lagos at the time. (See Godwin 1969 for a sample of the Lagos buildings) The teaching of history of architecture was based on European lines, starting with ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman through to the Modern movement. This approach has persisted till today. Adeolu (1969) compared the curriculum at some schools of architecture in Europe with the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, suggesting that there was very little difference.

After independence in 1960, this attitude persisted as other schools of architecture were established. These schools included the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) in the East, the University of Lagos, (UNILAG) in the capital city of Lagos and the Obafemi Awolowo University, (OAU) formerly University of Ife, (UNIFE) in the Western Region. They also had programmes modeled after the Zaria school in part because by this time the Nigerian Institute of Architects (NIA), modeled after the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), had been established and had adopted guidelines for architectural education in the country that were obviously extracted from the Zaria programme.

Since the establishment of these three schools, 13 other university-based departments of architecture and some Polytechnique-based departments have been established around the country. These schools have relied on the same NIA documents modeled after the British tradition, in the development of their programmes.

A Critique of the Architectural Programmes

At the 1983 EAAC conference a key question was raised about separating the ‘general from the local’ (Habraken, 1983) implying that a careful delineation of the central

disciplinary focus of architecture ought to be achieved in order to make the local orientation possible. On the other hand, architectural education for the third world had meaning only to the extent that it could grant skills that could address the kinds of architectural problems associated with the specific context of the third world.

In addition to these issues it is clear from the quoted statement of Maxwell Fry that there is the challenge of identity that one must contend with in formulating an appropriate programme of architecture in Nigeria. Aradeon, 1981 addressed this problem from another perspective by considering the challenges of teaching sensitivity to cultural issues to Nigerian students of architecture. Also in his inaugural lecture he took a more specific view of the subject of culture by examining the idea of 'identity and continuity' in the architecture of Nigeria. (Aradeon, 1998)

In no other aspect of the curriculum is this more obvious than architectural history. It is therefore highly instructive to examine architectural history in the curriculum over the past fifty years or more.

Why History

In the European or western tradition, between the Renaissance and the modern movement, to be trained in architecture was to be trained in history (Crook, 1984). The rationale is that history is important to the enterprise of architecture and that indeed to examine the role that history plays in the curriculum of any school of architecture may reveal its philosophy of education (Swenarton, 1987). In addition, the conscious effort to

create identity or interpret architecture in context is dependent on the understanding of local architectural histories.

History is important because it embodies the precedents in architecture. For the architecture student or practitioner these precedents are important to the formation of new or the understanding of existing forms of architecture or indeed the imagination of future forms of architecture. In addition, the kinds of histories presented very often represent the first encounter with what is worthy of study and therefore acceptable forms of architecture. In spite of the recent past which has attempted to raise the profile of 'ordinary buildings', history has usually been associated with the high profile buildings or what Rapoport, (1969), has called the High Style or Monumental tradition. History is the context within which students first encounter polemical issues, criticism and theories in general and continuously through out their student years. It is therefore important to the architectural curriculum to fashion a history or histories with which students can identify in relation to the local context of the Nigerian environment.

The Current Condition of History in Architectural Education

I do not think much has changed in the content and teaching of architectural history since 1954. The central focus is still the western tradition represented largely by Banister Fletchers enduring book. Indeed as if to continue this analogy history courses in many cases have also included new areas of the world such as Indian Architecture and Chinese Architecture, treated in much the same way as the period western styles.

In addition to these however a significant inclusion has been made to the courses, which now include what, are generally referred to as 'Traditional Architecture' or 'Vernacular Architecture'.

Problems of Defining a Conceptual Framework

It is useful to define a conceptual framework to guide the study and teaching of architectural history in Nigeria. A conceptual framework, as 'a way of thinking' is a useful instrument for ordering otherwise disparate data. It is also an organizing principle for cumulative and comparative work. Several studies, which have emanated from different disciplines and which have different perspectives on the same subject, may be woven together meaningfully through a useful conceptual framework. However, certain problems associated with such a framework for architectural history must be raised and addressed. These problems include those associated with defining the buildings which may be included, the delimitation of the area(s) of study, the temporal framework introduced, and the identification of relevant analytical tools or instruments. Of these, perhaps the most critical is the first because it suggests that we may be engaged with disparate forms of architecture.

An examination of the history of architecture, which I propose, presumes that it is possible to clearly define what may be included in the context of the built environment of the country. This built environment contains buildings, which range from those, which are described as 'traditional' to those described, as 'modern'. Included within this range are buildings variously described as 'popular', 'spontaneous', 'vernacular and 'primitive'.

What kind of history may be proposed which embraces all these? This is the challenge of a framework for architectural history in Nigeria.

The next critical issue to which we need to pay attention is the question of the societies or cultures, which constitute our context of study. Anyone who understands Nigeria well knows that the political boundaries that we have today are only artificial. When it comes to the main cultural groups upon which a history may be developed, we are faced with more than two hundred and fifty ethnic groups. Upon which of these histories can the architectural history of Nigeria be based?

It is also imperative to consider the analytical methods, including their underlying assumptions, which will guide the analyses of these disparate buildings. Certainly, the same methods cannot be used to analyse the traditional chief's palace as well as the new presidential complex in Abuja.

These problems are not insurmountable. As long as one recognizes them, a useful conceptual framework must account for them or tentatively recognize their consequences as weaknesses in the framework to be resolved.

Towards a Conceptual Framework

In the literature, three relevant proposals have been offered either implicitly or explicitly. Aradeon (1984) has implicitly suggested a framework for architectural history in Nigeria. She took an inductive approach by surveying the Nigerian landscape and distinguished or identified three broad periods implying three general types of architecture belonging to the different historical periods. These different types of architecture were identified as

traditional architecture, modified traditional architecture and modern architecture. These periods she warned only allow for ‘the very broadest of generalizations’.

Elleh (1997) has identified key events/ historical periods upon which a history of African Architecture may be based. According to Nnamdi Elleh, these periods/events defined the roots of his Architectural history of Africa. They include, the indigenous, the advent of Islam and Western influence. Upon these he constructed a history of African Architecture

Finally, Upton (1991) has proposed what he called ‘Landscape History’. He questioned “the utility of several of the elementary categories of architectural history, including the assumption of aesthetic universals, of individual work as the unit of analysis and distinction between creator and audience and proposes a ‘landscape’ approach to architectural history that acknowledges the multiplicity and fragmentation of environmental meaning” It is Dell Upton’s position which seems most attractive for the development of a conceptual framework for architectural history in Nigeria because it addresses the conceptual difficulties earlier mentioned.

Conclusion

This essay suggests that the current approach to architectural education in Nigeria is rooted in the western tradition stemming from the RIBA concept of the professional architect. At best the programmes in the schools of architecture address only the central concerns of architecture as a discipline and are concerned with an aesthetic bound up in the modernist concept of tropical architecture. At the worst they do not equip the students with the relevant skills to address the local urban and rural problems in Nigeria. In particular, architectural history, which is a central component of the programmes in

architecture, needs to be refocused to address the local history of the Nigerian environment. In order to achieve this, a useful conceptual framework, which accounts for the multiplicity and fragmentation of environmental meaning, needs to be developed. Upton's proposal for an architectural history that accounts for the environment in an all inclusive manner seems most attractive for the development of a conceptual framework for architectural history in Nigeria.

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