



**Assessing the Influence of Trade Fair Participation on Entrepreneurial Learning and Skills Development:
A Case Study of the Lagos International Trade Fair at Tafawa Balewa Square**

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ABSTRACT

This study assesses the influence of trade fair participation on entrepreneurial learning and skills development through an architectural lens, using the Lagos International Trade Fair at Tafawa Balewa Square as a case study. Trade fairs in emerging economies are often examined for their economic and commercial outcomes; however, their spatial and architectural qualities as learning environments remain underexplored. The study argues that the design, layout, and spatial organization of trade fair facilities play a critical role in shaping interaction, knowledge exchange, and experiential learning among entrepreneurs. Attention is given to architectural elements such as spatial permeability, circulation networks, exhibition hall configuration, visibility, and flexibility of temporary and permanent structures, and how these features facilitate observation, networking, and informal skill acquisition. A qualitative research methodology was adopted, employing site observations, spatial analysis, and photographic documentation at the trade fair. Thematic analysis was used to interpret how users experience and learn within the built environment of the fair. Findings indicate that open layouts, clear circulation routes, and visually connected exhibition spaces enhance peer-to-peer learning, marketing skills, and adaptive business practices, while poorly defined spaces limit interaction and learning opportunities. Economic and entrepreneurial outcomes, such as improved market awareness and confidence, are therefore presented as consequences of effective spatial design rather than primary variables. The study concludes that trade fair architecture functions as an active learning infrastructure and emphasizes the need for architecturally responsive trade fair designs that intentionally support entrepreneurial capacity building in Nigeria.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial Learning, Lagos State, Skills Development, Trade Fair, Trade Fair Participation

INTRODUCTION

The Lagos International Trade Fair (LITF) at Tafawa Balewa Square (TBS), Lagos Island, stands as one of West Africa's largest annual commercial exhibitions, attracting thousands of local and international exhibitors and visitors across an extensive exhibition footprint designed to support trade promotion and business networking (Lagos International Trade Fair, 2025). While trade fairs are traditionally studied for their economic impacts, they also constitute complex spatial environments where interaction, observation, and informal learning occur. The built environment, including exhibition halls, circulation pathways, and spatial organization, shapes how participants encounter products, engage with other entrepreneurs, and navigate learning opportunities. Research in spatial design shows that architectural configuration influences behaviour, wayfinding, and cognitive engagement in exhibition and cultural settings by affecting visitor movement, orientation, and attention patterns in spaces where learning and commercial activity overlap (Chen et al., 2025).

Architectural scholarship increasingly recognizes that spatial layouts and environmental cues significantly influence how people interact with space and one another, affecting social interaction and informal knowledge exchange. Qualitative studies in other contexts have highlighted how thoughtful design can support orientation, encourage exploration, and facilitate engagement, contributing to richer experiential outcomes. By focusing on architecture as a learning infrastructure rather than merely a backdrop for commerce, this study foregrounds how trade fair spaces at LITF can enable or constrain

entrepreneurial learning and skills development, with economic and business outcomes serving as supporting evidence of the architectural environment's role.

This study examines how the architectural design of trade fair spaces influences entrepreneurial learning and skills development at the Lagos International Trade Fair. The research focuses on spatial qualities such as layout organization, circulation routes, exhibition zoning, spatial adaptability, and perceptual wayfinding, and how these features function as catalysts for interaction, engagement, and informal knowledge transfer among participants. Drawing on architectural research conceptualizing exhibition design as a spatial communication system that facilitates meaningful encounters between users and their environment (Güler, 2024), the study investigates how exhibition layouts guide movement and enhance cognitive and social engagement. Architectural determinants of visitor engagement and spatial learning, such as visual connectivity, focal nodes, and sequential spatial experience, are considered critical to shaping learning outcomes (Chen et al., 2025). Studies further show that well-planned exhibition space and scene creation can enhance visitor experience and comprehension (Zhou, 2024), while architectural theory suggests that exhibition design actively constructs narratives and experiential flows that support knowledge acquisition (Melis et al., 2025). Although economic outcomes such as networking, visibility, and market insight are discussed, they are treated as supporting evidence of effective spatial design rather than independent variables.

