



PRESERVING IDENTITY THROUGH DESIGN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF YORUBA ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENTS IN IBADAN'S CULTURAL CENTRES

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ABSTRACT: *Architecture not only fulfils practical needs but also encapsulates ideological values, identity, and legacy. This research explored the integration of traditional Yoruba architectural styles in two cultural centres in Ibadan: the Cultural Centre Mokola and the New Culture Studio Mokola. A qualitative case study approach was used that included site visits, photographs, and architectural descriptions to distil the essence of pivotal architectural features, which include courtyards, carved pillars, symbolic ornamentation, and local materials. It was observed that both cultural and architectural centres include elements of Yoruba culture, but the degree of integration varies. The Cultural Centre, for instance, is modernist and symbolic in character, in that it is expressive of concrete constructions with subdued ornamentation and minimalist symbolic elements. The New Culture Studio, in comparison, is culturally authentic with much laterite, brick, carved motifs, and a courtyard aligned with Yoruba cosmology and spatial hierarchy. The conclusion drawn is that cultural centres can defuse or strengthen Yoruba identity, which is a function of architectural integration. This study has important ramifications for contemporary civic architecture, which is that indigenous design principles need to be integrated for cultural identity to be retained. Defusing traditional design logic ought to be incorporated in public works, alongside the advocacy of cultural custodianship and increased study of vernacular changes in other Yoruba cities.*

KEYWORDS: Yoruba architecture; cultural centres; Ibadan; indigenous design; symbolism; vernacular sustainability; identity preservation.



INTRODUCTION

Architecture is far more than a mechanical skill in African cultures. It is a cultural artefact representing values, faiths, and identity. Architecture among the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria is a spatial and symbolic story of their lineages, religions, and social structures (Adebaike et al, 2020; Akin-Otiko, 2021). Standing out with hierarchically ordered spaces set aside courtyards (àgbàlá) and painted timber columns, coupled with locally obtained earth-like coloured materials strongly underline Yoruba's architectural legacy and the ecological and cultural wisdom in her traditions (Olaniyan *et al.*, 2023).. Ridwan & Eze (2023) note that the Yoruba's political and sociocultural centre, Ibadan, is undergoing significant urbanisation. Consequently, the native forms of architecture within her borders, courtesy of the Yoruba people, are becoming scarce. These include adobe brick structures, facades of glass, and a variety of Western architectural designs, all of which contribute to the incremental disappearance of Yoruba identity within the region (Akhanolu & Ahianba, 2025). The cultural significance of the central messages relics by the contemporary changes intensifies their disappearance, collectively termed city memory.

In the midst of these conflicts, cultural and civic institutions have come up with designs to capture identity and strenuously defend it. More than ever before, museums, theatres, and cultural centres function as heritage sites where the architecture is deliberately used to embody indigenous principles and aesthetics (Anifowose & Olatubosun, 2020; Umukoro, 2023). The Cultural Centre, Mokola, and the New Culture Studio, Mokola, in Ibadan, within this framework, are critical for understanding the presence or absence of Yoruba traditional architecture in contemporary public architecture. These cultural centres were anticipated to project Yoruba identity in the arrangement of space, decoration, and materials used (Olaniyan et al. 2023; Adenaike et al 2024).

The cultural and civic architecture under study is purported to have been drawn primarily from the Yoruba civilisation. These case studies form the focus of the study. This is within the context of identifying and articulating the constituent elements of Yoruba architecture and assessing the buildings to determine their level of cultural authenticity. The purpose is to answer the question: how much is the architecture of these cultural centres in Mokola, Ibadan, rooted in traditional Yoruba civilisation? The identity and vernacular preservation discourse relevant to this research adds to the repository of knowledge in a form of architecture relevant to sustainability, cultural continuity, and the preservation identity discourse within African cities." (Agboola et al., 2022; Ridwan & Eze, 2023).

Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to investigate how elements of traditional Yoruba architecture are embedded in the design of cultural centres in Ibadan, with particular focus on the Cultural Centre, Mokola, and the New Culture Studio, Mokola. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- i. Identify the defining elements of traditional Yoruba architecture as documented in literature. Assess the extent to which these architectural elements are integrated into the two case studies in Ibadan.
- ii. Evaluate comparatively the degree of cultural authenticity and symbolic continuity reflected in both buildings.



