

SEARCHING FOR IDENTITY: ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM IN UGANDA

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Introduction

What is 'Ugandan Architecture', or more significantly, 'What is Ugandan'?

Before we can begin to discuss 'Ugandan architectural identity', we must first appreciate what exactly is it that we refer to as Uganda. Uganda as a country was created with little regard for the ethnic groups that inhabit the area. Its borders were largely defined by the 'Berlin Conference' of 1884-1885, which had as its main aim, the devising of a method to divide the continent of Africa between the European powers. As such, within Uganda's boundaries can be found four major African cultural groupings, the Bantu, the Eastern Nilotic, Western Nilotic, and the Central Sudanic. Within these broad groupings are forty or more distinct societies that constitute the Ugandan people. This diversity of ethnic groups makes Uganda as an ethnic entity, more a colonial paradox than culturally homogeneous (Finnström). This lack of cultural homogeneity has been something a number of countries in Africa have been grappling with since 'independence', raising the spectre of imagined or invented (group) identity. Many nations, seeking legitimacy as nation states, attempted to define unique national identities through art, architecture, clothing and music. The representation of national identity in this context is clearly a paradox, (re)presenting a unified national identity which has never really existed (Olweny, M., 1998).

The search for identity has been observed in a number of spheres, as a recent example from Kenya's search for a 'national dress' to represent itself as a nation has shown. This was brought to prominence after three Kenyan MPs were barred from entering the Kenyan Parliament for wearing brightly-coloured West African robes (Agbadas). This edict was based on regulations that date back to the colonial days, and which state that "clothes worn by Kenyan parliamentarians must meet a 'decency' standard. For men, that means suits and ties" (Crawley).

affects the African perception of self (Buwembo, 2004, p. 14). This exemplified by Katongole in his discourse, *Where is Idi Amin? On violence, ethics and social memory in Africa*. He finds insight into this cultural dilemma in the words of Ibn Khaldn, a fourteenth Century philosopher: “Those who are conquered always want to imitate the conqueror in his (sic) main characteristics – in his clothing, his crafts, and in all his distinctive traits and characteristics” (Katongole, 2004, p. 11).

What is ‘Ugandan’ is thus a perpetual struggle by the Ugandan people to seek and find themselves and their identity in a post-colonial world.

Architecture in Uganda

What can be defined as ‘Ugandan architecture’? Could it be defined by the use of indigenous materials (mud, timber poles and thatch), materials synonymous with ‘African Architecture’. An analogy based on discourse which has tended to freeze African Architecture in the distant past, portraying a continent in which the typical, if not the only form of architecture are grass thatched mud huts. This image has promoted the view that the African traditional way of life has not changed over time (Wright, 1997, p. 331). It has been argued that use of these indigenous materials and forms produces stereotypical ‘pseudo-African’ buildings, better placed in theme parks (Low, 2003). Without a doubt, architectural identity is more than just form and materials - the aesthetics of a building, but also about its function - the ability to define space in the context of a society.



Figure 2: Traditional Hut – Western Nilotic

Traditionally in Uganda, as in most tropical regions, the relationship between the built and the un-built is somewhat blurred by the fact that the climate ensured that the outdoors were a year-round extension of the living space. Indigenous buildings in many parts of Uganda have extended eaves not only at the entrances, but also in some cases right around the building. Under these wide eaves is where the activities often associated with the modern 'living room' were carried out outdoors.

Architecture in Uganda has developed with numerous cultural, political economic and religious facets in the development of the African continent. For the most part, modern architecture in Uganda is determined by foreign rather than local forces. A substantial number of construction projects, particularly housing projects, are funded by remittances by Uganda nationals resident abroad. The lack of discourse in the Architectural profession is further constrained by the fact that there are very few Architects in Uganda. As of December 2004, there were less than 130 Registered Architects, for a population of 25 million. This situation is further intensified by the fact that the first cohort of locally trained architects only graduated in 1992 from the Faculty of Technology at Makerere University. Currently there are still only two architecture schools in the Uganda.

Figures from the Uganda Society of Architects

Identity in Architecture

So why the search for identity through architecture? The answer possibly lies in the notion of status and meaning. These could be regarded as important concepts in the selection of archetypes, which supposedly portray to the reader – the public – a sense of belonging – in this case to a nation state. Rakatansky uses the example of 'everyday items' which if designed without the theoretical and conceptual context, the meaning could be ignored, and potentially be lost (Rakatansky, 1997, p. 274). Architecture thus serves an important purpose in the non-verbal communication of cultural values and aspirations of a community or in some cases of the ruling class (Lang/Desai/Desai, 1997, p. 1). Colonial architecture, as Nnamdi points out, "... served the colonialists as an instrument of social oppression and urban segregation. ... architecture served as a tool for formulating collective colonial memories among distinct African ethnic groups, uniting them into exploitable nation states ..." (Nnamdi, 2001, p. 235).

