



Buildings that Talk! Ornamentation and its Meaning in Osogbo, Nigeria

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Abstract: This discourse focuses on ornamentation and its meaning as projected on contemporary buildings in Oshogbo, south west Nigeria, from the year 2000 to 2015. Ornamentation is examined from the economic, cultural and socio-political perspectives as they relate to home owners. The research highlights four major decorations on domestic architecture elements and their significance in the society. The method adopted is a combination of historical and qualitative analyses. Results show that house owners have a preference for using a myriad of materials for ornamental decoration on their buildings. In many cases a quintessential aestheticism to the environment is noticed as a distinguishing genre in the area of study, which highlights how sophisticated the home owners are in creating artistic forms.

Keywords: Ornamentation, meaning, contemporary, domestic architecture, culture, decorations, Oshogbo, Nigeria.

Introduction

This study highlights ornamentations and the meanings they project on buildings in Osogbo, a city peopled by the Yoruba ethnic group of south west Nigeria. Ornamentation is

operationalized in this work to mean a decoration, an embellishment or adornment. The study explored mainly the Osogbo metropolis,

particularly the government reservation area (GRA) where there is a preponderance of contemporary buildings.

Studies affirm ornamentation as a creative work genre of the decorative arts (Darley 1986, para 2). The purpose of this ancient human endeavor is to enhance the beauty of buildings. Man has been decorating his objects, buildings, and himself throughout all of history. The context of ornaments and ornamentation is broad, constrained only by the limits of human imagination (Kaplan, 2009, pp121-132).

An ornament is a decorative device, not essential to the intrinsic structure of the building in context, but often necessary to emphasize or diminish the impact of structural elements, sometimes with iconographic roles (Curl, 2000, para 1) while ornamentation could be iconographically symbolic to represent a corporate logo. It could be the application of ornaments on objects and people for overall beautiful disposition. Most cultures have evolved their own repertoire of architectural ornaments. Some of these materialize in the form of plant or floral motifs, animals and birds, emblems and heraldry, or human forms as reflected in architectural caryatids.

Ornamentation has been defined by a myriad of scholars from diverse

disciplinary backgrounds. Majority of these definitions and explanations agree that ornamentation is an adjunct, embellishment or decoration to enhance aesthetic appeal. In architecture and the arts, it is a decorative detail used to embellish parts of a building or interior furnishing. Ornamentation is derived from a variety of media such as stained glass, studio glass, carved stone, wood or precious metals, Plaster of Paris (POP), clay, cement or even some kind of graphics produced from the computer and posted on the walls of the building visible to the residents of the building or passers-by. In cement and POP applications for instance, the mould for an ornamentation design is casted and impressed onto a surface as applied artifacts on columns or windows as appropriate. A multiplicity of decorative styles and motifs developed for architecture and the applied arts, including ceramics, furniture, metalwork and textiles. Decoration, synonymous with ornamentation is evident in civilization since the beginning of recorded history, ranging from ancient Egyptian architecture to date.

The choice of Osogbo as the study location was inspired by the presence of an art school located in the city. The school was initiated by Horst Ulli Beier, a German with Jewish roots who is remembered for his pioneering role in the development

of drama and poetry forms in Nigeria and a few other African countries. The school has churned out indigenous artists with peculiar art styles and characteristics. Among them are the late Taiwo Olaniyi (also known as 'Twin 77'), Jimoh Braimoh and Muraina Oyelami. These artists are respected and have succeeded in making Osogbo a reference point in art matters. There are many towns and cities in the southwest of Nigeria known for their artistic exploits but none seems to have a formal art school training directed at indigenous talents like the one established by Beier. The presence of the school has attracted researchers including this writer who investigated decorative art works on domestic buildings. The influence of art establishments and the resident's positive proclivity for the arts encouraged UNESCO to declare Osogbo a World Heritage Centre in 2005. A vital part of Osogbo's artistic scene is the Osun Shrine (believed to have impactful healing virtues). The Austrian artist and Osun devotee, Susan Wenger (1915-2009), was once the chief priestess at the shrine.

