



The Role of Integrating Yoruba Motifs in the Design of Civic Centres in Lagos Island

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the integration of Yoruba motifs in the design of civic centers on Lagos Island to strengthen cultural identity, enhance spatial functionality, and promote socio-cultural sustainability. Although Lagos Island is rooted in Yoruba heritage, there is a disconnect between civic buildings and indigenous culture, largely due to globalisation. Through a literature review and case studies of the John Randle Centre, Freedom Park, and the Nike Art Gallery, the research illustrates how Yoruba architectural principles such as courtyard organization, symbolic ornamentation, and climate-responsive design can enrich modern civic architecture. The findings indicate that incorporating these motifs can enhance user engagement, reinforce collective memory, and foster a sense of belonging. In an environment threatened by commercialisation and infrastructure demands, integrating Yoruba concepts provides a pathway to preserving culture while supporting sustainable urban development. Ultimately, the study emphasises that culturally responsive civic architecture can serve as both a landmark and a platform for social interaction and community cohesion. It concludes with recommendations for architects and policymakers in Nigeria.

Keywords: Yoruba Motifs, Civic Centre Design, Cultural Heritage, Yoruba Architectural Motifs, Civic Architecture, Cultural Identity, Lagos Island. Indigenous Design Principles

INTRODUCTION

Civic centres strongly influence cultural identity, community cohesion, and public interaction within urbanising societies. These buildings fulfil utilitarian purposes while also representing collective memory, governance, and socio-cultural values (Adeyemi, 2021). In African contexts such as Lagos Island, civic architecture is important for preserving indigenous values and cultural memory amid globalisation and modernisation (Ogunmakinde & Olalekan, 2022). Nevertheless, many civic buildings in Nigerian cities, especially on Lagos Island, increasingly reflect generic international styles that often disregard indigenous culture and local environmental conditions (Adebayo & Ojo, 2023). Recent scholarship, primarily within postcolonial design models, has focused on embedding indigenous motifs into contemporary architecture to critique Eurocentric paradigms and recover native knowledge systems (Mensah, 2021). Yoruba motifs, which include symbolic patterns, geometric forms, cosmological diagrams, and spatial hierarchies, afford notable architectural potential for creating culturally relevant contemporary spaces in Nigeria (Adeoye, 2020).

Lagos Island is of considerable cultural meaning as a ancient settlement of Yoruba communities. It has developed into a political and economic centre, exhibiting a diverse range of architectural styles influenced by Portuguese, Afro-Brazilian, British colonial, and post-independence periods (Smith, 2020). In recent decades, civic centres on Lagos Island have predominantly featured glass-and-concrete forms and neutral colour palettes, frequently lacking connections to Yoruba architectural traditions (Ogunyemi, 2024). Yoruba motifs are distinguished by their diversity and symbolic depth, including geometric patterns such as *ila* and *keke*, as well as zoomorphic symbols like *Eja* (fish), *Iyanrin* (earthworm), and *Igbin* (snail).

When civic centres lack local motifs, the spaces feel devoid of culture, and people feel less connected to their community (Akande & Omotayo, 2023). Adding cultural symbols to buildings helps people feel more at home and improves their well-being (Okunola & Hassan, 2021). Using Yoruba motifs in civic centre design helps solve these problems by including heritage values and responding to the local environment. Features like Yoruba-style courtyards, screens for shade, and patterned building fronts can help with the climate and also strengthen cultural identity (Ojo & Aluko, 2022). Traditional Yoruba building methods, such as interior courtyards for airflow and gatherings, thick walls to keep buildings cool, and

shaded porches for sun protection, offer useful ideas for modern civic buildings (Ogunbiyi & Abiodun, 2020). Decorative columns, carved doors, and screens with holes show ways to provide shade, let air in, and make buildings look better, which is important for building design in hot places like Lagos Island (Thomas & Akinwale, 2022). Local motifs also support the use of local materials, traditional crafts, and building methods that work well in tropical climates (Badmus & Abdullahi, 2023). Today, many civic buildings on Lagos Island are designed with Western styles, focusing on glass walls and commercial-style looks (Afolabi & Bello, 2023). Specialists caution that Nigeria could lose its unique building style to global trends if local designs are not included in public buildings (Oluwole & Ajayi, 2021). Not having culturally inspired civic buildings makes it harder to teach about heritage and makes Yoruba art less visible to young people (Adebanjo, 2022). In Yoruba beliefs, motifs carry memories, stories, family history, and values in the way buildings are made (Ogunlade, 2021). In the past, Yoruba motifs helped organize how people interacted and gave rules for making spaces which are both organized and welcoming for many uses (Adeniran, 2021). Because Lagos Island is home to many cultures and has a busy business life, it is very important to have civic buildings that are based on local culture. These centres help keep community identity strong, bring in tourists, protect heritage, and get people involved (Adewale & Mustapha, 2021).

