

EXAMINING THE RECORDED HISTORIES OF NIGERIA'S FIRST POST-INDEPENDENCE UNIVERSITIES

Adefolatomwa Toye

ABSTRACT: Nigeria's independence ushered in an era of university creation. Four new universities were established by 1962, just two years after attaining self-rule. Twenty-five years later, they each commissioned and published a book that documented their histories. This article employs a textual analysis of these publications within the context of contemporary research on university architecture in 20th-century Nigeria. It examines these books as a historical source for tracing the universities' architectural histories. It further explores the ways they documented their built environment through their accounts of academic development, institutional changes, and nation-building goals. Finally, it reflects on the relevance of their sources, narratives, and limitations in reimagining the architectural history of Nigeria's first universities.

KEYWORDS: Nigerian universities, architectural history, built environment, university publications

INTRODUCTION: University creation marked the period of decolonization in Nigeria. By the mid-1950s, the country's only colonial university, University College Ibadan, was incapable of providing the workforce demand for a colony on the path to self-rule (World Bank Group, 1955)¹. The University of Nigeria, Nsukka, opened days after Nigeria's independence in 1960 and was followed in 1962 by the University of Lagos, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife², and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (Okafor, 1971). The University of Lagos-UNILAG was a federal institution, while the University of Nigeria, Ahmadu Bello University-ABU, and Obafemi Awolowo University-OAU were administered by the regional governments of Eastern, Northern, and Western Nigeria, respectively, until 1975 (Anyanwu, 2011).

Two and half decades after their creation, these universities began extensive documentation of their histories. The books published for this purpose were titled:

- The University of Nigeria, 1960-1985: An Experiment in Higher Education (Obiechina et al., 1986)
- Great Ife: A History of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife (1962-1987) (Omosini & Adediran, 1989)
- Ahmadu Bello University (1962-1987) (Tukur & Mahadi, 1989)
- A History of the University of Lagos 1962-1987 (Aderibigbe & Gbadamosi, 1987)³

This article aims to examine the universities' account of their built environments by conducting a textual analysis of these publications in the context of current research on Nigerian university architecture. It discusses their relevance as sources, the extent of the built environment they cover, and their limitations when centered as historical sources for scholarship on Nigerian universities' modernist architecture.

RELEVANCE AS SOURCES

The books—initiated as part of silver jubilee celebrations—appraised the institutions' strides in academic and campus expansions, staff and student growth, and local and national impact. They were preceded by *The University of Ibadan, 1948-73: A History of the First Twenty-Five Years* (1973). The publication was referenced primarily to provide a background to the state of higher education in Nigeria prior to the new institutions' establishment. *University of Ibadan, 1948-73*, alongside those published by the universities under consideration, serves as secondary historical sources in current studies on nation-building and higher education in Nigeria. They were used in *The Politics of Access and Architecture and Development* to discuss the background of university education in late colonial and early independence Nigeria (Anyanwu, 2011; Levin, 2022). Anyanwu (2011) contends that in the second half of the twentieth century, national and

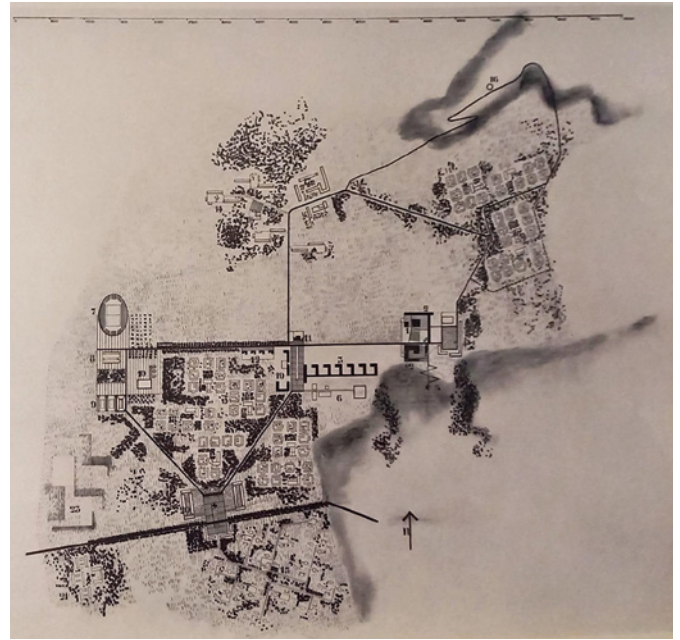
global politics directed Nigerian policies for mass higher education, whereas Levin (2022) investigates Israel's aid relationship with post-colonial Africa through the architecture of their development projects, including Obafemi Awolowo University. In contrast, Livsey's (2017) *Nigeria's University Age* departs from the books' polished histories to examine the multi-layered nature of development and decolonization in Nigerian universities influenced by local ambitions and transnational exchange. Regardless, it incorporates the institutional archival sources used in *University of Ibadan, 1948-73* and *A History of UNILAG 1962-1987*.