The ornamentation under investigation in this study should not be mistaken for the house sign design systems invented by Omojola (2015, p.5371). His invention is basically about house numbering that features three distinct design elements namely house number,

street name and the third element in the form of social message and outright advertisement. These elements are graphically packaged and posted on the frontal wall of a building. House sign is a novel marketing outlet that allows short messages to be transmitted to a micro audience that comprises the dwellers of the house and passersby. Building ornaments, while not about numbering, can be used to complement house numbering designs but this aspect is not part of the investigation in this study.

Methodology

The researcher adopted a combination of historical and qualitative analytical approaches for the study. Conceptually, the residences are treated as material (culture) artifacts. Material culture is the physical evidence of a culture in the objects and architecture they make. Therefore, the search for meaning of ornamentation on the buildings necessarily derives from the cultural context of Osogbo and the Yoruba people in general. In addition, the oral historical method was deployed to aid in the collection of historical data on the residential buildings from the patrons and the producers (artisans) of ornamentation in the study area. Specifically, the following qualitative research systems aided the study.

Observation

The strategy of physical observation was adopted to identify

ornamentation on buildings. Graphic illustration and descriptive analysis of the artifacts were carried out. The location of ornamentation on a building is particularly important in relation to its visibility. This was observed as well as identified on the buildings selected for the study. Furthermore, ornamental decoration on buildings is myriad but, only four were identified and discussed namely: floor level definers, the portal, windows, and gates and fences.

Interview

Oral history is the African transitory process of generating information from one generation to the other. Historical data were collected from landlords and their surrogates as the primary entry source. It is a very reliable approach as it gives first-hand information according to Munsterberg (2009, para 3). It is a potent approach for this study, since it allows the culture to speak for itself. The concept of oral historical method connotes a scheduled interview with key persons. These key respondents were the house owners and the artisans responsible for the production of decorations on the buildings. The tool of interview guide was adopted as flagged in Appendix I. The semi-guided interview schedule enabled more interrogation as the recipients responded. Such other data received from house owners captured the values and attitudes placed on the

ornamentation in buildings which aided the understanding of what the decorations symbolize. These were juxtaposed with situations of no ornamentation on buildings. Data collected from artisans in the city also revealed the content and medium of the ornaments and the value placed on these ornamentation motifs beyond economic and status considerations.

Data Collection

The primary source of data collection for this research work comprised the domestic buildings and the decorations on them. The research approaches generated descriptive and analytical data. The approaches had the additional advantage of providing data that came directly from the source that was investigated. The historical approach implied interviewing building owners as well as other informants. Re-living history would warrant interacting with eye witnesses or their surrogates through the oral historical method. It is important to note that the idea of interviewing surrogates became necessary because a number of direct witnesses were indisposed for a reason or the other. It has been established historically that the city of Osogbo grew from the traditional core area (Agbola 1997, p17); that is, the growth of Osogbo Township developed cyclically round the Oba's Palace tangential to the people's daily market place. The open market opposite the palace served as a focal

point and regarded as convenient for the monarch to meet his people when the need arose. The phenomenon is obsolete now for the sake of technology and development. The buildings were therefore chosen according to their locations indifferent areas which developed at different historical periods. An examination of the city revealed that the domestic building types differ according to these historical periods (Okpako and Amole 2012, p.55). The selected buildings thus captured the historical periods implicitly in the different zones related to the historical development of the city. This selection process added the historical dimension to the selected buildings. The selected buildings were those identified as indigenous buildings with ornamentation. The selection was based on chronology and time. The selected buildings for investigation were chosen using the snowball sampling method because the landlords of the initial buildings carefully chosen did assist robustly in locating other ornamented buildings. Each building was cautiously investigated.

