

Intrinsic Value of Embellishment on Domestic Buildings in Osogbo, South Western Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: The utility of ornamentation of buildings has been subject of architectural deliberations since the early 1900s, following its denunciation as crime by Loos in 1908. This resulted in the abandonment of ornamentation of buildings from the early 1900s. Investigations reveal that ornamentation in Yorubaland like other arts within the culture transcends mere decorations, as they make other statements louder than what the eyes can see. These functions are most times the *raison d'être* for executing the works and the determinants of the choice of the images used. This paper highlights the obscure functions of ornamentation in typical Yoruba environment and the push factors for the forms on Yoruba domestic buildings. It uses Osogbo long-established but modern city, with a wide variety of ornamented buildings spanning different historic periods, as a prototype for Yoruba cities. The study concluded that ornamentations are imperative elements of domestic buildings in Yorubaland with manifold aesthetic functions.

KEYWORDS: Functions, Embellishment, Domestic buildings, Osogbo.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, visual forms have always performed significant roles in the life of people and societies at large, as just different people have different design needs, which diverge with their values, income, occupation, social affiliations and exposures. Designs are most times solutions to problems; thus they serve some additional physical functions. These functions or utilities (*ire* or *iwulo*), also elate the mind and constitute the moral dimensions to the ornamentation, which is comparable to human character (*iwa*). In Yoruba philosophy, the possession of character (*iwa*), or usefulness of forms (*iwulo*) is regarded as inner beauty, without which the outer or physical beauty is invalid and valueless. This is the basis for the exepert "*iwalewa*", meaning: "beauty is the possession of good character". To the people, things (ornamentation inclusive), are therefore considered as ugly and repulsive if they are useless, even if they are physically attractive, while the possession of only the outer beauty, is regarded as "*ewa oju akala*", meaning: mere superficial or surface beauty (Lawal 1974:293). Consequently, things only incite pleasure, admiration and are seen as beautiful, if they are useful and fulfil their ascribed roles. These roles are the essence or the inner beauty of the forms (*ewa inu*), which are most times hidden or not obvious to viewers.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of ornamentation on buildings has been subject of architectural discourses since the 1st century A.D. with Vitruvius in his foremost architectural exposition '*De architectura*', positing that 'a good building must be built with reference to durability, convenience and beauty' (Morgan, 1914:17). Similarly, Ruskin (1849:11), defining architecture as an 'art which orders, organizes and adorns edifices raised by men' affirmed the importance of aesthetics, stating that a building is not truly a work of architecture unless it is in some ways 'adorned'. The utility of ornamentation of buildings continued to be the topic of architectural discussions, which became more intense since the early 1900s, following the condemnation of ornamentation as wasteful, structurally irrelevant and sign of backwardness by architectural modernists (Stewart (2000); and Paner (2013). The distaste for ornamentation is affirmed to have been incited by its lavish use in the Rococo, Art Deco and Art Nouveau styles (Encyclopaedia of Art and Design, 2016; Getleni, 2002:322; Feldman, 1969:322), as well as the economic restraint imposed by the then just concluded World War II (Feldman, 1969:178) and Darwin's theory of evolution (Kleiner, 2011:845; Gibson, 1997). This resulted in the modernists' abandonment of ornamentation in architecture for plain unembellished walls surfaces, from the early 1900s (Gusevich, 1988; Encyclopaedia of Art and Design, 2016), and series of counter discussions highlighting its functions, following its rebirth in the early 1970s (Vera, 2018; Brett, 1992; 2005; Moussavi, 2006; Small, 2009; and Mitache, 2012). However, these studies discuss ornamentation in European culture, which inspires the

assessment of the functions of ornamentation in Yorubaland, renowned for its rich artistic ornamentation culture.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study collected data through both primary and secondary sources. The primary data were sourced through observation, photographic survey of domestic buildings in the study area, and oral interviews with owners of buildings with relevant motifs. Secondary data were sourced from relevant literature, to corroborate the interviews and aid the extraction of the utilities of buildings.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The utilities of embellishments on domestic buildings in Osogbo Southern-Nigeria are discussed below:

4.1 Beautification

The prime and commonest function of ornamentation in Yoruba culture since time immemorial is beautification. Ornamentations transform buildings into attractive and aesthetically pleasing edifices, the absence of which the buildings are less appealing, looking different from what it is. Small (2009:1), enlightens that ornaments are often found in parts of a building that requires attention, either disguising particular parts or to amplify specific features of a building. However, Rosenbauer (1947:2) asserts that the purpose of ornamentation should be to heighten excellence, and not to conceal errors, nor correcting bad shapes and bad designs. Rousebauer's criticism of the use of ornamentation for concealing errors and bad designs in buildings is a pointer to the fact that it serves this purpose, and ornamentation of domestic buildings in Osogbo Nigeria is no exemption.