The books relied on historical data sourced internally from university archives and from interviews with pioneer staff and founding figures. University archival records included (but were not limited to) minutes of Senate and faculty meetings, reports, speeches, and prospectus. External records from government archives and newspaper publications were cited, especially in chapters that discussed controversial events of administrative tussles and student protests. Also referenced were books on university development in Nigeria already published by the 1980s. They include *The Development of Universities in Nigeria* by Nduka Okafor (1971) and *University Development in Africa, the Nigerian Experience* by Chukwuemeka Ike (1976). Both books position the universities' origins within the political landscape of colonial and independent Nigeria. The publications of founding figures like Nnamdi Azikiwe's (1937) *Renascent Africa* were also referenced.⁴

The use of primary sources varied across institutions. The destruction of infrastructure and loss of records at the University of Nigeria during the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) resulted in a reliance on oral history in *University of Nigeria 1960-1985*. *ABU 1962-1987* also used oral accounts collected from invited participants at a four-day workshop in September 1987 on the book's content and scope (Mohammed, 1989). In contrast, *A History of UNILAG 1962-1987* based its research largely on its extensive catalogue of university records. The absence of a university archive at OAU at the time of *Great Ife 1962-1987*'s publishing was compensated with archival records of the defunct Western Nigeria government and the book *Ten Years of the University of Ife 1962-1972* (1973) written 16 years prior by Stephen Akintoye, a historian and member of staff.

DESCRIPTION OF BUILT ENVIRONMENT

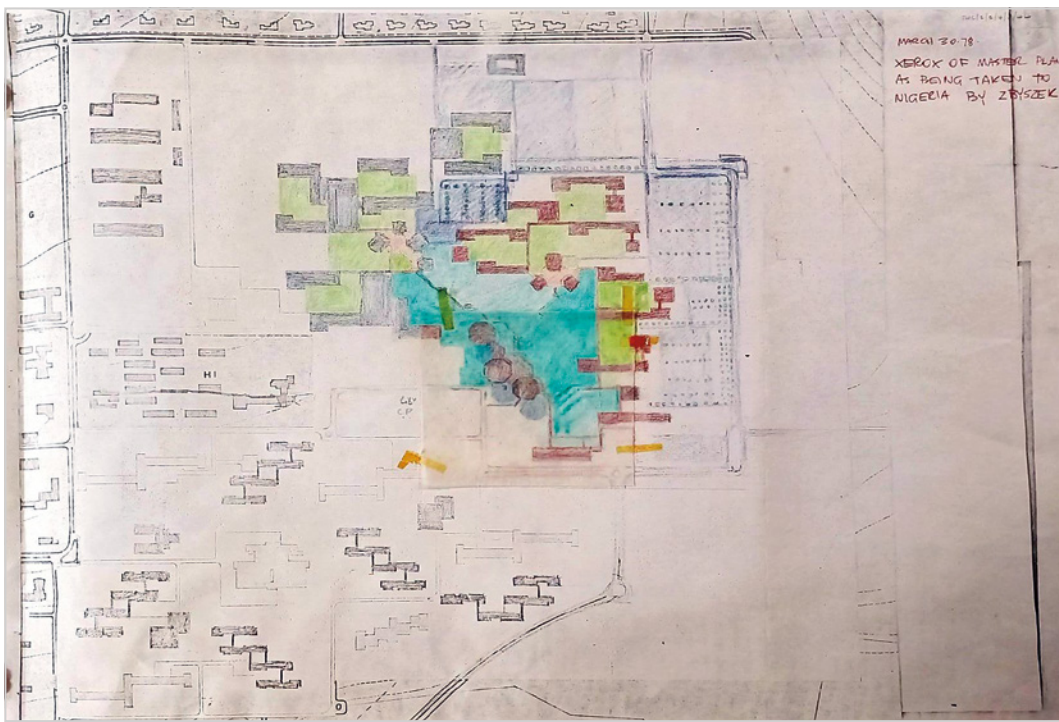
The descriptions of the universities' built environments in the publications were linked to their institutional objectives. These centered on providing adequate facilities for their expanded curriculums, university population and nation-building goals. Although the tropical