Research Questions

The central research question guiding this study is: To what extent are traditional Yoruba architectural elements incorporated into the design of cultural centres in Ibadan?

To address this overarching question, the study further asks:

- i. What are the defining elements of traditional Yoruba architecture?
- ii. How are these elements expressed in the Cultural Centre, Mokola, and the New Culture Studio, Mokola?
- iii. In what ways do the two case studies differ in their levels of cultural authenticity and symbolic representation?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study comes from its understanding of the impact of architecture on cultural identity, especially in this period where urbanisation and the architecture of new constructions tend to overlook local styles. The study focuses on two primary cultural centres in Ibadan and sheds light on how the elements of traditional Yoruba architecture can be retained, incorporated, or innovatively redesigned and reintegrated into contemporary civic structures. These outcomes should be useful in cultural resilience and in providing direction to architects, urban designers, and policymakers in the creation of buildings that are culturally relevant and context-appropriate. Further, the outcomes of this study, in addition to serving this practical purpose, also advance the academic discussion on the vernacular architecture of the region by demonstrating, in a well-supported manner, how cultural memory can be absorbed in architecture to promote identity, continuity, and sustainability.

Scope and Limitation of the Study

This study is geographically limited to Ibadan, Oyo State, focusing on the Cultural Centre, Mokola, and the New Culture Studio, Mokola. These sites hold a special place in the study as they reflect rich history and culture as centres of identity and performance of the Yoruba people. The study focuses on the architectural features of the Yoruba culture, such as the arrangement of space, the use of traditional construction materials, ornamentation, symbolic designs, and architectural types. In this regard, the inquiry is restricted to case studies on the observation of supplemented architecture and photographs, as well as the architectural documentation on the construction of the case studies in focus.

The focus on heritage architecture and its design principles is the main concern of the study. Other studies, however, have concentrated on the socio-economic and construction as well as the engineering aspects of the architectural designs in various cultures as compared to the Yoruba. The concentration on the two case studies alone is to vindicate propagation to any relevant context. It describes the case studies in their present dilapidated form and does not concern itself with wider urban renewal and restorations planned. All the conclusions and insights the study draws are equally relevant in the context of architectural design, urban heritage, and critical renewal, as the study is not constrained solely by geography, culture, or approach taken.



LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Review: Traditional Architecture

Building archetypes changes over time as people adapt to their surroundings and culture. This is not learned through textbooks, but through enthusiastic and manual practice (Adebaike *et al.*, 2020; Ibitoye *et al.*, 2022). Unlike modern constructors, traditional builders understand the relevance of their buildings to the culture of their people, as well as the environment. For the Yoruba people, buildings must be strong and flexible enough to accommodate community living. Structures are built using local materials such as adobe, laterite, timber, and palm thatch, which are low-cost, climate-responsive, and, unlike modern materials, are biodegradable (Agboola *et al.*, 2022; Ridwan & Eze, 2023). Most of these materials have decorative and traditional elements that tell of ancestry, spirituality, and social hierarchy (Akin-Otiko, 2021). It is evident that the culture of the Yoruba people directs and influences the ethos behind the shapes and style of their buildings, and the style is not purely aesthetic.

Yoruba Culture and Courtyards

In terms of architectural style within the Yoruba community, the centrepiece of a dwelling unit is the courtyard (àgbàlá or akodi). In terms of its location within the dwelling unit, the courtyard performs dual functions—spatial as well as symbolic. As a climatic device, the courtyard is very effective in alleviating the heat during the hot, humid months of southwestern Nigeria (Stephen & Ademuleya, 2021; Oladunmoye *et al.*, 2024). It captures airflow, as well as controls daylighting, and reduces heat within the indoors. They are social spaces for the family where interaction can take place, and thus, storytelling, performance of rituals, and even resolution of conflicts. In this sense, the courtyard performs the very primary function of family cohesion and continuity/preservation of traditions (Sonaiya & Dincyurek, 2009). Their social arrangement within the compounds mirrors the social order of the Yoruba; elders in the family occupy more ‘cherished’ as well as more ‘private’ spaces while the younger members of the family, and visitors for that matter, occupy the periphery (Akin-Otiko, 2021; Adeyemo *et al.*, 2022). The courtyard is also a hallmark of the culture and the home. As the dwelling unit is extended to the palace, the courtyard becomes a cultural centre where performances, rituals and ceremonies are hosted. It retains its function as a climatic device while becoming expressive of the social order and cosmology of the area.