Findings and Discussion

The findings and discussion are qualitatively executed in the following paragraphs, using narratives and pictures. Decorations appear on some elements of the buildings such as the door and its terrace, the gable end of roof and pediments and the aeration holes that

allow air into the ceiling, usually on the façade which appears extinct now in contemporary architecture. Further to the element where decoration appears on buildings is the long stripe of mould round the building top. This signifies the roof level and floor level definer located half way of the building height (with reference to a storey building). Others elements of decoration are the arches and columns of varying sizes and forms, the veranda balusters, the windows and window hoods of all forms, the fascia board, the wall treatments and rustications in addition to the gates and fences. Four elemental decorations were chosen for discussion of all the points of building embellishments reiterated. These are the floor level definer, the portal terrace, windows, and the gates and fence.

The Floor Level Definer (FLD)

The floor level definer is an indicator signifying the floor levels in a storey building. This is diversely expressed as desired by either the building contractor or the property owner. Some other prototypes are cantilevered with a combination of two/three floors on the same structure whereas some express no indication for the floor level. Plate 1 is an illustrated example of the contemporary FLD decoration variant. Two indicators in Plate 1 mark the FLD. There is a thin line divider protruding or rather a relief strip halfway the building height.

This goes round the building but the circle is incomplete for the decisive facade design. The second indicator of the FLD in the same Plate 1 is the differential hues displaying the demarcation of the lower and upper floors. In this circumstance, the building wall is turned into a painting canvas on which two colors are applied, thereby segregating the floor levels. The interface of the two colors is indicative of the floor level. Both the color differentiation

indicator and the relieved protrusion do not completely go round the building. The overall outlook is aesthetically pleasing to the eyes.

The structure in Plate 1, built in 2003, belongs to a journalist. The building had been renovated thrice in compliance with the extant environmental standards. The façade bears a double twin column overhanging a vaulted arch, which emphasizes the building portal. The simplicity of his house is attractive.



Plate: 1. A thin, protruding floor level definer (FLD) on a contemporary Ornamentation genre; in conjunction with the color differentiation application mark the floor level

The Portal Terrace

The portal terrace is synonymous with the door and doorway as well as its surroundings leading into a building. An illustration is in Plate 2

below. The house is just one year old at the time of investigation, according to the co-landlord. The stone tiles on the floor and building facade welcome an approaching

visitor by their striking visibility. The tiles on the columns and remote wall portion are two of a kind. The first one is the rectangular (almost) flat stone tiles chipped into the walls of the prominent segmental arch and columns encountered as one approaches the entrance. This brand of stone tiles one comes across in most contemporary ornamented buildings.

The second is the smooth type on the far left behind the columns. The lower part of the wall bearing the smooth stone tiles hosts a half of the white baluster inlet gate before the black remote door into the house.

The over-hanging ceiling is decorated with white Plaster of Paris (POP). The remote building wall has two distinguished color combinations which enhance the aesthetic beauty of the building. A touch of horticulture is palpable at the portal terrace of this building. The sprouting flowers should soon attain maturity in a couple of months to further add splendor to the terrace. The owners (married couple) of the house by profession are interior and exterior designers and to them it should be the case of a house that talks. One of them said: “We want the house to say welcome to you before we say it!”



Plate 2: A Contemporary portal terrace decoration

The Elemental Window Decoration

The window is an element of the building usually chosen for ornamentation to add beauty for aesthetic purposes. It is a functional device on the building, dedicated to achieving free movement of fresh air exchange in and out of the building. Ventilation within the building is a necessity for good health. The

contemporary taxonomy of window designs is diverse and appealing. They achieved aesthetics with different shapes and sizes. The designs hardly have hoods except one example located on one of the chalets of an almost completed building in the GRA. The buildings in the compound are actually completed and at the finishing stage.