01 The University of Nigeria 1958 unbuilt master plan by James Cubitt and Partners. © James Cubitt and Partners, 1964. By courtesy of the University of Liverpool Library.

modernist character of university campuses was not explicitly discussed, the books did describe and explain some underlying factors that impacted site selection and campus layout. These included institutional founding ideologies and site constraints. OAU's emphasis on academic and architectural uniqueness influenced expressive designs by Israeli architect Arie Sharon (Adediran & Omosini, 1989). Similarly, the University of Nigeria's populist ambitions for accessible university education encouraged simpler and cheaper structures on its campus (Ijomah, 1986). ABU's architectural style was defined by the tropical modernist buildings of the institutions it acquired, i.e. the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, and the Institute of Agricultural Research in its Zaria campus (Baba, 1989). While at UNILAG, the mangrove swamps on its main campus limited construction to specific cores for two decades (Agiri, 1987).

The account of the institutions' spatial development centered on the need to accommodate diverse academic programs and an increase in student enrolment. Book chapters on the creation and reorganization of academic programs included the completion timeline for new buildings and their subsequent extensions (Baba, 1989). They also listed the funding sources, including the amounts allocated for construction and the equipment they housed. A key component of the histories narrated and analyzed in the books was deliberations on academic organization. The University of Nigeria's collegiate system debate of the 1970s was one example, with implications for the built environment. During the post-civil war reconstruction, the university administration proposed an institutional reorganization modelled after the British 'Oxbridge' system, implemented at the old University College Ibadan (Olisa & Enekwe, 1986).



02 1978 sketch master plan for the University of Nigeria by James Cubitt and Partners. © James Cubitt and Partners, 1978. By courtesy of the University of Liverpool Library.

James Cubitt and Partners, previously commissioned for a master plan in 1958, was once again appointed to design a master plan reflecting the proposed college system. [FIGURE 01]. The sketch designs showed plans for compact complexes of colleges with students' residences, common rooms, lecture halls, and working spaces for staff (Cubitt, 1971). Those within the university community who resisted the proposal believed it was antithetical to the anti-colonial and populist foundations of the university. The proposal was eventually scrapped alongside the master plan, with only a few buildings constructed [FIGURE 02].⁵

National integration in the early 1960s was stressed, particularly in *University of Nigeria 1960-1985*, *ABU 1962-1987*, and *Great Ife 1962-1987*. These universities had been established by regional governments whose localized motivations were feared to jeopardize national unity. The books express their dedication to these goals through the halls of residence built to accommodate students of diverse backgrounds. Also, buildings and routes within campuses were widely named after Nigerian heroes from within and outside their regions [FIGURE 03].

EXAMINING THE 'INCOMPLETE' ACCOUNTS

These extensive accounts of their built histories leave out vital information about professionals involved in the projects as well as the importance of built spaces in student activities. Architectural firms either had the scope of their works reduced or omitted altogether. For instance, James Cubitt and Partners' commission for the University of Nigeria's 1958 unbuilt master plan is captured only as soil tests. Meanwhile, another unbuilt master plan designed by the firm of Israeli architect Alfred Mansfeld was highlighted (Ofomata & Ewelukwa, 1986). The authors suggested that the urgency to start off academic

activities at Nsukka with temporary structures may have resulted in a deviation from the master plan. Also, *A History of UNILAG 1962-1987* omitted the role of Robert S. McMillan Associates, a Rome-based American firm that designed the University of Lagos's first buildings and academic core.⁶ But the book acknowledged the works of the architecture firm Ibru Vaughn-Richards & Associates and local construction companies. Ibru Vaughn-Richards & Associates co-designed the university's 1982 master plan (Agiri, 1987). One of the firm's partners, Alan Vaughn Richards—a British architect domiciled in Nigeria by that time—had also designed staff housing and temporary campus buildings at the medical school in the 1960s.⁷ Contractors T.A. Oni & Sons and G. Cappa Ltd built the staff housing and the academic core buildings on the main campus, respectively (Aderibigbe, 1987).⁸

Architecture periodicals and the private collections of architects and firms involved in university projects tell these missing stories. The growing scholarship on modernist architecture in West Africa has also brought valuable sources to light. Journals such as *Progressive Architecture*, *The Architectural Review*, and, importantly, the *West African Builder and Architect* (1961-1968) featured a series of commissioned Nigerian higher education projects ("University of Nigeria," 1959; "University of Lagos," 1967; "Engineering Labs for Lagos," 1969).⁹ Furthermore, digitization projects have been conducted for the works of architects Arie Sharon and Alan Vaughn-Richards (University of Ife, Nigeria - 1962-1972, n.d.; Uduku, 2020).