The cultural identity of Lagos Island, which started as a Yoruba settlement, is now challenged by fast city growth, modernization, and the spread of plain building designs that often ignore local styles and ways of organizing space (Adegoke & Salami, 2020). Many new civic buildings on Lagos Island do not have Yoruba motifs, local building styles, or meaningful decorations, which makes it harder for them to show local culture (Akinola & Otunola, 2020). Not including local culture in civic centres puts heritage at risk, makes people feel less connected to the place, and lowers social interaction (Adegoke et al, 2020).

This study examines how incorporating Yoruba motifs into civic centre design on Lagos Island can improve cultural identity, spatial functionality, and social engagement in contemporary public architecture. The objectives are as follows:

1. Examine the principles and motifs of Yoruba traditional architecture and their relevance to modern civic design.
2. Analyse the spatial organisation and materials of Yoruba vernacular architecture to inform climate-responsive, interactive design insights.
3. Evaluate selected civic centers on Lagos Island for cultural representation, functionality, and environmental performance.
4. Identify strategies for integrating Yoruba motifs into contemporary civic architecture.

Incorporating indigenous motifs and local principles is important for upholding cultural identity, encouraging social cohesion, and improving environmental performance (Eze, 2020). Documentation of Yoruba architectural vocabularies further confirms that key elements, including roof structures, wall treatments, spatial organization, and decorative motifs hold symbolic meaning and reinforce cultural identity (Ibitoye, Solomon, Afolabi & Oyewole, 2022). Civic centers, as public buildings, serve as landmarks of governance and social interaction. Incorporating Yoruba motifs guarantees that these buildings express local identity and historical persistence. (Okonkwo, 2020). Moreover, the research preserves indigenous knowledge, serves as a reference for future designers, and contributes to discussions on postcolonial urban architecture in Nigeria. (Nwosu, 2020). In conclusion, this study deals with a research gap, as there have been few empirical studies focusing on Yoruba motifs in civic centers on Lagos Island, despite their public significance (Oladeji, 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualising Culture, Identity, and Architecture

Traditional Yoruba buildings have long been understood to convey social values, social structure, spiritual beliefs and universal viewpoints (Emusa, 2025). Studies on “traditional Yoruba building patterns” show that structures are configured not simply for functional utility but as cultural expressions that materially record community identity and social organisation (Emusa, 2025). According to architectural theorists, the built environment constitutes a medium through which societies project their collective memory and cultural identity (Frampton, 1983; Norberg-Schulz, 1980). These theories emphasise the importance of context-responsive design, in which architecture is grounded in local histories, cosmologies, and material cultures. Modernist approaches, in contrast, have often devalued indigenous forms, leading to a loss of cultural tradition in architecture, especially in post-colonial contexts such as Nigeria (Omene,

2025). Through form, ornament, materials, and spatial organisation, buildings can articulate cultural values equally symbolically and functionally. In societies with rich indigenous traditions, failing to incorporate local cultural elements into civic architecture can result in spaces perceived as alien or disconnected from community identity (Mba, Ozigbo, Oforji, Onyia, Ugwu, Onyia, & Okolo, 2025).

Yoruba Architectural Concepts

Yoruba architectural expression historically intertwines spiritual beliefs, social organisation and ecological adaptation. The indigenous architectural morphology also reflects Yoruba cosmology, where physical forms are shaped to conform to spiritual principles, social hierarchy, and environmental responsiveness (Adenaike, Opoko, & Oladunjoye, 2020). Decorative motifs and iconography in Yoruba architecture are not random embellishments but carry deep symbolic meanings linked to myth, cosmology and history (Adépégba & Isaac, 2024). Motifs such as geometric patterns, stylised deities' symbols, animal forms, and carved reliefs reflect cultural stories and spiritual associations. This characteristic highlights how material ornamentation becomes an expressive language for worldview and identity (Adépégba & Isaac, 2024). In residential and communal structures, ornamentation often communicates lineage, authority, spiritual protection and unity, serving as cultural markers that connect residents to shared traditions and histories (Ibitoye et al., 2022).

Civic Centres and Public Architecture

Civic centres are institutional public buildings designed to serve administrative, ceremonial, cultural, and community functions. They are important civic symbols and commonly embody the values, aspirations and identity of the people they serve (Moughtin, 2003). Civic centres can take the form of town halls, cultural complexes, museums, libraries, civic squares, and public meeting spaces. Their architectural character shapes public perceptions of institutional legitimacy, cultural meaning, and engagement with the built environment. Consequently, the architectural language of civic centres greatly shapes collective identity and urban experience. Public buildings that incorporate cultural motifs often facilitate stronger emotional and social connections among users, because they reflect culture and tradition (Mba et al., 2025). By contrast, public architecture that neglects indigenous patterns and symbolism tends to be perceived as generic or externally imposed. Evidence from multiple Nigerian cities shows a disconnection between contemporary civic architecture and local culture in many government-sponsored buildings, where Western modernist idioms dominate at the expense of vernacular traditions (Kalio, Wokoma, Gogo, & Briggs, 2025).

