

Walls and Ancestors, Spatial Organisation and Tensions in the Evolving Built Environment of Urhobo Architectural Tradition in Nigeria

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Abstract: This paper investigates the traditional communal lifestyle of neighbours who live in vernacular structures, and how modernity and globalisation threaten these ways of life. The Urhobo people of southern Nigeria, in their traditional built-environment live in 'nucleated' settlements, which are not built around physical central features but around a mental central kinship belief system. The adoption of modernity and Western cultures has changed people's mindset toward one another, and this modern trend affects how houses and compounds are now constructed. This study compares childhood memories of living in Urhobo vernacular spaces and a recent ethnographic fieldwork experience of social trends in the same location. It explores the relationship between architectural spaces and human behaviour towards these spaces in a changing world. In addition to direct observations, and interviews, the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was adopted to explore the lived experiences of participants in Urhobo-built environments. These approaches helped to extract the ethnographic context of the relationship between architecture of the Urhobo people and their social lifestyles. The findings of the study indicate that the "spirit of kinship" and the traditional social relations of kinsmen are declining, other social tensions have increased among neighbours.

Keywords: Urhobo, vernacular architecture, social tensions, walls, modernity

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the relationship between Urhobo architectural tradition and anthropology. It investigates the traditional lifestyle of neighbours who live in intentionally built structures without walls, which enabled communal living, and how modernity and globalisation threaten these ways of life. The Urhobo people, in their traditional built-environment live in 'nucleated' settlements, which are not built around physical central features but around a mental central kinship belief system. They have no physically well-defined boundaries, so neighbours, who are traditionally kinsmen live together communally. However, as traditional social and cultural practices get eroded by factors of modernity and globalisation, social tensions become inevitable. Modernity obstructs communalism and the adoption of Western cultures has changed people's mindset toward one another, and this modern trend affects how houses and compounds are now constructed. This study uses autoethnography and compares childhood memories of living in Urhobo vernacular spaces with a recent ethnographic fieldwork experience of social trends in the same location. It explores the relationship between architectural spaces and human behaviour towards these spaces in a changing world. In addition to direct observations, and interviews, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was adopted to explore the lived experiences of participants in Urhobo vernacular architectural landscape. These approaches were to help extract the ethnographic context of the relationship between the architecture of the Urhobo people and their social lifestyles and coexistence. The findings of the study indicate that the traditional friendly social relations of kinsmen are declining drastically and boundary disputes and other social tensions among neighbours are increasing.

1.1. Understanding the Urhobo Community Context

Location of Urhobo

The Urhobo people traditionally live in twenty-four kingdoms in eight local government areas of Delta State, in southern Nigeria. There are also indigenous communities of Urhobo people in Bayelsa State,

while migrant communities where Urhobo people have lived and formed strong solidarity for many decades exist in Oyo, Ekiti, and Ondo States in western Nigeria. The physical environment determines the range of economic activities of the Urhobo people. The people collect raw materials from local forest vegetation comprising various species of plants and trees, which they use in their daily activities. Those living on the mainland do farming, hunting, and trading, while those who live near rivers and streams add fishing to the other forms of occupation. The climate is humid subequatorial with an annual rainfall of up to 2800mm during a wet season (Aweto, 2005). *Urhobo Social institutions*

Each kingdom is governed by several leadership institutions, which take oversight over social and cultural relations. The ovie (king) is the head of the kingdom, and he rules with a council of ilorogun or ehonvwo (chiefs). Gerontocratic leadership exists in the form of male and female institutions, which are based on several layers of age grade. The ekpako are the male custodians of culture in each town or village that make up the kingdom, while the ephraghwa are the youths who carry out specific duties that are assigned to them by the ovie and the ekpako. Women belong to at least two leadership groups, the eghweya, and the emete organisations. The eghweya group is made up of married women, young or old, which administers issues about women in the community. The emete are women who are either unmarried, divorced, or widowed, and who are mostly more elderly than the eghweya. Therefore, the emete presides over more advanced matters of women. All the socio-political institutions of Urhobo are involved in governmental processes, which include legislative, administrative, executive, and judicial (Otite, 2011). The aforementioned institutions – ovie, ilorogun, ekpako, ephraghwa, eghweya, and emete - handle the resolution of social tension in the community, including land disputes among neighbours.

