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### **Interactive and perceptual engagement of reconstructed thoughts: A sustenance for our built environment**

#### **Abstract**

*This paper discusses how the thought process of a society, which has over the years been nurtured by man's interactions with his immediate and remote environment, becomes a brainchild of tangible constructions and a subtle testament of how the society evolves from the old into the new. It further examines the basic factors that have over the years influenced the sustenance of Architectural design as a societal experience carefully crafted over ages. Perception and discussions about culture and cultural practices are sometimes done as if these are static and have no response to changing times, however, the Built environment, particularly Architecture, as an art form, from antiquity has played a rebuttal role, from the structure itself through the embellishment to consumption.*

#### **Introduction**

From antiquity, man has always sought ways to make his environment friendly and habitable. It is unarguable that the primary purpose of Architecture is habitation. The question here is "Is this quest just about occupancy? The complex simplicity in this question takes us on an expedition into how forms have become, as a results of the engagement of people and their environment. Wilson (1984) opines that there is an innate psychological need for humans to be in a positive relationship with other life forms, because of the 'neurological nourishment they provide.

This engagement leads to the unending development and sustainability of structures especially in the field of Architecture. The confluence of art and architecture is such narrow that they eventually tend to merge into each other forming a single entity. For this discussion, a simple proposed working definition for art would be, "the expressions of thoughts in tangible form being the result of the interaction between man and his environment" (tangibility here refers to the situation where one perceives the forms generated with the various senses). By this, cultures have and will be communicating their thoughts, and reactions about their perceptions through the everyday objects they shape, ornament and decorate, for both secular and religious purposes. These objects shape the individual and collective experiences. Art could therefore be seen as an avenue to a scholarly discussion on the presence of the past and possibly the future of our lives and how recipient generations relate sustainably to it. Kofi (1964) relating to Ghanaian Art( and for that matter architecture) sees it not just as a series of museum pieces with just anthropological or aesthetic interest as living things which have the tendency to grow in terms of development.

Focusing on architecture as an artistic expression by various cultures, this paper will consider factors and mode that has informed how thoughts have become tangible. The key areas to be discussed include:

- Factors that influence the reconstruction of thoughts in tangible forms
- How Cultures reconstruct forms in terms of perception and interaction.
- The characteristics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century design environment

**Factors that influence the reconstruction of thoughts in tangible forms.**

Architecture has over the ages incorporated material and methodology from a wide variety of geographic and historical heritages. It therefore becomes a multifaceted discipline of perspectives and interests which many times infers from works in its immediate and remote environment as well as identity of their makers. Through this, it interrogates how individual perceptions are expressed and how it influences wider aspects of their culture. It further explores how the sustainable use of resources and physical space significantly contributes to keep the necessary balance between human development and the living environment, and recognizes the inter-generational and collective memory attached to it (Tassel. 2007). According to Kellert, (2005), this relationship among culture, environment, and architecture evidently becomes as a living part the society's collective consciousness and identity. As such the environment as milieu becomes not just something a creature is merely in, but something it has (Cooper 1992).

Cultures are not static but are continuously evolving; as such their architectural expressions cannot fit into a single form or definition. Given the richness of the many evolving cultures in Africa and their architectural expressions, it is indeed rather impossible to define African Architecture without reducing it into a cliché or into an incomplete collection of stylistic elements or forms. (Tassel 2007). This becomes possible because every generation of Africans have a different interaction with technology in terms of materials, taste and purpose. Is architecture (which, in this discussion, termed as habitable works of art), just structures to shelter humans from the austerity of the elements of nature? If so, a simple walled structure should probably be enough for that purpose. However, from time immemorial, man has spent immeasurable time and effort to move architectural structures from just simple walls to objects of aesthetic and status appeal.

