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Evaluating the Role of Trade Fairs in Enhancing Entrepreneurial Growth and Market Visibility in Emerging Economies: A Case Study of the Lagos International Trade Fair

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of trade fairs in promoting entrepreneurial growth and market visibility in emerging economies, through the architectural lens of the Lagos International Trade Fair (LITF), with a particular focus on the 2025 edition held at Tafawa Balewa Square (TBS), Lagos. Trade fairs offer platforms for business exchange, networking, and branding; however, the influence of spatial design and the built environment on entrepreneurial outcomes remains underexplored in architectural research. By adopting a qualitative methodology, this research engages in in-depth observations and analysis of architectural configurations to understand how design attributes at the fair impact economic visibility and business engagement. The LITF 2025, one of sub-Saharan Africa's most significant trade events, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors and thousands of exhibitors across diverse sectors, offered a dynamic environment where spatial layout, circulation patterns, pavilion design, and venue appropriateness shaped experiential outcomes for entrepreneurs. Architectural features at TBS, including booth arrangements, accessibility of exhibition halls, and visual hierarchies within the fair space, were assessed for their contribution to brand prominence, visitor flow, and interaction quality. Findings suggest that spatial clarity, intuitive circulation, and visually engaging exhibition settings have a positive influence on entrepreneurial growth indicators, including stakeholder engagement, networking opportunities, and consumer attention. This demonstrates that architectural design extends beyond aesthetics to impact market visibility and economic opportunities for emerging enterprises. The study highlights the need for design-centric frameworks in planning trade fairs to optimize their economic and entrepreneurial impact in emerging contexts like Nigeria.

Keywords: Economies, Entrepreneurial Growth, Lagos State, Market Visibility, Trade Fair

INTRODUCTION

Trade fairs have long served as strategic platforms for business exchange, networking, and market expansion, particularly in emerging economies where entrepreneurial growth and international visibility remain key development objectives. In these contexts, architectural design plays a fundamental role in shaping the spatial experience of exhibitions, influencing how visitors and exhibitors interact, circulate, and perceive presented products and services. The design of trade fair spaces—through layout, spatial organization, and structural features—can significantly affect visibility, accessibility, and engagement, representing critical determinants of market exposure for participating entrepreneurs (Melis, Vavetsi, & Finotti, 2025).

The Lagos International Trade Fair (LITF) is a major annual event in West Africa, recognized for its scale and commercial significance. In 2025, the trade fair was held from 7th to 16th November at Tafawa Balewa Square (TBS), Lagos Island, Nigeria (JETRO, 2025). Occupying an expansive exhibition area of approximately 40,000 m², it attracted over 1,600 exhibitors and more than 500,000 visitors, providing a broad platform for manufacturers, suppliers, buyers, and service providers to showcase innovations and expand market networks (ECOWAS Trade and Investment Forum & Exhibition, 2025; Lagos International Trade Fair, 2025). Before its relocation to TBS, the fair was staged at the Lagos Trade Fair Complex, which featured a hexagonal exhibition hall with a distinctive space roof and shading panels, exemplifying architectural innovation during its time (Finelib.com, 2025; Lagos International Trade Fair, 2025). These

architectural elements demonstrate how built form and spatial quality contribute to the functional and experiential aspects of trade fair environments.

This study uses observations and spatial analysis to explore how architectural features at the 2025 LITF mediate entrepreneurial visibility and engagement outcomes. By situating architectural design as a central lens of inquiry, the research investigates how spatial attributes influence visitors' navigation, interaction with exhibitors, and overall perception of entrepreneurial offerings within the built environment. Specifically, it focuses on spatial layout, circulation patterns, exhibition pavilion design, booth configuration, and the overall quality of built environments that shape visitor interactions and exhibition visibility. These design features are analyzed in relation to outcomes such as visitor engagement, exhibitor visibility, and networking opportunities, which are widely regarded as markers of entrepreneurial growth and market exposure in temporary exhibition settings (Melis et al., 2025).