With its basis in the colonial period, modern architecture in post-colonial Africa has been described as being yet another cultivated, colonising influence, a technological legacy left behind after the withdrawal of the European colonisers and has becoming an enduring legacy (Headrick, 1981, p. 210; Curtis, 1982, p. 333). Of particular interest are some of the more prominent buildings in the post colonial states. In Uganda, the Uganda Parliament Building (Peatfield and Bodgener Architects), which falls into a category described by Nnamdi as a project designed to function as a tool to reform the collective public memory from colonial to post colonial experience (Nnam-

di, 2001 op. cit., p. 243). This building uses western designs and imagery in preference to indigenous ones, something rationalised by Wright, using the former French colony of Vietnam as an example, where “... ornamental references to classical and baroque monuments, [were] a visible expression of the supposed universality of [the] western concepts of order and beauty” (Wright, op. cit., p. 332). Nnamdi defines it using the notion of the “abnormal environment” whereby colonialists reinforced the concepts of civilisation by “... advancing narratives that equated traditional African architecture with the primitive man who was the ‘responsibility’ of the European colonizer on a ‘civilizing’ mission” (Nnamdi, 2001 op. cit., p. 234). This Laclau refers to as ‘historical mutation’, (Laclau, 1994, p. 1) exemplified by the Uganda National Theatre and Cultural centre in Kampala (Peatfield and Bodgener) completed in 1956. The theatre was designed “... in the European tradition, built by Europeans in Africa for Europeans ...” (Kultermann, 1969, p. 54). Although this is one of the oldest formal theatres in Africa,



Figure 3: Ndere Centre, Kampala

it did not respond to Ugandan traditional theatre. A direct consequence of the introduction of this form of theatre, has been a reconfiguration of theatre in Uganda to meet the ‘western’ concept of theatre – a case of the architecture determining social and cultural evolution (Mbowa, 1996, p. 88). More recently, there has been a urge to revisit this, with the Ndere Cultural Centre (FBW Architects), a new cultural centre advertised as the only true ‘African’ theatre in Uganda. The designers drew inspiration from Ugandan culture, attempting to combine it with modern construction methods and techniques in a quest to provide a modern interpretation of Ugandan Architecture.

Answering the question, “What is Ugandan about architecture in Uganda?” Wakhweya aptly points out that the architecture of Uganda today is defined by “... all the buffeting the country has endured” (Wakhweya, 1993, p. 52). Thus buildings are culturally grounded in the real or imaginary history of a place, and thus reflect the social, cultural and political identity of a particular point in time. Buildings however cannot define an identity, particularly a future imagined identity, although, this is often a requirement. They can only represent the culture of a place at a particular stage of its history. It is therefore questionable whether it is possible to define through built form, a lost identity? Ngugi wa Thiong’o, a prominent Kenyan author and artist, sees it not as defining a lost identity, but rather, remembering the dismembered parts of Africa. He does this by making the analogy that colonialism cut off the head of Africa, a violence that is still perpetrated in post-colonial Africa, where people are no longer able to see, hear or think independently. ‘Our face is gone, our identity lost ... until we re-member’ (Wa Thiongo, 2004).

The Project

The design studio undertaken as part of this exploratory study, was by carried out by first year students of the Bachelor of Architecture programme in the Faculty of Building Technology and Architecture at the Uganda Martyrs University. The Architecture programme at the Uganda Martyrs University follows a 'three plus two' structure, in which students first undertake a three-year undergraduate programme in Building Technology (Bachelor of Science Building Design and Technology). Before proceeding to the two-year professional degree in Architecture, graduates must first undertake a year of practical experience with a Registered Architect.

The design studio was the first design projects undertaken as part of the professional programme and explored the concept of culture within the context of domestic architecture in a semi rural setting. Its purpose was not to fabricate an identity, but rather to use key design issues that would form the basis for a contemporary solution to the challenges of providing domestic shelter in Uganda today.

