

DEMAS NWOKO: A STUDY IN REIFICATION*

INTRODUCTION

African architecture exists. You find the traditional types in the rural areas and in urban peripheries. However ‘experts’ are free to qualify or disclaim its existence.

Practicing Architects (foreigners or nationals trained abroad) were directly confronted with this dilemma as their creations stood as islands in the sea of traditional buildings. The discernible responses were (and TODAY are) imposition, integration and innovation and their variants.

The pre-occupation of this Conference should be helped by the following developments among others :

- (i) paradigm shift in perception of architecture and its studies

- (ii) increasing (renewed?) interest in sustainable design and processes

- (iii) search for (new) ways to express the complexities of contemporary life

It is inappropriate to neglect any part of available knowledge in African Architecture.

What is critically needed is the development of appropriate framework(s) to study and understand ‘what is on the ground’.

In facilitating ‘ how African Architecture can be sustained into the future’ some critical and recurring concerns need be addressed. Aptly expressed about 5 decades ago by Maxwell Fry thus:

I am commonly asked to what extent the development of contemporary architecture draws on the cultures indigenous to the countries in which it takes place, to which I could reply: How much continuing life is there in these cultures? Have they contemporary validity? Are there artists (?) who can state them in contemporary terms?¹

This paper addresses the third question.

*5 minutes of slides show will precede the Paper presentation

ENCOUNTERING AFRICAN ARCHITECTURE

In 1982 I encountered an architectural piece on the hill of Oremeji².

I visited the Dominican Chapel and later met the Master on the first floor of the Studio. I became acquainted with New Culture (a review of Contemporary African Arts).³ My fascination with the buildings and the Master knew no respite till I had three months stint in Ugboko's Office. Then I 'knew' the House and visited the Cultural Centre, Benin (then partially completed). In 1985 I returned to work for four years. I visited the buildings while preparing this paper.

DEMAS NWOKO'S WORKS (1968-1978)

Demas Nwoko (b 1935) began private studies in 'creative Architecture' in 1956 at Ibadan. He later attended College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria between 1957 and 1961 where he studied Fine Art. At 33 Nwoko began a decade that produced in conception and construction three great buildings focused in the paper. The period coincided with the later end of Civil war, oil boom, 2nd national Dev Plan and massive (re) construction and was characterized by quick processes (briefing, design production and construction).

a) Dominican Chapel

In 1968, the Dominicans sought terra cotta (African) plaques for Altar of a proposed Chapel located in a religious zone of Ibadan. A sheet of drawing, seminal paper on 'Art and Religion' and 3 hours of presentation redefined the brief and marked the beginning of design and construction of an (african) Chapel.

The altar wall and forms the base of a bell-tower terminated as concrete Cross.

Sacristy and Stores are tucked in the basement. Walls are in stone, concrete and (unfinished) sandcrete blocks (all available locally), The ceiling follows the roof's profile.

b) Oba Akenzua Cultural Centre, Benin

In 1972, armed with uncommon determination to see to the establishment of African Playhouse he got the commission to design and construct a Theatre (for the then University of Benin multi campus idea). He influenced the selection of the site to

encourage town –and- gown interaction and nearness to existing sites of cultural significance.

Tiered seats surround the thrust stage extended from the proscenium stage to define shape of the foyer and external approaching wall finished with precast fluted tiles. The exposed concrete framework (column/ beam) carry different patterns. The ‘open’ ceiling panels made of hardwood in angle iron frames admit light. The essentially cantilevered façade at the lower level is sliced to reveal screen with fixed and operable glass panes. Top (recessed) and floor windows leave most wall surfaces continuous.

A network of facilities enclosing two small courts adjoins the auditorium. These as well as the wall enclosing the stage are built of multi-toned sandcrete blocks.

c) Residence, Idumuje-Ugboko

The house, located in the royal Quarters, was constructed between 1977 and 1978. The ‘square’ plan is approached through an aedicule that bursts into a voluminous interior with impluvium. Windows are at top and ground floor levels. The perimeter is fenced with earth walls (roofed) and hedges.

Now completed the decked garage has been extended and developed to serve as office (ground floor) and master room on upper floor. .

The master room is ‘enclosed’ on four sides by light well, toilet / wardrobe, deep eave over (fish) pond below and screened verandah. The external walls are made of multi-toned sandcrete blocks.

KEY INFLUENCES

Age 3-14

- (a) His father’s architecture (notably the ‘aesthetic presence’ of the patterns of the roof structure of the assembly hall in the father’s palace and ‘the feelings of grandeur –‘Space has always been the most important feature of my own work.’
- (b) Public Works Departments’ buildings in Enugu: ‘ I watched them built from the scratch. I can still describe every one of those buildings ’⁶
- (c) Impluvial style of the mid west:’ A pool of light was let into the centre of the house through the impluvium opening. This created a dramatic effect

of light and shade in the interior of the house and I applied this effect of light and shade in all my architectural designs.⁷

