

WHERE IS IGBO-UKWU?

Retracing the Igbo culture through architecture

Success Okeke Chijioko

Project description and program

Diploma 2019

Project description

In this project I will like to explore how the Igbo culture of southeastern Nigeria, can be traced and preserved through architecture. Even in the midst of cultural transformation from colonial and globalization forces. I will like to do this by going back in time, into the cultural system of the Igbo people, especially as it reflected in her architecture. And assuming that the core of the Igbo culture and identity was well preserved by a balanced integration with the foreign and the modern influences;

- What would her architecture be today ?

urban context

Starting from a macro level of understating how the community was set up originally. Traditionally in the Igbo community settings, the transitions from public to private spaces were more gentle as boundaries were marked with natural and open elements like trees. This consequently created good social communications and spaces. The environment was also much more greener, as the major occupation was farming. Trees were also part of the space composition ,either for space definitions or for creating shades for the hot climate.

Today, with urbanity encroaching even into the village settlements, these qualities are fast been lost. Fence walls made of cement blocks are now used to define the boundaries, making the transition so sharp. Strong and rigid grid patterns of private property development, has also set in. Reducing spaces left for public/social use. With this urban developments growing very fast, the green areas are also fast disappearing, making the environment less climatically comfortable and safe.

In this project, I responded to this by introducing a design which works to protect one of the remaining green area in the heart of the village settlement. Also creating pedestrian paths and sitting spaces within the forest. So that the trees will become a part of the people's life and movement again. The new structures I introduced, are low structures that flow with the original random but dynamic placement of structures in the context. Which helps to create pockets of spaces, with a gentle transition from the private to the public. At the instances were my new structures share boundaries with other old private structures, I planted new trees to mark the boundary. Which is ecologically and socially more healthy.

building analysis

At a micro level, I worked to understand and express how the traditional Igbo buildings worked in response to the climate. Traditionally, earth was used to build the walls, floors

and parts of some furnitures in the house, while straws of different types and makings together with woods and bamboos where used for roofing. These materials, especially the earth with its thermal mass kept the internal spaces passive to the external climate. These materials where also very good with humidity control, as they absorbed moisture from the air to a good degree. The straw roof also allows the risen warm air to escape. The roofs are significantly extended to protected the external walls from so much rain water. The challenge was that in the rainy season from April to November, the roof straws get wet and rotten and so must be changed yearly.

Today, people prefer to build with imported and non environmental friendly materials, which requires extra energy to keep the buildings comfortable. This 'modern' buildings cost far more than the traditional ones, and are completely out of context climatically.

In this project I used my understating of the traditional buildings, to design new buildings that will be built with same materials but in a modern way. Walls built with rammed earth; which makes the walls more stronger and water resistant. Roof built with straw tiles, making it easy for maintenance. The straw roof is protected from rain using metal sheets, mounted with enough air and space from the straws to avoid heat transfer. The metal sheets will carry solar panels to make the buildings and facility energy independent and efficient.

design programs

In this project, I designed a primary school for ibagwa nike community located in Enugu state, Nigeria. It is a school built with the local and natural materials, by a combination of traditional and modern systems. The community will be fully involved in the construction of the project, as the system of construction is something most of them can relate with.

Designing a primary school is strategic, as it will help the younger generation to appreciate and understand their culture and environment in a different and better way. I did this by creating a good environment for them to learn formally and informally both indoors and outdoors. But beyond the function of a formal primary school environment, the design is done in way to achieve an alternative function of a community collage. In the same school environment and buildings, spaces for learning and performing various cultural activities and programs are provided in an overlapping way. These activities includes but not limited to; cooking, dancing, art and craft etc. This is to enable other members of the community to connect back to their cultural ideas and ideals.

In this project, I worked together with nature as a co-designer to achieve a more ecological and social spaces and places. Which is a true reflection of what the traditional environment used to be. This will make the environment very welcoming for both individual and group events like relaxing in the woods, group meetings, weddings, games etc.

To make it a practical place to retrace and strengthen the culture of the people, I created some situations in the design for the community and the children to have the opportunity to rebuild some parts of the elements periodically themselves. As they reproduce elements like straws roofs, benches made of earth, in more creative and sustainable way subsequently, it will help then learn how it was done before and how it can be done better.