Domestic architecture could be regarded as a society's solution to its habitation problems, a cultural phenomenon greatly influenced by the culture of the group it is situated in (Denyer, 1978; Rapoport, 1969). These cultural factors, such as the need for privacy and security, religious beliefs, ceremonial needs, or in some cases to exhibit power, status and for prestige are often responsible for what are sometimes regarded as irrational architectural responses, particularly in relation to climate (Olweny, M., 1996).

The first step of the project was to acknowledge what culture is and what it is not. There are a number of definitions of culture. However, all definitions agree that it is "... the sum total of what binds individuals as a group with roots or into a community in which they think and will together" (Olweny, C., 1994, p. 12).

Cultural identity, therefore, cannot be a 'found' object, but a process' that is defined through history (Correa, 1983, p. 10). It is widely accepted that culture is not static, and as such, the notion of Ugandan architectural identity today being represented by grass thatched circular mud and wattle dwellings is erroneous. Identity, as we know is determined by our understanding of who we are, where we are and what we are, thus the importance of understanding the principal components of architecture: materials, customs, climate and traditions of a particular place and time. An understanding of these issues should therefore result in buildings that are relevant to their locale.

Design Issues

Some of the key design issues identified and investigated as part of the design process included:

Climate/Location

Climate is a crucial determinant on the process of finding our identity, and this according to Correa operates on two levels. Firstly in the immediate expression of the building, as well as determining patterns of culture and ritual and ultimately to built form (ibid.). In central Uganda, where the project was based, the climate is warm to hot (mean temperature of 25deg.C.) with high humidity throughout the year. The selected site was located within the grounds of the Uganda Martyrs University, and surrounded by existing residential buildings to the south and east, a computer room to the west, and exposed to a recreation space to the north. This offers it protection from the prevailing winds (from the south east) but its location did expose it to the evening sun. A design solution presented by Alex Ndibwami, found inspiration from the courtyard houses of central Africa, viewing them as analogous to the kraals of eastern Africa, and could offer a solution to an outdoor living space within the context of a built up area. His idea was to create a space within the building that could be used as an outdoor extension of the living area, but protected from the evening sun, and also provided a means for through-ventilation.

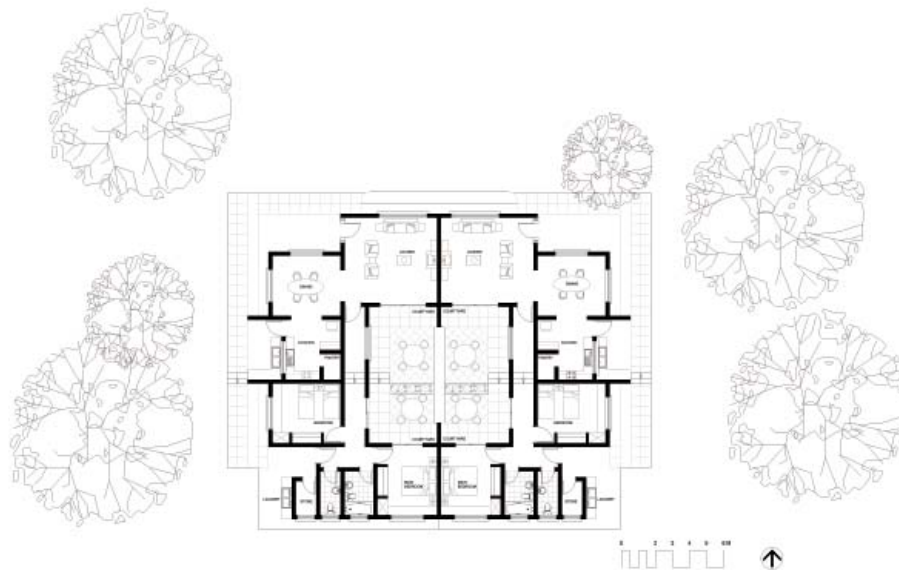


Figure 4: Proposal by Alex Ndibwami - Floor plans

Living Patterns/Function

A study of the housing and thermal preferences of house occupants in Uganda, revealed that there was a mismatch between the dwellings being provided and the actual functional requirements of the inhabitants (Olweny, M., 1996, op. cit.). This

often resulted in the misuse of dwellings, or the use of dwellings for purposes never intended for. An example is the constant provision of western style kitchens in houses. However, for the most part, most households find these kitchens inappropriate for the type of cooking that takes place.¹ Provision of the kitchen is often more for prestige than for any practical reason. Further, the times that meals were prepared usually resulted in unpleasant indoor conditions, due to the fact that cooking extended over a long period of time, and often all windows were tightly shut for various reasons that include the need to prevent the entry of malaria carrying mosquitoes, to security concerns! John-Paul Babinga's solution, provided some insight into the heat problem. His design had a kitchen and dining room as a general space, but included a double height space as a means of reducing the build up of heat at the lower levels. This also served to provide light into the central areas of the building. It also enabled the incorporation of a study room upstairs.



