

DOCUMENTING THE REUSE OF MODERN BUILDINGS

An appraisal of a 2022 British Academy writing workshop of postgraduate students and researchers

Adeyemi Oginni, Oluwaseyi Akerere, Ademola Omoegun, Nnezi Uduma-Olugu

ABSTRACT: This paper looks into the 2022 writing workshop sponsored by the British Academy with Nigerian and Ghanaian participants. It was focussed on the present status of modern buildings, which are quickly replaced by newer ones, eroding the prevailing vernacular of the landscape of African university campuses. A new approach was adopted to documenting the stories of these buildings, which had existed prior to the time, by Africans, not foreigners. Postgraduate students were co-opted to participate in a five-day writing workshop across three universities in Nigeria. The teams were headed by Early Career Researchers (ECRs) led by a Nigerian Co-Investigator (Co-I), similar to a workshop held in Ghana just a week before. The Principal Investigator (PI) was based in the United Kingdom and assisted by two co-investigators, one from Nigeria and one from Ghana. For the Nigerian contingent, the loci group comprised four participants per group (12 participants in each of the three universities in Lagos, Jos, and Enugu campus). At each university, the participants selected modern buildings on the campus to write about, guided by the ECRs. Scheduled meetings were arranged for expert presentations, site visits, and group meet-ups to discuss their working papers. Recommendations were made for architectural histories and criticisms to be introduced into the students' curriculum, from which publications and documentation of these buildings can be carried out concurrently. Grants and awards can also be targeted at universities both locally and globally to further improve this approach. Emphasis on the cultural point of view was encouraged in the writing exercise to preserve the heritage aspects of the buildings.

KEYWORDS: Architectural styles, ECR, modern buildings, university campuses, writing workshop

INTRODUCTION: Cities across the globe are overwhelmed with population pressure, and many old facilities are undergoing retrofitting or total replacement for newer, more efficient ones. This results in a gradual effacing of neighborhoods and buildings, leading to a loss of the prevailing cultural identity of such places (Melenhorst & Bastos, 2018). One of the programs developed to tackle this urban issue in Nigeria is the *Reuse of Modern Buildings (RMB)* program, through which students document these buildings before they are completely destroyed. Students and graduate architects also participate in practical workshops where they are instructed in writing, critical thinking, documentation and evaluating the present state and possible reuse of such buildings. One such workshop took place under the supervision of Early Career Researchers (ECRs), with a series of seminars conducted by visiting speakers revolving around the preservation of heritage modernist buildings.

In all the workshops, participants were involved in deploying their analytical and descriptive skills in evaluating sketching or taking photographs and documenting how they experienced the buildings, a brief background history on them, the departure from the initial use, and the present state of these buildings. This included archival reviews of plans and documents used in the construction of these facilities.

The students were from various departments ranging from architecture, archaeology, and urban planning to languages. They were mentored by various ECRs who served as tutors, as well as experts in the field of academia, advocacy, and practice. The participants were also from both local and international backgrounds, encouraging cultural blending and opening up to new ideas from each of the students. The forum provided the students with the initial data and information they included in their write-ups.



01 A cross-section of the team members, students, ECRs, and the Co-Is. © Oginni Adeyemi and the teams, 2021.

THE WRITING WORKSHOP

The workshop, which was held in both Ghana and Nigeria in 2021, ran from 11 to 16 June 2021 in Ghana and from 18 to 22 June 2021 in Nigeria, respectively.

The 2021 workshop focussed on Modernist Architecture on university campuses in West Africa. Workshop mentors guided participants to develop their writing skills to write critically in academic publications and contemporary media about architecture in Africa. It was decided that the workshops would have candidates work in groups of four. In essence, there were 12 students working simultaneously in three groups each at the workshops in Lagos, Jos, and Enugu campus. For each school, the aim was to identify three campus buildings for the 12 student groups to work on. This was coordinated by the Principal Investigator (PI) via scheduled timetables and delivery dates. Participants attended seminars and workshops online daily for one and a half weeks.

A short open call was made to encourage students who might have learned of the scheme online to apply. Invitations were sent out via Google application forms, which were filled out prior to shortlisting. Shortlisting involved certain criteria, including gender, level, location, school, interest in the workshop, etc. A decision was made cutting across various related disciplines and sexes to ensure gender balance. Each team was then headed by an ECR who were PhD students or graduates, supervised by the Co-Is, and headed by a PI who presided over the workings of all groups [FIGURE 01].