Symbolism in Yoruba Architecture

In materials, ornamentation, and even the layout of spaces, Yoruba architecture is rich in the use of symbolism. Wooden pillars, for example, often feature carvings of deities, ancestors, and proverbs, thus turning these structural features into narrative surfaces (Anifowose and Olatubosun 2020; Olaniyan *et al.*, 2023). The gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ mask, snakes, and some geometric forms are all motifs that connote wisdom, protection, and fertility (Adebaike *et al.*, 2020; Akinmolayan, 2023). All these colours have symbolic associations as well; for example, red ochre colours are associated with spirituality, the earthy red with anchor, and indigo with ritual mourning or purity. The symbolism of space is just as significant, with screened corridors and thresholds illustrating the movement between the religious and secular, the private and the social (Anifowose and Olatubosun 2020). These codes, which connect social actions, spirituality, and architecture, are crucial to Yoruba cosmology Design Principles Vernacular Sustainability



The Yoruba traditional architecture is an excellent example of an approach to architecture that is traditionally sustainable. The use of local and renewable resources lowers embodied energy and promotes ecological balance (Ibitoye et al. 2022). The thickness of earthen walls helps to control heat gain, and palm fronds and timber provide aid in ventilation. The courtyard system also encourages airflow and increases daylighting, which reduces reliance on mechanical energy systems (Sogbesan & Awonusi, 2022). These methods embody indigenous knowledge systems, which are equipped with contemporary sustainable design understandings. Yoruba architecture also proves that sustainability is cultural and social in addition to ecological.

Continuity and Adaptation

Although modernist aesthetics are most popular, the forms of Yoruba architecture are still able to persist through change. Courtyards, carved woodwork, symbolic decorations, and even courtyards can all be found in hybrid urban buildings, but often the elements are diluted and used for decoration (Agboola 2021, Olaniyan *et al.*, 2023). This change in style demonstrates the strength of Yoruba design languages; however, they are most often reinterpreted and lose the depth of their original meaning. Many modern civic architecture does the opposite; they use concrete and steel to try to keep the indigenous materials and simultaneously try to embrace the cultural motifs portrayed in the ornamentation and facades (Olaniyan et al. 2023). This type of continuity shows cultural survival; however, it also brings to light problems about the commodification of tradition in modern contexts, as well as the lack of authenticity.

Cultural Centres as Identity Markers

Cultural centres serve as important civic spaces where civic identity is performed, marked, and conserved through the built form. The Ibadan Cultural Centre, built for the FESTAC 77, aims at projecting and instilling pride in Africa (Olaniyan, Egunjobi, & Adegoke, 2023). However, the centre's architectural logic is said to be sorely lacking in Yoruba attributes and is accused of being more obsessed with monumental scale than cultural intimacy. In contrast, Demas Nwoko's New Culture Studio is much more representative of the authentic ethos of Yoruba architecture, incorporating local materials, symbolic elements, and being responsive to the climate. These centres offer a unique opportunity to analyse the dilution/reinforcement of culture through architecture, which is why they are important for studying contemporary Yoruba architecture.

Empirical Review

Studies on Yoruba Architecture

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that Yoruba traditional architecture is both ecologically effective and culturally symbolic. Adeyemo et al. (2022) emphasise the courtyard as a thermal regulator and social nucleus, while Umukoro (2023) highlights its role in preserving family cohesion. Sogbesan and Awonusi (2022) examine carved pillars as didactic tools transmitting cosmological knowledge, and Akinmolayan (2023) documents motifs as expressions of religious and ancestral values. Yet, other studies warn of cultural erosion as globalised aesthetics displace indigenous forms (Akhanolu & Ahianba, 2025). Collectively, these studies confirm both the richness of Yoruba architecture and the risks it faces under modernisation pressures.

