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The Integrated Studio Projects Method: A Veritable Tool for Educating Future Architects in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Architects and architecture in Nigeria stand a danger of being grossly disfigured in the coming decades if adequate measures are not put in place to comprehensively groom future practitioners who will be capable of understanding societal demands in terms of shelter and environment. The Integrated Studio Projects Method constitutes a humane system of propagating architectural education to the student architect. In an era where alienating housing schemes and faceless office blocks constitute the urban sky line, architectural education must attempt to bridge the gap between what could be built and what should be built. Indeed, through the Integrated Studio Projects Methods, the student practitioner would seek to differentiate at a primary level between problems to be solved by virtue of design and those to be resolved administratively. The approach further allows a variation in design solutions while promoting more perceptible identity for the solutions, and a subtle development of an architecture that is responsive to cultural as well as societal demands.

Key words: Integrated studio methods tool, education, traditional studio methods

1. Introduction

Architecture and architects in Nigeria have a great future. A future predicated on today in spite of the uncertainties which becloud the socio-political/economic climate. In an era when great strides are being made in medicine, sciences, and the arts, individuals entrusted with the grooming of future architectural practitioners in Nigeria must also strive to bequeath a lasting legacy to the generations yet unborn. This legacy could be appraised by the quality of the finished product—the pulse of the built environment (Adeyemi, 2000). Being at the vanguard of the making of the built environment, the architect thus seems to be entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring a proper balance between “what could be built” and “what should be built”. The concern for this balance has prompted the author to attempt to investigate the methods of propagating architectural design ideas in the studio within the Nigeria context. In an era when alienating housing schemes, and faceless office buildings constitute the skyline of our towns, traditional African forms and images which distinguish the African from western ideals stand the danger of commercial extinction. No thanks to globalization and mass production of construction materials that are applied without being mindful of their suitability or otherwise for the environment (Runeson & Devalence, 2015). Nigerian architecture has passed through many phases partly in response to the criticisms that have been leveled against it, especially that of eclecticism. From ancient times, architects have always adopted the strategy of selective borrowing in proffering solutions to contemporary problems. However, when eclectic architecture does not respond meaningfully to societal and regional peculiarities, several problems may arise. The problems include the levels of response to the functional, aesthetic, and safety goals of the project.

Gofwen (2018) opines that certain forces have impinged negatively on the evolution of architecture in Nigeria entrenching design decadence as the order of the day. The forces include arbitrary pricing of building materials, influx of architects from foreign nations, quackery depressed economy, and unhealthy rivalry among practitioners. Nigerian architectural education in a sustainable age should integrate sustainability into the thinking and teaching in the ivory tower, while stimulating the student architect to critically observe, analyze and creatively evolve sustainable solutions to the challenges of the built environment (Adegbile, 2012). A strategy in architectural education that skips an examination of how societies maintained a balance of the ecosystem in the past may not be the best for the future of the built environment in Nigeria. Suarez (2013) identifies discrete but interacting steps that typify human cognition, from early processes of acquiring information from the environment to the complex thoughts about the intention to apply the knowledge creatively to design according to the manner we observe the environment. Synthesis in design occurs when there is a need to make a decision against competitive factors (Ghajargar, 2021; Alexander, 1964). The paper argues that design requires a synthesis of two contrasting forms: conventional practical forms, and evocative forms.

2. Architectural Education and Design Studio Methods

“What kind of architecture and architectural education do we want to bequeath to the coming generations? An architecture truly deriving from our traditional culture and heritage of a distinctively national character or architecture of international character created to suit universal taste but having no meaning and relevance?” Adeyemi (2000), in attempting to proffer a meaningful response to the aforesaid paradox, stated that the quality and

methods of running the design studio-“the mill for baking architects”- need be investigated. Among other things, the atmosphere and nature of the design studio must be congenial for learning, creativity, and propagation of knowledge. This factor has a universal application and needs not be overstressed in this paper. However, the issue of the “methods” of running the design studio has deep implications, especially in a tropical developing country, such as Nigeria. Two major systems are currently being used in the teaching of architectural design in our schools of architecture today. These are the TRADITIONAL STUDIO METHODS, AND THE INTEGRATED STUDIO PROJECTS METHODS. In the Traditional Studio System, the student architect is normally given an architectural problem to be solved. He then uses the sources available to proffer design solutions to the problems so assigned. On the other hand, the Integrated Studio Project Methods involves “thorough study of communities through critical observation, surveying, documentation, analysis and syntheses of their needs in terms of planning, design and construction, special attention being paid to graphic, oral and technological proficiency”, Owusu-Addo (1987).