Despite the Lagos International Trade Fair's longstanding role as a platform for business engagement and market exposure, there remains a critical knowledge gap regarding how its architectural design influences entrepreneurial learning and skill development. Most existing research prioritizes economic metrics, such as market visibility, networking, and business performance, while underexploring spatial organization, circulation patterns, and exhibition layout as determinants of informal learning. Architectural studies show that built environments actively guide human behaviour, social interaction, and cognitive engagement in exhibition and learning spaces (Chen et al., 2025). Research on exhibition and trade fair design suggests that spatial arrangements, including focal points, circulation routes, and interaction zones, facilitate knowledge exchange and enhance experiential learning (Zainal Abidin & Fadzil, 2024; Zhou, 2024). However, there is limited empirical inquiry into how these architectural features function in large-scale African trade fairs, leaving designers and organizers without evidence-based guidance for creating spaces that intentionally support learning and skill acquisition. This study addresses this gap by investigating how architectural design at LITF enables or constrains learning experiences and skill development.

The aim of the study is to investigate how the architectural design and spatial configuration of the Lagos International Trade Fair at Tafawa Balewa Square influence entrepreneurial learning and skills development among participants.

1. To examine how the spatial layout, circulation patterns, and exhibition hall configuration at the Lagos International Trade Fair facilitate or hinder entrepreneurial learning and skill acquisition.
2. To identify key architectural features that promote informal knowledge exchange, interaction, and networking among trade fair participants.
3. To assess the relationship between the architectural qualities of trade fair spaces and participants' economic and entrepreneurial outcomes, such as market awareness, networking, and business performance.

Research Questions

1. How do the architectural design and spatial layout of the Lagos International Trade Fair at Tafawa Balewa Square influence participants' opportunities for entrepreneurial learning and skill development?
2. Which specific architectural features, such as circulation patterns, exhibition hall configuration, and interaction zones, facilitate or constrain knowledge exchange, networking, and observational learning among trade fair participants?
3. To what extent do the spatial and architectural qualities of the trade fair environment indirectly support economic and entrepreneurial outcomes, such as market awareness, networking, and business performance, through enhanced learning experiences?

This research is significant for both architectural theory and practice because it foregrounds the role of spatial design in mediating learning and engagement within large-scale trade fair environments, an

area that has received limited scholarly attention despite extensive studies on exhibition architecture in related settings. Spatial configuration influences visitor behaviour, circulation patterns, and cognitive engagement, demonstrating that architectural choices can directly shape how users interpret, interact with, and learn from a built environment (Liu et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2025). By examining the Lagos International Trade Fair, this study extends exhibition space research into the trade fair typology, showing how attributes such as circulation, visibility, and layout affect user interaction, orientation, and knowledge exchange. Understanding these conditions can inform future design strategies that enhance social interaction, wayfinding, and experiential learning at trade fairs, ultimately improving participant outcomes. Economic outcomes such as networking and market awareness are positioned as consequential to effective spatial design rather than primary variables. Insights from architectural spatial analysis can guide architects, urban designers, and event planners in creating trade fair environments that simultaneously foster entrepreneurial learning, community engagement, and economic opportunity.

This research is justified by the recognition that physical space configuration plays a crucial role in facilitating human interaction, cognitive engagement, and experiential learning, all pivotal for entrepreneurial development in trade fair settings. Contemporary studies indicate that spatial qualities such as circulation clarity, sequencing, and interaction zones measurably impact visitor engagement and knowledge exchange (Chen et al., 2025; Kamila & Sunarya, 2025). Furthermore, linking this research to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals emphasizes its broader societal relevance. SDG 8 advocates for inclusive and sustainable economic growth, which trade fairs promote by providing platforms for enterprise exposure and market linkages enhanced by spatial design. SDG 9 highlights the role of infrastructure and innovation in enabling SMEs, underscoring how thoughtfully designed trade fair environments can reduce barriers and stimulate business development. Finally, SDG 11 emphasizes sustainable cities and communities, illustrating that well-organized urban venues like trade fairs can support economic activity while fostering inclusive, safe, and functional public spaces.