Project program

Preface

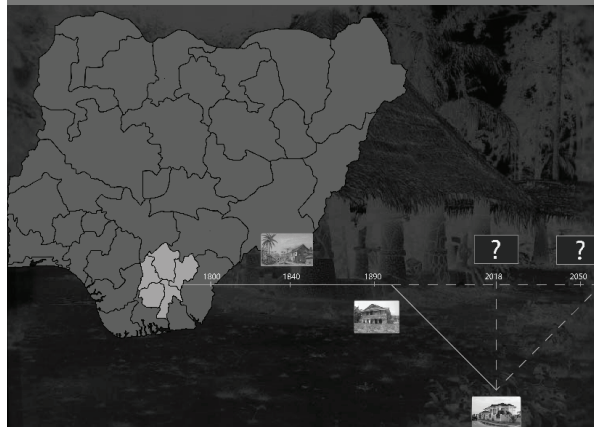
Culture is simply defined as the people's way of life which is visibly expressed in both their material and immaterial activities. It seems easier to appreciate a cultural system within an ethnic group by looking at how they carry out activities to satisfy needs, especially the basic ones.

In the quest to satisfy these needs, shelter for example, we learn and adopt to foreign influences. These influences have to be mutually adopted to the local system instead of supplanting it. The major problem associated with wiping out a cultural system from the world's cultural map, is the difficulty of correctly retracing it with time. Change in itself is not a problem, if the local is transformed to new shades of itself, by integrating the foreign to the local in a complementary way.

Our culture lies as the substratum of subsequent different forms and shades of identities that emerge. Having an identity is part of, if not the main essence of living. All we contribute to our world and society is a product of who we are. This goes a long way to describe how important it is for our identity to have an amount of stability, at least at the core of it. I believe that the best way to retain an effective cultural system and identity is by ensuring that they are relevantly and reasonably preserved.

In this project I will like to explore how the Igbo culture of southeastern Nigeria, can be traced and preserved through architecture. Even in the midst of cultural transformation from colonial and globalization forces. I will like to do this by going back in time, into the cultural system of the Igbo people, especially as it reflected in her architecture. And assuming that the core of the Igbo culture and identity was well preserved by a balanced integration with the foreign and the modern influences;

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The Igboland

In Nigeria today, Igboland is roughly made up of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, Northern Delta and Rivers states, and small parts of Akwa Ibom. More than 30 million people inhabit

Igboland, with a population density ranging from 140 to 390 inhabitants per square kilometer. It could be the most densely populated area in Africa after the Nile Valley. Altogether Igboland has an area of some 40,900 to 41,400 km², with elevations above the sea level ranging from 0 to 1000m.

The Igboland has both Forest and Savannah vegetation belts: the mangrove forest and fresh water swamps of the Niger delta, the rain forest of the central parts and the guinea savanna of the northern fringe. The climate in this area is tropical and humid with a temperature range of 20 - 34 degree C. While the region experience two seasons namely ; raining season from April to November and dry season from December to March ending.

The rainy season brings in cooler weather as a result of an increased cloud cover that acts as a blockage to the intense sunshine of the tropics; this in turn cools the land, and the winds above the ground remains cool thereby making for cooler temperatures during the rainy season. But afternoons in the rainy season can be hot and humid, a feature of tropical climates. The dry season is a period of little cloud cover. The sun shines through the atmosphere with little obstructions from the clear skies making the dry season a period of warm weather conditions. In the middle of the dry season around December, a dusty wind from the Sahara Desert called the harmattan enters from the northeastern part of the country blocking sun rays partially from shining and also creating haze in the atmosphere, this activities of the wind lowers temperatures considerably saving inhabitants for sometime, from the scorching heat periodically.



Local context

Cosmologically, the Igbo cultural practices, had a huge influence on her traditional architecture. For instance, Igwe, as god of the sky, is omniscient, and controls the terrestrial bodies, while ensuring that rainfall and sunshine are provided in moderation. Rainy season is a time when the earth is provided with water and the forests bring forth timber and palm fronds for building. In dry season, building materials stored at the end of the rainy season are used, and there is little or no rain to disturb building work. Ala, the earth goddess (the superior god), is an omni-present witness to all the actions of people living on its earth. It provides the mud with which the building is shaped. A creative talent, which Agwu, the god of destiny, controls, is needed for building and wall decoration.

From a more practical perspective, is the influence of the physical environment in Igbo architecture. Climatically, Igboland experiences a typical tropical climate. A high intensity of solar radiation all through the year due to its latitudinal location, with consistent hours of daylight supply. Geologically soil deposited alluvium which contains a percentage of clay that is suitable for building is abundantly available. It is also quite suitable for the warm climate of the area, as it keeps the internal room temperature reasonably passive. The soil type and climate of Igboland supports the growth of trees and plants that are suitable for building timber, bamboo and grass. Which also helps to keep the interior cool. The availability of materials and skill in Igbo traditional architecture ensured and encouraged a good social life, as building was more of a community thing than just a professional thing.