3. The Traditional Studio Methods Vs The Integrated Studio Projects Methods

There is no doubt that both systems of propagating architectural design knowledge could encourage creative design aptitude in student-architects and practitioners alike. However, the question here is that of ease of design application and appropriateness in the Nigerian context. In a system where textbooks are in short supply, and when available, they may not be most suitable for creative education, Adeyemi (1990) opines that a reallocation of scarce resources presupposes a reconsideration of options”. One of the options is the task of disseminating architectural design knowledge from “first principles” Edem (1990). This implies an appraisal of the status quo with an aim toward analyzing, and synthesizing design solutions. This in fact, is the process of the integrated studio projects methods. In the system, the student-architect is given the opportunity to discover environmental design problems rather than being assigned problems to be solved. He is involved ab initio in creative thinking, with the translation of the thought processes into physical events which may be planning and architectural solution to problems of the built environment. It is this ingredient that creates the distinction between the Traditional Studio methods and the Integrated Studio Projects Methods. Incidentally this distinction could be translated into a deficiency in imparting comprehensive design skills in the student while educating with the former method. Further, Adeyemi (1990) while discussing the design process correctly observed that some design programmes in the Traditional Studio System “may have been uninteresting, irrelevant, sometimes nonsensical, showing artificial origin, and lack of care and imagination in preparation. Little wonder then, our schools have laboured with measured success in developing students' capacity to seek and solve problems. The Traditional Studio Method could engender intellectual satisfaction at the expense of environmentally cognitive design solutions. Sometimes the system could produce professionals who have distinction in producing high quality designs which at the end may not be contextual, and adaptable to the environment.

On the other hand, the Integrated Studio Projects Method recognizes varying students' interests, goals and abilities. It emphasizes that the architectural design process should be broad based seeking to provide education for the varying roles of the architect in the society. Similarly, the Integrated Projects Method encourages mutual awareness and facilitates the cultivation of “esprit de corps” among student-architects. Esprit de corps is a necessary attribute of the architect as a team leader in the construction Industry. It is noteworthy to state that the Integrated Studio Project method has several other advantages. First, it engenders an accelerated development of the mental processes such as perception, reasoning, and problem-solving because it relates design issues within a perceptible context, and as a complex whole within the environmental system. Uji (2000) aptly suggests that systems approach to phenomena implies an appreciation of the issues within a complex whole made up of specific systems and sub-systems in order to achieve optimal satisfaction for the users in the final solution, so generated.

4. Application of the Integrated Studio Projects Methods at IMSU/ABSU

The Schools of Architecture at both Imo State University, Owerri, and Abia State University, Uturu are among the institutions that currently apply the Integrated Projects approach in the propagation of architectural knowledge. In these Schools, the programme is applied at the 300,400 and 700 levels where the Studio emphasis varies from rural to semi-urban, and to urban environmental design problems respectively. The students and staff who constitute the study team would normally be required to spend 2-3weeks of the long vacation in the field conducting social and physical survey of the study community. The data so collected constitute the basis for the integrated studio projects for the rest of the session. The course programme includes documentation, analysis, synthesis, and formulation of a planning programme The planning programme is crowned by the design of specific domestic and non-domestic projects by the students.

It is however, important to observe that in applying the Integrated Studio approach in these institutions, a basic assumption was made: It was normally assumed that the student-architect understands the dilemma of the designer-the cyclical nature of the design task wherein one oscillates between analysis-synthesis until the ultimate evolution of satisfactory design proposals.

5. Some Thoughts on the Adoption of the Integrated Studio Projects Methods

There is no gain saying that when properly implemented, the Integrated Projects Methods could lead to a maximization of available opportunities and potentials in both the students, and the built environment. However, two important issues which must be resolved before adopting the system are:

- i. At what points of the educational career would the system fit?
- ii. What resources are available to the school?

Having acquired basic skills in verbo-graphic communication in the first two years of a 4+2 curriculum, the third and fourth years seem most suitable for the application of the Integrated System. In addition, the skills so acquired should be further refined in the first year of the professional programme.

Similarly, the human and materials resources available to the school could enhance or deter the success of the Integrated System. For instance, inadequate funding/staffing, and willingness or otherwise of architect-educators in the school to adopt the system, since the majority may have been educated in the traditional system.

6. Architectural Challenges of the Future Practitioner in Nigeria and the Integrated Design Studio

The future practitioner of architecture in Nigeria must attempt to contribute meaningfully to the pool of world architectural values. The Ancient Egyptian architects have no doubt left their footprints on the sands of time, Nigerian form ideals could be manifested in the use of traditional images, local references and symbols, native construction materials, and planning techniques. The philosophy and world view of Nigerian architecture should be predicated on a sincerity of purpose. One that revolves on the integration of such determinants as religion, ethno-sociology, economy, climate, vegetation, technology, materials, and context in design delivery. Indeed, a blend of a rejuvenated Nigerian tradition with the most current technologies seem most appropriate as we seek for a truly Nigerian architecture. Against the aforesaid background, it is only proper that future Nigerian architectural practitioners be in tune with the society and the context of their practice. There is every hope that the Integrated Studio Projects Methods could equip the future practitioner with versatile creative skills and technical virtuosity fortified with a humane concern for the built environment.

7. Conclusion

With the foregoing, it is thus crystal clear that the Integrated Studio Projects Method is a veritable tool for educating future practitioners of architecture in Nigeria. It is through this method that we can re-assert and revive the cultural values, identity and authenticity of Nigerian architecture, and if possible extol the ancestral glories/beauty of African vernacular vigour in the global construction industry.

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