4.2 Means of entertainment

Ornamentation on domestic buildings feature as means of entertainment, as people derive pleasure from viewing environmental decorations, an act that provide emotional release and prevents boredom. There is also the joy of producing them in the designers, thereby creating leisure or recreation, while doubling as sources of income generation and livelihood, which are antidotes for poverty. Small (2009, op-cited) is thus apt in stating that architecture is a public platform for people to share their experiences and delight in a collective way.

4.3 Memorability

Ornamentations on buildings are essential features that make buildings to be remembered while aiding peoples' perception of the city milieu. The forms on buildings with elaborate and memorable ornamentations thus serve as visual clues that are easily located by visitors, functioning as nodes by which places are identified. They also serve as special pointers by which such places are described.

4.4 Enhancement of quality

Ornamentation boosts qualities of buildings, as many decorative forms are economically induced, with sales, increase incost of buildings and achievement of excellence as driving factors. These forms add value to the buildings, giving them additional worth. A cluster of such buildings often increase the worth of the areas where they are concentrated, making the value of the properties in such areas to appreciate. Apart from the enhancement of aesthetics, Vansina, (1984:5) observes that decoration was used to provide a frame for enclosing architectural spaces or to separate them, while also organizing spaces, either by covering them with patterned web, repetitive geometric shapes, or isolated motifs as focal points.

4.5 Enhancement of environmental aesthetics

Ornamentation not only provide attractive edifices which gladden the hearts of the viewers, but also enrich the general aesthetics of environment, making them aesthetically pleasing, emotionally convenient, while making life worthwhile. They are thus indispensable part of the urban elements that beautify the cities, and which Agbola *et. al* (2002:3) aptly see as significant in realizing the millennium development goal of achieving sustainable urban fabric. Thompson (1971:4) is therefore apt in asserting that ornamentations cool the earth and make life worthwhile.

4.6 Means of self-expression and communication

Ornamentation on buildings like many other aspects of Yoruba art are powerful means of self-expression and information dissemination, hence a visual metaphor that is understandable by people within the culture, and those who share common values. Consequently, knowledge of the culture is most times needed to clarify the meanings and the messages imbedded the images. It often involves sending messages which arouse actions at one end, while people interpret and react positively to the messages imbedded in the forms. An

example is the abstracted image in plate 1, which looks like just beautiful forms, but with deep philosophical connotation rooted in the belief in duality of life. The motifs and forms in the ornamentation of domestic buildings also help to inform people about the identities, occupation, and the socio-religious affiliations of the owners. They equally reflect the uniqueness of both the owners of the buildings who commission the designs, and the designers who made them. The images similarly showcase the peoples' values, personal experiences, exposure and tastes, as men often express in their visual forms the totality of their experiences, leading viewers into new cluster of meanings about them (Ajibade, 2002:6). This is reflected in the abstracted image holding a camerain a photographers building opposite the technical college, Osogbo(Plate 2).



Plate 1: Painting attachment embellishing TayoAbiola's façade, at Osograms area Ede road, Osogbo (Photo: F.M. Abejide, 2020).



Plate 2: A semi abstracted form at a photographer's house, Osograms area Osogbo (Photo: F.M. Abejide, 2019).

4.7 Provision of social status

The financial and social statuses of the owners of premises are not determined only by the sizes of the buildings they erected, but also by how elaborately the buildings are adorned. This makes buildings to often be described as small but elegantly ornamented. Consequently, the richer the owners are, the more elaborate the scope of the embellishments of the buildings with murals, wall relief mouldings, mosaics, ornamental pillars, designed doors, enriched balustrades, floor tessellations, as well as colourful and artistic roofs. Furthermore the more expensive the materials used for these designs, the higher the values of the buildings, and their power to incite the admiration of outsiders. Moreover, ornamentations on buildings provide social strata, which help to differentiate between groups of people in a city. It marks out the residences of the high class people, from those with medium status and the low grade.

