Traditional African Architecture: Materials, Techniques, Influence Of Western Art

Traditional African architecture consists of houses or buildings which constructed from local materials such as earth, timber, straw, and stone/rock. This is normally built with the simplest of tools and methods to allow a straightforward and quick build which is habitable. Earth and mud have been one of the most vital building materials which when combined with timber and palm/coconut and straw bales this would be used for the roofing. In tropical countries, it is normally seen that traditional houses are more suitable to the current climate and provide comfortable interiors. The typical traditional building which was made from earth and mud rocks would maintain a high level of thermal comfort (Ejiga, Paul and O. Cordelia, 2012). Vernacular architecture is one of the building techniques which is so common within traditional African architecture which commenced in the 1880s. Vernacular architecture can be said to be ‘the architectural language of the people with its ethnic regional and local dialects.’. It is built to meet the specific needs of the local people, and the ways of living, from the people’s cultures. It has evolved over many years which has reflected the characteristics of the local environment, natural materials such as clay and mud, culture, and technology (Oliver, 2006).

Even though there are many materials which is a big factor in traditional African architecture, the three specific materials which have been persistent in the building traditions is; stone, straw and earth, which have been skilfully combined and applied when buildings houses or buildings. Stones and rocks were one of the basic forms of materials used for the construction of houses and buildings. The crafts men in Africa who were specialised in rocks, were able to extract it from earth, cutting and reshaping them to fit together into architecturally stable forms. An example of this if the pyramids in Egypt which go back to the ancient worlds. The second construction material they used is straw/thatch, which is a product of grown plants. As this material is made from plants, this meant there was a vast majority of this which made it easily accessible for local people to make straw huts. The third material which is the commonly used was adobe/earth/mudbrick, this was easily accessible to get. Adobe material is made from natural elements of the earth mixed with water and sun. This material was sustainable as it was structurally firm, environmentally sound and could exist for years if the day to day maintenance was followed. These type of material houses were more common in the rural villages; however, they also would use straw for the roofing. Most windows on houses were wooden frames with wooden poles going vertically across to allow airflow throughout the house. Glass windows is not a local material which was easily accessible to the local people as it was a material which needs to be imported meaning it is more expensive. Also, glass is a material which generates a high level of solar radiation and traps heat, meaning it would overheat the interior. Hence, glass might not be a suitable in hot tropical regions for construction of buildings. (Ejiga, Paul and O. Cordelia, 2012).

However, the traditional African architecture is addressed and seen globally as ‘primitive’ which is ‘basic’ or ‘unsophisticated’. Due to the building materials used in constructing, the ‘primitive’ classification comes from this. But not only this, it is the low technological methods used when compared in today’s architectural construction techniques which has resulted in skyscrapers (Ejiga, Paul and O. Cordelia, 2012). In the 1900’s when architect and author Edwin Maxwell Fry arrived in West Africa, ‘Traditional African building’, they argued, was ‘unsuitable

for the development of a modern civilization’(Whyte, 2010). They felt that ‘European importation’ was needed in order to make modern civilization more suitable. In order to build the modern life which appeared to be in demand by the people in Africa, Edwin felt that they ‘lacked infrastructure, the training, and the industrial base to build the skyscrapers, factories and other modern buildings. (Whyte, 2010).’ In order to build skyscrapers, factories and other modernised buildings, Edwin felt that they needed to look at European-trained architects and European-based construction companies. As Nnamdi Elleh put it in 1997, ‘The only way the nations of Africa can maintain modern architecture is by depending on western countries for the supply of both prefabricated industrial materials and skilled labour.’ Globalisation has also made traditional African architecture more sustainable and eco-friendlier to the environment. Not only that, but it enables a better condition of living.