The scope of the study includes qualitative investigations conducted during and immediately after the 2025 LITF, drawing on observations of spatial use and analysis of event documentation. Architectural elements considered include wayfinding, visual access to booths, and organization of visitor flows, while trade fair scale and demographic data, such as number of exhibitors and visitor counts, serve as contextual indicators of economic engagement facilitated by architectural settings (ECOWAS Trade and Investment Forum & Exhibition, 2025; JETRO, 2025). The study does not extend to detailed economic modeling of national trade data or longitudinal firm performance outside the fair context, instead deliberately focusing on how built form and spatial design within the fair environment contribute to measurable entrepreneurial and market visibility outcomes observed during the 2025 event.

Despite the economic significance of trade fairs, limited research exists on how architectural design influences their effectiveness in achieving entrepreneurial outcomes. Elements such as spatial layout, circulation patterns, booth configuration, and pavilion design are likely to impact visitor engagement, exhibitor visibility, and overall interaction quality, yet empirical studies analyzing these aspects in commercial trade fairs are scarce (Melis et al., 2025). Research on exhibition spaces demonstrates that architecture shapes visitor perception, cognition, and engagement, affecting the success of exhibitions and interactions between participants (Saucă & Tudora, 2025; dos Santos Coutinho & dos Santos Tostões, 2020; Utomo, Maharani, et al., 2025). Applying these principles to trade fairs suggests that architectural design can directly influence entrepreneurial outcomes by enhancing visibility, engagement, and accessibility.

The aim of this study is to evaluate the role of architectural design in trade fairs in enhancing entrepreneurial growth and market visibility, using the 2025 Lagos International Trade Fair at Tafawa Balewa Square as a case study. To achieve this aim, the study seeks:

1. to examine how the architectural design elements of the Lagos International Trade Fair (such as spatial layout, booth arrangement, and circulation patterns) influence exhibitor visibility and visitor engagement.
2. to assess the impact of the fair's physical organization on facilitating entrepreneurial networking and business interactions among participants.
3. to identify the architectural features that most significantly contribute to enhancing market visibility and overall entrepreneurial outcomes for exhibitors in an emerging economy context.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do the architectural design elements of the Lagos International Trade Fair (e.g., spatial layout, booth configuration, and circulation patterns) influence the visibility and engagement of exhibitors with potential clients and partners?
2. In what ways does the physical organization of exhibition spaces at the 2025 Lagos International Trade Fair facilitate or hinder entrepreneurial networking and business interactions among participants?
3. What architectural features of the Lagos International Trade Fair contribute most significantly to enhancing market visibility and overall entrepreneurial outcomes for exhibitors in an emerging economy context?

This study is significant because it advances understanding of how architectural design functions as a strategic tool within trade fair environments, particularly in emerging economies. While trade fairs are widely acknowledged as drivers of entrepreneurship, networking, and market exposure, limited scholarly

attention has been paid to the role of spatial planning, circulation, visibility, and exhibition layout in shaping these outcomes (Melis et al., 2025). By focusing on the 2025 LITF, this research highlights architecture not merely as a backdrop for economic activity but as an active contributor to exhibitor engagement and market visibility (ECOWAS Trade and Investment Forum & Exhibition, 2025). From an architectural perspective, the study contributes to exhibition and event architecture discourse by empirically examining how design elements such as spatial configuration, wayfinding, booth arrangement, and movement patterns influence visitor behavior and interaction quality. Prior research confirms that exhibition architecture significantly affects perception, cognition, and engagement within temporary and semi-permanent exhibition spaces (dos Santos Coutinho & dos Santos Tostões, 2020). Applying these principles to a large-scale trade fair context expands architectural knowledge beyond museums and galleries into commercially driven environments. Practically, the findings will benefit architects, exhibition designers, urban planners, and trade fair organizers by providing evidence-based insights into how architectural decisions can enhance entrepreneurial visibility, networking opportunities, and business interaction. For an event like the LITF, which hosts thousands of exhibitors and visitors annually, improved spatial design can directly support enterprise exposure and participation efficiency (Lagos International Trade Fair, 2025). Ultimately, this study advocates for the integration of architectural design strategies into trade fair planning as a means of strengthening entrepreneurial ecosystems in emerging economies.