Although chapters addressed student life from the universities' inception, they lacked the voices of the pioneer student population. This is crucial as buildings and public spaces were sites and symbols of academic and social



03 Student halls of the defunct Nigerian College of Arts Science Technology, Zaria, currently the Ribadu and Alexander Halls, Ahmadu Bello University. © Central Office of Information London, 1959. INF 10/244 The National Archives, London.

activities discussed in the books. The dining halls boycott defined the protests at the University of Nigeria in 1962 and UNILAG in 1968, where students demanded better feeding and welfare services (Anyaeibunam & Ogbuka, 1986; Akingbade & Enahoro, 1987). They also adopted public spaces as meeting grounds for demonstrations,

such as the Freedom Square at the University of Nigeria, named after the 1962 protests. This spatial dimension to student activities on campuses was most apparent in *University of Nigeria 1960-1985*, which contained the accounts of pioneer students [FIGURE 04].



04 Aerial view of UNILAG academic core with the old dining Hall at the centre (currently a Natural History Museum and library extension). © Adefola Toye, 2018.

CONCLUSION

The missing histories in the books compel the examination of historical sources necessary for documenting the architecture of Nigeria's early universities. As an 'official' testament to the institutions' progress, they reflect an extensive yet incomplete documentation of their built history. Revisiting the cited historical evidence through an architectural lens, as seen in recent works, is therefore essential to uncover the details of vague areas.

Undiscovered and/or unofficial sources could break the silence of excluded voices. Written and oral accounts of pioneer students, non-academic staff and university-employed construction workers offer a new perspective to understanding how universities were built and used. However, assessing student-led publications, staff correspondence, and construction documents is challenging because they are often held in unknown or unexplored locations.

Despite their limitation, the history books have been the foundation for research on the origin of higher education in Nigeria and their subsequent editions. They hold the few documented experiences of pioneer students and staff who have passed on and information on sites and buildings demolished or repurposed today. Ultimately, they present a chance to contextualize the architectural history of Nigerian universities within the institutional, political and social settings they originated.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (later World Bank) report raised concerns about University College Ibadan's low student enrolment, costly university buildings, and a limited range of academic programs. The College was renamed the University of Ibadan in 1962.
- 2 Obafemi Awolowo University was called the University of Ife from its inception until 1987. Adediran, B., & Omosini, O. (1989). Conception Planning and Birth. In O. Omosini & B. Adediran (Eds.), *Great Ife: A History of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, 1962-1987* (pp. xvii-xix). Obafemi Awolowo University Press.
- 3 The books are cited in this article as University of Nigeria 1960-1985, Great Ife 1962-1987, ABU 1962-1987 & A History of UNILAG 1962-1987.
- 4 In *Renascent Africa*, Azikiwe argues that indigenous African universities were essential to liberation from colonial authority and self-rule. Azikiwe, the Premier of Eastern Nigeria until independence in 1960, was instrumental in founding the University of Nigeria.
- 5 An example is the Department of Mathematics and Physical Science building completed in the 1980s.
- 6 A *Progressive Architecture* issue highlighted the architect's projects in Africa. U.S. Firm Radiates from Rome. (1964, October). *Progressive Architecture*, 239-242. <https://usmodernist.org/PA/PA-1964-10.pdf>
- 7 These projects were featured in the *West African Builder and Architect Journal*. University of Lagos temporary accommodation at Idi Araba. (1964, January/February), 4(1), pp. 2-5.; Houses and flats for the University of Lagos. (1965 July/August), 5(4) pp. 66-72.
- 8 The university moved from its temporary location at the medical school to the main campus in 1965.
- 9 *Progressive Architecture*, an American Architecture journal which ran until 1995, showcased the works of the American firm Robert S. McMillan & Associates in Nigeria and Africa. The *Architectural Review* had included the works of British Architects in colonial Nigeria, such as Fry & Drew's design at the University College Ibadan. The *West African Builder and Architect* was the first architectural journal of its kind published in West Africa from 1961 until 1968. The 8-year span of the journal saw an extensive documentation of development projects in Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone.