

# AFRICAN ARCHITECTURE TODAY

## Approaches and Appreciation of African Architecture

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### **ABSTRACT**

*There is a gradually increasing attention to the various facets of the subject of African architecture, by both the academic and practising sectors. This subject, however, has been disadvantaged, in that, while it has received such extensive attention from scholars internationally, its value is still limited to academic researches only.*

*It is generally acknowledged that Africa is making considerable efforts to find its social, economic and political space on the globe, and there is an apparent international response that acknowledges that Africa's reconnection is overdue to make the world complete. It is unfortunate that the built environment, which has to be the physical expression of such an effort, appears to be battling to play its part to this day. An overwhelming majority of both the academics and practitioners are still struggling to appreciate and understand the meaning of African architecture. An informed approach by these sectors of the profession has, thus, become an emergency*

### **Introduction**

Exercises around Rediscovery, Renaissance, Rebirth, Regeneration and so forth, have become a major preoccupation of the African continent today. Political boundaries and naming of countries, provinces, cities, institutions, streets, heritage sites and, even persons, are being reviewed. Cultural systems, religious values, language and the social integrity of even the least regarded person can no longer be ignored, all being an effort to restore identity and value to the African continent.

This exercise has, inevitably, involved quaking of economic integrity of most parts of the continent, as budgets and governing policies are being redirected to the renaissance of its people in all aspects. The little intellectual and economic capacity that has survived so far is spent in the restoration of the continent on which poverty and desperation for regaining deserved lost power and belonging has often even swayed social behaviour. Along with this, is the resultant liberation stampede that has cost millions of lives of those who were anticipated to enjoy the heritage of their motherland. However, confidence is apparent in the eventual rise of the continent from its buried greatness.

Three approaches to this discussion are possible. Firstly, one may speak of African architecture today merely as the architecture that exists on the continent today, regardless of its origins. Secondly, one may speak of African indigenous architecture, being the architecture of the people that inhabit the continent today, regardless of their origins and backgrounds. One may also speak of indigenous African architecture today, being the architecture that carries an identity of the indigenous people of the continent today. For the purpose of the subject, this discussion will be directed to the latter approach.

This paper highlights some of the critical factors of the apparent misinterpretations and misleading, or misled, definitions and nomenclature around the subject of African architecture. This has contributed negatively to the education of architecture. This discussion is aimed at exposing and stimulating debate on some of the challenges that impair success of even the most willing academics and practitioners as they make positive attempts to appreciate African architecture.

The core argument of this paper is, firstly, that the state of the architecture of the continent cannot be viewed in isolation of its socio-economic context. Secondly, the definition of African architecture cannot be precise until the continent is viewed with balanced understanding and esteem.

### **Through the Eye of Society**

The many centuries of colonial invasion in Africa passed with an extinction of generations with reliable understanding of what would be regarded as African; reliable in the sense that their definition of African systems would not be approached with the emotions of protection or quest for restoration of self esteem. Neither would it have been stained with economic desperation and envy for a lifestyle of the rich European among them.

The impoverishment of Africa was sufficient to breed generations that could never depend on their own socio-economic muscle for development and sustainability of the continent. As a result, the rich would easily dictate standards and be assured of reception by the poor counterpart. That has been the general make-up of Africa's relationship with the European and Western worlds. It is in that disorientation of identity and self worth that Africa, called 'the dark continent', has to stand up for her space on the globe, and to find meanings of her socio-cultural and physical environments. From observation, this background and context, therefore, obviates that the approach and appreciation of African architecture by the global society today, including the current breed of indigenous Africans themselves is, somehow, still directed by European and Western interpretations (Manning, 2004); in that, anything African is associated with backwardness and, therefore, needs European attention.

It follows, then, that a financially successful African will be marked with some Victorian house, no matter how old, bought from some white couple that has moved into a retirement home. Alternatively, if new, it must be a fancy Tuscan house in a formerly white suburb where their children will attend schools that will keep them speaking English only. It appears that search for pride-worthy and deep meanings in African architecture and related systems has not been a priority to many in our global society, given the colonial history of the continent.

On the other hand, an extreme opposite response is the recent reaction to the lost connection with African roots; another mist of disorientation where ethnography and the indigenous African society seek to define current African identity by drawing in traditions and cultural systems of the past number of centuries to the present, disregarding any possibility of evolution through time (Hall, 1984). Indigenous African architecture has, thus, been defined within such a frame, as a result finding itself not befitting the modern African man.

### **African Architecture to the Intellectual Community**

Since colonial interventions African architecture, much like all other aspects, has been a victim of suppression; drowned into Eurocentric standards of definitions and interpretations.

Much of academic materials and buildings designed in the name of African architecture so far, have displayed, from various angles, influences of colonial ideologies; consciously, subconsciously or unconsciously so. There is a paradigm whose conscious mission has been to reinforce European imperialist objectives in the continent through the built environment. The academic sector has been a successful tool for fulfilment of that mission, where research is focused on showcasing the current unacceptable state of African architecture; presenting it in comparison with developed contemporary architecture of the rest of the world while masking factors around it. Such respectable sources of knowledge have produced generations that are naively injected with a Eurocentric approach to the subject. Such a generation is one that does not consciously mean to proliferate colonial ideologies, but has been successfully

influenced to view life the colonialist way. Among these, one also finds those that take life with a blind eye and continue to fulfil those colonial objectives without question.

