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HISTORICAL ARCHITECTURE AND POLITICAL SYMBOLISM: THE CASE OF RIVERS STATE GOVERNMENT HOUSE

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Abstract: The architectural transformation of the Rivers State Government House serves as a lens for examining the interplay between political authority, historical influence, and cultural identity in Nigeria. This study traces the evolution of its design from colonial-era structures to modern government complexes, analysing how governance, modernisation, and external architectural trends have shaped its development. Using a qualitative case study approach, data was collected through semi-structured interviews, direct observations, and archival research. Findings reveal that while successive administrations have modified the building to reflect changing priorities of governance, it remains largely influenced by Western architectural styles, with minimal incorporation of indigenous Nigerian elements. The study highlights the role of government buildings as both a functional and symbolic expression of power, economic capacity, and state identity. To foster greater cultural representation, the study recommends integrating indigenous motifs, engaging local architects, and balancing modernisation with heritage preservation in the government buildings.

Keywords: Architectural evolution, Political architecture, Colonial legacy, Indigenous identity, Government buildings

Introduction

Architecture has long been intricately linked to political power, serving as a physical manifestation of authority, ideology, and governance (Wilson, 1988). Beyond its structural purpose, architecture encapsulates the socio-political narratives of a given period, reinforcing the identity, aspirations, and values of a governing elite (DeLong, 2002). Across civilisations, monumental structures such as palaces, government houses, and city halls have stood as powerful symbols of administrative control and legitimacy. These structures not only provide functional spaces for governance but also embody the ideological underpinnings of political regimes (Vale, 1999).

The Rivers State Government House, commonly referred to as the Brick House, is an architectural landmark in Nigeria that reflects the interplay between power, governance, and design. Like other statehouses across the country, it serves as the official residence and administrative headquarters of the state's highest political authority - the governor. However, beyond its utilitarian purpose, the Brick House has evolved through various architectural transformations that reflect the historical, cultural, and political shifts within Rivers State. Understanding the

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architectural metamorphosis of the Government House provides insight into how leadership, governance structures, and socio-political influences have shaped its design over time (Imaah, 2004; 2006).

The evolution of the Brick House can be traced from Nigeria's colonial past to the present day. During the colonial era, administrative buildings were often designed to emphasise British authority, control, and permanence (Wilson, 1988). These structures were typically characterised by axial layouts, grand facades, and imposing designs intended to signify dominance and order. Many of these colonial influences persisted in post-independence Nigeria, with successive administrations either modifying existing structures or constructing new ones to reflect evolving political aspirations. As Vale (2014) posits, statehouses are not just centres of governance but also serve as ideological statements that reinforce the authority of those in power. In the case of the Brick House, its successive architectural phases embody the shifts in governance, economic priorities, and cultural identity of Rivers State.

The intersection of architecture and political power is further evident in the use of specific design elements to convey authority and legitimacy. As Sullivan (1896) famously stated, "form follows function," meaning that architectural design is often driven by the intended purpose of the structure. In the context of statehouses, this principle is particularly relevant, as these buildings must simultaneously function as administrative centres while also serving as representations of state authority. However, from a Marxist perspective, Jameson (1991) argues that "form follows values," suggesting that architectural design is deeply rooted in the prevailing ideologies of society. When examining the Brick House, both perspectives are applicable - its form reflects its administrative function, while its evolving design encapsulates the political values and aspirations of its occupants.

Moreover, the Government House's architectural evolution aligns with broader trends in Nigeria's Statehouse designs. While some State governments have retained colonial-era buildings, others have opted for modernised structures that project a sense of progress and national identity. These decisions are not merely aesthetic but are deeply political, as they signal shifts in leadership styles, governance philosophies, and even geopolitical influences (Hale, 2000). As Vale (1999) argues, Statehouses should not be viewed in isolation but within the context of their urban settings and socio-political environments. Thus, to fully appreciate the significance of the Brick House, it is essential to consider how its design has been influenced by broader historical and political narratives within Rivers State and Nigeria at large.

The historical trajectory of the Brick House dates to the colonial era, with its origins traced to 1884. The Government House initially functioned as a consulate before being relocated to Degema in 1885 and later returning to Bonny Island (Rivers State Government Archives, 2017). Over time, the seat of power underwent several relocations and architectural modifications, reflecting the administrative transitions and infrastructural developments within the region. The present-day Brick House, with its distinct architectural features, represents the culmination of decades of structural evolution, governance shifts, and cultural influences.

This study aims to analyse the architectural transformation of the Rivers State Government House from its colonial origins to the present, highlighting the socio-political factors that have shaped its design. By examining the materials, spatial configurations, and symbolic elements embedded in its architecture, this research seeks to understand how built environments serve as historical records of governance and authority (Ackerman, Scruton, & Collins, 2022). Additionally, the study contextualises the Brick House within the broader framework of architectural

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interpretations, exploring how statehouses function as both practical administrative spaces and powerful symbols of statehood and political legitimacy.