Cultural Centres in Ibadan

Empirical studies focusing on cultural centres in Ibadan demonstrate different approaches to the Yoruba identity. Although the Cultural Centre, Mokola, attempts to represent the Yoruba heritage, the reverse is true, as it does not truly incorporate the ‘heart’ of the Yoruba architecture and instead focuses on mass, decoration, and contemporary construction (Agboola, 2021). The New Culture Studio, on the other hand, engages more deeply with the vernacular. It is Demas Nwoko's work that utilises red brick and incorporates artificial elements, such as courtyards, responsive to the climate, yielding a built form that resonates with Yoruba cosmology and architecture (Olaniyan *et al.*, 2023). These contrasting cases illustrate the spectrum of cultural authenticity in architectural practice, making Ibadan a valuable site for evaluating continuity, adaptation, and erosion of Yoruba traditions in public buildings.

METHODOLOGY

This study examines the application of traditional Yoruba architectural features to two cultural centres located in Ibadan using a qualitative case study approach. The case study strategy was deemed the most suitable given the need to understand the architectural features in their geographical and cultural surroundings. The choice of the Cultural Centre, Mokola, and the New Culture Studio, Mokola, stems from their stature as civic buildings and their intended purpose as the guardians of Yoruba culture. The architectural drawings and elevations, along with photographs (Figure 1-4) captured during the site visits, facilitated the identification of Yoruba elements like courtyards, spatial organisation, ornamentation, building materials, and symbolic motifs. Each structure was evaluated using a three-step process, which included a description of the building, an analysis of its architectural features, and finally, the integration of the insights gained to determine the level of cultural authenticity. In a second stage of the analysis, a comparative approach was used to examine the two case studies and assess the level of integration or erosion of Yoruba cultural values in public architecture today.



Figure 1. Front view of the Cultural Centre, Mokola, Ibadan (Photograph by Author, 2025).



Figure 2. Front view of the New Culture Studio, Mokola, Ibadan (Photograph by Author, 2025).

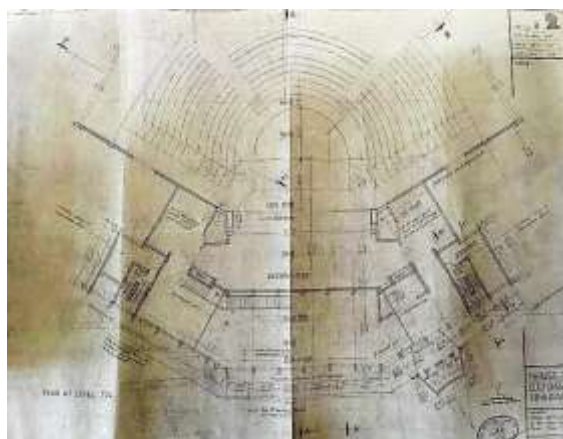


Figure 3. Ground Floor plan of the Cultural Centre, Mokola (Source: Author, 2025).

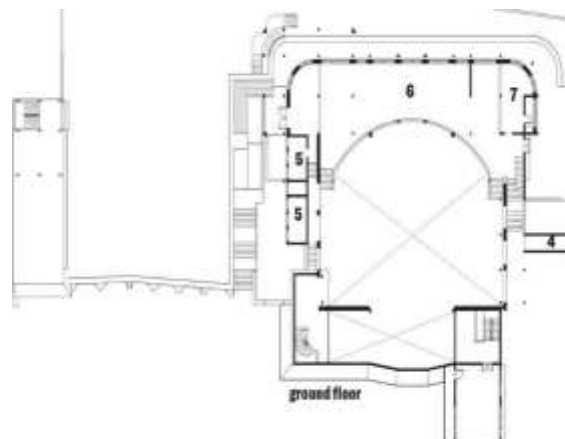


Figure 4. Ground Floor plan of the New Culture Centre, Mokola (Source: Author, 2025).

RESULTS

Research Question 1: What are the defining elements of traditional Yoruba architecture?

