

Shape as Substance? Materiality and L

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Coupling of the Built

Environment with

Individual Narratives

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In Unit 2, we explored how built environments aid scholars' ability to ascertain deeper meanings and histories regarding a given terrain. A built environment refers to man-made creations that define, characterize, and/ or generate a landscape. In the context of our class, we particularized how African-built environments serve as a medium for scholars to assess how the changes and creation of built spaces impact societal progression. Thus, examining built environments allows scholars to understand various questions that pertain to a landscape, such as who controls a given structure and how they came to this power, who is the structure aimed to serve, and how has the architecture undergone structural changes and

what these changes imply. However, if a scholar only draws knowledge from the built environment, the deeper emotional connection, perspective, and experience of the everyday being is mitigated. Therefore, the most productive examination of a built environment is through coupling African narratives with the built structures. Through this complementary framework, a scholar gains a comprehensive understanding of the historical origins and progression of a particular African landscape.

My first example focuses on Tony Yeboah's essay *Asanteman Noumena*, which takes the reader to the Asante palace in Kumasi, Ghana. Originally, this palace was built to house the ruling family of the Asante Kingdom – an empire beginning in the early eighteenth century. Although the palace served as a physical symbol of the Asante Kingdom's power, it also served as a site of “constant communication” between the semi-divine Asantehene, the ruler of the Asante kingdom, and ancestors/gods/deities of Asante cosmology¹. Despite the palace's rootedness in Asanteman's spiritual beliefs, “British colonial forces attacked and ransacked the capital” in 1847². Consequently, the British tactically chose to destroy the Asante palace and relocated it to Manhyia, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Kumasi, to physically display the Asantehene's loss of power.

Due to this relocation, the British government allocated money to the reconstruction of the Asante palace. However, the new space lacked “vernacular architectural designs and imperatives,” resulting in the palace resembling an idyllic Western architectural style³. For instance, the palace included “two big verandahs” – architectural elements familiar and pleasing to the Western colonizer's eye. Scholar Sandy Prita Meier elaborated on this concept in her novel *Swahili Port Cities: The Architecture of Elsewhere*, explaining that verandahs, “like other modern structures are meant to embody a new aesthetic of global circulation and capitalist expansion.”⁴ Thus, the inclusion of verandahs in the new Asante palace visually signifies the presence and control of British colonizers over all facets of Asantean life. The incorporation of verandahs is one of many other intentional modifications imposed on the original construction of the palace, diminishing its cultural and historical characterization. Due to this loss, the next step in the analysis is to question the impact of the structure on the society it resides.

Yeboah recognizes this importance through the inclusion of his engaging discussions with those of Asante dissent. Yeboah learned that the Asante firmly believed in this aforementioned connection between the palace and the world of spirits. However, the newly built space was not constructed to preserve the relationship

between the Asante palace and the gods. Consequently, the Asante developed a metaphysical interpretation of the spiritual connection between the Asaae Yaa, the earth, and the Asamando, the world of the spirits and the dead. Yeboah tells his audience that the community's ability to imaginatively configure ways to keep this spiritual connection alive allowed them to maintain value in their culture. Through Yeboah's description of these personal narratives, the audience gains the emotional essence and affiliation that the community has towards the palace. Without unraveling these narratives, a crucial piece to the equation of understanding the significance of the built environment is lost. Thus, by coupling the transition of the Asante palace from its original to its reconstructed state with the spiritual elements ascribed to the space by the Asante people, one gains a greater sense of the culture that was disrupted by British reign.

An additional, relatively modern example of built environments is Abuja – the Nigerian government's newly created capital. Lagos, Nigeria's former capital, faced immense criticism for being significantly influenced by its European colonizers, making it difficult for the city to attain an identity autonomous to Nigeria. Ademola T. Salau wrote *A New Capital for Nigeria: Planning, Problems, and Prospects* to explain the contentious debate and rationale for the new capital. He explains the Nigerian government

proposed to create a “new capital in place of the one bequeathed to the country by the colonial rulers” because “Nigerians need a focal point symbolizing [their] unity and [their] nations greatness.”⁵ Thus, the government’s alleged primary goal was to create a city emblematic of unity to foster greater nationalism within Nigeria. It was concluded that it would be more economical to relocate the capital rather than reconstruct Lagos. Thus, the Committee on the Location of the Federal Capital was created and made an extensive criterion for choosing the location of the capital. One of the chief criteria was the capital’s central location to “enhance easy accessibility to and from every part” of the country⁶. The committee then created the *Master Plan for Abuja: the New Federal Capital of Abuja* to outline the extensive urban planning of the city. Scholars who analyze this plan can gain a sense of the close detail that was devoted to determining crucial aspects of the city. On a physical level, these analyses were concerned with the terrain’s climate, proximity to water, and geographical altitude. Additionally, the plan included thorough budget plans made to ensure that efficient systems of infrastructure and housing could be implemented.

On paper, a scholar can analyze the committee’s intricate plan for Abuja, which fostered the successful creation of a functioning built environment. However, what a scholar cannot deduce from analyzing blueprints of urban

planning and the physical built environment is the underrepresentation of Nigerian citizens. The government took it upon itself to decide to relocate the capital and masked the intention of the relocation as an advantageous opportunity for the people to connect with a distinctly Nigerian culture. However, Abuja's built structure resembled the architectural modernity and aesthetics of the West. Additionally, due to the government's enforcement of land laws, the only way for one to attain land was through the permission of the government. Therefore, Abuja became predominantly populated by wealthy bureaucrats, perpetuating classism throughout the country. Abuja's innate segregation contradicts the sole purpose of the city's creation, which likely would lead to Nigeria's frustration with the government, resulting in a diminished sense of national pride.

Therefore, it is essential for scholars to consider the perspectives of those who inhabit and have connections to a particular built environment. If a scholar can access these accounts and engage with these narrators, gain an intricate and extensive interpretation of a given terrain. This is particularly important in the context of African landscapes to ensure that individuals' experiences with colonialism and its present-day implications do not go unnoticed.

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