4.8 Indirect means of advertising

Information embedded in ornamentations sometimes indirectly sends out messages to people. According to Ifájké (oral communication¹), "*Babaláwotómo fákíín gbepátákóipolówó*" meaning: Yoruba herbalists who worth their salt do not broadcast with sign boards. This implies that their skills and symbols on their buildings will announce the, signaling the presence of a genuine diviner or herbalist, (*iléògidiawo, tí kii se àsá wò*). Correspondingly, houses of artists, as creators of art works and things of beauty are observed to always be tastefully and uniquely decorated. An examples is plate 3, depicting mosaic mural embellishing the facade of JímòhBùràímòh, building, Odiolowo, Osogbo, projecting the artist's talent and artistic style. According to JímòhBùràímòh (oral communication²), the embellishments on artists' buildings, serve as points of contact and advertisements to foreigners and tourists, who are likely to be potential clients. This according to him, is in line with the proverb "*Enitómád'aso róni, tiorùnre la máanwò,*" meaning: those who will cloth others stylishly must be capable of creating elegant wears for themselves. Another example is No.50 Ìta-Olóókan Street Osogbo (Plate 4), known as '*Iléolónàrà,*' meaning: "the house with spectacular beautification" said to be so named because of the uniqueness of its tasteful enhancement with a dormer window, which although now common, was extraordinary in the area at the time it was erected (Elder Fabunmi Oloko, oral communication³). The building is asserted to give credence its owner as an accomplished carpenter. Similarly, the forms in plate 2 equally advertise the services of the photographer.



Plate 3: Mosaic murals in JímòhBùráímòh's, building, Odiolowo, Osogbo (Photo: F.M. Abéjidé, 2019).



Plate 4: Dormer window in Apete compound, No.50 Ìta-Olóókan Street, Osogbo which earned the building "the house with spectacular decoration" (Photo: F.M. Abéjidé, 2019).

4.9 Promotion Values and Philosophical Ideals within a Culture

Many of the forms in the ornamentations on domestic buildings in Osogbo are recalling the past, by celebrating their progenitors and legends of the town, with pragmatic lessons from history. They refresh, project and propagate the myths of the town, while also showcasing the religious values and philosophical ideals of people in the society. Ornamentation also upholds the peoples' self-esteem, pride, and sense of belonging to the community. This idea is apparent in Bakewell's (1998:7) affirmation that images like words, are powerful tools that can help establish group solidarity, and give nobility to opinions. The promotion of the culture and philosophical ideas held as sacred is further helpful in restoring and renaacting the cultural practices, that are going into extinction due to neglect.

According to Moussavi (2006:8), architecture needs mechanisms that allow it to become connected to culture. Apart from the variety of information transmitted about the owners and the designers of buildings by the presented images, Adejumo (1998:9) postulated that the culture of a people can be seen in their art, which usually mirrors aspects of the culture visually. This is evident in depictions of the masquerades at No. 41 Ibokun road (Plate 5), doubling as ornamentation and means of correcting social ills, and plate 6, which portrays traditional entertainers, an aspect of Osogbo culture, on a façade wall in Oke-Baale, Osogbo.



Plate 5: Stucco screen reflective of culture in No. 41, Ibokun road, Osogbo (Photo: F.M. Abejide, 2019).



Plate 6: Mural in Isale-Osun Osogbo, depicting traditional Entertainers (Photo: F.M. Abéjidé, 2019).

4.10 Record of events

Several of the forms used in the embellishment of buildings are mimesis of things around the people. Some of the decorative forms sometimes serve as diary of events commemorating, highlighting and preserving the recent past in the society for posterity. An example is the use of pound sign memorializing the Nigerian currency before 1973, in the ornamentation of balustrades (Plate 7). Bèwàjí (2003:10) also avows images in ornamentation as signatures or stamps which identify the makers. This is because the images used are capable of telling where they come from through their association with the myths of the societies and background culture, as well as through their mode of presentation.



Plate 7: Icons memorializing the Nigerian pound currency on a balustrade (Photo: F.M. Abéjidé, 2019).

4.11 Education

Some forms embellishing domestic buildings are educative, sometimes serving as indirect ways of imparting knowledge or jolting peoples' memories of societal values and instructions. Values such as moral uprightness and virtuous living are being taught and reinforced through some of the forms adorning buildings, especially those with folkloric allusions. They also are sometimes means of regulating and visually transmitting morals or social mores of the society from one generation to another. They are therefore means of socialization and exerting social influence, which ensure the preservation and survival of the society, while sometimes motivating people to perform desired actions. This is seen in the earlier discussed stucco boundary demarcator recalling memory of the masquerade culture in the town (Plate 5), an aspect of the cultural heritage that is threatened by both the Islamic religion and Christianity. Likewise, the stories in ornamentation with folkloric portrayals of animals, men and spirits in Plate 8, double as ornamentation and means of correcting social ills.



Plate 3: Plate 8: Mural with folkloric allusion enhancing Chief (MNikeOkundaiye's fence, No. 1 Oladipupo Street, Ede road, Osogbo. (Photo: F.M. Abéjidé, 2019).