The study is justified because it contributes to both academic knowledge and practical design strategies at the intersection of architectural design, economic development, and sustainability in emerging economies. Trade fairs, such as the 2025 Lagos International Trade Fair, serve as highly visible platforms for networking, market exposure, and business development, drawing over 1,600 exhibitors and more than 500,000 visitors while occupying a significant urban space in Lagos, Nigeria. Government agencies and regional bodies support these fairs to promote economic collaboration, investment, and enterprise growth across West Africa (ECOWAS Trade and Investment Forum & Exhibition, 2025; Lagos International Trade Fair, 2025). However, research is limited on how architectural design elements, including spatial configuration, circulation patterns, and exhibition layouts, contribute to entrepreneurial visibility and engagement within these environments. The study also aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) advocates for inclusive and sustainable economic development and productive activities that generate employment and business growth, which trade fairs facilitate by providing platforms for enterprise exposure, market linkages, and cross-sectoral engagement that can be enhanced by thoughtful architectural design. SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) emphasizes the role of innovative infrastructure and inclusive industrialization, highlighting that well-designed physical environments can stimulate innovation, reduce barriers to market access, and support small and medium enterprises. Finally, SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) recognizes the need for inclusive, safe, and functional built environments; investigating how trade fair spaces are architecturally organized contributes to understanding how urban public venues can support economic activities that benefit communities.

By focusing on the architectural determinants of entrepreneurial growth and market visibility, this research fills an interdisciplinary gap in architecture and urban design literature while aligning with global development frameworks. It provides actionable insights for architects, urban planners, policymakers, and event organizers on how built environments, particularly large-scale exhibition settings, can be optimized to support sustainable economic interactions in rapidly urbanizing contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Architecture plays a critical role in structuring social, economic, and cultural interactions within large public environments. Trade fairs, as temporary yet intensive spatial configurations, rely heavily on architectural design to organize movement, enhance visibility, and facilitate interaction among diverse users. In emerging economies, such environments are particularly significant because they serve as platforms for entrepreneurial exposure, business networking, and market integration. This literature review examines existing scholarship on exhibition and event architecture, public space and spatial organization, and the relationship between architectural design and entrepreneurial outcomes, situating these discussions within the context of the 2025 Lagos International Trade Fair (LITF).

Recent architectural literature emphasizes that exhibition spaces function as experiential and communicative environments rather than passive containers. Melis, Vavetsi, and Finotti (2025) argue that

exhibition architecture shapes how content is perceived and accessed through spatial sequencing, visual hierarchy, and material articulation. Their work establishes that architectural design influences attention, orientation, and engagement, factors that are critical in competitive exhibition contexts such as trade fairs. Similarly, dos Santos Coutinho and dos Santos Tostões (2020) demonstrate that architectural elements such as light, form, and spatial composition contribute to cognitive engagement and memory formation in exhibition environments. Their findings reinforce the idea that spatial quality enhances the communicative power of exhibitions. While their research is rooted in cultural exhibitions, the principles are transferable to trade fairs where visibility and memorability directly affect entrepreneurial outcomes.

Trade fairs often occupy large urban public spaces, making urban design theory relevant to their architectural evaluation. Carmona (2021), in *Public Places, Urban Spaces*, emphasizes that spatial legibility, permeability, and enclosure strongly influence how people move through and use public environments. These principles are applicable to trade fair layouts, where circulation routes and spatial clarity determine how visitors encounter exhibitors and engage with displays. UN-Habitat (2020) further highlights that well-designed public spaces support social interaction, inclusivity, and economic activity. According to the report, spatial organization directly affects accessibility and participation, especially in dense urban contexts. Applying this framework to trade fairs suggests that architectural planning decisions, such as zoning, entry points, and spatial transitions, shape the quality of economic and social exchanges within these environments.