Material culture and Environment of Urhobo

The Urhobo people have a rich heritage of material culture, which includes sculpture, pottery, beadworks, basket weaving, drum-making, vernacular architecture, etc. The sculpture and other art of Urhobo have been considerably studied, but their vernacular architecture has not been given much attention in scholarly studies. Prussin (1974) describes how the Urhobo people build their houses to withstand humidity, while Darah (2004) briefly mapped the shrines of Esaba, a community of Urhobo in *Where Gods and Mortals Meet: Continuity and Renewal in Urhobo Art*. Recently, Umukoro, Aminu, and Adamu (2023) gave recommendations on how architectural strategies could be employed to express cultural identity in the construction of vernacular architecture, particularly, a cultural centre for the Urhobo ethnic group.

The diverse and complex landscape of Sub-Saharan Africa and its climatic conditions to a large extent determine the architectural traditions of the local people. The vernacular architecture of Nigeria is embedded in socio-cultural practices, artistry, religion, available materials, and labour supply of the people (Auwallu, 2019). Particularly, the presence of rainforests with tall vegetation in the Niger Delta region provides a rich source of building materials for local builders. Thus, like other people who dwell in the region, the Urhobo people use vertical wattles of bamboo, raffia palm leaves, rattan cane, palm fronds, clay soil, and tall and straight timber for construction (Amasuomo and Amasuomo, 2016 and Prussin, 1974). Invariably, the materials and methods of constructing vernacular architecture help to minimize environmental issues such as carbon emission and global warming (Remigius, Cheche, and Udomiaye, 2016). My childhood experience in, and a recent ethnographic observation of traditional dwellings in Eghwu, support Vellinga's (2013) position that vernacular architecture is appropriate, sustainable, and ecologically friendly.

2. METHODOLOGY

This paper probes the cross-disciplinary application of methods of architecture and anthropology to the study of the built environment and human behaviour in Urhobo. It looks at the relationship between the two disciplines and combines them to unravel knowledge about social relations in the architectural traditions of the people. I used qualitative methods to observe, record, and collect the desired knowledge for this research project. Autoethnography was adopted to explore my personal childhood experiences and compare them with my recent research experience in my community. This method acknowledges my relationship with my community, helps me to critically describe the cultural practices of my people, and balances intellectual and methodological rigour (Witkin, 2022). The descriptive model of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen for this work to focus on the observation of

cultural practices of local people in their built environments, interviewing them and describing their experiences to identify general themes about the intrinsic nature of the phenomenon. IPA provides researchers with an advantageous standpoint to comprehend the innermost deliberation of the lived experiences of the researched community as they share a bonding relationship with the researcher (Alase, 2017, and Mohapatra and Satpathy, 2022).

Comparing Childhood Memories of Vernacular Architectural Tradition with Recent Observations

After a long absence from (except for periodic short visits to) the Urhobo community of Eghwu where I grew up and spent my first 21 years of life, I was dumbfounded to see new styles of buildings, architectural spaces and construction during a recent ethnographic research work in the community. The community was no longer the same, as old ancestral vernacular dwellings have mostly been pulled down by descendants of the builders to give way for modern structures. Additionally, the new buildings mostly had walls, except for where the space between neighbours' plots of land was too narrow to contain both houses and a wall. New areas, which were previously family communal farmlands now have gigantic modern buildings with walls.

My observations took place for a period of eight months, from December 2023 to July 2024, and I was able to engage many people in unstructured and qualitative interviews, conversations, and discussions. As the Field Supervision Officer for an NGO, I was in town to supervise a one-year project on the documentation of Urhobo vernacular architecture that was funded by the Endangered Wooden Architecture Programme (EWAP) of Oxford Brookes University in the UK. Local builders were commissioned to construct a vernacular dwelling, a kitchen, a shrine, a yam barn, a traditional altar, a pulley mill system for processing garri, and an oven structure for drying fish and other food items. As the builders worked, I directly observed them and listened to their conversations on the subject of change in architectural practices. I also observed the procedural skills, teamwork, and collaboration of these local builders who had not acquired these skills through apprentice training but through observation, trial, and correction. My experience in my hometown during the time of this ethnographic fieldwork brought up series of childhood memories of life in the vernacular dwelling of my parents, where the family gathered yearly to repaint our earth house with brown mud. It also opened my learning skills to do a comparative analysis of the changes taking place in the built environment of my community. The house forms, the structure of the compounds, and the living patterns of the occupants had changed in most places, especially among families who had rebuilt and now occupied modern houses with walls.

Observing Changing Architecture, Human Behaviour and their Link

I started the fieldwork funded by EWAP as a member of the local community, making use of old-time friends and colleagues as research participants, yet I had to adopt the ethnographic processes of in situ and immersion. This approach was to enable me gain a sensibility and depth of understanding (Roller and Lavraskas, 2015) of the changing architectural practices because I had almost become a “stranger” and an “outsider” to the changed social and cultural practices in the built environment due to my long absence from home. In order not to alter the observed new architectural practices (collection of raw materials, their processing, construction, use, and repair) to align with my knowledge of the old practices, I had to play the dual role of insider and outsider, and adopt what Roller and Lavraskas (2015) call acting skills. In other words, in order to mitigate observer-bias, I adopted abilities to minimise my observer effects on the behaviour of the observed and the events I observe.

Turan (1996) notes that anthropology and architecture are “strange bedfellows”, and other scholars agree because culture and environment are interrelated, interwoven, integrated, and do complement each other invariably (Askland, Awad, Chambers, and Chapman, 2014; Oz and Staub, 2019; Sfintes, 2019). In agreement with this argument, research methods from both disciplines were combined to seek a proper understanding of the Urhobo people and their built environment. Thus, architectural techniques tend to give rise to new social and cultural practices, and vice versa, which may warrant new anthropological approaches to studying the built environment. The new approaches may be more of a collaboration between both disciplines as their methodologies and theories overlap (Oz and Staub, 2019). The application of anthropological research methods to the investigation of architectural fieldwork can help to reveal interesting ways of analysing the invisible features of built environments (Sarvimäki, 2015). By applying autoethnography to a study of Urhobo vernacular dwellings it was easy

to observe and document the social and cultural practices of local people in their built environment and to see the compatibility of both disciplines in the study.

2.1. Urhobo Traditional Architecture and Organisation in Nucleated Settlements

Communal Living Facilitated by Traditional House Designs

Aspects of communal living are represented in Urhobo traditional house designs. The idea of “community” in many parts of Africa is expressed in the Zulu principle of “Umntu ngumntu ngabantu”, which means “I am because we are”. In this regard, individualism or the life of the individual apart from his community, is seen as an unauthentic life (Etta, Esowe, and Asukwo, 2016). The African communal identity encompasses tolerance, mutual respect, and expressions of humanity through interactions with society (Acquah, Appiah-Konadu, and Amoah, 2023) by people whose members are related by a common parental (ancestral) link (Etta, Esowe, and Asukwo, 2016).

The concept of communal living among the Urhobo people also influences their traditional house designs and neighbourly relations. According to a district elder in Eghwu town, people were known to freely give plots of land to their kinsmen to enable them to build their houses near them so they could live together. Traditionally, walls were not erected to demarcate the compounds of one man from that of his kin neighbour because the occupants of several compounds would live together, and interact as one family. Thus, in two interconnected compounds, one occupant could walk over to another occupant to collect a pinch of salt for cooking or borrow an axe for tearing firewood for cooking.

