

## Upgrading Ile-Ife's vernacular architecture heritage

C. O. Osasona & F. O. Ewemade

*Department of Architecture, Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria*

### Abstract

The importance of vernacular architecture is increasingly being acknowledged worldwide. This is particularly true of developing economies where the globalization process is progressively being questioned, and where appropriateness of approaches and technologies has become increasingly topical. Ile-Ife, a city in south-western Nigeria, has long caught the world's attention notably for its superlatively naturalistic bronze and terracotta heads, and for its cardinality in ethnological considerations of the Yoruba, a major socio-cultural group locally and in the diaspora. As with several ancient and historically significant Nigerian towns, Ile-Ife is blessed with a rich legacy of heritage buildings ranging from the near-pristine traditional, through the equally typical colonial, to the hybrid vernacular. The traditional heart of Ile-Ife is characterized by dilapidated buildings and out-migration, typical of old cities worldwide (at some point in their historical development). Within a two-kilometre radius of Ife Palace, there are choice buildings typifying the peak in the town's Afro-Brazilian architecture – alas, in a sorry state of maintenance. This paper is an account of the efforts of Faculty and students of the Department of Architecture, Obafemi Awolowo University, to initiate restoration of some of these vernacular buildings. The tentative interventions have highlighted the potential for streetscape upgrading, in the short-term, and renewal of such properties (and ultimately, the inner-core urban fabric) in the long-term. With the government and/or NGOs tapping into such architecture-based tourism potential, not only will these samples of Ife heritage building have their lives extended by proper conservation, but also the economic viability of the ancient city will be further enhanced.

*Keywords: inner-core upgrading, Nigerian vernacular architecture, heritage architecture, transformed traditional architecture, Nigerian architectural pluralism, Ile, Aguda, Saro, repatriated slaves, folk building practices.*



## 1 Introduction

The term “vernacular” is understood to be that which is indigenous to a people – that which they spontaneously identify with, and regularly showcase as belonging to them. As such, it could be language, mode of dress, cuisine, architecture, etc. Specifically, vernacular architecture has been defined as “post-traditional” (Amole [1]) i.e. transformed traditional – what the traditional has evolved to be. It is synonymous with folk building practices, and is the style of building spontaneously and consistently adopted by the majority (Rudofsky [2]). It is a true reflection of how the generality of the people want to build, and is depictive of the lifestyle they are comfortable with. In its articulation, it is a product of age-old building traditions of a locale, amalgamated with selectively-borrowed practices and features of other cultures the original group has interacted with (Osasona [3]). This explains its popularity, and the fact that it is continuously evolving.

In particular, Nigerian vernacular architecture is a product of traditional building practices, British colonial architectural inputs and colonially-aided Latin American/Sierra Leonean archi-cultural transplants. As a result of the cultural diffusion which occurred with British colonization, architectural pluralism – hitherto unknown and among other transplanted phenomena – came on the scene, featuring hospitals, schools, factories, warehouses, offices, churches and Western-style residences.

Colonial architecture in Nigeria was characterized by the use of steep, hipped shingle roofs and lofty (sometimes profiled) ceiling heights, columned and massive masonry structuring and extensive verandas. Buildings were generally bungalows or two-storey structures, and were of fired brick or stone, in conjunction with timber and wrought iron. Such buildings serviced the needs of the colonial administrators for administrative, commercial, educational, industrial and social purposes; the residential structures were part of a low-density development, well-serviced by roads, piped water, electricity, retail stores, parks and other amenities (Osasona and Hyland [4]).

It is a historical fact that while the British were the chief sponsors of the African slave trade, they were also the arrowhead for its stoppage. A major fall-out of this intervention was the repatriation of African slaves from Bahia in Brazil (Hallen [5]), Cuba and other Latin American countries. With respect to these activities in Nigeria, Lagos island was the destination for such returnees-slaves, with the main groups being the *Agudas* (the local name for *emancipados* – repatriates from Brazil, Cuba and other Latin American countries) and the *Saros* (the local pidgin form of “Sierra Leone”; Osasona and Hyland [6]), who were repatriates from England, initially re-settled in Freetown, Sierra Leone, but later assisted to re-locate to Lagos. The *Agudas* were skilled craftsmen, specializing in the highly-ornate Hispano-Portuguese brand of building popularly referred to as “Brazilian Architecture”, while the *Saros* were astute businessmen who popularized the two-storey, mixed-use archetype (Osasona and Hyland [7]).