Ultimately, by tracing the architectural history of the Brick House, this research contributes to a broader discourse on the role of architecture in political representation. As Lawal (2009) notes, the way humans organise, and design spaces reflects their social, economic, and political realities. In this light, the Brick House stands as more than just a government building - it is a testament to the evolving political landscape of Rivers State, embodying the governance ideologies and aspirations of different eras. By understanding the architectural journey of the Brick House, we gain deeper insights into the broader relationship between architecture, power, and cultural identity in Nigeria.

Data and Methods

The Rivers State Government House, popularly known as the Brick House, is a significant architectural landmark and the official residence of the Chief Executive of Rivers State. It is located in the Old Government Reserved Area (GRA) within the Port Harcourt Municipality, the capital of Rivers State, Nigeria. Geographically, it is positioned at 4°46'36"N and 7°0'59"E, in the heart of the city (Figure 1). Beyond serving as the home of the Governor and their family, the Brick House functions as the administrative headquarters of the State government, hosting high-profile meetings, official receptions, and government conferences (Mapcarta, 2023).

Port Harcourt, originally known as Igwe Ocha, was founded in 1912 by Lewis Viscount Harcourt, the then British Secretary of State for the Colonies. Traditionally inhabited by the Ikwerre and Ijaw ethnic groups, the city lies within the Niger Delta region, along the Bonny River, approximately 66 km upstream from the Gulf of Guinea (Uwadiae Oyegun et al., 2023). Over the years, Port Harcourt has expanded significantly, growing from 15.54 sq. km in 1914 to 106 sq. km in 2008 (Owei, Obinna & Ede, 2010). The city's rapid urbanisation has led to the entrapment of previously rural communities such as Choba, Rumuokoro, Elelenwo, Rukpokwu, and Woji within its metropolitan structure, often in an unregulated manner.

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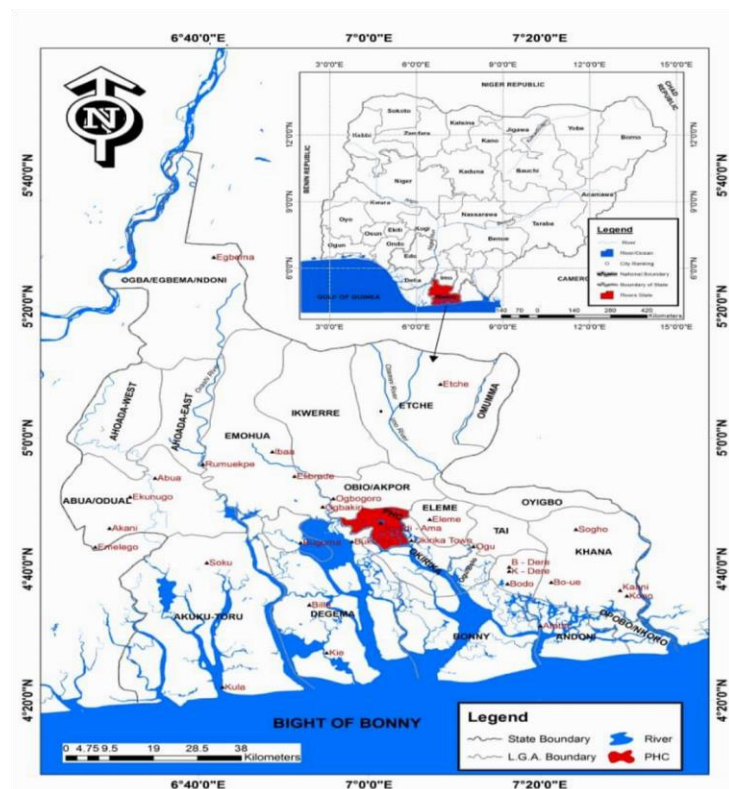


Figure 1. Map of Rivers State Showing Port Harcourt (State Capital) Source: Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Rivers State University, Port Harcourt. 2022

The city experiences a tropical monsoon climate, characterised by heavy rainfall and high humidity. The rainy season extends for most of the year, with September being the wettest month, averaging 370 mm of rainfall, while December records the lowest rainfall levels at approximately 200 mm. The Harmattan winds that influence much of West Africa are less pronounced in Port Harcourt due to its coastal position (Abatan et al., 2014). Temperatures remain relatively stable throughout the year, typically ranging between 25°C and 28°C, with relative humidity levels of 75% to 78% (Williams, 2014).