‘Nucleated’ Settlements and the Concept of ‘Mental Central Features’

There is a relationship between kinship, spatiality, and identity in Urhobo traditional architectural practices. The *esemo*, ancestors, form the nucleus of the kinship relationship, which influences the way space is designed and defined. Traditionally, space had no physically defined boundaries, so neighbours, who were traditionally kinsmen lived together communally. Architectural spaces and human behaviour were closely connected. Kinship takes pre-eminence in this arrangement, with the connecting ancestor forming the central feature of the community and its structures. The kinship relationship of the people determines the allocation of land for building or farm work. It also determines their living and social interactions within those spaces. A man could give a portion of land to his cousin without charge or deed of conveyance, but require the receiver to bring only a bottle of *ogogoro*, local gin for prayers of blessing upon the gifted parcel of land. The kinsmen would put their efforts and skills together to construct the dwelling for the new landowner so that they could live near one another. Such a gift or even a sale of land would not be offered to a stranger or a community member from another family, because a stranger living near this family could cause interference with the family life that was centred around their ancestor. Consequently, the space defines the identity of those dwellings next to one another as “children” of the same ancestor. This ancestor becomes the mental and spiritual central feature around which the traditional buildings are constructed and around which their social lives unfold. This is so, regardless of the physical forms these settlements may take.



Figure 1. A commissioned worker building a vernacular dwelling in an open compound. Photograph by the author

The built environment expresses and shapes community organisation and identity (Gyucha and Salisbury, 2022), however, in the case of Urhobo vernacular architecture, it may also apply the other way round. In the architectural tradition of the Urhobo people, their identity and kinship relations could also shape and express the layout of their built environment. They build to suit their kinship relationship; thus, their communities are *identity units*, which, according to Gyucha and Salisbury (2022), develop as a result of the “integration of individuals and groups by way of shared values and ideological agendas”. Obiagwu and Obasi (2021) succinctly stated that in these small-scale traditional societies, social organisations and social structures are understood only through the idiom of social relationship arising from the mutual rights and obligations which mark the kinship system.



Figure 2. A vernacular dwelling in an open compound with a bathroom at the backyard where neighbours can have a shared bathroom. Photograph by the author.

2.2. Spatial and Material Transformations

Modernity, globalisation and their effect on vernacular architecture

Modernity and globalisation are agents of change to traditional social and cultural practices, including erosion of vernacular architectural traditions (Pardo, 2023; and Samalavičius and Traškinaitė, 2021). In Nigeria, several factors associated with modernity and globalisation are responsible for these changes. These factors include climate change and ignorance about the sustainability of local materials used for constructing vernacular architecture. Local builders and house owners now prefer to use foreign building materials like corrugated iron sheets, concrete, and rods, which are readily available as a result of globalisation and the assumption that foreign building materials are more prestigious than local raw materials. Like a bombshell coming after a barrage of gunshots, the global spread of architectural modernity and urbanism became so dominating that these factors have led to the marginalising and neglecting of vernacular architecture (Samalavičius, Traškinaitė, 2021). During a research visit to Olodiana, a neighbouring community some years ago, I observed hybrid dwellings that were constructed with both local and foreign materials, which signalled the gradual decline in preference for local materials.

How modernity disrupts and threatens Urhobo communal living and social relations

Modernity has changed, not only the built environment and the local building tradition, but it has also disrupted social and cultural practices and communal living in hybrid and modern architectural spaces in Urhobo communities. In the context of this study, modernity refers to the state of “social existence that is radically different to all past forms of human experience” (Shilliam, 2010). The difference between the old and the modern built-environment of Urhobo people is especially manifest in the construction of walls, and architectural practice, which now affects social relations. It appears that these changes in architectural construction and lifestyle are both attitudinal and an adaptive mechanism. For instance, economic globalisation and the acquisition of new values and habits by local people in a neo-liberalised African economy has led to the introduction of Western individualism, which causes the alienation of people from one another, as opposed to African communalism and communal ownership of land (Acquah, Appiah-Konadu, and Amoah, 2023). Furthermore, the people change their choice of

building materials, from traditional to modern to help them adapt to changing environmental disasters such as flooding and harmful events that damage their traditional constructions.