Geddes (2012), distinguishing the architect and the urbanist will perhaps bring this discussion to its true focus as his interrogative assertion is considered: "Why do we design where we live and work? Why do we not just live in nature, or in chaos? Why does society care about architecture? Why does it really matter?" These questions bring into mind the fact that architecture, aside its conventional use has an underlying essence. It could be seen clearly that architecture together with its aesthetics, in its very essence, incorporates the aesthetics of everyday life. As such architecture whether indigenous or contemporary is always influenced by a direct analytical intelligence and theories shaped either in part or whole by developments in the environment and has over the ages been made aptly for the purpose, place and for future possibilities (Geddes 2012, pp. 98-99).

Architecture's sustainability is however largely dependent on knowing the very essence of the structures being constructed. It goes a long way to influence the growth of the society. Goodland (1995) assert social sustainability is conditional upon environmental sustainability, his concept of knowledge is indispensable throughout the widest gamut of human activities. Without such concepts, the activities in question would not exist (Carroll 1999). Form follows function. The relationship between architecture and society is a true dialogue, dynamic and complex (Geddes 2012.p. 99) which can be evolved to suit the needs of every generation.

Are we then the architecture we want to see? And has it been so throughout the ages? The answer to a large extent is yes, because from antiquity, architecture, being a form of art has existed beyond being specific objects. They may neither be paintings, nor sculpture, nor buildings, nor landscape etc.

Forms, it could be said, “have” no form but “become” as they interact with the audience. The forms as seen, are receptacles carrying the thoughts of the recipient society. If they are viewed as objects, then those, who give meaning to their existence, have become objects like them. These forms could therefore be said to be the interrogative thought and how it is constructed in a tangible space.

### **How Cultures have engaged forms in terms of perception and reconstruction**

Has a homogeneous material culture, or house plan been expected throughout generations? Houses that were erected reflected the style worked out by the community, and perfected over many generations (Eglash, 1999). Geddes is of the view that, “Simultaneously, we signal who we are, where we are, what we are doing. We express ourselves, our memories, our social institutions, in architecture” (Geddes 2012, p.15). Haggard (2006) is of the view that such a process helps in reawakening the connection people experience between themselves and the places they inhabit’.

If so, we can then say that concurrent indigenous material practices have informed the essence of contemporary architecture via association and modernity. This can be revealed when we take an intellectual trip into Pre-historic, the formative years into the Classicisms, Early Christian, Dark Ages & Feudal, Reformation, Humanistic Traditions, Modern, Post-modern and presently, Contemporary within the Western praxis.

Balogun (1979) notes how African artistic genius was strongly asserted in the decorative embellishment of the built environment. Varying decorative patterns could be found sculpted or painted on walls and wooden doors, which ranged from figurative designs to complex abstract patterns which revealed an exquisite balance of form, colour, and shading. Painting was carried out as an extension of architecture than an independent medium.

History of art and for that matter architecture has been about peoples’ proximities to materials and contexts that give them formats of representations and techniques for achieving them. The basic vehicles that inform how cultures reconstruct their thoughts include:

- Plausibility: probable material and skills that can carry the expression of the thoughts of the society.
- Immediacy: availability of such materials.
- Conventional: established materials and mode of presentation which usually say what the society wishes to say.

Sight should not be lost of the fact that culturally, works of art might be in the custody of an individual but their interpretation (concept) is communally owned. Different cultures in different times have approached materials in different way. This is usually determined by circumstance surrounding the relationships with particular materials. This form the basis upon which other meanings are generated through associations.

Have artists and architects been well placed to reconstruct ‘thought’ in tangible form? Architecture and art have been with man since the inception of the universe. There is no society that cannot boast of an ingenious craft which will be categorized under art and architecture. However the statement by Kofi Antubam (a postcolonial Ghanaian), is worth examining: “As far as it is known, Ghanaians have no great concrete architectural, sculptural, ceramic, painting, musical, or literary work to be shown. What then is to be considered to be [*sic*] Ghana’s peculiar contribution to the arts? (Antubam 1963). Another instance could be that of the southern African region’s impressive stone ruins, especially those of Great Zimbabwe, were long attributed to outsiders on the assumption that Africans were incapable of producing such imposing architecture (Clarke, 2008). Considering the earlier working definition given to art and for that matter architecture, as an interrogative thought and how it is presented formally in a tangible world, could the architectural pedigree of the African be challenged? Providing a credible answer Geddes (2012), makes allusion to Christopher Alexander’s (1964) view of the great test of the fitness of architectural lying in its intended purpose.