Geologically, the city is located within the Lower Niger Delta, consisting primarily of quaternary alluvial deposits that have undergone gradual metamorphosis. The soil is generally poorly drained, with thick humus-rich topsoil but a deficiency in essential minerals such as nitrogen and potassium, due to intense leaching caused by frequent rainfall (Uwadiae Oyegun et al., 2023). The relief is low-lying, sloping gently at an average of 3m to 5m from the northwest to the southeast, while its drainage system is structurally controlled by the coastal lowlands, featuring a dendritic pattern that allows water to flow into the Bonny and New Calabar rivers before emptying into the Atlantic Ocean (Umeuduji & Aisuebeogun, 1999). Due to poor drainage, parts of the city are prone to seasonal flooding, particularly during the rainy months.

The demographic expansion of Port Harcourt has been substantial over the years. The 2006 national census recorded a population of 1,255,387, which was projected to 1,337,800 by 2009 (NPC, 2013). By 2021, the city's population had surged to approximately 2,848,176, reflecting a rapid urban growth rate of 6.5% (NPC, 2019). This increase

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has led to numerous urban challenges, including uncontrolled development, high traffic congestion, a proliferation of informal settlements, and rising unemployment rates. The economic structure of Port Harcourt is primarily driven by its strategic position as the centre of Nigeria's oil industry. The city houses numerous multinational firms, major oil refineries, and industrial hubs that contribute significantly to Nigeria's petroleum exports, making it one of the most economically significant cities in sub-Saharan Africa (Kalu et al., 2019). Additionally, the seaport, railway network, and major highways connecting the South-South and South-East regions bolster trade and attract investors (Ojo et al., 2018).

Urban planning in Port Harcourt is divided into central business districts (CBDs), industrial zones, and residential areas, which are further categorized into low-, medium-, and high-density areas. The low-density zones, known as Government Reserved Areas (GRAs), are typically occupied by senior government officials and affluent individuals, featuring large plots of land, ample parking spaces, and green areas for recreation (Port Harcourt Master Plan, 1975). Medium-density areas, such as D/Line and the town centre, cater to middle-income earners, while high-density areas are designated for low-income residents, characterised by overcrowding and minimal open spaces (Eyenghe, Williams & Tobi, 2019). Despite these zoning efforts, many indigenous enclaves within the municipality remain unplanned, resulting in informal settlements that pose significant infrastructural and governance challenges. The increasing urban sprawl, coupled with weak enforcement of physical planning regulations, has contributed to the complexity of land use and development control within the city.

The Brick House, as part of Port Harcourt's governmental and architectural landscape, exists within this broader urban and socio-political context. Its location within the Old GRA, a historically significant area, underscores its importance as a seat of power and governance in Rivers State. The transformation of its architecture over time mirrors the city's evolving sociopolitical dynamics, economic growth, and infrastructural development. The architectural evolution of the Government House reflects shifts in governance ideologies, colonial legacies, and modernisation efforts, making it an essential part of Rivers State's political and architectural history.

Data

This study relied on both primary and secondary data sources to examine the architectural evolution and values of the Rivers State Government House. Primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with key informants, direct observations, and oral histories. A total of 18 key informants were selected using a judgmental (purposive) sampling technique. These informants included five architects (from private practice and academia), five builders, five government officials (serving and retired), and three historians. The interviews provided valuable insights into the architectural transformation of the government house, its historical significance, and the design principles underlying its construction.

In addition to interviews, direct personal observations were conducted to examine the architectural features of the Rivers State Government House. Photographs were taken to document key structural elements, ensuring a visual record of the building's architectural evolution. Oral histories from historians further enriched the study by providing chronological insights into the development and transformation of the government house over time.

Secondary data were collected from various sources, including government archives, published literature, and online materials related to Nigerian Statehouses and their architectural significance. These sources helped

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contextualise the architectural evolution of the Rivers State Government House within the broader framework of Nigerian governmental architecture.

Methods

The study adopted a qualitative research approach, guided by a constructivist research philosophy. Constructivism asserts that knowledge is socially constructed through human experiences and interactions. This perspective was essential in exploring and interpreting the architectural values of the Rivers State Government House. A case study research design was employed to allow for an in-depth examination of the subject matter. This approach facilitated a detailed understanding of the historical and contemporary significance of the structure, drawing insights from multiple sources.

Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, direct observations, and document analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the qualitative data. Interview responses were coded and categorised into themes that captured key aspects of the architectural transformations of the government house. This method allowed for a structured analysis of the diverse perspectives gathered from key informants.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the research instruments, content and face validity measures were employed. Experts in architectural heritage and cultural studies reviewed the interview questions to verify their relevance to the study objectives. A pilot survey was also conducted to refine the research instruments, ensuring their consistency and accuracy. By subjecting the data collection tools to expert validation and preliminary testing, the study ensured that the findings accurately reflected the architectural characteristics and historical evolution of the Rivers State Government House.