An elder who has lived through generations that experienced the old and the new in Urhobo architectural and cultural space observes that communal living in the Urhobo community has changed. His observation points out attitudinal changes in people who now live with suspicion of their neighbours and such suspicions have led to the modern practice of constructing walls to ward off intrusion into one's compound. People now believe that intrusion could either be physical, spiritual or both. In the case of physical intrusion, a neighbour could encroach on a piece of land that is near his and claim it as theirs, but in the case of spiritual intrusion, intruders could invite malevolent spirits and cast spells on the particular piece of land in dispute to cause harm to the other disputant. At times, and the top of several plantain plant are cut off and they are planted upside down on the disputed land. If this is done, the occupant or user of that piece of land would withdraw due to fear of death, as the plantain planted upside down was symbolic of death to whoever uses the land, whether it was the rightful owner or not.

The changing organisation of house and compound construction



Figure 3. *A modern building with a wall under construction. Photograph by the author.*

2.3. Proxemics, Kinship and Social Tensions

The findings of this research can be grouped into three general thematic categories, individualistic territoriality vs communal proxemics, personal security vs kinship relations, and the resultant social tensions and conflicts.

Proxemics and the Shift from Communal to Individual Territoriality

The research reveals a profound spatial transformation in the organization and perception of proximity within Urhobo communities, what might be termed a shift from communal proxemics to individualistic territoriality. Traditionally, the spatial orientation of Urhobo settlements fostered a sense of physical openness and social permeability. Neighbours, often kinsmen, lived in interconnected compounds with open spaces, shared courtyards, and absent boundary walls, promoting free movement, spontaneous interaction, and mutual support. These architectural expressions of proxemics, how people perceive and use space, were deeply informed by kinship ties and collective values. The absence of walls symbolized an embedded trust and a collective understanding of space not as something to be possessed, but as something to be shared for mutual benefit.

However, as modernity, economic migration, and global architectural influences take root, Urhobo communities are witnessing the dissolution of open spatiality. The introduction of walls, both symbolic and literal, is now reshaping proxemics in fundamental ways. These barriers demarcate “mine” from “yours,” not just in landholding but in worldview. It is now articulated how modern compounds now mirror notions of privacy, surveillance, and autonomy, aligning with Western individualism and property norms. The erection of boundary walls, metal gates, and private entrances does more than restrict physical access; it marks the psychological shift from collective belonging to personal territory. In many observed cases, walls have also become instruments of silent communication and symbolic

assertion of land claims. Individuals now use indirect, nonverbal methods such as planting plantains upside down, an ominous and culturally charged practice, to stake their ownership or ward off other claimants to the same property. These gestures were previously unimaginable within the ethos of Urhobo communal living. The reorientation of spatial values is thus altering community dynamics, where proximity no longer implies relational closeness but rather a contested geography of distrust, and where houses, once clustered as expressions of shared ancestry, now declare separateness through masonry and boundaries.

Kinship, Ancestral Centrality, and Eroding Intergenerational Bonds

The dissolution of communal proxemics simultaneously signals a weakening of kinship as the organizing principle of space. Historically, Urhobo communities were designed around what this research refers to as “mental central features”, the *esemo* (ancestors) whose spiritual and symbolic presence provided both cosmological anchoring and social coherence. Spatial organization revolved around genealogical unity, not urban planning logic. This ancestral focus dictated how land was gifted, shared, or used. Fathers bequeathed land to sons, cousins helped one another build dwellings, and constructions emerged not through architectural blueprints but through family consensus and social obligation. This kinship-oriented model meant that boundaries were not reinforced with walls but with rituals of trust and reciprocal labour. Urhobo vernacular architecture reflected this ethos: kitchens, shrines, yam barns, and even bathrooms were constructed as communal assets accessible to all members of a compound. Children could pass through neighbouring homes without suspicion, and interactions across households sustained a rich intergenerational transmission of not just craft and custom, but emotional bonds and ethical imagination. This lifestyle was so entrenched that even the repainting of houses with brown mud became a ritual of collective renewal, performed annually by family members.