By focusing on architectural determinants of entrepreneurial learning and skills development, this research fills an interdisciplinary gap in architecture and urban design literature while providing actionable guidance for creating large-scale exhibition spaces that support sustainable economic and social interactions in rapidly urbanizing contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent architectural scholarship increasingly recognizes the role of the built environment as an active facilitator of learning, interaction, and skill acquisition. Beyond aesthetics and functionality, architectural spaces, particularly those designed for exhibitions and trade fairs, shape human behaviour, cognition, and social engagement. Trade fairs operate as temporary learning ecosystems where spatial configuration influences how participants navigate, interact, and exchange knowledge. This literature review examines existing studies on exhibition architecture, spatial behaviour, and experiential learning, drawing connections to entrepreneurial learning as a secondary outcome. By synthesizing architectural research, the review establishes how spatial design principles underpin learning and skills development in trade fair environments, providing a foundation for analysing the Lagos International Trade Fair at Tafawa Balewa Square.

Empirical studies in exhibition architecture demonstrate that spatial configuration significantly influences visitor behaviour and engagement. Chen et al. (2025) analysed cultural exhibition spaces using spatial mapping and regression techniques and found that architectural zoning, spatial hierarchy, and circulation patterns directly affect visitor dwell time and movement choices. Their findings confirm that architecture functions as a behavioural guide, subtly directing users toward interaction and exploration. Similarly, research published in *Buildings* (2025) on museum environments shows that spatial layout, visibility, and accessibility shape visitor interaction with exhibits. The study revealed that well-defined circulation paths and visual connectivity enhance engagement and information retention, reinforcing the idea that architectural clarity supports experiential learning. These findings are directly applicable to trade fair halls, where participants rely on spatial cues to navigate dense informational environments. Further supporting this perspective, studies on spatial syntax and pedestrian movement indicate that architectural permeability and pathway legibility encourage exploration and prolonged engagement (Frontiers of Architectural Research, 2025). Such design strategies are essential in trade fair contexts, where informal learning occurs through observation, comparison, and repeated interactions across spaces. Learning in

exhibition environments is largely experiential and informal. Zainal Abidin and Fadzil (2024) demonstrated that exhibition design elements, such as spatial sequencing, layout coherence, and environmental cues, play a central role in shaping visitors' learning experiences. Their research highlights that architecture does not merely house learning activities but actively structures how knowledge is perceived and internalized. Studies on exhibition design further emphasize that spatial storytelling and environmental coherence enhance meaning-making and cognitive engagement (Chen et al., 2025). These principles align with architectural theories that position space as a medium for communication and learning rather than a passive container.

While entrepreneurial learning literature often emphasizes networking, innovation, and market exposure, architectural research reveals that these outcomes are spatially mediated. Trade fair environments facilitate learning through physical proximity, visual exposure, and spontaneous interaction, all of which are influenced by spatial layout and design quality. Research on exhibition circulation and interaction suggests that spatial arrangements that encourage face-to-face encounters and ease of movement increase opportunities for informal knowledge exchange (Buildings, 2025). Thus, entrepreneurial learning and skills development at trade fairs can be understood as secondary outcomes enabled by architectural design. Well-designed trade fair spaces enhance visibility, interaction, and engagement, indirectly supporting learning, adaptability, and skill acquisition among participants.

The reviewed literature indicates a gap in architecture-focused studies on trade fair environments, particularly within developing urban contexts such as Lagos. While exhibition and museum studies provide transferable insights, there remains limited architectural analysis of how trade fair spaces specifically support learning and skills development. Addressing this gap justifies the present study's focus on the Lagos International Trade Fair, positioning architecture as a critical framework for understanding entrepreneurial learning in trade fair settings.



Figure 1.0: Showing how spatial arrangement and sequencing mitigate interaction

Source: Researcher's fieldwork (2025)



Figure 2.0: Showing how circulation mitigates interaction

Source: Researcher's fieldwork (2025)

RESEARCH METHODO

This study adopts a qualitative case study research design to examine how the architectural design of trade fair spaces influences entrepreneurial learning and skills development at the Lagos International Trade Fair held at Tafawa Balewa Square. A qualitative case study is suitable for investigating spatial phenomena within real-life contexts where the relationship between the built environment and human experience is complex and context-dependent. In architectural research, case studies are widely used to explore how spatial form, circulation, and environmental qualities shape user behaviour and experiential outcomes (Salura & Clarissa, 2024). This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of how architectural configurations at the trade fair facilitate informal learning, interaction, and skills acquisition among participants.