Theoretical Framework

The concept of critical regionalism proposes architecture that mediates between modernist universalism and local cultural settings, promoting designs that are both modern and rooted in place (Frampton, 1983). This system argues that indigenous motifs and spatial logic should not be applied superficially but embedded meaningfully to convey local identity within contemporary architectural expression. In line with this theory, Nigerian researchers argue for the reintegration of cultural heritage in modern architecture as an approach to sustain cultural endurance and identity (Mba et al., 2025).

Incorporation of indigenous motifs in contemporary architecture can occur through façade articulation, ornamentation, use of symbolic patterns, culturally inspired spatial organisation, and selection of materials that reference local craft traditions. Research on contemporary cultural centre designs in Nigeria has demonstrated that, where designers deliberately integrate indigenous motifs, buildings gain cultural pertinence and identity resonance (Omale & Ola-Ajayi, 2024). Documenting and reinterpreting Yoruba architectural vocabularies, including roof forms, carved elements, ornamentation, and court layouts, provides a valuable repository for contemporary architects aiming to conserve cultural heritage through design (Ibitoye et al., 2022).

Case Studies

The John Randle Centre

The John Randle Centre in Lagos Island functions as a significant example of integrating Yoruba cultural references in contemporary public architecture. The design incorporates earth-toned materials, iconographic lattice patterns, and forms resonant with Yoruba urban typologies, positioning the centre as

a cultural hub that celebrates local identity (The Guardian, 2024). Architectural analyses of the centre show that metal screens, spatial sequencing and material choices evoke traditional Yoruba symbols and craftsmanship, creating a built form that connects with both modern use and cultural heritage (Singh, 2023).

Freedom Park, Lagos Island

Freedom Park remains one of the most significant examples of adaptive reuse in Lagos Island, transforming a colonial prison site into a civic-cultural arena. Recent scholarship highlights how postcolonial reinterpretation of heritage spaces strengthens urban identity and cultural endurance (Adeyeye & Adebayo, 2022). Urban studies between 2021 and 2024 emphasize that Lagos Island's civic spaces are under pressure from commercialization and infrastructural congestion, making culturally symbolic public environments increasingly critical (Akinmoladun & Oluwoye, 2023). Contemporary research on indigenous materiality argues that tactile surfaces, earthy finishes, and locally inspired textures reinforce identity in public architecture (Ogunsemi & Adedeji, 2021).

Nike Art Gallery

Recent cultural architecture scholarship emphasises the role of ornamentation as an active communicator of identity rather than simple decoration (Balogun, 2024). Nike Art Gallery incorporates textile-inspired motifs, sculptural installations, and layered façade treatments that reflect Yoruba artistic traditions. Studies on contemporary African civic-cultural buildings argue that including craft-based aesthetics into architecture promotes cultural sustainability (Eze & Okonkwo, 2022). The spatial configuration of the gallery encourages communal interaction and participatory engagement, in accordance with Yoruba social structures that value collective experience. Furthermore, research on heritage-based design strategies between 2021 and 2025 indicates that cultural buildings in rapid urbanizing cities like Lagos must serve dual functions: economic viability and cultural maintenance (Oladipo, 2023). Nike Art Gallery achieves this by functioning as both exhibition space and cultural archive.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study uses a research method that focuses on design and understanding meaning to explore culture in architecture. Information was gathered by reviewing recent research, looking at examples such as the John Randle Centre, Freedom Park, and Nike Art Gallery, and studying the history, culture, and city life of Lagos Island. These examples were chosen because they are important to the culture and respond well to their surroundings. They were studied based on how spaces are arranged, the materials used, the inclusion of symbols, and how well they function as civic buildings. The study compared these examples to find common design ideas and ways to include culture. The results from the research, case studies, and local context were brought together to create design guidelines.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of the John Randle Centre for Yoruba Culture and History, Freedom Park, and Nike Art Gallery reveals that the adoption of Yoruba motifs in civic architecture operates at spatial, symbolic, material, and experiential levels rather than simply decorative application.

Spatial Organization and Indigenous Planning Logic

A major finding from the three examples is the use of courtyard layouts. The John Randle Centre has an inner courtyard that replicates the traditional Yoruba compound, where buildings are arranged around a shared open space. In the same way, Freedom Park changes the old prison yard into an open area for people to gather. Nike Art Gallery, even though it is built upward, still has large open halls for people to come together. This shows that Yoruba ways of planning spaces focus on common experiences, the ability to see each other, and interaction. Civic buildings that use Yoruba motifs should have different areas for public, semi-public, and private use, all centered around a main social space.