Plate 3: An arched contemporary window design

Plate. 3 is a unique window design after the late Roman example (Adam, 1989, pp.55-103). Its shape is arched at the top and comes down with two legs as in arch and column. It is sculpted round. A strip of mould forms the base line of the pseudo-column legs, giving it a balanced overall design. The location of the window, the wall color, colors of the molded frame, the glass and

the steel are harmonious. It is perfect, and aesthetically pleasing. Most other forms of the contemporary shutters are as represented in Plates 1 and 2; while others are much wider with four to six vertical and four horizontal rows. The one in Plate 2 is structured with two vertical and four horizontal rows.

A most unique one that is worthy of mention is the Oriel shutter type which existed in ancient period now resurfacing in the contemporary time. It has a semi-circular window design. In England about the late medieval ages, such projection on a lower floor was called a 'Bay' window (Adam, 1990, p.159). In other words, the Plate 3b window type is a projection from both the upper and lower floors giving it a nomenclature of Oriel and Bay windows. But for this research, it is taken as Oriel window. Historically, the Oriel window was defensive in origin by being able to monitor assailants without being noticed from within. This window type came to have a luxurious character with seating space and large areas of glass in the late medieval ages. The type in Plate 3b is a modification to the late medieval age form as the content in height is half glass and half concrete/stone tiles. This corroborates Cordell's observation that the Yoruba adopts change in their culture and any imported idea is

never taken hook line and sinker but slightly modified to suit their cultural setting, making it exclusively Yoruba or Nigerian (Cordwell, 1983).

The Gates and Fences in Contemporary Architecture

The custom in Osogbo currently is that people delineate their properties by erecting a fence to distinguish one property from another and as a way of forestalling encroachment. This is unlike in the ancient time when people built houses without fence and owners could perceive passersby' footsteps close to the window. Low fences though less protective enables easy sighting of an intruder which elicits a prompt call to the police. Plate 3a is an illustration of a low fence and gate in the contemporary time. For any visitor to gain access into the compound, he would require the attention of the residents. Plate 3b is another example of a relatively low fence. Though not as low as Plate 3a, it, however, is low compared to some high fences that have no see-through framework. It is aesthetically notable that the hue and decoration on the fence is very similar to the edifice within the fence.



Plate 3a: Atypical Low Fence and Gate in Contemporary Architecture



Plate 3b: A relatively low fence in contemporary time

The high fence, illustrated in Plate 4a, has deceptive convex shaped decorations of sharp Piercing rods in black color targeted as piercing instruments against unwelcome guests. Both house owners and the

builders work together to fashion out defensive decorative features on buildings to combat burglars and assailants. The wall of the high fence is decorated with a semi-circular shaped stone tiles towards the base,

in segments of 2.4 meters interjection by four sided pillars. A space measuring 0.6 meters is earmarked for horticultural decoration to compliment the fence. These are the main decorative features of the contemporary fences whether high or low, denoting class for the owner and occupant. Plate 4b is an aggressive looking gate that any stranger will should dislike. It appears like the gateway to the residence of the Prince of Persia, the

biblical demon that specializes in usurping people's blessings. The gate is high, so is the fence. One could only observe the roof of the storey buildings behind the walls. These frontal elements (gate and fence) are not looking friendly at all. The gate is solid metal with a high grade gauge up to the top. The upper part has decorations with piercing, pointed rods, welded to a curved framework, ready to waste the blood of its victims.



Plate 4a: A Contemporary High Fence Belonging to the Gate in Plate 4b.



Plate 4a: A 'mean' looking gate detesting the presence of strangers

The Socio-economic and Political Considerations

The Yoruba have a culture that is rich in art and are among the most prolific people in the world of art (Delange, 1974; Ottemberg, 1983; Drewal and Pemberton, 1989). The study shows that residents at the GRA are oil company workers, business men and women, retired civil servants scheming for political positions, government officials and politicians in both active and retired capacities - all using the Osun State capital (Osogbo) as a country home. The aesthetics and meaning of ornamentation on domestic buildings in this location is not far-fetched as

such houses belong to owners who are in the upper-crust level of the society.