The study identified several defining elements of Yoruba traditional architecture, which include courtyards, carved pillars, ornamentation, symbolism, and the use of indigenous materials such as laterite, timber, and clay (See Table 1). These features embody the cultural philosophy of the Yoruba people, emphasising communal living, spirituality, and climatic responsiveness as illustrated in Figure 5

Table 1. Defining Elements of Yoruba Traditional Architecture

Element	Description	Cultural Significance
Courtyard (àgbàlá/akodi)	Central open space	Climate regulation, communal life
Carved Pillars	Timber supports with carvings	Depiction of ancestors, deities, and proverbs
Ornamentation	Reliefs, motifs, decorative carvings	Cultural symbolism and storytelling
Materials	Laterite, timber, clay, and palm thatch	Locally available, sustainable, ecological
Symbolism	Use of colours, motifs, and spatial hierarchy	Reinforces cosmology and identity



Figure 5: Yoruba architectural elements: courtyard, carved pillar, ornamented façade, and symbolic motifs (Photographs by Author, 2025).

Research Question 2: How are these elements expressed in the Cultural Centre, Mokola, and the New Culture Studio, Mokola?

Findings show that the two cultural centres display these elements to different degrees. The Cultural Centre, Mokola, incorporates some Yoruba elements, but these are overshadowed by modernist design, concrete structures, and minimal ornamentation, as illustrated in figures 6 and 7 and highlighted in table 2. By contrast, the New Culture Studio demonstrates deliberate integration of Yoruba traditions, including intimate courtyards, carved motifs, and natural finishes, making it more authentic to vernacular principles.

Table 2. Presence of Yoruba Architectural Elements in the Case Studies

Architectural Element	Cultural Centre, Mokola	New Culture Studio, Mokola
Courtyard	Present, but monumental and modernised	Present, intimate and traditional
Carved Pillars	Minimal, concrete pillars dominate	Prominent, carved wooden supports
Ornamentation	Limited motifs and reliefs	Extensive use of symbolic carvings and motifs
Materials	Concrete, cement plaster	Laterite, red brick, timber, stone
Symbolism	Weakly expressed	Strongly expressed in multiple forms

**Figure 6. Exterior view of the Cultural Centre, Mokola (Photograph by Author, 2025).****Figure 7. Exterior view of the New Culture Studio, Mokola (Photograph by Author, 2025).**

Research Question 3: In what ways do the two case studies differ in their levels of cultural authenticity and symbolic representation?

The comparative analysis revealed that while both buildings serve as cultural landmarks, their architectural expressions differ significantly, as illustrated in Figures 8 and 9 and highlighted in Table 3. The Cultural Centre reflects a modernist interpretation with limited cultural integration, while the New Culture Studio reflects a deeper continuity with Yoruba vernacular traditions. Table 3. Comparative Integration of Yoruba Architectural Features

Feature Category	Cultural Centre, Mokola	New Culture Studio, Mokola
Spatial Organisation	Monumental scale, limited Yoruba hierarchy	Hierarchical, compound-inspired layout
Climatic Responsiveness	Limited passive design strategies	Strong natural ventilation and thermal mass
Materiality	Predominantly modern concrete and plaster	Locally sourced laterite, brick, and timber
Ornamentation	Minimal, decorative but not symbolic	Rich in carvings, reliefs, and cultural motifs
Cultural Authenticity	Moderate, symbolic elements diluted	Strong, deeply rooted in Yoruba traditions



Figure 8. Interior courtyard of the Cultural Centre, Mokola (Photograph by Author, 2025).



Figure 9. Interior courtyard and carved pillars of the New Culture Studio, Mokola (Photograph by Author, 2025).

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The results indicate that, compared to the Cultural Centre, New Culture Studio more effectively assimilates Yoruba architectural features within its design. It showcases cultural authenticity in the arrangement of space, the use of materials, and symbolism, while the Cultural Centre, although important, displays a modernist corporate approach and superficial integration of local elements. These results support the proposition that the deliberate integration of traditional features enhances the cultural identity in modern architecture.



DISCUSSION

This study's results reiterate the importance of Yoruba traditional architecture in the construction of identity in contemporary public architecture. The study found that although both the Cultural Centre, Mokola, and the New Culture Studio, Mokola, incorporated Yoruba elements, the extent of their integration and authenticity differed greatly. This is in line with previous assertions that architecture transcends the function of providing shelter and becomes an embodiment of culture, values, cosmology, and collective memory (Adebaike *et al.*, 2020; Akin-Otiko, 2021).