The workshops were run simultaneously, while panel discussions were done synchronously online. At the commencement of the project, a timetable was drawn to schedule all the activities of the teams, which included an opening program, daily site visitations, daily meet-ups, and presentations of daily 'work in progress' on the write-ups [FIGURE 02].

On the first day, the opening session was carried out with all the members in attendance. The units in charge of each building were visited to get approvals and to ensure the smooth running of the workshop. Students were informed of the scope of the work they were expected to deliver by the end of the workshop. Panel discussants were introduced to serve as resource people for the writing workshop. Afterward, the students were released to start their



02 Diagram of the activities and course schedule. © Oginni Adeyemi, 2021.



03 Online presentation by one of the students and the Pls. © Akerele Oluwaseyi, 2021.

writing until the penultimate day of the workshop, when they were to present to their ECRs and then the entire group.

On this final day, an online presentation was done by each member of the four groups [FIGURE 03].

Each team member made an oral presentation of their write-ups on inspirations and experiences they had acquired while visiting the buildings. All the writings were now collated by the ECRs, vetted by the Co-Is, and prepared as working documents for publication in journals.

DOCUMENTED BUILDINGS

THE UNIVERSITY OF LAGOS MAIN AUDITORIUM

The main auditorium is located at the heart of the University of Lagos [FIGURE 04]. It is bounded by the Council Building, the University Main Library, the Senate building parking, and the Department of Architecture. It was built in the late 1970s by American architecture firm Mac Millan and Associates as an auditorium for stage plays, performances, inaugural lectures, and, most recently, for both matriculation and convocation ceremonies. The main auditorium, located in the administrative area of the campus, speaks boldly with its rugged exterior and then more calmly as you explore the interiors.

The building was perceived as a mighty giant of solids, lines, and spaces that has found a place to rest and manifest its scale; the building shows off a balanced play of solid forms and lines to define its spaces. As one walks towards the entrance, the walls reveal grove-like lines on the solid faces. Further into the space, linearity is created by the wooden panels, floor finish, staircase, and gridded plus-sized columns. The overall plan of the building is an interaction of shapes; a hexagon in a square, all together in an outer square. The hexagon is placed diagonally in the smaller square, leaving a buffer region between the exterior and interior. This space houses the lobby adorned with wooden panels similar in pattern to the concrete exterior form. It subtly welcomes you into a calmer textural expression of the initial rough exteriors.

The dexterity of space planning, material use, scale, and sensitivity to the environment, the majestic columns appearing in a fine grid, create this sense of dominance compared to human proportion. The solid concrete base on which the building stands emphasizes the sense of stability, making it appear as though it was etched out of the

landscape. The stairs connecting different building levels to the outside further amplified the appropriateness of its position on campus.

The building is brutalist in nature, although it has soft elements both in its interior and exterior. It has an outdoor space with a double volume and columns coming right down from the roof that reminds one of a caryatid as it carries the large roof; this space is located on two sides of the building connected by a walkway. The concrete overhang serves as balconies.

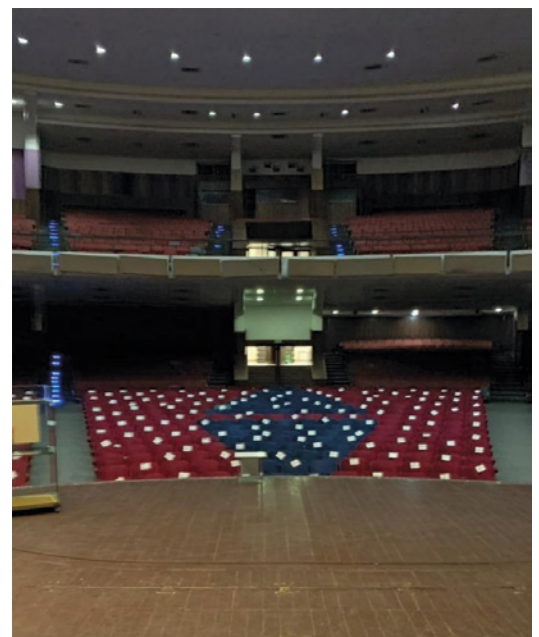
The interior speaks to a much different look than the tough exterior; it shows the contractors' expertise and level of thought and precision that can only be appreciated. On entering the central lobby, one immediately notices the interesting use of materials for space definition, from the wooden wall finish to the terrazzo floors. Right at the entrance, one sees a security machine very alien to the rest of the space, which says it is an addition. The building layout is open, and one can see several directions, each showing where to go without having to look at the signage. The design engages the use of straight lines, angles, and geometry, which are translated all through every element of the building, from the floor to the walls, the ceiling, and the stairs; indeed, a carefully planned work of art that interprets the building's language.