Results and Discussion

Results

Evolution of the Architectural Design of the Rivers State Government House (1849 – 2005)

The architectural evolution of the Rivers State Government House can be traced back to the precolonial era, beginning in 1849 when the British Consul for the Bights of Benin and Biafra was stationed in Fernando Po (present-day Equatorial Guinea). Due to administrative challenges and distance, a Vice Consulate was established in Bonny in 1884, which was temporarily relocated to Degema in 1885 while a permanent consulate was under construction. By 1891, the British Consulate in Bonny was completed, featuring key structures such as the Consulate building, a courthouse (Court of Equity), and a prison (Rivers State Government Archives, 2017).

Initially, the British consul operated from the hulk *George Shotton* at Bonny River (see Plate 1). However, as Bonny's economy declined, the colonial administration shifted its focus to Port Harcourt, which was officially founded in 1913. This relocation resulted in the demolition of the old Bonny consulate and the establishment of the Residency of the Consul in Port Harcourt.

The new consulate was a prefabricated iron two-storey building that housed administrative offices and auxiliary services (Rivers State Government Archives, 2017).

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Plate 1. The Hulk Housing the Consular Building, George Shotton on Bonny River in 1884 (First Administrative Building)

Source: Rivers State Government archives, 2017

The Rivers State Government House, commonly referred to as "Brick House," was originally built in 1928. Over time, the structure has undergone several modifications influenced by various military and civilian administrators. Significant architectural changes occurred during the administration of Chief Melford Okilo (1979–1983), who initiated modifications to the existing Brick House. However, the most transformative phase occurred under Dr. Peter Odili (1999–2007), who spearheaded the construction of a modernised Government House. The completed structure, commissioned in 2005, features contemporary architectural elements, blending historical influences with modern design principles (Rivers State Government Archives, 2017).

Plates 1 to 6 illustrate various stages of the architectural evolution of the Rivers State Government House, showcasing its transformation from colonial-era structures to the presentday administrative complex.

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Plate 2 The New Bonny Consulate Building in Bonny Island Built in 1899

Source: Rivers State Government Archives, 2017



Plate 3. Rivers State Government House (Brick House) in Port Harcourt Built in 1928

Source: Rivers State Government Archives, 2017

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Plate 4. Rivers State Government House (Brick House) in Port Harcourt Commissioned in 2005

Source: Rivers State Government Archives, 2017



Plate 5. Aerial view of a segment of the Rivers State Government House, Port Harcourt (2005)

Source: Rivers State Government Archives, 2017

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Plate 6. Aerial view of a segment of the Rivers State Government House, Port Harcourt (2005)

Source: Rivers State Government Archives, 2017

Architectural Influence of Past Administrators on the Government House

The architectural modifications of the Rivers State Government House have been shaped by successive military and civilian administrators (see Table 1).

Table 1. List Past Military Administrators and Civilian Governors of Rivers State

S/N	Name of Government	Head of Service (Military or Civilian)	status Tenure in Office Architectural Influence
1	Commander Alfred Diete-Spiff	Military (Navy) 1975 the existing	May 1967 – July Modification of Rivers State Government Statehouses
2	Colonel Zamani Lekwot	Military (Army)	August 1 st 1975 – July 1978
3	Commander Sulaiman Sa'idu	Military (Navy)	July 1978- September 1979
4	Chief Melford Okilo	Civilian	October 1979 Modification of the Brick House
5	Police Commissioner	Police	January 1984 – 1983

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	Fidelis Oyakhilome	August 1986	
6	Colonel Anthony S.I. Military (Army)	August 1986	
	Upko	July 1988	
7	Group Capt. Ernest Military (Airforce)	July 1988	–
	Olawunmi Adeleye	August 1990	
8	Colonel Godwin Osagie Military (Army)	August 1990-	
	Abbey	December 1991	
9	Chief Rufus Ada Civilian	January 1992	–
	George	November 1993	
10	Lt. Col. Dauda Musa Military (Army)	December 1993	
	Komo	– August 1996	
11	Colonel Musa Sheikh Military (Army)	August 1996	–
	Shehu	August 1998	
12	Group Capt. Sam Military (Airforce)	August 1998	–
	Ewang	May 1999	
13	Dr Peter Odili	Civilian	29th May 1999- Started the
	28th May 2007 construction of the new phase of the modern day Brick House		
14	Dr Peter Odili	Civilian	29th May 1999- Completed and
	28th May 2007 commissioned the modern day		
	Brick House		
15	Sir Celestine Civilian	May 29 th	–
	Ngozichim Omehia	October 25 th	
2007			
16	Rt. Hon. Chibuike otimi Civilian	October 25 th	
	Amaechi	2007 – May 28 th	
2011			
17	Rt. Hon. Chibuike Civilian	29 th May 2011	–
	Rotimi Amaechi	May 28th 2015	
18	Nyesom Ezenwo Wike	Civilian	29 th May 2015 –
	May 28th 2019		
19	Nyesom Ezenwo Wike	Civilian	29th May 2019 –
	May 28th 2023		
20	Sir Siminalaye Fubara	Civilian	May 29 th 2023
	till date		

Source: Rivers State Government Historian, 2023

These leaders played key roles in either maintaining, modifying, or reconstructing the Government House to suit the administrative needs of their time.