Age 21-33

- a) Traditional architecture of the Africans, the Arab world and the far East⁸
Their comfort attributes which ensure constant stable ambient temperature irrespective of the external vagaries.'
- b) Works of great architects like Christopher Wren and Gothic Architecture. They had profound Art content; 'this became my vision of what architecture should be.'⁹
- c) African arts which should 'provide direction and innovation' for the budding artists. Nwoko concentrated on 'dynamics of the creation of expressiveness of form in African Art' not the physical forms and images. At the end of the Zaria years (1957-61), he could produce works 'unmistakably African without being a replication of traditional African Art images'.
- d) Study Tours to Greece, France especially at Ecole Des Beaux Art (Paris) where he studied architectural decoration.
- (vii) researches and experimentations such as 'improvement of mud', 'terra cotta' African Theatre House'

REIFICATION/ ANALYSIS OF ELEMENTS

Architecture is a personal art responding directly to what its creator bring to it of knowledge and experience. (Fry, 1982)

In the three buildings Nwoko brought into play strong feelings, deep knowledge and rich experience to express his New Culture philosophy (each work should be unmistakably African) and diverse requirements

Unwin (2006) classified elements of architecture as basic, modified and combined. The following analysis uses the classification.

Each building enjoys appropriate location and is raised above the ground to allow floor openings. The floor of the impluvium in the house breaks the open floor into units acting as psychological barrier to the (semi-) private areas.

The bell tower and service core above the stage and the positioning on site identifies each building. The house, partially hidden, has extensive foreground (a local cultural space).

Barriers are expressed in diverse ways –walls (stone, multi-toned, blocks), Screens (sand-cast, metal, wooden) moat and earth walls (with art works) and hedges. The moat at the chapel was intended to make the extension of the chapel unthinkable.¹² The roofs generally high pitched have deep eaves. The fascia, badge board and gutters in the public buildings when executed in concrete, became objects of artistic expressions. Columns replicated traditional carved pillars. The fluted patterns on the porches in Benin and Ugboko as royal emblems while the carved totems in the chapel separate the monks from others.

The buildings had types in the traditional African Architecture: the theatre after the palace, the house after the Benin and Igbo house forms and the church after ‘the shape of the great ancient mosque of Mali’¹³ Also each project was conceived as a stage: ‘ I start to plan (my projects) thinking about the functions and then construct an aesthetic whole that allows you to act and live in it – a bit as in the performing art’.¹⁴

Transitions from the outside are indirect and between levels are celebrated with the attention to steps. One rises and moves through a defined path to emerge into spacious core (not on the main axis). The interior spaces are open and well modulated.

In the openings (windows, doors, corridors), Nwoko displayed freedom in types, sizes and location and in exerting control he created harmonious facades. The positioning of windows was guided by requirements of stack ventilation rather than cross ventilation. In the theatre windows are located above the ceiling of the auditorium to draw the air moving from outside (‘cooled ‘ in the foyer) before passing through the openings under the theatre seats.

The modifying elements¹⁵ mostly primary tools of an artist were deployed with uncommon mastery. Approaching the house at Ugboko aura of silence is palpable and throughout the building, light (from the sky/ high openings) contributed to the definition of the character and ambience of space. Light from above the main and side altars

achieved dramatic effects in the chapel while the expansive glass walls of the theatre reveals open-work (wooden) screen. Sound modulation is notable

Surface textures, colours and details of all elements (floors, walls and pathways) combined draw all senses for their appreciation.

Three other parallels with traditional African architecture can be drawn. The projects are all enclosures – views focused on the inside with no celebrated views outside. The enclosed spaces have constant ambient temperature irrespective of the exteriors. Materials and technology employed are obtainable locally. In the 60s foundations were built with stones and walls of adobe or blocks (7”x9”x18”) in Ibadan. Blocks mostly produced on site had different colours depending on site location and depth of excavated soil. Timbers of all sizes were readily available in sawmills. How can one explain the profuse use of wood in all his works? ‘ I favour wood, but use concrete mainly for load bearing purposes’, he responded to a question on new techniques and materials.¹⁶

The buildings are married to their site (excavation on each site will always be disputed except consciously investigated). In none of the projects is man out of scale. The extensive foreground (surround) of the theatre and the rationalized proportion mitigates the size.

Time has had diverse and immense effects: gradual completion of each project and enhancement by (growing) plants and trees. Age has not been able to conquer their beauty.

The chapel and theatre plans are not simple orthogonal forms and might be functional constructs. The house is basically a square. He wrote in 1979 ‘ Square buildings can be beautiful in the sum total of the composition of their forms... you do not see the sharp edges but the light and shade of the formed walls and the openings...The sum total of the patterns formed by all these, added to their balanced existence in space, makes the building beautiful’¹⁷

CONCLUSION

The affecting presence of these buildings is difficult to convey in words. Godwin (2005) wrote '...when I experienced Demas' architectural work and try to analyse its form that I find it a monolith ...a deeply integrated artifact, which defies any dissection' Time is needed to assimilate each work.

Key influences have been highlighted but his personality (African ness, naturalness, simplicity) and ability (as master builder) remain cardinal in explaining all his works, which give fresh expression to materials, reify key elements, respond to climate and remain organic.

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