Figure 5: Proposal by John-Paul Babinga - North elevation

Colour

The choice of colour for the exterior of the building was also regarded as important. According to Landow, the choice of colours used for the exterior of buildings in the colonies was often to indicate the status of the building, and often used to emphasise the difference between perceived progress and modernisation and continued existence as a 'primitive' society. At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, white was the preferred colour for the exterior walls of mission buildings, chosen in the belief that "... only white houses were cool enough to be comfortably lived in" (Landow). Standing out from the terrain, these colonial buildings were in sharp contrast to indigenous structures that were coloured using earth tones, an aesthetic ethos that emphasised the unity between the terrain and architecture. In Uganda today, the use of white as an external colour is problematic given the state of the environment, where the red soils and proliferation of dust quickly turns any white surface a deep shade of

¹ Cooking of the staple food 'Matooke' (a type of plantain) can take up to 3 hours.

red! Students identified that colour is an important identification factor in the project. In one solution, provided by Royii Rwakihura, the selection of 'ochre' as the colour of the exterior was to relate the building to its context, an acknowledgement of the source of the materials used in the construction (compressed earth blocks). This colour serves another purpose, helping to reduce the cleaning time for white buildings that quickly become dirty and require a new coat of paint every two to three years due to the dust from the unpaved roads in the neighbourhood.



Figure 6: Proposal by Royii Rwakihura - Perspective

Conclusion

It is evident that identity is not fixed, stable, nor in the case of Uganda is it unified. Thus the aim of representing a society - a transitory identity in a fixed form - is difficult if not impossible, particularly when trying to represent an amalgam of disjointed groups (Olweny, M., 1998, op. cit., p. 18). The relevance of representing identity in architecture is thus questionable. Thus we can ask, is there a possibility of creating a 'Ugandan Architecture' or is this prospect something that is impossible to achieve?

In 1907, as Parliamentary Undersecretary of State for the Colonies, Winston Churchill made a stop over in the then British Protectorate of Uganda. In his travelogue, published as 'My African Journey', he wrote of the Protectorate, "... for magnificence, for variety of form and colour, for profusion of brilliant life - plant, bird, insect, reptile, beast - for vast scale... Uganda is truly the pearl of Africa." Almost 100 years later, Uganda still associates itself with these sentiments, which would possibly have never been given a second thought, but for the fact that 32 years after they were published, (Sir) Winston Churchill became possibly Britain's most famous Prime

Minister. Today, “Uganda, the Pearl of Africa” can be found on virtually all promotional literature for the country. Why is it that forty years after the granting of self-governance, Uganda still clings to this fabricated image? It could be for the same reason it is possible to find places in Kampala, with attention-grabbing names as ‘Half London’ and ‘Middle East’. Interesting as they are, the existence of these context-misplaced names, begs-the-question as to what identity Ugandans seek for themselves. Why should the words of a Parliamentary Undersecretary be so important? Why is it important for Ugandans to identify themselves with the use of foreign place names as opposed to an indigenous name? It is evident that Uganda still embodies significant aspects of the colonial period. This affects the approach people have towards virtually every aspect of their daily lives, and often cited as a hindrance to the search for what is a fundamental basis for identity.

This association with anything foreign is also evident in the architecture profession as well, with most new projects, driven by neither local needs nor clients, but by foreign influences and financing. This is further intensified by the fact that a number of architects regard the use of indigenous materials and typologies as being ‘primitive’, and ‘irrelevant’ for the modern world. As such they tend to replicate modernist architectural examples here is Uganda, which are indistinguishable from those found in Europe, Middle Eastern or North America.

The post-colonial period has been a painful discovery that the invented traditions and value systems were inappropriate for Africa. It is thus up to Africa and Africans to rediscover who they are, and where they want to go in terms of architectural expression. According to Katongole, identity in the Ugandan context may be achieved through ‘liberation philosophy’ – allowing memory to allow the (re)membering of the past to help shape the future (Katongole, op cit.). Architectural identity and identity in general can only be defined by an understanding of (ourselves), and of (our) environment, a long and arduous process.

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