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- **Commander Alfred Diete-Spiff (1967–1975):** As the first Military Administrator of Rivers State, Diete-Spiff made modifications to the existing statehouse infrastructure.
- **Chief Melford Obiene Okilo (1979–1983):** The first civilian governor, Okilo, introduced significant alterations to the Brick House to reflect the evolving administrative needs.
- **Dr. Peter Odili (1999–2007):** His administration initiated and completed the construction of the modern-day Brick House, replacing the older structure with a more contemporary design.

Architectural Characteristics of the Rivers State Government House

Findings from interviews with key informants indicate that the Rivers State Government House has undergone significant architectural transformations in terms of location, size, and design. Initially established in Bonny Island in 1884 as the Vice Consulate, the administrative seat moved temporarily to Degema in 1885 before finally being relocated to Port Harcourt, where it remains today (Historian - Respondent 9). Despite modernisation, many Statehouses, including the Rivers State Government House, lack contextual values that would distinguish them architecturally. Respondents observed that these structures primarily serve as residential and administrative buildings with conference and council meeting facilities, but they fail to incorporate geographical and cultural elements that would reflect the identity of the state (Architect - Respondent 1).

Interview data revealed that the architectural styles of the Rivers State Government House have evolved from Gothic Revival to Neoclassical (Architect - Respondent 1) and from ancient to modern-day architecture (Builder - Respondent 2). The Gothic Revival elements, which include pointed arches, asymmetrical structures, vaulted ceilings, and stained-glass windows, are characteristic of European architecture from the 12th to 18th centuries. Over time, Neoclassical features, such as symmetrical designs, grand columns, and blank walls - common in Greek and Roman architecture from the 18th to 20th centuries became dominant. These influences reflect the lingering impact of European colonialism on post-independence architectural design.

Other respondents emphasised that pre-colonial influences, which are unrelated to Nigerian culture, remain dominant in Statehouse architecture. The structures are fortified and built to withstand external threats, a feature aligned with Gothic, Neoclassical, and ancient African architectural styles, such as those seen in Egyptian civilization (Builder - Respondent 2). However, these designs largely ignore indigenous Nigerian architectural traditions, resulting in a loss of cultural identity.

Additionally, interviewees pointed out that many of Nigeria's Statehouses, including the Rivers State Government House, were originally designed and constructed during the colonial era, and even those built post-independence were mostly designed by foreign architects. As a result, these buildings retain an overtly European architectural style, which does not authentically reflect Nigeria's cultural heritage (Government Official - Respondent 3).

Statehouse Architectural Design and Value Representation

Professional assessments of the architectural value of Nigeria's Statehouses, including the Rivers State Government House, yielded varied perspectives. Some respondents noted that while these buildings effectively serve their administrative functions, they lack the symbolic architectural elements that could make them iconic or representative of their geographical and cultural contexts (Architect - Respondent 12). The subjective and objective nature of architectural value was emphasised. Subjectively, an individual's perception of a Statehouse's design is influenced by personal feelings and experiences.

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Objectively, architectural value is determined by professional principles, historical evolution, and established design practices in the field (Architect - Respondent 12). Although many Statehouses are functionally valuable, they fail to incorporate cultural, traditional, and symbolic elements that would unify their representation of governance and heritage. Some respondents argued that Nigeria's Statehouses do not convey any clear architectural statement. Ideally, these structures should reflect the cultural identity, traditions, and history of the people they serve.

However, many continue to exhibit colonial-era Gothic and Neoclassical influences rather than indigenous architectural traditions (Architect - Respondent 10). Another key finding was that Statehouse designs generally follow prevailing architectural trends and project briefs rather than striving for cultural uniqueness. Architectural designs evolve based on professional standards and stylistic preferences of the time, which explains why many Statehouses maintain European-inspired aesthetics (Builder - Respondent 12). While these designs may incorporate elements of modernity and functionality, they often do not align with the cultural and historical identities of the states they represent.

Additionally, the security-sensitive nature of Statehouses makes architectural analysis challenging. Due to strict security protocols, access to these buildings is limited, restricting opportunities for in-depth study of their architectural significance and value representation (Government Official - Respondent 16). Consequently, a comprehensive evaluation of their architectural evolution remains difficult. In essence, the findings suggest that while the Rivers State Government House and other Statehouses in Nigeria have evolved structurally and functionally, they have yet to fully integrate cultural and geographical identity into their designs. Instead, they continue to be influenced by colonial-era architectural styles, making them architecturally significant yet disconnected from indigenous heritage.