The Cultural Centre, Mokola, is an example of the conflict that arises between modernist hopes and indigenous culture. Its huge size and the reliance on modern, concrete construction illustrate the modernist desire to put function and durability above all else, and along the lines, utterly devoid of architectural symbolism (Ridwan & Eze, 2023). The almost total absence of carved motifs and decorative patterns, along with the embellished ornamentation of the Cultural Centre, Mokola, suggests that Yoruba traditions were superficially incorporated and do not reflect a profound integration. This is consistent with the work of critics who observe that numerous state-sponsored cultural initiatives dilute indigenous architecture in favour of "globalised" designs (Akhanolu & Ahianba, 2025).

In contrast, New Culture Studio integrates principles of Yoruba architecture more thoroughly and holistically. Its laterite, brick, and timber construction is ecologically responsive and exemplifies the philosophy of construction with nature (Ibitoye *et al.*, 2022). The carved pillars, symbolic motifs, and the courtyard's intimate enclosure embrace the literature that positions Yoruba architecture as sustainable and culturally significant from the climate (Stephen & Ademuleya, 2021; Olaniyan *et al.*, 2023). This supports Sogbesan and Awonusi 2022, who argue that indigenous ornamentation serves as a narrative device that encodes ancestral knowledge and social values.

The comparative analysis also illustrates that architectural authenticity goes beyond the decorative motifs. The Spatial organisation, materiality, and symbolism within the Cultural Centre's architectural structure create a coherent spatial organisation. New Culture Studio exemplifies greater continuity with the Yoruba worldview because of the hierarchy of spaces, ornamentation, and ecological balance. This illustrates Agboola's 2021 claim that to maintain continuity in vernacular architecture, the designer must make deliberate decisions that adapt the traditions of the architecture without losing its cultural essence. These results add to the ongoing conversation surrounding the identity of cultural centres. According to Umukoro (2023) and Anifowose and Olatubosun (2020), cultural structures must be designed to reflect identity and also serve as repositories of legacy. This study confirms the proposition that cultural centres can be identity-preserving monuments when architectural elements of the Yoruba culture are purposefully integrated, as in the New Culture Studio. However, when such elements are diluted, as in the Cultural Centre, architecture becomes a risk, a cultural hero devoid of meaningful culture.

This shows that the retention of Yoruba architecture in current municipal settings rests on the preservation of dominant physical attributes and sustaining their cultural rationale. Sustainable and symbolic architecture presents avenues for reinforcing Yoruba identity in the face of the challenges of urban modernity.



CONCLUSION

This research focused on the integration of Yoruba traditional architectural elements within two structures located in Ibadan: the Cultural Centre, Mokola, and the New Culture Studio, Mokola. The research concludes that the two structures, although they possess courtyards, traditional materials, and symbolically ornamented features, do not exhibit the same levels of integration and authenticity. Moreover, the Cultural Centre reflects modernist styles while the New Culture Studio is purposeful in its integration of Yoruba traditions and serves as a model for contemporary architecture that is culturally relevant. The findings of the research suggest that architects and legislators need to include and prioritise indigenous design elements and also strategically incorporate facade symbolism, material, space, and ecological elements of architecture. Also, the practice of architectural heritage conservation should include contemporary structures that are culturally significant. Finally, tangible and intangible heritage projects should be made a part of architectural work to preserve the traditions in their true form instead of popularised, surface-level renditions.

Future research should go beyond case studies in Ibadan and include comparative studies in other Yoruba cities and regions. Such studies could explore how different socio-political and economic contexts affect the integration of traditional architecture in modern civic spaces. Further interdisciplinary studies could examine the impact of preserving and reconceptualising indigenous design principles through technology, for example, the digital archiving of design motifs and climate modelling of courtyards. Also, longitudinal studies could examine the evolution of cultural centres and determine the impact of renovations, expansions, and adaptive reuse on cultural authenticity. This research acknowledges the continued importance of architecture in the preservation of cultural heritage. Ethically and creatively integrating traditional Yoruba designs into modern cultural centres enables architects to add to thoughtful, ecologically responsible architecture that serves as a source of identity for generations to come.

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