Although entrepreneurship and market visibility are often discussed in economic terms, recent studies recognize the influence of the built environment on business interaction and exposure. The OECD (2021) notes that physical marketplaces and trade platforms remain essential for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), particularly in developing regions where face-to-face interaction builds trust and visibility. Architectural design, therefore, becomes a mediating factor in how effectively these platforms function. In the context of trade fairs, spatial factors such as booth placement, visual access, and circulation density influence exhibitor exposure and visitor engagement. The 2025 Lagos International Trade Fair, held at Tafawa Balewa Square, is one of the largest trade exhibitions in West Africa, attracting thousands of exhibitors and visitors annually (ECOWAS Trade and Investment Forum & Exhibition, 2025; Lagos International Trade Fair, 2025). The architectural organization of this expansive urban space plays a decisive role in determining how enterprises gain visibility and how interactions unfold, linking architectural design directly to entrepreneurial outcomes.

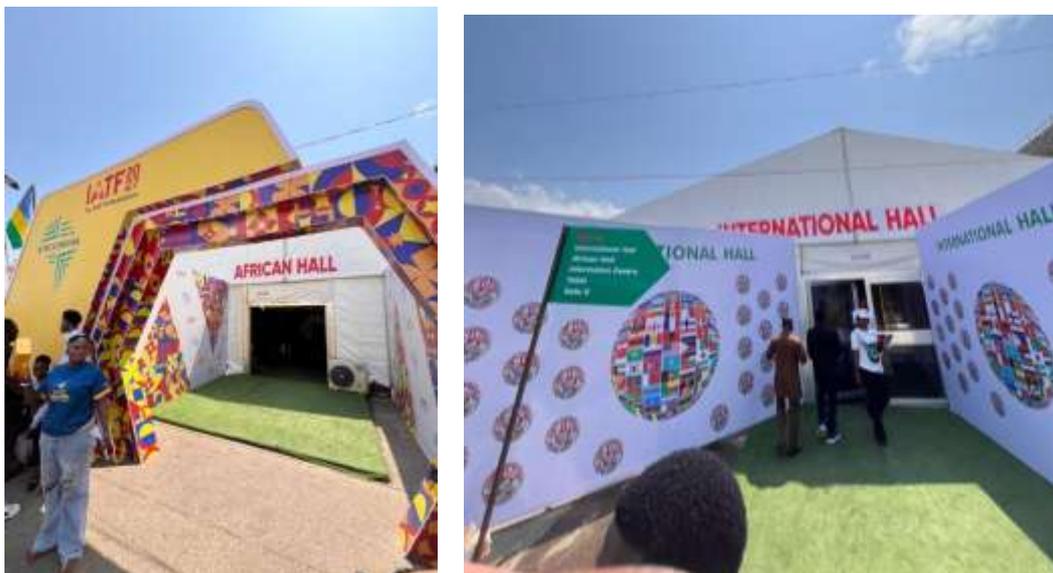


Figure 1.0: Showing the thematic and cultural expression (aesthetic qualities) of the exhibition pavilion/ trade fair halls

Source: Researcher's fieldwork, 2025



Figure 2.0: Showing the spatial sequencing and organization to enhance visibility, movement, and facilitate interaction

Source: Researcher's fieldwork, 2025



Figure 3.0: Showing the spatial permeability influencing how people move through and use public environments

Source: Researcher's fieldwork, 2025



Figure 4.0: Showing the thematic zoning within the fair (cream products e.g. mayonnaise, butter, etc. & food section), contributing to improved market visibility by grouping related exhibitors
 Source: Researcher's fieldwork, 2025

Research Gap

Despite extensive scholarship on exhibition architecture, public space design, and urban economic activity, there remains a clear gap in studies that explicitly examine trade fairs as architectural environments within emerging economies. Existing literature focuses largely on museums, galleries, or permanent commercial spaces, leaving trade fairs underexplored despite their economic significance. This study addresses this gap by evaluating how architectural design at the Lagos International Trade Fair influences entrepreneurial growth and market visibility, thereby extending architectural discourse into economically productive and temporally dynamic spaces.