The lobby's entrance to the auditorium hall is lined by wooden wall finishes that blend with its wooden doors as one steps down into the main hall. On pushing the doors open, one gets a view of the entire auditorium, the stage, and cascading rows of seats. The seats are covered in wine and blue velvet covers, and the ceiling is perforated with acoustic ceiling boards [FIGURE 05].

On entering the auditorium, you are welcomed with the soft feel of the carpet underneath your feet, used along



04 The University of Lagos Main Auditorium. © Oginni Adeyemi, 2021.



05 Interior of the main auditorium. © Oginni Adeyemi, 2021.

the aisles to serve as a sound absorber while accessing the seats. There is an introduction of curves from the stage design, which was translated to the gallery arrangement, giving a wide-angle view of the stage from every level. The interior of the building is very colorful. The chair arrangement in the main auditorium can seat about 2,000 people.

THE UNIVERSITY OF LAGOS GUEST HOUSE

The subtle interplay of levels characterizes this building [FIGURE 06] as one is led through the volumes into the interior and gradually toward the waterfront on the other side. The building's solid form masks the interior impressions made with light, sound, texture, and color; the hard exterior contrasts with the sense of warmth felt as one walks through the interiors. Despite its relative obscurity, the building is nestled between the Faculty of Management Science to the south, the Faculty of Law to the southwest, the Tayo Aderinokun auditorium to the north, and the Lagos lagoon to the east along Otunba Payne Street. The monotonous treatment of the shading devices, as well as the rectilinear arrangement of the spaces make it easy to dismiss the building as one of the many others that exist on the campus. However, it is not until one has a chance to see beyond this prevailing vernacular, tropical style that dominates the campus that the building actually comes to life. The wrought iron artwork is a signature element on the outer layer that incites curiosity about the combination of an artistic feel and the modernist building.

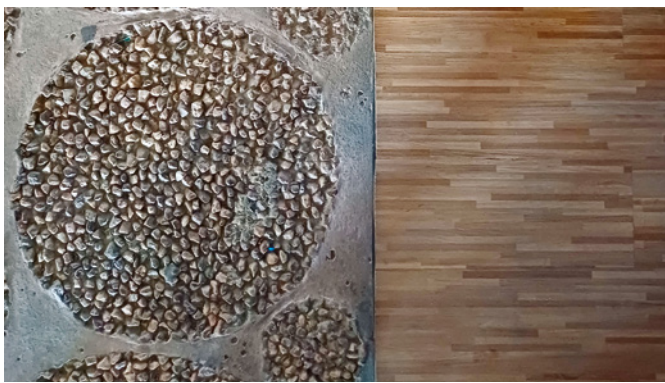
Despite its strong visual characteristics, experiencing the building creates a totally different impression from

what was initially perceived. Its subtle and unassuming approach gives nothing away, revealing very little about what lies underneath. The building opens up more and more with every step, every sound, and every encounter. Every view allows for a deeper appreciation of the building and the spaces within, around, and in between and sets the stage for various human actions and interactions. The experience of the spaces can be likened to a hug from a distant family member, one only known from pictures or stories, meeting them for the first time. The sense of familiarity that accompanies the exchange, despite not knowing them at all. The building is situated at the northernmost point of the campus, away from focal activities. In spite of the activities that take place around the building, the guest house provides a place to rest amongst the prevailing activities of work and school. The building can be accessed primarily from Otunba Payne Street, which comes from the University's senate building. It is a road shaded from the sun by leaves and branches of trees that flank either side. The drive on Otunba Payne Street is calming, with the bright yellow walls of the guest house ready to receive one at the end.