Statehouse Transformation Concerning Power, Economy, Tradition, Culture, and Aesthetics

Findings from interviews with key informants reveal that the architectural transformation of Statehouses in Nigeria has been driven by evolving political, economic, technological, and aesthetic considerations. However, these transformations lack a consistent reference to iconic architectural principles or cultural identity (Architect - Respondent 1). Instead, successive political administrations often modify Statehouses to reflect their own preferences and era, without adherence to historical or cultural architectural elements. These changes are facilitated by the control of financial resources and the absence of regulations mandating adherence to specific architectural principles in Statehouse modifications. Consequently, there is no continuity in design, and each administration leaves its own mark without necessarily preserving cultural or traditional identity.

A key driver of architectural transformations in Statehouses is technological advancement (Architect - Respondent 13). Continuous improvements in architectural design have enabled the integration of ancient Gothic and Neoclassical styles with contemporary architectural innovations. The adoption of new materials, construction techniques, and design principles has allowed decision-makers, particularly politicians and government officials, to modify Statehouse structures in alignment with modern aesthetics and functional needs. As architectural technology evolves, economic resources are leveraged to incorporate modernised traditional, cultural, and aesthetic features into the design of these government buildings.

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From an evolutionary perspective, architecture as a discipline undergoes constant change, and the design of Nigeria's Statehouses has reflected this ongoing transformation (Builder - Respondent 2). Historically, Statehouse architecture has transitioned from colonial-era Gothic and Neoclassical influences on contemporary styles. These transformations are shaped by broader global architectural trends, which interact with local adaptations. However, the focus remains on modernisation rather than a conscious effort to embed cultural, traditional, and symbolic elements that would reflect Nigeria's diverse heritage.

Despite these changes, some respondents argued that architectural transformations in Statehouses have been minimal, with modifications primarily limited to furnishings, security networks, and interior refurbishments rather than structural redesigns (Government Official - Respondent 18). In some cases, new Statehouses are built when the existing structures become inadequate in terms of functionality and facilities. However, even when new buildings are constructed, they rarely incorporate significant elements of power, tradition, or culture. Instead, the emphasis is placed on the aesthetic preferences of the politicians in office, who prioritise modern conveniences over cultural representation.

Additionally, an interviewee noted that while Statehouses symbolise power and aesthetics, they largely fail to incorporate economic, traditional, and cultural values into their design (Government Official - Respondent 5). The transformation of these buildings primarily reflects shifts in political leadership rather than a deliberate attempt to create architecture that embodies Nigeria's heritage. Consequently, while the external grandeur of Statehouses may signify power and governance, their architectural evolution does not fully integrate the traditional and cultural identity of the states they represent.

Overall, the findings indicate that Nigeria's Statehouses undergo continuous transformation due to technological advancements, political preferences, and evolving architectural trends. However, these changes prioritise modernisation and aesthetics over the incorporation of traditional and cultural elements. As a result, Statehouses remain largely detached from their indigenous architectural heritage, reflecting a broader trend of globalization and contemporary architectural influences.

Statehouses Architectural Designs and Their Relationship to National Characteristics and Values (Power, Economy, Tradition, Culture, and Aesthetics)

The interviews conducted with key informants on the relationship between national characteristics (socioeconomic factors and demographics) and the values captured in Statehouse architectural designs revealed diverse perspectives. These values—power, economy, tradition, culture, and aesthetics—are expressed differently in Statehouse architecture across Nigeria.

Respondent 1 (Architect) highlighted that economically affluent states often use their Statehouse designs to showcase their wealth:

“Interestingly, the economically rich states have used the design of their Statehouses to make statements about how rich their states are” (Architect - Respondent 1).

This observation suggests that certain states leverage architecture as a means of communicating economic strength, often moving away from colonial-era Gothic and neoclassical influences to develop new Statehouses that symbolise prosperity. However, this shift does not necessarily reflect traditional or cultural heritage but focuses instead on projecting power, economic success, and aesthetic appeal.

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In contrast, some respondents argued that there is little to no relationship between Statehouse architecture and national characteristics. Respondent 5 (Architect) simply stated:

“No relationship” (Architect - Respondent 5).

This suggests that many Statehouse designs fail to integrate national characteristics such as indigenous architectural styles, cultural motifs, or economic identities into their structures. Similarly, Respondent 14 (Government Official) asserted that:

“Apart from representing power and aesthetics, I do not believe the ones I know have any of the other attributes and characteristics stated in the question” (Government Official - Respondent 14).

This viewpoint reinforces the notion that most Statehouses primarily serve as political symbols, with little emphasis on incorporating traditional, economic, or cultural identity into their design.

Other perspectives acknowledged some degree of relationship between national characteristics and Statehouse architecture but emphasised its limitations. Respondent 2 (Builder) noted:

“Little relationship because their architecture styles have only satisfied power but not economy, tradition, and culture of the three main Nigerian tribes of Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba traditional heritage” (Builder - Respondent 2).