*Aguda* architecture was characterized by multi-storey construction, complex roof configurations (featuring attics and dormer windows); the use of balconies



and staircases with ornate newels and balustrades, and decoration (centred on the highlighting of quoins, dadoes and columns, and the use of relief murals). Other features of this brand of architecture were a prominent, centrally-located double-loaded corridor, and detached conveniences. On the other hand, *Saro* construction was distinguished by timber-framed-and-boarded houses, single- or two-storey, and usually with an en-framing veranda. It also featured carved fascias and extensive timber fretwork at the eaves; attics and dormer windows could also be a feature of the roof. In general, the style was reflective of British colonial building practices.

## 2 The emergence of Nigerian vernacular architecture

A major influence on what has become the popularized model of Nigerian residential architecture has been the “Brazilian Style” which, essentially, was the style of the first generation of buildings erected by the *Agudas*. In addition to multi-storey construction and complex roof forms, it was characterized by highly-ornate craftsmanship and, being very expensive, had very limited patronage; in fact, in Lagos at the turn of the Twentieth Century, it soon became a status symbol.

The “Brazilian Style” progressively gave way to the “Afro-Brazilian” – a less ornate, less structurally-complex archetype, but still greatly reminiscent of its pre-cursor. Because it was the product of apprentices of the original “master craftsmen”, it was less expensive (i.e. more affordable) and in consequence, could be more readily replicated. As such, it soon became not just a feature of Lagos and its immediate environs, but gradually even of the hinterland (Osasona [8]). Other noticeable differences with respect to this latter typology were the gradual disappearance of the garret, and an increasing tendency towards infusing mixed-use functionality. In addition, with the gradual decline in exclusivity, such buildings moved from being solely owner-occupied to tenement tenancy (Osasona [8]). Though commonly of two (or more) storeys, single-storey variants eventually came on the scene and today, are the most proliferated typology.

The British colonial influence (subsuming, essentially, the *Saro* style) encouraged the use of new building materials and more complex plan-morphology. This was in sharp contrast to the deployment of room-deep spaces on both sides of the exaggerated central passage, depicted by the Portuguese-influenced Latin American models. The steep, hipped roofs and pronounced eaves of colonial typologies were readily identified with as, essentially, they typified traditional Nigerian building practices.

### 2.1 Characteristics of Nigerian vernacular architecture

In its general configuration and present stage of evolution, Nigerian vernacular architecture appears to have leant more on *Aguda* designs for inspiration, than on the other extraneous influences. As such, the archetypal model of commonest expression features a one- or two-storey structure with rooms on either side of an



extra-large corridor. Such buildings usually accommodate the living-and-trading habits of Nigerians, with shops on the ground floor of multi-storey versions (or in a frontal flank of bungalows). Conveniences are semi- or totally detached, and there is a graduation of space from private indoor, through semi-private internal circulation space, to semi-public front (or back) veranda to public zones. See Fig. 1. There is limited ornamentation in “traditional” locations – particularly with respect to columns and fascia-boards (which were initially quite elaborately sculpted).

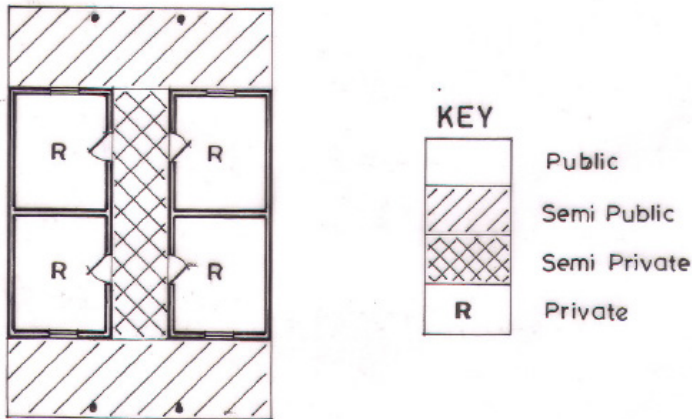


Figure 1: Schematic of basic vernacular house-type layout.

### 3 Heritage architecture

Worldwide, various buildings have been preserved for posterity, for reasons of typological significance, excellence of craftsmanship, historical associations and/or other cultural considerations. Such buildings constitute heritage architecture, and usually come under government listing for conservation, restoration and often, public viewing, for tourism purposes. Sadly, as a result of an apparent lack of political will, Nigeria is yet to fully come to terms with the cultural implications – not to talk of the economic losses – of the neglect of her heritage architecture.