### **Characteristics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century designs environment**

Existence is a dynamic complex situation where new ideas always replace old paradigms by recognizing that the determinant for this change is a relationship between man and his environment. There is usually a critical engagement of interdisciplinary essence in terms of multiplicity of functions in the making, audience perception and interactions. As such, designs, no matter the mode of rendition, become a form of documentation for a particular era and a testament on which subsequent eras base their developments. In this wise, if designers (artist and architects) are expected to provide a creative solution to a problem, within a given set of parameters and era, they will definitely be rethinking the terms of engagement and praxis of previous generations. The story of every generation is usually told within the confines of the available technology and practice. These strategies are usually enshrined within points such as:

- **The static dynamism of human thoughts**  
Culture, which is basically the thoughts generated when humans interact with their environment and its resultant desires and aspiration has never changed over the ages. The changes and for that matter the differences are usually in the traditions which are as a result of the technologies that determine the practice. Teairo (2002) sees culture as a dynamic phenomenon that evolves over time to respond to emerging needs and circumstances. This evolutionary nature of culture is a direct consequence of learning about and responding to these needs and circumstances
- **The trends in globalisation**  
globalisation is not intended to bring about an entire sweeping out of the indigenous and traditional concepts of a generation in a society, but rather, it is to disseminate critical information about why a particular society and for that matter a generation chose to present their thought in a specific manner. It stands to reason according to Van Fraassen (1980) that this century's "superstition" was last century's triumph of reason as such there is always the need for a change in how a generation perceives and engages its environment. Sadly, in most cases, the old paradigm is replaced with a new one without due recognition to the sustaining force. Here the superiority of clients who have been confronted with a chain of obstructive false dilemmas coded in colonial logic but surviving as primordial vestiges in post-colonial ethos (seid'ou 2014:p8), under the guise of modernity make demand for designs which are overbearingly incongruous to both the physical and conceptual mind-set of the society.
- **The social, environmental and technological development.**  
This encompasses the expansion of the society and its impact on the environment as well as the import of new and much desirable ways of doing things to suit the needs of the society. Within these two areas, designers generate aesthetics that highlights concepts of social status, beliefs, power and security. Thus, a mere description of a house for instance, or "enumerating its picturesque" features and analysing its comfortability alone does not suffice for an in-depth discourse on the primary function of inhabitation (Bachelard, 1994). Bachelard asserts; "...inhabited space transcends geometrical space" (p.vii). Such Concepts, which usually start as formations in the mind or mental representations also act as abstract objects and constituent of propositions that mediate between thoughts and referent.
- **Materiality**  
This is a vehicle through which concept and practice acquires presence. Usually its relevance, in terms of content, form and quality (physical and, or mental) is in relation with the socio-cultural and political construct of the environment. Geismar (2004), in discussing the materiality of contemporary art in Vanuatu, notes the relationship between the material world and social relations. He emphasises that, "within such relations, objects are not merely privileged sites of analysis but intrinsic to the development of a social world" (p44). Different

people approach different materials in different way. The circumstance surrounding a person's relationship with a particular material forms the meaning base upon which other meanings are generated through its associations.

### **Conclusion**

Every design problem begins with an effort to achieve fitness between two entities: the form and the context. The form is the solution to the problem; the context defines the problem (Alexander 1964, p.15). Posing another modest question would be: are designers well placed to reconstruct thought tangibly as well as document the events of time for posterity? Answering this question, calls for a conceptual trip into antiquity, where the intertwining of art and architecture helped various cultures use the rightful reconstruction of their thoughts in a tangible form to link the past, present and the future. This could be achieved if an environment for designing is created, where the intent of the individual fits into the intent of the larger society. This generates an integration of cultural thoughts into material forms by adding conceptual thinking to competence in our mode of representation.

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