This response underscores the architectural disconnect between Statehouses and Nigeria’s diverse ethnic heritage. While Statehouses embody power and governance, they often do not reflect the cultural diversity and indigenous traditions of their respective states.

However, some respondents acknowledged a level of sustainability in Statehouse designs. Respondent 7 (Architect) pointed out:

“Sustainability” (Architect - Respondent 7).

This suggests that despite a lack of cultural integration, many Statehouses retain elements of colonial-era architecture, preserving certain architectural traditions over time. The continuation of these historical styles ensures consistency in the visual representation of governance, even as new Statehouses are built.

Measures to Improve Statehouse Architecture for Better Representation of Power, Economy, Tradition, Culture, and Aesthetics

To enhance the representation of national characteristics in Statehouse architecture, respondents provided various recommendations.

Respondent 9 (Architect) suggested incorporating historical and cultural elements into Statehouse designs:

“Statehouses architecture should have a symbolic design that reflects their history and culture of the state. This may include the state symbols, historical references, and the cultural motifs of the people of the state. Of course, the usual architectural spaces must be provided for discussions, meetings, and the hosting of dignitaries and tourists. The garden of the Statehouses shall also speak to her economic power” (Architect - Respondent 9).

This recommendation emphasises the need for a conscious integration of historical and cultural symbols in architectural designs. By including state emblems, local motifs, and historical references, Statehouses can serve as representations of regional identity rather than just centres of governance.

Respondent 8 (Architect) emphasised the importance of local expertise in transforming Statehouse architecture:

“By the use of indigenous Architects and architectural firms for the process of the transformation” (Architect - Respondent 8).

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Similarly, Respondent 3 (Historian) stressed the need for regional representation in architectural design:

“Consideration should be given to local Architects with emphasis on representation of the region and cultures that the Statehouses” (Historian - Respondent 3).

These suggestions advocate for the involvement of indigenous architects, who possess a deeper understanding of regional traditions, culture, and architectural styles. Their expertise could ensure that Statehouses reflect the cultural and economic characteristics of their respective states.

Additionally, Respondent 11 (Architect) proposed a more technical approach to improving Statehouse designs:

“Thorough analysis of the architectural brief regards to climate and topography” (Architect - Respondent 11).

This perspective highlights the role of environmental factors in architectural planning. By considering climate and topography, Statehouse designs can incorporate locally sourced materials and construction methods that align with regional environmental conditions, further strengthening their cultural and economic relevance.

Respondent 2 (Builder) also emphasised the importance of African architectural elements in Statehouse designs:

“The courtyard is present as the only African pattern; encourage it, meeting halls, local materials and motifs as decorative elements” (Builder - Respondent 2).

This suggests that incorporating traditional African architectural patterns, such as courtyards and indigenous decorative motifs, can enhance the cultural significance of Statehouses. These findings indicate that while current Statehouse architecture primarily focuses on power and aesthetics, there is a growing awareness of the need for designs that better reflect the economic, cultural, and traditional identities of Nigerian states. By integrating historical references, involving indigenous architects, and considering environmental factors, Statehouse architecture can evolve to become more representative of Nigeria’s diverse national characteristics and values.

Discussion

The architectural transformation of the Rivers State Government House reflects broader historical, political, and cultural influences, aligning with established theories on architectural history, political architecture, and postcolonial urban development. The building's evolution from a colonial administrative centre to a modern government complex exemplifies how architecture serves as a political instrument, a reflection of governance structures, and an expression of socio-economic realities.

Colonial Legacy and the Initial Architectural Framework

The origins of the Rivers State Government House are rooted in British colonial administration, echoing broader trends in colonial architecture as discussed by Abu-Lughod (2014), King (1976, 2003), and Çelik & McDermott (1997). The establishment of British consular offices in Bonny in 1884 and the prefabricated iron consulate in Port Harcourt illustrate how colonial authorities imposed European architectural styles on administrative buildings. This reflects the broader trend of colonial cities, where European design principles dominated administrative districts, while indigenous areas were either regulated or neglected (King, 2003).

The British colonial preference for Gothic Revival and Neoclassical styles, characterised by pointed arches, vaulted ceilings, symmetrical layouts, and grand facades, aligns with the classification of architectural styles based on historical design elements (Onians, 2020; Yoshimura et al., 2019). These choices were driven by efficiency and durability rather than an attempt to incorporate indigenous Nigerian aesthetics, reflecting how colonial architecture often functioned as a tool for political control and symbolic governance (Goodsell, 1988a; Mayo, 1996).

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Modernisation and Political Symbolism in Architectural Transformation

As Nigeria transitioned to self-rule, the Rivers State Government House underwent significant modifications, reflecting broader postcolonial shifts in African state architecture. The construction of the "Brick House" in 1928 was an early attempt to localise colonial styles, but true modernisation efforts emerged under Chief Melford Okilo (1979–1983) and Dr. Peter Odili (1999–2007). These renovations mirror the architectural shifts observed in Aliyu and Abdulsalam's (2020) study of the German Reichstag, where changes in political leadership influenced structural modifications to align with evolving national values.