Artistically, the Igbo people are known for their sophisticated art expressions. Aided by the availability of the clay soil, timber and extractable metal deposits. The most sophisticated being the internationally known bronze castings of Igbo-ukwu in the 9th century AD. It proved that the Igbo people had metallurgical experience before their contact with the western world. This artistic expressions can be seen in the architecture of the Igbo people and in their fashion.



Research approach

To have a deeper understanding of the Igboland, Igbo people and the Igbo architecture, I intend to carry out some research. It will include;

- Research through making things; Trying to understand how the Igbo people saw their world, by learning to reproducing some of the art works that is connected to the Igbo cultural identity. Trying out the processing of some of the local materials they use for their traditional architecture.
- Speaking with some Igbo historians; I would also interview some Igbo leaders and historians, to get some knowledge of the past Igbo cultural practices especially those that has little or no physical traces left
- Visiting cultural institutions; I would visit some Igbo cultural institutions and schools department of art and culture located in Igboland.
- How to build with earth; I will be enrolling in a course, to learn how the main Igbo traditional architectural materials (earth and straw) can be used more efficiently in a modern world

This will be conducted for a period of 1 month within the Igbo states of Nigeria and a week course in Slovakia.



Project approach

My project would be in three major stages.

Stage 1: to show the importance of a complementary combination of the traditional cultural system and the modern/foreign ones

Stage 2: to show qualities and value of the traditional Igbo architecture from a micro point of the building materials to a macro point of the spaces they created.

Stage 3: to show how this qualities can be used in a modern way through a proposed design of a primary school. Where local values are present in both material and immaterial aspects, as it alternatively serves as a community collage for learning traditional crafts and knowledge amongst other functions. The project will be sponsored by the king of the community and will be built with earth and straw as the main materials by the community.

The local Igbo traditional architecture is treated with contempt in the present Igbo community even with the good environmental, economic and social advantages it offers. Whereas foreign materials and construction techniques are seen as correct, modern, permanent, and for the affluent, the local is viewed as substandard, outdated, temporary, or for the poor.

In stage 3 above I would be working with one of the respected Igbo leaders and his community as my client, as an effective strategy for restoring worth and attraction to the local materials and traditions of the Igbo architecture. But also to a larger extent, her culture.

Work schedule

January	social anthropology essay and exam, diploma program draft, other preliminary tasks
February	research study trip
March	research, conceptualization
April	research, concept development, project development
May	concept development, project development
June	project presentation development, exhibition making, exam

CV

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Education: Bsc (architecture)

Nnamdi Azikiwe university Awka Anambra, Nigeria
(2006- 2010)

Bsc/Msc (architecture)

Bergren arkitektthøgskolen Bergen Norway
(2014 -)

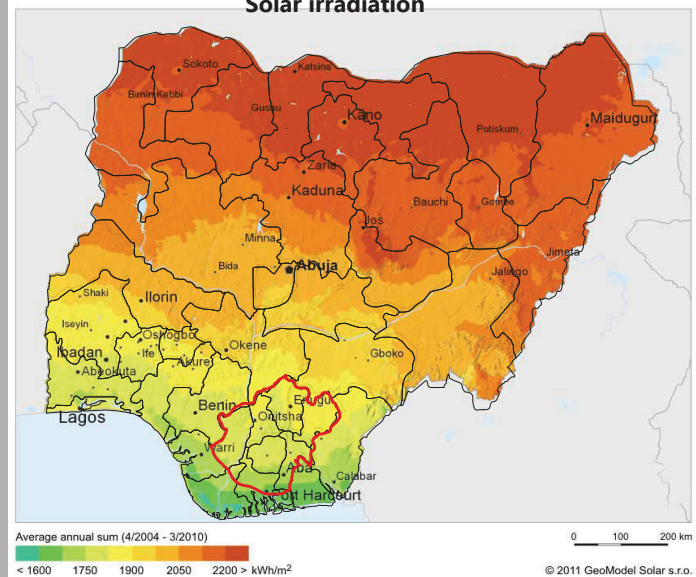
Software Skills: Auto-Cad, Revit, QGIS, Photoshop, Illustrator, InDesign.



Local conditions



Solar irradiation



Local conditions