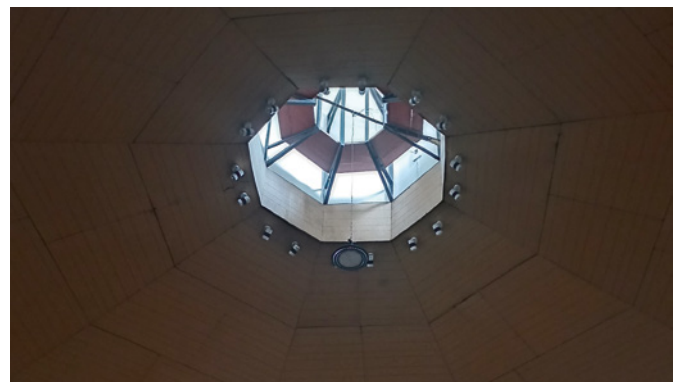
The architect's use of contrasting materials is evident from the first step into the building. Shoes clacking on the stone-coated concrete floors announce one's entry into the guest house. The sound forces you to immediately look down at the pattern of circular patches cast within the concrete floor beneath your feet. The rugged character of the building carries through the entire space, and every material used begs engagement. As a result, one might



06 The University of Lagos (UNILAG) Guest House. © Omoegun Demola, 2021.



07 The UNILAG guest house stone-floor finish against the tiled walls. © Omoegun Demola, 2021.



08 The hexagonal skylights beaming light inwards into the interiors of the main conference hall. © Omoegun Demola, 2021.

find oneself running one's fingertips over the tiled walls of the lobby or rubbing the soles of one's feet against the rocky ground plane. The texture or finishing of the floors of the guest house is shown in [FIGURE 07].

The architect consciously used a change in materials as a way to define space as well as spatial elements. As a result, the stark contrast between the treatment of the ground, floor, and roof planes is immediately evident. The rough floors differ from the smooth brick walls, which were painted over and over again in an attempt to preserve them. The white asbestos ceiling boards differ from the concrete columns to which they are attached. Conversely, the stones used on the floor of the entrance lobby differ from the ones used in the waiting area despite their proximity.

Within the space, it is also evident that light is treated as an element of the building [FIGURE 08]. Sunrays from the adjoining courtyards filter through the arches of the walkway, punctuating the darkness of the semi-enclosed spaces. This use of light is particularly evident in the rotunda conference hall that sits above the auditorium. Upon entry, the light beams from the skylight above filter through the dark, dusty air and slightly illuminate the velvet seats below.

The building's response to the site is simple, as the individual blocks cascade towards the Lagoon front to accommodate the site's slope [FIGURE 09, FIGURE 10]. As movement drops downwards, one gets closer to the lagoon and a sense of calmness permeates the space. The administrative block and the rotunda auditorium are situated at the highest point of the site, while the restaurant and the senior staff club are situated at the lowest point towards the lagoon.

As a result of the play-in-levels, one would often hear something before realizing what it is, as everything is hidden from a direct plane of sight. From the noises of the receptionists talking at the welcome desk to guests making conversation in the lobby, sounds from the business administration building seeping in through the courtyard along with the buzz from the students leaving the coffee shop, the sound from the auditorium as students gather for their weekly church fellowship, and the sound of a man hidden

behind the hedges eating his lunch after a long day of work. The chatter of students at the surrounding auditorium talking about their day, the quiet of the quadrangle that invites contemplation.



09 The differences in levels of the spaces within the complex. © Omoegun Demola, 2021.



10 The UNILAG guest house quadrangle. © Omoegun Demola, 2021.

FACULTY OF SCIENCES

The Faculty of Sciences, University of Lagos, [FIGURE 11] is a building that welcomes you with uniformity of forms and layers. This structure was designed by John Godwin and Gillian Hopwood and constructed in the 1970s. On approaching the complex, one is overwhelmed by the building's four-floor façade; a concrete interplay of walls and columns. Rows of windows punctured by unsightly outcrops of air conditioning systems are complemented



11 The Faculty of Sciences. © Akerele Oluwaseyi, 2023.



12 The courtyard of the Faculty of Sciences. © Akerele Oluwaseyi, 2023.

by the vertical members on the façade. The courtyard is shown in [FIGURE 12].

On one's journey through this old building, one is struck by the stark differences between its original form and its current status, resulting in an impression of disconnection between the years of use.