Symbolism and Narrative Expression

An additional critical finding is the importance of narrative symbolism, The John Randle Centre integrates Yoruba cosmological references, sculptural storytelling, and cultural iconography within its

exhibition and architectural detailing. Freedom Park incorporates memorial symbolism and artistic installations that tell colonial history within a culturally reclaimed space. Nike Art Gallery uses textile-inspired patterns and indigenous art as architectural language.

Materiality and Cultural Authenticity

Material expression across the three projects expresses a sense of contextual grounding. Common features include earth-toned finishes, textured concrete, locally inspired detailing, handcrafted art pieces, and natural ventilation strategies. The John Randle Centre integrates modern materials but expresses cultural identity through pattern, light screening, and geometric abstraction. Freedom Park uses rustic textures and preserved masonry to retain historical memory. Nike Art Gallery emphasizes craft, fabric, and handmade installations.

Discussions

The studies show that the role of integrating Yoruba motifs in civic centre design exceeds aesthetics to include spatial philosophy, identity construction, and socio-cultural activation. First, the courtyard style seen in the John Randle Centre and Freedom Park shows the Yoruba way of living together as a community. Bringing this idea into a modern civic centre on Lagos Island means creating a central plaza or open area that serves as the building's heart. This space can be used for festivals, performances, and public discussions, in accordance with the building's local community values.

Second, using Yoruba motifs should be done in a way that is neither too obvious nor too subtle, but still meaningful. Instead of just carving designs, these motifs can shape elements such as shade screens, patterned walls, the rhythm of the building's structure, floor patterns, and garden layouts. This upholds the design modern but still deep in culture.

Third, choosing materials should mix modern building methods with respect for the local setting. The examples show that identity is strengthened by using surfaces you can touch, letting in filtered sunlight and natural airflow, and adding art. In Lagos Island's hot climate, using a design that works with nature can show cultural ideas and help the environment at the same time.

Also, the discussion notes out that civic buildings need to help bring people together in Lagos Island, where business and traffic are growing fast. Culturally rooted civic spaces are important to preserve culture and society. Putting all these ideas together means the new civic centre will not just show Yoruba culture, but truly represent it in its design.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of integrating Yoruba motifs in the design of a Contemporary Cultural Civic Center in Lagos Island, pointing out the importance of culturally responsive architecture in rapid urbanizing environments. Through literature review, contextual analysis, and case studies of the John Randle Centre, Freedom Park, and Nike Art Gallery, the research showed that meaningful cultural incorporation goes beyond decorative application to include spatial organization, material expression, symbolic abstraction, and civic functionality. The findings show that Yoruba architectural concepts particularly courtyard-based planning, communal spatial hierarchy, narrative symbolism, and climate-responsive design—remain relevant in forming contemporary civic environments. These principles support social interaction, reinforce collective identity, and strengthen cultural tradition. The study similarly points out the need for civic centres to serve as active cultural platforms that support exhibitions, performances, and public engagement, rather than merely existing as static monuments. In the context of Lagos Island, where commercialization and congestion increasingly threaten public cultural spaces, integrating Yoruba motifs offers a strategy for preserving identity while supporting sustainable urban development. Ultimately, culturally grounded civic architecture can act as both a symbolic landmark and a living centre of community life.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are made to guide the effective integration of Yoruba motifs in civic centre design.

1. Architects should adopt indigenous spatial principles, particularly courtyard-based planning systems that emphasize communal gathering and layered zoning. Designing around a central public nucleus will reinforce social interaction and reflect Yoruba cultural organization.

2. Yoruba motifs should be interpreted through abstraction rather than literal replication. Traditional patterns, cosmological symbols, and textile geometries can inform façade treatments, perforated screens, landscape design, and interior detailing in a contemporary manner. This approach secures cultural authenticity while continuing architectural innovation.
3. Material selection has to prioritize contextual responsiveness and sustainability. Earth-toned finishes, locally inspired textures, passive ventilation strategies, and shaded transitional spaces should be integrated to address Lagos Island's tropical climate while reflecting indigenous building traditions.
4. Civic centres must incorporate flexible spaces for exhibitions, performances, workshops, and public forums to ensure that architecture actively supports cultural production and local involvement. Cultural programming should be considered integral to the design process.
5. Collaboration between architects, historians, artists, and local communities is important to ensure that cultural symbols are respectfully and accurately represented. Policymakers should also encourage heritage-sensitive design through urban planning regulations and investment in cultural infrastructure.

Together, these strategies will promote cultural identity preservation, social cohesion, and sustainable civic development in Lagos Island.

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