The qualitative approach enables the collection of rich, descriptive data that captures how users perceive and engage with architectural space. In architecture and environmental design research, qualitative methods are particularly effective for examining spatial experience, behavioural patterns, and cognitive responses to the built environment (Malec, 2025). Rather than measuring economic performance directly, this study focuses on how architectural features such as spatial layout, accessibility, visual connectivity, and interaction zones support learning processes that may indirectly enhance entrepreneurial capacity.

Data for the study were collected through systematic field observations and spatial documentation. Field observations focus on how participants navigate the trade fair environment, use circulation routes, interact within exhibition spaces, and occupy learning-oriented zones such as demonstration areas and clustered stalls. Observational methods are well established in architectural research for capturing real-time spatial behaviour and human–environment interaction (Troiani & Ewing, 2020). In addition, spatial documentation, including architectural drawings, site layouts, photographs, and mapping of movement patterns, will be used to record the physical characteristics of the trade fair spaces and relate them to observed learning behaviours. Data analysis will be conducted using **thematic analysis**, which involves identifying recurring patterns and themes from observational notes and spatial records. Thematic analysis is appropriate for qualitative architectural studies because it allows the interpretation of experiential and behavioural data within specific spatial contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Themes will be developed around architectural elements such as circulation clarity, spatial permeability, spatial hierarchy, and interaction density, and how these elements support learning and skills development during trade fair participation.

To ensure trustworthiness and rigor, the study will employ methodological triangulation by comparing observational findings with spatial documentation and architectural analysis. Ethical considerations will be observed throughout the research process, including conducting observations respectfully in public spaces and ensuring that no personal identifiers are recorded. This methodological

framework ensures that conclusions drawn about entrepreneurial learning are grounded primarily in architectural analysis, with economic and entrepreneurial outcomes treated as secondary effects of spatial design.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Observations and spatial analyses conducted at the Lagos International Trade Fair at Tafawa Balewa Square demonstrate that architectural spatial configuration plays a significant role in shaping participant movement, engagement patterns, and opportunities for learning within the fair environment. The spatial arrangement of exhibition halls, circulation corridors, and open interaction zones influenced how visitors navigated the environment, interacted with exhibitors, and accessed learning opportunities. This finding aligns with architectural research, which shows that circulation design and spatial integration strongly influence movement behaviour and visitor engagement in exhibition environments (Yue et al., 2025).

At the Lagos International Trade Fair, several distinct spatial zones were observed to influence participant behaviour differently. For instance, the main exhibition corridors linking clustered vendor stalls functioned as primary circulation routes where participants moved continuously while observing product displays and demonstrations. These corridors were typically wide and visually open, allowing clear lines of sight across multiple stalls. As a result, visitors were able to easily identify areas of interest and approach exhibitors without experiencing spatial confusion. Similar spatial effects have been documented in museum circulation studies, where integrated pathways improve wayfinding and enhance user engagement with displayed content (Yue et al., 2025). In this case, the architectural openness of the corridors allowed participants to observe activities across stalls, prompting spontaneous interactions and discussions that contributed to informal knowledge exchange.

Another important spatial typology observed during the field study was the clustered stall arrangement, where exhibitors were positioned in groups around semi-open circulation nodes. These nodes functioned as informal gathering points where participants often paused to observe demonstrations, ask questions, or compare products across different vendors. Such nodes were particularly noticeable around sections hosting technology, agricultural equipment, and manufacturing exhibits, where live demonstrations frequently attracted small crowds. The spatial layout in these zones enabled participants to observe multiple demonstrations simultaneously, creating opportunities for comparative learning and peer interaction. According to research on exhibition space circulation, layouts that encourage repeated viewing and cross-movement between exhibits increase the likelihood of sustained engagement and information retention (Liu et al., 2024).