#### 3.1 The decay of heritage architecture

As implied above, apart from the natural processes of wear and tear, there is the issue of political will backed up by enabling policy, at the root of much of the decay of Nigeria’s heritage structures. All over the geographic sprawl of the nation, samples abound of buildings – ranging from local traditional, through legacies of colonial occupation and facilitation, to locally-produced hybrids – each physically interesting, historically and culturally significant and thus worthy of preservation. Among such are palaces (e.g. the Deji of Akure’s

palace), colonial residences (such as the Residency building in Calabar) and the private residences of Nigeria's early Twentieth Century *nouveau riche* (in Lagos, Ijebu-Ode, Ilesa, etc). This entrenched neglect (resulting in trivializing evidences of the nation's material culture), has essentially been the result, on the one hand, of misplaced values, and on the other, of a genuine lack of the financial wherewithal, on the part of private individuals. Apart from government's relative inactivity (and the non-existence of NGOs like the UK's Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission (HBMC) and the Ancient Monuments Society (AMS) (Cooling *et al* [9])), generally, the populace occupies itself with more pressing issues of employment and the provision of food and basic shelter for families and individuals. As such, there is still a pronounced rural-urban drift, and even where a location may not be appropriately dubbed "rural", for the younger generation, prospects are always better in larger cities, and hence, the migration continues unabated. Thus, Brazilian and Afro-Brazilian houses bequeathed to individuals or families in urban centres characterized by general decay and out-migration are seldom the recipients of maintenance attention.

## 4 Vernacular architecture in Ile-Ife

The ancient city of Ile-Ife is blessed with a sample of heritage buildings – in addition to its international acclaim for its naturalistic terracotta and bronze sculptures. Many of the traditionally-significant buildings (of earth) have weathered badly and are practically derelict. Rather than be progressively maintained, most have been abandoned totally, or had their cultural significance transferred to more modern structures. However, there are still some examples of vernacular buildings in the spirit of the Afro-Brazilian style, in fairly good condition, which are still occupied and so have a good chance of maintenance and restoration – all things being equal.

### 4.1 Restoration of vernacular buildings in Ile-Ife

From years of History of Architecture-related classes at the Obafemi Awolowo University (entailing fieldwork in various parts of the town and environs) Faculty and students of the Department of Architecture, have frequently observed the level of neglect of such heritage buildings, and been concerned. In 1999, the first attempt was made to intervene, however minimally, on one such building, to stem the tide of inevitable degeneration. *Ile Olayinka* (the Olayinka House) was the first beneficiary of such interventions. Other buildings that have been similarly affected include *Ile Oyinbo Moore*, *Ile Timi*, *Ile Oladigbolu*, *Ile Oladinni* and *Ile Alubarika*. In each instance, the major objective was to kick-start the process of restoration by initiating some repair-work, thus encouraging the house-owners to complete the project. Most of these buildings are located close to the traditional core of the town – within a two-kilometre radius of the palace – representing one of the concentric rings of development, characterized by the residences of the traditional "elite". Three of these projects are briefly discussed in this work.



#### 4.1.1 *Ile Olayinka (Olayinka House)*

Built in 1928 of adobe, plastered over with cement render, this is a two-storey building of imposing presence – both from the point of view of its enigmatic owner (S. J. Olayinka), and its decorative finish (Osasona and Ewemade [10]). In 1999, when the restoration project was embarked upon, there were noticeable wall cracks (and missing chunks), peeled paint and copious biological growths. The intervention exercise consisted in the removal of lichens and fungi, the repair of cracks and damaged moulding, and the re-painting of the façade. One of the major challenges experienced was locating a craftsman to restore the decorative moulding that had been lost around two upper windows. Eventually, Sculpture students of the Department of Fine Arts were co-opted – but not before we had initially given up and painted! See Figures 2 and 3.



Figure 2: Olayinka House, before the tentative restoration, faded and cracked.

#### 4.1.2 *Ile Alubarika (“House of Blessing”)*

This was the “luxury home” of a cocoa magnate, and was built in the early ‘50s. It is similarly of adobe, plaster-rendered. Again like the Olayinka House, it is an arrangement of rooms on both sides of a large corridor, and is on two levels. However, this house is much larger and, despite being well-occupied, is in a worse state of deterioration, with structural damage to external floors, timber stairs, window hoods and even the roof; there was also problem with the compound sewerage. The stairs and broken concrete-work were repaired, the blocked drains cleared and biological growths removed. See Figures 4–6.

#### 4.1.3 *Ile Oyinbo Moore (Ologbenla House)*

*Ile Oyinbo Moore* – the name by which this residence is popularly known – literally means “the white man’s house-type on Moore Street”. The building



Figure 3: Restoration of decorative moulding around upper windows.



Figure 4: *Ile Alubarika*. Approach façade. Looking deceptively well-kept even at the time of the intervention, the house was in very bad shape.



Figure 5: Iron reinforcement exposed to rust on underside of balcony.