Political architecture, as theorised by Goodsell (2001) and Mayo (1996), is shaped by the political and economic priorities of ruling elites. Each Nigerian administration's renovations of the Rivers State Government House have served not only functional purposes but also symbolic ones demonstrating governance capacity and asserting political authority. The transition from purely colonial designs to a modernist approach, albeit still lacking indigenous elements, aligns with Goodsell's (2001) expressive lens, which suggests that government buildings communicate governance ideologies through their architecture. Additionally, Lasswell and Fox (1979) argued that political architecture not only reflects governance structures but also constructs the stage upon which political authority is performed. In this sense, the Rivers State Government House serves as a physical representation of political legitimacy, much like other monumental government structures globally, such as the Finnish embassy in Washington (Yari et al., 2012).

Cultural Identity and the Challenge of Indigenous Representation

Despite successive renovations, the Rivers State Government House like many Nigerian statehouses continues to struggle with integrating cultural and regional identity into its architectural design. This challenge aligns with Roux (2004) analysis of postcolonial African architecture, which highlights the tension between modernisation and cultural representation. In Nigeria, the persistence of European architectural styles suggests a continued reliance on foreign design principles rather than an embrace of indigenous architectural traditions.

Interviews with architects, builders, and government officials suggest that statehouses primarily serve as administrative and political symbols rather than cultural expressions. This is consistent with Wiseman's (1998) argument that political architecture is shaped more by governance priorities than by cultural considerations. However, scholars such as Yari et al. (2012) and Mayo (1996) emphasise that integrating traditional motifs—such as courtyard designs, carved wooden facades, and indigenous decorative patterns—could enhance cultural representation in government buildings.

The notion of "nation branding" through architecture, discussed by Yari et al. (2012) and Roskam (2015), is relevant here. While China has used architectural diplomacy in West Africa to project political and economic influence, Nigeria has not actively employed statehouse architecture as a means of asserting cultural identity. Instead, modernisation efforts in state architecture remain largely influenced by Western styles, reflecting the broader neo-colonial architectural influence discussed by Chang (2010) and Roskam (2015).

Statehouse Architecture as a Reflection of Power and Economy

The architectural evolution of the Rivers State Government House is closely tied to economic and political factors. Goodsell (2001) argues that the ability to construct or renovate statehouses is often a function of economic capacity, with wealthier regions able to invest in grandiose government buildings. In the Nigerian context, resource-rich

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states tend to showcase more elaborate government complexes, reinforcing the notion that statehouse architecture is a visual representation of political and economic power.

However, while these buildings symbolise governance, they often fail to reflect the economic, historical, or cultural identity of their respective states. Instead, architectural evolution is dictated by global design trends and political priorities, rather than an intentional effort to create regionally distinctive government buildings. This aligns with Roskam (2015) argument that architectural projects in Africa often embody modernist ideals influenced by external economic and ideological forces, rather than local cultural heritage.

Security and Accessibility Considerations

One of the significant limitations in assessing the architectural transformation of the Rivers State Government House is its restricted access due to security concerns. This reflects the broader challenge noted by Goodsell (1988b, 2001) that statehouses are often fortified structures designed primarily for administrative functionality and political security, limiting public engagement with their design and heritage. As Putnam et al. (1992, 2004) argue, public spaces contribute to social capital and civic engagement, but the highly secure nature of statehouses makes them less accessible for architectural discourse. Consequently, architectural transformations in these buildings remain confined to discussions among policymakers and architects, rather than reflecting broader societal input.

Conclusion

The architectural transformation of the Rivers State Government House serves as a microcosm of broader historical, political, and cultural influences that have shaped government architecture in Nigeria. From its colonial-era foundations to its modern adaptations, the building reflects shifting governance structures, economic capacities, and evolving architectural trends. While modernisation efforts have improved functionality and aesthetics, they have largely failed to integrate indigenous cultural identity, reinforcing the dominance of European and global design principles.

Drawing from theories in political architecture and postcolonial urban studies, this study highlights the role of government buildings as both administrative centres and symbols of power. The analysis reveals that architectural decisions in Nigerian statehouses are primarily influenced by political priorities and global trends, rather than by deliberate efforts to reflect local heritage. Additionally, security concerns and restricted public access further limit engagement with these buildings as cultural artifacts.

To bridge the gap between modernisation and cultural representation, future architectural interventions should prioritise indigenous design elements, climate-responsive construction, and public engagement. By integrating traditional motifs, utilising local expertise, and fostering architectural transparency, government buildings can serve not only as symbols of authority but also as reflections of Nigeria's rich cultural heritage. Ultimately, a more intentional approach to statehouse architecture can contribute to a national architectural identity that is both functional and deeply rooted in local history and traditions.

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