In addition to circulation corridors and clustered stalls, open demonstration areas played a critical role in facilitating learning interactions within the trade fair environment. These spaces were typically located at the intersection of multiple circulation routes, making them highly visible and accessible from different parts of the exhibition area. Observations revealed that these demonstration zones often attracted participants who gathered to watch product presentations, listen to explanations from exhibitors, or engage in direct discussions about production techniques and business practices. Architectural research suggests that such highly visible and accessible spaces function as interaction nodes, where spatial configuration encourages longer dwell times and collective engagement (Chen et al., 2025). Within the Lagos International Trade Fair, these demonstration spaces became important learning environments where participants exchanged ideas, gained exposure to new technologies, and developed practical insights relevant to their entrepreneurial activities.

The architectural sequencing of spaces within the trade fair also influenced how participants experienced the exhibition environment. Certain areas functioned as threshold spaces, such as the entry points into exhibition halls where visitors initially encountered introductory displays or general product showcases. These threshold zones typically encouraged quick exploration as participants oriented themselves within the broader fair environment. In contrast, deeper interior zones containing specialized exhibitions or interactive displays functioned as focus spaces, where visitors spent longer periods engaging with exhibitors and observing demonstrations. Studies of exhibition spatial behaviour confirm that such spatial hierarchies, comprising orientation zones, transition spaces, and engagement zones, affect how users move through environments and how long they remain engaged with particular exhibits (Chen et al., 2025). The presence of these spatial hierarchies within the Lagos International Trade Fair contributed to varied patterns of engagement across different sections of the fair.

Although the primary focus of this study is architectural influence, qualitative observations indicate that entrepreneurial learning and economic opportunities often emerged from spatial conditions that encouraged interaction and engagement. Participants in open, well-connected zones reported greater opportunities to discuss products, exchange contact information, and learn about new production methods or marketing strategies. These interactions often occurred spontaneously when participants encountered demonstrations or conversations within shared spaces. Research on exhibition environments suggests that such interactions are facilitated when architectural design promotes visibility, accessibility, and spatial connectivity among users (Liu et al., 2024).

Conversely, areas of the trade fair characterized by narrow circulation routes, obstructed views, or poorly defined pathways tended to experience lower levels of engagement. In these zones, participants often moved quickly through the space without stopping to interact with exhibitors or observe demonstrations. This observation supports findings from spatial configuration research indicating that environments with poor spatial legibility can limit user engagement and reduce opportunities for meaningful interaction (Yue et al., 2025). Reduced interaction in such spaces ultimately limits the potential for informal learning and knowledge exchange.

Overall, the findings from this study suggest that architectural design plays a crucial role in shaping the experiential and learning dynamics of trade fair environments. Spatial features such as circulation clarity, visual connectivity, open interaction zones, and hierarchical spatial sequencing contribute to increased participant engagement and facilitate informal learning processes. Through these mechanisms, architectural design indirectly supports entrepreneurial learning and skills development by creating environments that encourage observation, dialogue, and collaborative knowledge exchange among participants.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how the architectural design of trade fair spaces influences entrepreneurial learning and skills development, using the Lagos International Trade Fair at Tafawa Balewa Square as a case study. Findings indicate that spatial configuration, circulation clarity, visual connectivity, and interaction zones significantly shape participant engagement, informal learning, and knowledge acquisition. Areas with open pathways, clear sightlines, and well-structured layouts encouraged exploration, observation, and peer interaction, highlighting the central role of architecture in facilitating experiential learning. The study further demonstrates that architectural features indirectly support economic and entrepreneurial outcomes. Participants in well-designed spaces reported enhanced opportunities for networking, idea exchange, and skill development, suggesting that spatial conditions create an environment conducive to entrepreneurial growth. Conversely, fragmented or poorly connected areas were associated with lower engagement and reduced opportunities for learning, reinforcing the importance of thoughtful architectural planning in trade fair contexts. These findings underscore that architecture is not merely a backdrop for activities but an active enabler of learning and skills development. By linking spatial form with participant behaviour and cognitive engagement, the study contributes to a nuanced understanding of how design can optimize the effectiveness of trade fairs, both as learning environments and as platforms for entrepreneurial exposure.

In conclusion, the Lagos International Trade Fair demonstrates that architectural design is a critical determinant of the quality of participant experience. Strategic attention to circulation, spatial hierarchy, and interactive zones can enhance learning outcomes and support the development of entrepreneurial capabilities. These insights provide a foundation for architects, event planners, and policymakers to create trade fair environments that are educationally effective, socially engaging, and economically productive.

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