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Colonial Architecture

Shaping Post-

Independence Sentiments

in Africa

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In African cities, architecture, and built environments are more than just brick, cement, and pillars on a foundation. Archeologists and historians both agree that to better understand the history of a place one must analyze things like artifacts, historical remains, written texts, etc. In this case, we will look at Africa's architecture as evidence meant to testify about Africa's urgency to put its history with colonialism rule behind. The architecture has acquired a voice of its own that has helped create and display Africa's new national identity, sense of community, unity, and inclusion.

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obtained after most of its country's independence. I argue that the British colonialist architectural footprint embedded in Africa's architecture has been overshadowed by Africa's new post-independence architectural ideas to express its new identity and freedom.

Furthermore, I argue that the new ideas on architecture and city organization reflect what most African leaders like Ghana's first president envisioned for these new free cities, not what African people wanted or were expecting to see post-independence.

Colonialism in architecture

Africa was under colonial rule for almost a century and the British were "characterized by [their] effort to regulate the structure and organization of the city [Accra, Ghana]."¹ Colonialists' efforts went towards making these city(s) their own by relocating trading spaces, public services, and by building spaces with the special materials and colors which screamed colonial rule. In addition, they "attempted to control urban life through laws and administrative polices [...] built codes, [had] zoning regulations, and property laws."² The British saw these built environments as an opportunity to impose their ideas on separation, social hierarchies, differences in race and education. With that being said, it is no surprise that the later African leaders were eager to erase the message that these buildings transmitted.

Unfortunately, when Africa was under colonial rule their ability to self-express, embrace their culture, and to build their own environment was forcefully taken away.

Post-colonialism architecture

When countries that were under colonial rule for so long, like Ghana, started to gain independence a behavioral and architectural shift took place. The leaders of Ghana saw their post-independence as an opportunity to bring the changes that they were wishing for so long. They wanted to get rid of that colonial influence that took over their buildings and city organization. Ghana's first president Kwame Nkrumah and his administration wanted to make national identity evident by being the “promot[ors] of architectural modernity [which was] a sign of national and political achievement.”³ The new architectural vision was mostly implemented in the city’s major buildings like government buildings. Furthermore, post-independence brought this desire to build more places that would bring about a sense of community, unity, and nationalism. In Ghana, these new projects also brought an opportunity to “reconcile national individualism with an international idea of a progressive society.”⁴

The Great Hall, Knust Kumasi, is a building in Ghana that “appear to be made of a series of horizontal slabs of varying dimension [...] [with]

elevated columns and [...] the design facilitates air circulation and incorporates several techniques of passive cooling”⁵ This architectural piece is very unique because it evokes all the new post-colonial sentiments. The Great Hall’s style in general clearly represents the modernity that the leaders sought to promote because it also establishes that connection to the world. Moreover, it was built as a spacious environment and its openness is an expression of inclusivity that symbolizes freedom and welcomes new beginnings.

Furthermore, this building was meant to be a place that is one with nature, which symbolizes the importance that mother nature plays in most African societies. This building also has multiple paintings that express cultural pride and the promotion of the fine arts. Last but not least, among the many meaningful details even the white color of the walls expresses Ghana’s clean slate.

Additionally, another great example is the Arch of Independence which is a site that “commemorates Ghana’s independence [...] [and] is placed at the edge of the square where it meets the ocean.”⁶ The location of this arch was purposefully chosen because the government wanted to make sure that the arch would become an evident symbol of independence before the international community, and to anyone who navigates those waters. Furthermore, it symbolizes the main assembly

point where the state holds major events, galas, speeches, and it became the stage upon which the effort to create a new Ghana starts.

Furthermore, Lagos was the capital of Nigeria for over seventy years, and “between 1945 and 1955, various development plans were drawn up for Lagos. The shortcomings of these plans resulted from the fact that the city was viewed essentially as a small capital serving colonial needs, without taking into consideration the forthcoming attainment of independence.”⁷ Ghana’s independence in 1957 incentivized major changes like relocating Nigeria’s capital from Lagos to Abuja. The history of colonialism was so detrimental and the traces were so hard to erase that relocating and planning to build a new capital did not sound like a crazy idea.

Architecture during colonial times and the messages those buildings transmitted faced a major change once countries like Ghana started to gain independence. For most leaders, it was key to erase any trace of colonialism from their cities and most of them, like Ghana’s first president, brought the idea of architectural modernity style. As explained earlier, buildings like The Great Hall, Knust Kumasi, The Arch of Independence, and actual cities like Lagos serve as great examples of how through architecture a country can express its freedom, national identity, culture, and can advocate for their own destiny. Now, we might see and admire these

major architectural changes brought about by the leaders, but something that was not taken into account when making this major decision was the citizen's opinion. The government assumed that this change is what the people wished for, but we will never know if that was the case. For historians, archeologists, and other scholars, African cities are places with amazing historical backgrounds and so much meaning that can be forever studied but never completely understood.

FOOTNOTES

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