RESEARCH METHODO

This study adopts a qualitative research approach using the case study method to evaluate the role of architectural design in enhancing entrepreneurial growth and market visibility at the Lagos International Trade Fair (LITF) 2025, held at Tafawa Balewa Square, Lagos. Qualitative case study research is appropriate for this investigation because it enables an in-depth examination of complex spatial phenomena within their real-life context, particularly where the boundaries between architecture, user behaviour, and economic interaction are intertwined (Yin, 2021). The study prioritises architectural interpretation by examining how spatial configuration, circulation systems, visibility, and environmental quality influence entrepreneurial engagement and market exposure within the trade fair environment.

The Lagos International Trade Fair 2025 is selected as the case study due to its scale, architectural diversity, and socio-economic relevance within an emerging economy. As one of West Africa's largest trade exhibition platforms, the fair provides a dynamic spatial setting where architectural design directly mediates visitor movement, exhibitor visibility, and interaction density. The temporary and semi-permanent exhibition structures, zoning strategies, and public circulation spaces present at the fair allow for critical evaluation of how architectural decisions support commercial exchange and entrepreneurial participation (Carmona, 2021; Melis et al., 2025).

Data collection for this study relies on direct on-site observation and documentary analysis. Direct observation is employed to assess spatial layout, booth arrangement, circulation efficiency, wayfinding systems, and patterns of user movement within the fairgrounds. Observational methods are particularly valuable in architectural research because they allow for evaluation of how built environments perform in use and how spatial design influences behaviour and interaction (Emmitt & Gorse, 2021). Observations at the LITF focus on architectural attributes that affect exhibitor exposure, accessibility, and spatial hierarchy, which are essential determinants of market visibility. Documentary analysis is used to complement observational findings through the examination of site layouts, exhibition zoning plans, architectural drawings, and official publications related to the 2025 Lagos International Trade Fair. These documents

provide insight into the design intentions behind the spatial organisation of the fair and enable comparison between planned architectural outcomes and observed spatial performance. The integration of documentary evidence strengthens the credibility of the qualitative analysis by grounding interpretations in verifiable design data (Yin, 2021).

Data analysis is conducted using thematic analysis, which involves identifying recurring patterns and themes related to architectural design and spatial performance within the trade fair environment. Thematic analysis is suitable for this study because it allows for systematic interpretation of qualitative data without reliance on numerical measurement, aligning with the architecture's emphasis on experiential and spatial qualities (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Key themes include spatial legibility, circulation flow, exhibitor visibility, flexibility of exhibition spaces, and architectural atmosphere. These themes are then linked to entrepreneurial outcomes, such as increased engagement, networking opportunities, and market exposure, strictly as effects of architectural design rather than independent economic variables.

The rigor and trustworthiness of the study are enhanced through methodological triangulation using multiple data sources and through reflective documentation of observational processes. Ethical considerations include non-intrusive observation within public exhibition spaces and responsible use of publicly available documents. While the qualitative case study approach limits statistical generalisation, it provides rich contextual insight into how architectural design contributes to entrepreneurial growth and market visibility within major trade fair environments in emerging economies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative analysis of the 2025 Lagos International Trade Fair (LITF) held at Tafawa Balewa Square reveals that architectural design played a central role in shaping exhibitor visibility, visitor movement, and the quality of entrepreneurial engagement within the fair environment. Observations of the spatial layout indicate that the overall organization of exhibition zones, circulation networks, and spatial hierarchy significantly influenced how visitors navigated the space and encountered entrepreneurial displays. The legibility of major circulation routes and the clear distinction between primary and secondary exhibition areas enhanced orientation and reduced spatial confusion, thereby increasing the likelihood of sustained visitor engagement with exhibitors. This finding aligns with architectural theory, which emphasizes that spatial clarity and legibility are critical in large public environments where economic and social interactions are expected to occur (Carmona, 2021).

