



Proposal for the 2019 Lagos Biennial

by Willy Sengewald and Moritz Fehr

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House Of Independence

(working title)

Introduction / Background

When asking people around Lagos Island about the Independence House near Tafawa Balewa Square, nobody seems to know. Referring to it as the Defense House, the name it currently bears, does not make a significant difference — only when starting to describe the tall abandoned skyscraper in its monumental dark appearance, people begin to recall the structure. In fact, the Independence House cannot be overlooked easily, but it seems to have lost its place in the perception and identity of the city of Lagos today.

Donated by the British crown to the people of Nigeria in honor of its independence in 1960, 'The Independence House' was meant to be a legacy for a new era of self-governance and modernization of the country: the construction of the twenty-five-story building with an estimated height of 103 meters was completed in 1961. At the time, it was not only the first high-rise of Nigeria, but also the tallest building on the African continent. In the years following independence, when Lagos Island served both as the State and Federal capital, it became the first Federal Secretariat housing several ministries.

At this time, a new architectural image for downtown Lagos was sought to demonstrate an independent culture and a functional modern state. 'Tropical Modernism', an adaptation of the 'International Style' for warmer climates, became the preferred language for newly erected prestige government buildings like 'The Independence House'.

Under the regime of General Ibrahim Babangida, the building was taken over by the military and renamed as the 'Ministry of Defense Building' in the late 1980s. The relocation of Nigeria's capital to Abuja in 1991 and a fire in 1993, that occurred under suspicious circumstances, marked the beginning of the decline, deterioration and subsequent abandonment of the monumental structure.

A decade later, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry announced its redevelopment into a 'World Trade and International Business Centre', that, when completed, would be the proposed rival of the Dubai World Trade Centre. The center was supposed to house all types of investors, entrepreneurs, associations, and businesses. This proposal never made it into reality: 'The Independence House' stands vacant and neglected to this day.

Walking up to the building today, one finds that access is highly restricted and people in the neighborhood tell stories of rodents, reptiles, and all manner of people dwelling in its empty halls. Looking at the building's prevailing appearance, we recognize its significance, but we see a ruin.

Description

Artists Moritz Fehr and Willy Sengewald went to Lagos in December 2016 and February 2017 to document the Independence Building, an abandoned high-rise structure in the city center. They conducted interviews and collected facts and stories on the history of the building. Sengewald and Fehr will create an installation that resembles the iconic structure in stereoscopic 3D imagery and surround sound, focussing its importance for the history of the city of Lagos. As if the building was a silent observer, they will be addressing question to it. What are its memories? What did it encounter and observe during its almost 60 years of presence in Lagos? The conceptual approach of Fehr and Sengewald is to let the building tell its own story.

During their visit, Sengewald and Fehr shot 3D Video and Sound from within and around the structure, systematically documenting the entirety of its 25 floors. This footage forms the basis of a video work. It will be complemented with found audio fragments and newly produced material compiled from the interviews and archive research.



Presentation

The work will be presented as a sculptural object that resembles an architectural fragment of the building and at the same time serves as a stereoscopic viewing apparatus. Visitors can watch the video and listen to the sound individually by using a binocular viewer and headphones integrated into the object. The work will be presented for the first time at Lagos Biennial 2019.



Binocular Viewer, 1920s

Moritz Fehr (*1981)

Moritz Fehr is an artist working in time-based media, his projects include site-specific installations, spatial sound compositions and experimental films.

An abandoned gold- and copper mine, the empty frame of the stolen painting *The Concert* by Vermeer, the Veterinary Anatomy Theatre in Berlin and a historic large-scale panoramic painting in Bavaria have been, among others, subjects of his work.

His projects engage with constellations of objectivity and emotion, technology, infrastructure, music and the sonic environment. Moritz creates installations that often have an immersive appearance, either using methods of hyper-realistic simulation (spatial sound and stereoscopic 3D images) or employ site-specific strategies of amplification or evocation of existing subjects, structures or spaces with sound.

Projects have been presented at exhibitions, screenings and festivals internationally, for example at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (Boston), Skulpturenmuseum Glaskasten (Marl), Youkobo Art Space (Tokyo), Humboldt Box (Berlin), Barrick Museum of Art (Las Vegas), Kunstsaale (Berlin), Beyond 3D Festival (Karlsruhe), After the Butcher Gallery (Berlin), European Media Arts Festival (Osnabrück), Smithsonian Hirshhorn Museum (Washington DC), Kunstverein Hildesheim, Hygiene Museum (Dresden) and others. Some of his sound pieces are permanently installed and can be visited at the Velaslavasay Panorama (Los Angeles), Jerusalem Panorama (Altoetting) and Continuous Drift (Dublin). Radio works have been broadcasted on WDR3 and Deutschlandradio Kultur Klangkunst. Moritz Fehr was born in 1981 and is based in Berlin. He received a Diploma in Media Art and Design from Bauhaus-University Weimar, Germany and studied at Tokyo National University of the Arts in Japan. Also from Bauhaus University, he holds a Ph.D. in Fine Arts and was awarded grants from the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service), the State of Thuringia and the Bauhaus Research School in Weimar.

Willy Sengewald (*1981)

Willy Sengewald is an artist and a founding member of Studio TheGreenEyl Berlin. His work includes site-specific and interactive installations as well as exhibition and spatial Design.

In recent years he has realized several international projects and cooperations revolving around issues of distribution and access to space in urban environments taking him to places like Damascus, Cairo, Istanbul, Shanghai, Lagos Maputo and Amman among others. As part of Studio TheGreenEyl he has been working with numerous cultural institutions and museums on archives and museum collections. In this context he aims at the questioning of conventional techniques for museum displays continuously seeking a critical engagement with the reading of history and institutionalized culture.

Willy Sengewald lives and works in Berlin. He holds a degree in Visual Communication from the University of Arts Berlin. His works have been shown internationally at places like Design Museum London, The Art Center Nabi Seoul, OK Center for Contemporary Art Linz, Wro Art Biennale Wroclaw and Academy of Arts Berlin. He has been teaching courses at University of the Arts Bremen, Art University Linz, Iuav University of Venice, University of Applied Sciences Berlin, University of Applied Sciences Potsdam, FU Berlin, University of the Arts Berlin, Bauhaus University Weimar and Academy of the Arts Hangzhou, China. Recent publications include *Urban Minorities*. Bauhaus Urban Studies Bd. 6, Königshausen & Neumann, 2015, *Transformation of the urban character of Arab Cities since the late last century*, BCU publication, Birmingham, 2015, *New Art/Science Affinities*, Miller Gallery.