The concrete members with stratified wall finishes have been repainted in many areas. Mosaic tiles on the first-floor walls have narrowly escaped renovation as they are still preserved in their original form, albeit worn out with age. Unfortunately, the wooden ceiling panels have not been so lucky. Most wooden panel ceilings on the ground floor have been replaced with PVC ceiling boards. Regardless, the building still works well for its intended purposes. However, there is a clear mark of discontinuity of use in the building materials. One cannot help but wonder how these contrasting features have materialized. Understandably, social and economic conditions have influenced these changes, but it seems that few attempts have been made to preserve or continue the building's theme with the new installations.

The building is a complex of blocks connected by a network of stair halls, walkways, and lobbies, all located on varying levels. Outcrops of stair halls on the otherwise seamless façade provide multiple accesses to the building. These areas, opened up on both sides, encourage the appreciation of the site's views for students ascending into the building. The stair halls serve a more definitive purpose as departments in the faculty are marked by each staircase landing. True to its architectural style, the complex entry stands on a series of *pilotis* interrupted by closed spaces of security posts. As one walks into the entrance area, one is greeted with the sight of students sitting at the quadrangle—reading, laughing, and chatting.

The building does not hide its purpose. However, there is a stark contrast between the outward minimalist appearance and the vibrant colors, activities, and scientific exhibits that characterize the interior space. Students lounge in curvilinear concrete seats that appear to have emerged from the ground. Alongside these are typical classroom pieces of furniture that seem misplaced in this scene. On the ceiling, plastic-based ceiling materials try

to imitate the original wooden look but have failed with the fading of the panels.

Walking further inwards, one leaves the sensory overload of the bustling activities behind and is soothed by the view of the building's landscape. The second half of the complex comes into view and calls you through the connecting walkways flanked by courtyards of green areas. This space is a transition from the outer social and administrative activities to the quietness of learning. You can feel the building's age as you walk down the hallway. Large water tanks elevated on slabs have replaced lush vegetation in green areas. On the walls of the staircase connected to the walkways is a plethora of students' posters, either newly pasted or already bleached. The landings are made of terrazzo floor tiles showing the same age as the walls and steel railings.

On arriving at the basement floor, one stands face to face with the most glaring evidence of the building's adaptation—the walls now doused in cream-colored paint. The attempt to renovate the walls may have proved abortive as this is the only outdoor section to have undergone this drastic change. This level of classroom blocks is adjoined by a long lobby directly opposite the courtyard [FIGURE 13].

The painting of the fair-faced concrete expresses a disconnection between the building's original form's texture and its renovation attempts which may have occurred as a result of the disregard of the building's initial brutalist architecture language which emphasized the use of concrete in its natural form. In spite of the users' appreciation of the building that functions well for their needs. However, to some, the Faculty of Science is seen as boring, lacking ornamentation, and color.



13 The wall treatment (painting) now. © Akerele Oluwaseyi, 2023.

THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF THE WRITING WORKSHOP AND ITS ROLE IN ARCHITECTURAL PEDAGOGY

The workshop proved to be an efficient process of studying and documenting the modernist buildings on each of the campuses. By the end of two weeks, descriptive write-ups had been produced by the students and presented on the final day of the workshop.

The documentation of these buildings served as an eye-opener for the students by improving their knowledge and appreciation of history, structures, and architectural detailing. However, one drawback was their poor knowledge of photography, which is key to documenting historical buildings. Another was the students' limited knowledge of architectural history, especially the architecture students, resulting from not having these courses taught earlier in their curriculum.

Architectural histories, being a course of study in the PhD curriculum, should already be implemented in the Master's levels of architectural studies at African universities. This will promote continuity in the documentation of these modernist buildings, increase the awareness of their historical value, and prevent the demolition of more structures in the nearest future. The workshop proved to be a successful tool for the documentation of the buildings.

CONCLUSION

Writing workshops serve as a tool for active pedagogy. They allow students to be hands-on on any particular theme for discussion, in this case, the adaptive reuse of modernist buildings. The exposure during this workshop was good for students as they learned the essence of modern historical buildings and appreciated them after the exercise. Engaging postgraduate students in this activity served to help document these African modern buildings, detailing their experiences while they studied them. This increased their knowledge of their history and why they should be preserved despite their current adapted use.

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