Susan Denyer points out: *“The myth of darkest Africa is persistent and there are still many people who find it hard to accept that the traditional buildings of the continent merit more than passing consideration. One only has to consider for a moment the vocabulary used to refer to them to realize that even for those who know and respect other aspects of African culture it is hard to avoid being drawn into a web of selective and distorted perception. ...”*(Denyer, 1978)

Surveys have shown that architecture in the history of the world has always evolved with time, as it is true that every product of human mind is bound to evolve with time. Evolution of world architecture has always involved borrowing of elements by one from other parts of the world. The many years of suppression and impoverishment of Africa have locked the continent out of the traceable global evolution of architecture. The resultant indigenous Africans and their architecture have, thus, remained caged in an academic museum for world researchers.

It is an expressed wish of most non-indigenous African researchers that what would ideally be regarded as historical architecture, remains at a contemporary level with architecture of the rest of the world today. It is rather preferred that research on African architecture remains limited to a timeless structuralist analysis of the underdeveloped rural buildings. This is where Hall challenges Kuper and earlier ethnographic researchers for their rigid approach with little interest to change through time (Hall, 1984). Disconnected from global evolution as it is, the slow inevitable metamorphosis of indigenous architecture much apparent in southern African rural settlements has, on the one hand, caused discomfort to many, like Whelan(2001). On the other hand, recent attempts to acknowledge and import elements of architecture from other parts of the world is regarded by others as the beginnings of the right move away from African traditional architecture (Frescura,1981).

Nomenclature and definitions of architectural terminology, particularly in academia, seem to be particular in Africa relative to the rest of the world in general. For instance, the underdeveloped architecture found in the poor rural areas is often defined as African ‘traditional’ architecture, where ‘*traditional*’ assumes an exceptional definition. ‘Rural’ is often understood as



*Above: Some of the various typologies of indigenous Southern African rural dwellings*

African and underdeveloped, with the exception of a white farmer's house away from the modern town.

Furthermore, there is a general academic perception that architecture is only European; one can only speak of African dwellings, not architecture, or a homestead in stead of a house. The list is endless.

Attempts by practising architects to acknowledge African architecture in their work have also displayed the strong influences of academic perceptions as discussed earlier in this paper. For a modern building to have an African identity the designer has to include some crude underdeveloped materials and decoration finishes, regarded as 'African Traditional' elements. It is somewhat ironical that highly trained professionals, both in academia and practise, do limit the completeness of architecture to such elements.



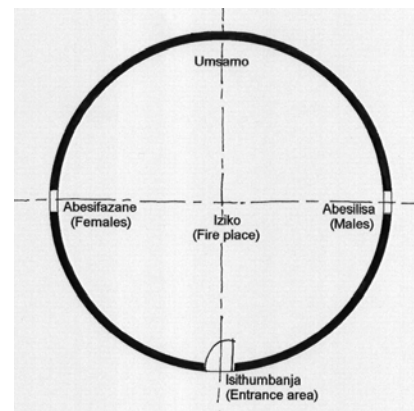
*Above: Typical Example of Applications of so called 'indigenous/traditional' African elements of architecture to modern buildings in South Africa*

### **What, then, is African architecture?**

From the above discussion, it becomes necessary for one to shift the approach to African architecture from the historically generated perception of European imperialism.

When one speaks of African architecture today it has to be made clear as whether it is about the architecture of the people that inhabit the continent today, or architecture that carries an identity of the indigenous people of the continent. An objective view to, particularly the latter definition, is that architecture that has an African character today cannot be limited to poor construction materials nor mud-walled cone-on-cylinders and grass domes. Use of such elements and forms today can only be encouraged where one wishes to acknowledge, with sufficient understanding, a historical milestone of the lost evolution of indigenous African architecture. The use of underdeveloped construction materials in contemporary architecture is only a celebration of African poverty in architecture.

Having lost its technological evolution, the most significant element of indigenous African architecture that has survived thus far is spatial planning, driven by culture. Architectural form is a product of technological advancements of construction materials and methods, which is



*Typical basic spatial planning in a traditional Nguni communal or sacred room*

subject to economy. In the case of indigenous African architecture this is opposed to the generally accepted determinist theory which emphasizes culture as the primary determinant for built form (Rapoport, 1969).

Therefore, if it is true that culture is the primary determinant for spatial organization in indigenous African architecture, it also needs to be acknowledged that culture within Africa is generally dynamic and diverse. Therefore it would be fruitless for one to link African architecture today directly with the cultures of centuries ago, as has been an attempt of many. However, along cultural evolution with time certain spinal elements of cultures have survived to maintain the social identity of the indigenous African people so far, though much has been mixed with responses to colonial interventions and poverty, which makes it somewhat blur.

The completeness of architecture, as shelter, involves space and form. It follows, therefore, that quality in indigenous African architecture today has remained in the planning of space relative to form. This is predominant in the rural built environments of indigenous African communities. This is a resource that, taken advantage of, has great potential in the redefinition and development of contemporary indigenous African architecture.

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## **PHOTOGRAPHS AND DRAWINGS**

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