The decorations are seen within their own aesthetic framework. Behind this is the idea that art has its functionality value (Lazzari and Schlesier, 2008, pp. 35-41). The function of art is to enhance the beauty on what it is imputed, thereby transforming the appeal of its host. Aesthetics connote beauty and the philosophy behind it including everything that contributes to our perception of creative expression. The purpose of ornamentation in buildings is to add beauty to the

appearance and make it appealing to the eyes.

Lazzari and Schlesier (2008) have noted that ornamentation serves more than adding beauty to things. It may also direct a particular attention to major elements of the building such as doors and doorways serving as the entrance, the columns and arches, as well as wall treatments. The decorations of these elements not only add to the aesthetic treatment of the building but the meanings are also derived in relation to their functions. The function of an element confers meaning on that particular element, not only in connection with what it metaphorically connotes. Ornamentation on building elements may also be symbolic of wealth, class and power. For instance, a door is a door but the value goes beyond a door if it has an embellishment on it. The decoration that Yoruba create on the entrance through a facade calls for attention (Darley, 1986. para 2). Denyer's allusion of the decoration on Yoruba doors emphasizes the significance of the entrance or an inroad to the Yoruba race. The door itself tells one the relative importance and the power of the one who owns the house. Yoruba doors and doorways are so important that other ornamentations on the building are metaphorical accents punctuating the structure.

The ornamentation on the elemental decoration of the door in Plate 2

indeed signifies class, power and opulence. The use of beauty expressed as symmetry is common in the design of domestic buildings, in the ancient designs, as well as other contemporarily decorated designs and more recently in cities. Taking into account the entire sensory life of human beings, contemporary urban planning, architecture, and landscape design all have an eye for aesthetics. In this sense, modern design is interested in the shape of a city, house or park more than its function. The artist is more interested in form as well as the expression of both meaning and beauty in our surroundings.

Ornamentation also serves as an impressive metaphor for wealth and power since it is expensive to create and install, especially on a large scale (Whitehead, 2010, pp1-4). The subject is aesthetically pleasing, adding interest and complexity to a large expanse of bare walls, transforming the ordinary into the sublime. Ornamentation often carries political significance with ornamental elements chosen for propagandistic goals (Whitehead, 2010, pp1-4).

The meaning of these decorations, relative to their forms, emphasizes the importance of their formal qualities (Panofsky, 2012, pp.8-15). This is especially true when their contents are read in the context of structuralism in which the social and cultural structures also shape the

meaning of the art of ornamentation (Lazzari and Schlesier, 2008. pp 35-41). Stone or ceramic tiles cut into shape, for instance, are applied as appropriate in landscape or portrait orientation on the wall or floor to create artistic designs. These social and cultural structures are seen to contextualize the aesthetics of ornamentation art from the structuralist perspective. This is in view of the fact that human culture may be understood by means of behavioral structure, substantiated by concrete reality rather than theoretical idealism (Mann, 2016 para. 3).

Conclusion

The study discussed ornamentation on contemporary buildings and their meaning in Osogbo, Osun State of Nigeria. The discussion has affirmed that aesthetics with regard to ornamentation is not just about beauty and the philosophy behind it, but everything that contributes to our art experience. The varieties of ornamentation adopted on these buildings are influences of a combination of the Brazilian and

classical architecture some of which still reflect the originality of its source while others have undergone modifications to be uniquely Yoruba style. Ornamentation in domestic buildings has a positive influence on the economy of the artisans and the house builders as well as enhances the general urban landscape of the city. It creates the means of livelihood for these artisans and fosters development of Osogbo.

The rapid development of city has exacerbated the penchant of the wealthy class for land acquisition to build structures with impressive ornamentations. It, however, gladdens the heart that even poor people still endeavor to erect their own structures with decorations they can afford. While such buildings are not visible in areas as expensive as the GRA, they still attract some attention in their humble locations and exhibit some semblance with classical architecture ornamentation. The cheering news is that both the poor and rich are ornamentation-conscious!

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