However, field observations and interviews reveal that this ancestrally-rooted kinship model is under siege. In contemporary Urhobo settings, architecture now mirrors individual aspirations rather than collective identity. Dwellings are no longer sited with reference to ancestral shrines or communal compounds but are dictated by market logic, privacy needs, and personal security. Kin no longer live in clusters where identity is spatially reenacted; instead, relatives are scattered, increasingly estranged by structural design. This unraveling of kinship centrality also carries intergenerational consequences. The once-organic apprenticeship of mat-weaving, building, and social etiquette, learned through immersion in daily compound life, is now disrupted by the decline of shared spaces. Parents express wariness about allowing their children to interact freely with neighbours’ children, citing fears of metaphysical harm or harmful gossip. Kinship, once the guarantor of trust, is now contingent and negotiated rather than assumed. Walls, therefore, do not just divide space, they fragment genealogies, severing the fluid transmission of culture embedded in architecture and everyday dwelling.

Social Tensions and the Rise of Spatial Conflict

The most potent consequence of these shifting spatial and kinship dynamics is the rise in social tensions, often manifesting in land disputes, emotional estrangement, and interpersonal conflicts. As traditional systems of communal coexistence erode, and as land becomes a contested resource under neoliberal economic pressures, urbanization brings with it friction. Informants described escalating conflicts that arise from ambiguous or violated boundary expectations. Where once a father’s land could be informally shared among siblings and cousins through mutual understanding, today’s landscape demands legal titles, fences, and confrontations.

Disputes now commonly begin with subtle provocations, altering old boundary lines or planting symbolic deterrents like upside-down plantain stems. Such gestures often result in verbal altercations, swearing, and threats. The ethnographic data detail cases where disputes transitioned from minor disagreements to formal summons by community institutions or even to courts of law. The decline of traditional conflict resolution through the *ovie*, *ekpako*, or *eghweya* institutions, as outlined in the study, means disputes linger longer and fester deeper, sometimes erupting into retributive acts such as demolishing unauthorized structures or invoking spiritual sanctions ((Diakparomre, 2009).

Underlying these overt tensions is a new model of social paranoia, where the neighbour is refigured not as a potential helper, but a potential harmer. This defensive behaviour where parents increasingly instruct their children not to play beyond their compound walls, citing fears of physical or metaphysical

danger, represents a dramatic departure from earlier times when neighbourliness was both expected and celebrated. The cultural logic has pivoted, from kinship interdependence to individualized vigilance and withdrawal.

As the architecture of compounds shifts, so too does the architecture of social relations. Older residents lament the loss of what they term the “spirit of kinship”, a living ethos that once animated Urhobo communities through seasonal festivals, inter-compound ceremonies, and daily acts of mutual aid. Modern compounds, with their enclosed courtyards and gated facades, stifle incidental interactions, such as borrowing cooking utensils, sharing news, or offering help during illness. The compounded result is a society spatially compressed but emotionally distant, where living “near one another” no longer guarantees communal life.

3. CONCLUSION

The Urhobo people of southern Nigeria once lived a communal lifestyle in their vernacular-built environments, but modernity and globalisation has negatively impacted their social life and their architectural practices in modern times. Compounds and houses nowadays are being constructed to portray new behavioural patterns that are influenced by Western individualism as opposed to former African communalism of their forefathers. Furthermore, observations of the social behaviour during recent ethnographic fieldwork within the built environment of an Urhobo town indicate that these new trends in social behaviour have opened up avenues for social tensions and conflicts among neighbours. The findings of this study indicate that the “spirit of kinship” and the traditional friendly social relations of kinsmen are declining drastically and boundary disputes and other social tensions have become rampant among neighbours.

Taken together, the findings of this research illuminate how architecture is not a passive container of social life but an active agent in shaping behaviour, values, and conflict. The move from communal proxemics to territorial individualism has upended traditional understandings of kinship and community, triggering a cascade of social tensions in Urhobo society. Walls are not just walls; they are expressions of ideological shifts, of modernity asserting its dominion over ancestry, of suspicion replacing trust, and of privacy undermining solidarity. Yet, this transformation is not inevitable nor irreversible. Documenting the intricate connections between built space and social life, could ensure contributions to a growing call for heritage-informed, community-driven architectural practices, ones that preserve not just physical forms but the relational ethics embedded within them. As Urhobo society grapples with the demands of modernity, the challenge lies in finding creative ways to harmonize innovation with inheritance, ensuring that the spirit of kinship finds new architectural expression, even in a changing world.

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