Figure 6: Adequate cement cover has been provided for the formerly exposed iron rods.

earned this name by being the first two-storey structure on the street. Rumoured to have actually been built by a repatriate from Brazil, it was constructed between 1938 and 1942, and was the country residence of a descendant of the 45<sup>th</sup> *ooni* (ruler) of Ile-Ife, Michael Aderin Ologbenla, who had been a Civil Servant in Lagos. In keeping with the vernacular model, it consists of a double-loaded, large corridor with the frontage sporting an apse-like protrusion. Two-storeys high and of adobe, the building had suffered severe cracking (from the vibrations of a powered mill the family had erected on an adjacent plot, for economic purposes), as well as the routine wear and tear. Essentially, the intervention consisted of bracing of such cracks (using 12mm twisted reinforcement rods), repairs of chipped steps and other masonry, and painting. See Figures 7-11.

## 5 Effects of restoration interventions

Despite the obvious modest scale on which we have had to operate, some gratifying fall-outs of the various interventions have been observed. In the spirit of desirable town-and-gown interactions, staff and students on the one hand, and the local populace, on the other, are progressively being given opportunities for collaboration on mutually-beneficial schemes. For their part, students are seeing the practical relevance and real-life authenticity of classroom teaching, as well as generally gaining community exposure. From the Ife community's point of view, the service rendered is much appreciated, and if there had been doubts hitherto, about the value of education students of the local University were getting, in the light of such tangible proofs of practical applicability, esteem and appreciation for it are now frequently expressed.

Experiences regarding feedback from the residents of these buildings (particularly offspring of the original owner-occupiers), have been bitter-sweet: the rewarding aspect is that in every single instance – apart from the expressed gratitude – there has been a subtle conferment of lost family glory and general boosting of dented social image. However, like the proverbial *Oliver Twist*, each





Figure 7: Ologbenla House, before the intervention. Note the chipped steps, missing balusters and general shabbiness.



Figure 8: Ologbenla House, after, sporting a new coat of paint and repaired steps. The baluster replacements (4<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup> left) could not be exactly matched.



Figure 9: Broken wall plaster, revealing adobe brick core.

family wanted more! Generally, rather than take up the challenge and complete the process (like has always been our intention), they unfortunately, expect that everything else will be done for their property.

In physical terms, even with the little that has been done, in each case the streetscape has come alive. Apart from the actual market value of such properties appreciating, attention is drawn to the intrinsic cultural and historical value of these buildings, since in the course of our interactions with residents (and their neighbours) we make it a policy to educate them on the implications of the loss of structures in this stylistic class – to the built-scape and to our cultural history.

## 6 Prospects

Given the circumstances of our interventions to date, obviously it is not envisaged that it can be an indefinite approach, or that it will make a far-reaching impact on the totality of the heritage-architecture stock of Ile-Ife. The challenges are monumental, the resources very limited and the actual time we can give as



Figure 10: Major vertical crack, from right under the ceiling. A 12mm iron rod is embedded as bracing before the crack is sealed.



Figure 11: Repair-work to the badly-chipped entrance steps and cracks in the façade of the Ologbenla House, Moore Street, Ile-Ife.

Faculty working within the time-frame of a university calendar is relatively negligible. Nevertheless, it is not just bright-eyed optimism (or justifiable enthusiasm) that underpins our position that a concerted, well-planned and thoroughly executed conservation/restoration programme will augur well – not just for these various properties in the short-run – but for further imprinting Ile-Ife on the world map as a tourist destination, in the long-run.

For instance, in the course of working on the Olayinka House, it was discovered that this wealthy man-of-many-parts had enjoyed a larger-than-life reputation (as a celebrated money-lender, traditional herbal healer and medium, among other things). He was reputed to have divined by a “talking effigy” (*osanyin*) that is buried – together with his other paraphernalia – on the premises. He was the first indigene to embalm his dead mother who he kept in a glass-covered mausoleum for all to gaze at in awe-struck wonder (which, though badly in need of repairs, is still visible in the back regions of the compound). The late Samuel Johnson Olayinka, enigmatic in life, continues to live on as a local legend for all manner of exploits (Osasona and Ogunfolakan [11]). Certainly, with the proper orientation and conceptualization, prospects abound here for a mini-museum, centred on the architecture, the personality and the artefacts. Every family house has a history, and treasures; what is possible with the Olayinka House, could also be possible with the others. In fact, the Ologbenla House is even more imbued with history centred on Ife royalty, with connections to another historically-significant town, Ede.

With the government (or NGOs who have such a vision) wading into this enterprise, it should be possible for more impacting interventions to be embarked

upon. The influx of foreign tourists – in the past to eulogize like Froebenius (Olomola [12]) and other early explorers did on the town’s classical sculptures (initially credited to the Greeks!) – will undoubtedly boost the economic returns to the town, and ultimately, its image. This will be not only metaphorically but literally, as the inner-core urban fabric can only cumulatively appreciate in quality and general outlook, from such exercises.

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