The arrangement of exhibition booths within the architectural framework further revealed how micro-scale design decisions affected entrepreneurial visibility. Booths positioned along major circulation paths and near activity nodes benefited from higher levels of attention and interaction compared to those located in more enclosed or peripheral areas. From an architectural perspective, this demonstrates how spatial prominence, visual access, and proximity to movement corridors influence patterns of engagement within exhibition environments. These observations support existing research in exhibition architecture which argues that spatial configuration and visual hierarchy are decisive factors in shaping user experience and attention distribution (Melis, Vavetsi, & Finotti, 2025). Consequently, entrepreneurial outcomes such as product exposure, informal networking, and brand recognition were closely tied to architectural placement rather than business size alone.

Circulation patterns within the fairgrounds also emerged as a critical architectural factor influencing entrepreneurial engagement. Observational data showed that areas where circulation paths intersected or widened naturally became points of congregation and interaction. These architectural nodes functioned as informal marketplaces where exhibitors experienced increased visitor dwell time and engagement. Such findings resonate with urban design principles that identify movement networks as generators of social and economic interaction in public spaces (Carmona, 2021). In the context of the Lagos International Trade Fair, the architectural integration of movement and gathering spaces enhanced opportunities for entrepreneurial visibility and exchange.

Thematic zoning within the fair further contributed to improved market visibility by grouping related exhibitors within identifiable architectural sub-spaces. These zones acted as spatial anchors that attracted visitors with specific interests, enabling more focused and meaningful interactions between exhibitors and potential clients. This spatial strategy aligns with exhibition design literature, which highlights the role of thematic clustering in enhancing user experience and reinforcing spatial identity within large exhibition environments (dos Santos Coutinho & dos Santos Tostões, 2020). As a result,

entrepreneurs operating within these zones benefited from targeted exposure facilitated by architectural organization rather than promotional effort alone.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the architectural design of the Lagos International Trade Fair functioned as an active agent in shaping entrepreneurial outcomes. The built environment influenced how businesses were seen, accessed, and experienced, thereby affecting market visibility and interaction quality. Rather than acting as a neutral backdrop, architecture structured movement, framed encounters, and supported economic exchange. This supports contemporary architectural discourse, which positions exhibition spaces as performative environments that enable communication, interaction, and value creation (Melis et al., 2025). In emerging economies such as Nigeria, where trade fairs play a significant role in entrepreneurial development, the study highlights the importance of intentional architectural design in maximizing the socio-economic impact of such events.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the role of trade fairs in enhancing entrepreneurial growth and market visibility in emerging economies through an architectural lens, using the Lagos International Trade Fair (LITF) as a qualitative case study. The findings demonstrate that architectural design is not a passive backdrop to commercial activity but an active framework that shapes movement, interaction, and visibility within trade fair environments. Spatial configuration, circulation networks, zoning strategies, and booth placement were shown to significantly influence how exhibitors are encountered and how visitors engage with products and services.

The study establishes that well-designed exhibition architecture enhances spatial legibility, encourages prolonged visitor engagement, and creates interaction nodes that support networking and business exposure. These architectural qualities directly contribute to entrepreneurial outcomes such as improved market visibility, increased informal business interactions, and opportunities for brand recognition. In the context of the Lagos International Trade Fair, thematic zoning and clear circulation hierarchies enabled targeted engagement between entrepreneurs and visitors, reinforcing the importance of intentional spatial planning in large-scale trade events. By focusing on qualitative observation and architectural analysis, the research highlights how design decisions at both macro and micro scales, ranging from overall site layout to booth positioning, can either enable or limit entrepreneurial participation. This underscores the responsibility of architects and planners to integrate economic functionality into exhibition design, particularly in emerging economies where trade fairs play a vital role in business development and regional commerce.

In conclusion, the study affirms that the success of trade fairs in promoting entrepreneurial growth and market visibility is closely tied to the quality of their architectural design. The Lagos International Trade Fair serves as evidence that strategically planned exhibition environments can enhance economic interaction and support entrepreneurial ecosystems. The insights from this study contribute to architectural knowledge and provide a basis for improving the design of future trade fair and exhibition spaces in similar socio-economic contexts.

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