4.12. Promotion of safety

Some decorative forms and locations make buildings to be convenient, while protecting people from dangers, thus promoting safety and security. Among these are window ventilation screens and burglary delaying devices, preventing free access of intruders into buildings. Similarly, goat gates prevent children from wandering away, while restricting access of unwanted animals into buildings, thus securing lives and properties. In a related vein, balustrades provide aesthetic surfaces and railing to hold on to, hence preventing people from falling from high verandas and staircases. Tessellated floors equally ensure friction, which prevent the risk of slipping and falling, while perforated bricks and masonry blocks provide cross movement of air, and adequate ventilation which helps to minimise respiratory problems and suffocations. Perforation further helps ensure privacy, allowing one to view happenings around, without intrusion from outside.

4.13 Provision of psychological relief

Some forms of ornamentation are however psychosomatic, psychological and magical, providing feeling of protection against harm. In this category are crosses signifying protection Jesus Christ (the author and finisher of the Christian faith, believed to suffered in place of the redeemed), while images of angels with dagger, connote the presence and protection of guardian angels. Some buildings are framed with images of fishes, suggestive of seeking refuge from the spirit of Osun river and territorial spirit of Osogbo (*Iyá-Osun* or *Osó-igbó*, Plate 9). In this category are also the uses of Islamic boards with writings or direct Quranic inscriptions of written prayers in Arabic texts on walls, believed to be capable of driving away calamities and evil forces. Such images are commonly executed on pediments, portals or above doors / entrances.



Plate 9: Painted fishes portal adornment at IleOlókúta, Ìsàlè-Òsun, Ósogbo (Photo: F.M. Abéjidé, 2018).

4.14. Therapeutic

The decorative forms and design elements (such as lines, shapes, variation in directions and sizes, tones, colour, textures, optical illusion), and the effect of the principles (such as depth, proportion, repetition symmetry, balance, rhythm, alternation, radiation, contrast, and harmony), utilized in the embellishment of buildings have tremendous influence on the health of the people. They are therapeutic, as they are soothing, and pleasant, giving a feeling of joy and satisfaction in both the owners and passers-by. Apart from affect peoples' moods positively, they relieve tension, by shifting peoples' focus from personal problems. The psychological effects include promotion of healthy living and mental wellbeing in both the residents and passers-by, thereby decreasing or eliminating depression, which is necessary for productivity.

4.15. Determinant of age of buildings

Historically, images on buildings can help to determine the ages of buildings, by showing the reigning styles when they were erected. This is in line with the Yorùbá philosophical saying that: “*aso igbà là ndá fún igbà*”, meaning “styles are best worn when they are reigning or in vogue.” People often adopt styles of ornamentation that are in vogue in line with the belief that “it is sensible to move with the time, as being odd and old fashioned is inapt.” Consequently, knowing when a style reigned can be used to indicate the age of buildings even without scientific proofs. Forms in ornamentation also serve as means of marking different historical eras, while they are helpful in identifying the background or deviating culture.

4.16 Durability

Materials used in ornamentation are capable of enhancing the durability of the surfaces, and by extension the building. Mud or laterite floors and walls, always need to be smoothed and given special treatment before the execution of designs. This prevents the chipping-off of the surfaces, just as potsherd and stone pavements keep for ages. Similarly, stucco walling and flooring, as well as floor treatment with ceramic tiles, terrazzo and other add-ons, prolong the lifespan of buildings on which they are used.

V. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Findings of the study reveal that ornamentations are vital elements of buildings with manifold aesthetic functions, as they promote goodness which elates the senses. The aesthetic functions of ornamentation on these domestic buildings are however in two parts. The first is through provision of physical or superficial beauty (*ewàojú or ewàòde*), by making buildings look attractive, satisfying, relaxing, entertaining and emotionally expressive, while giving the people avenues for showing affluence. The forms also add value, and class not only to the buildings, but to the environment in general, while providing nodes or pointers which designate areas where they are found.

In the second category of the aesthetic functions are the disguised beauty or inner beauty (*ewà inú*), which constitutes the hidden source of goodness and the main *raison d'être* of the forms. These diverse inner functions of embellishments on the buildings can be surmised, as advertising cum information dissemination, socializing, pedagogical, promotion of good physical and mental health, as well as ensuring convenient and livable environments. They are also stores of cultural heritage, means of commemorating events, celebration of pragmatic heroes, and a continuum of history, thereby advancing cultural consciousness in the people. Ajibade (2002, op-cited), posits that there are three components of urban images: identity, structure and meanings.

Ornamentations on domestic buildings in Osogbo facilitate these three by ensuring unique identities, and convenient components while guaranteeing social-cultural significance.

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