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REBIRTH OF THEATRE, USING SPATIAL FLEXIBILITY AS A CONCEPT: THE CASE OF NON-EXISTENCE OF FUNCTIONAL PERFORMING ART THEATRE IN AWKA.

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ABSRACT

When Architects create spatial design for various types of uses and experience, they consider both the aesthetic quality of the space, and consider how people interact within the space. The dynamic nature of urban cities, and a quest for active space has informed this study, as the evolution of cultures, traditions, and as man's activities, is geared towards survival, relaxation, worship, festivals, entertainment, etc. in a peaceful and orderly communal gathering. Performing arts such as music, dance, drama, comedy, etc; suggest the ways in which men met the above needs, however, these spaces are demanding, as to effectively communicate the intended purpose. This study focuses on methods of making a performance space flexible enough to accommodate various forms of the performing arts, and also house the different types of performing arts, which would cost much with respect to both space and the time frame in which such spaces are being used.

Keywords: Theatre, architecture, flexibility, spatial, performing art, communal.

Introduction

The performing arts, is one of the oldest and most popular forms of entertainment, in which actors perform live (via music, dance, drama, comedy, miming etc.) to an audience on a stage or in another space designated for the performance, either permanently or temporarily. The performing arts can serve many ends. Its purpose could be to entertain, to instruct, to motivate, to persuade, and even to shock, (Barranger, 2002). Therefore, the performing arts are intended primarily to sensitize, educate and bring global attention to the vital role of theatre in the affairs of man, socially and politically (Asagba, 2012). The theater is a kind of court where the economic, social, religious, and political issues of society are outlined, evaluated and judged, and known to be alive to the social-political realities of its time as this effect arouse the awareness of real or imagined situation of life being presented on stage by actors. Hence, the dramatist uses theatre to create awareness in the mind of the audience to change the ills of his society (Umenyilorah, 2014).

Our attention is hereby drawn to the submission of Dandaura and Asigbo, (1999.51), thus: Live theatre is fast losing its audience and the reasons for this loss could range from socio-economic factors to advances in technology, and Nigerian audience also has preference for novelty. The advent of television, radio and other electronic media of entertainment (phones, tablets, etc.) brought about advancement and diversion from the live theatre performance (Mabel, 1999). This has

brought relaxation and entertainment outside the theatre and deprived it of its audience patronage and its impact on the community.

However, performing arts building projects have been considered complex, and unique due to the strict requirements for meeting exacting technical demands and the necessity to respond to the varying, and sometimes conflicting needs of artists, performers, managerial staff, funding organizations, and the general public (Strong, 1990; Mulryne and Shewring, 1995; Appleton, 1996). These activities call for multiplicity of space, with huge economic liability, attributes and flexibility, to meet these various demands. Conditions of economic distress are often characterized by the lack of and/or ineffectiveness of existing systems of planning, which are typically contingent upon capital investment and tax-based resources (Acharya, 2013).

It is a quest for architectural solutions which may reflect the meaning of theatre, express contemporary ideas, or even create the meaning of theatre in our age, quite like it was once done by a box set in the illusionary theatre, architecture could regain the power to create spaces adequate for theatre through realization of the need of common space in the city (Wozniak, 2019).

Since Modern Movement, “flexibility” has been one of the most attractive words in architecture. According to Walter Gropius in 1954, looking at the dynamic features of modern life, insisted architecture needs to be flexible enough. The need for flexibility has been increasing, and it is natural that the “flexibility” concept is in the limelight of the field of architecture when we think about rapidly changing recent social demands. The impact of accelerating change on the physical form of the city is radical. Institutions have shorter, and shorter lives, railway stations, are converted into museums, power plants into art galleries, churches into night-clubs, warehouses into homes, and it is now a common place to anticipate that a building will outlive the purpose for which it is built in a matter of a few years. Modern life can no longer be defined in the long term and consequently cannot be contained within a static order of symbolic buildings and spaces. The classical order of architectural symbolism is no longer relevant. Buildings no longer symbolize a static hierarchical order; instead, they have become flexible containers for use by a dynamic society. Rogers Richard, mentioned the obsoleteness of the contemporary society and called for an architectural solution in his book, Cities for a small planet (Richard, 1998).

Flexible Space can be an effective way to promote place making and community development, flexible and short-term uses have a positive impact in connecting communities, and in linking people with places. The shared activation of a flexible Space can empower local networks, because it allows users and activators to develop new bonds of communication and trust (Acharya, 2013).

This is architecture that adapt, responds to changes, and not static, It is a design form that is by its essence cross disciplinary, multi-functional and consequently, is frequently innovative and expressive of contemporary design issues. By revealing its basis, and the factors that are determining its development, the value and relevancy of flexible architecture to contemporary problems, associated with technological, social and economic change can be revealed (Kronenburg, 2005).

This paper is not a re-reading of contemporary theories of performing arts and architecture; rather it is an approach into conceptual achievements of constructing space in a performing art theatre that provides tools for attracting the audiences to its architectural space and times, and issues surrounding the involvement of user groups in the performing arts.

Aim/Purpose of the Study

To emphasize the essence of spatial flexiblity architectural concept, as a tool in the rebirth of performing art theatre, thereby preserving the cultural heritage of Awka people.

Research Method

Methodology is the systematic, theoretical analysis of the methods applied to a field of study. Typically, it encompasses concepts such as paradigm, theoretical model, phases and quantitative or qualitative techniques, theoretical analysis of the body of methods and principles associated with a branch of knowledge. (Irny and Rose, 2005).

In tackling complex issues in complex arts projects, case study methodology has been selected as an appropriate research approach, as it is study is regarded as a strategy, a stance or an approach rather than a method in research (Robson, 2002).

In order to acquire knowledge on this thesis, the researcher used the Qualitative research methodology. This research methodology employed in this thesis involved; Primary source of data includes: interviews, photographs, field trips, etc, and Secondary source of data includes literature reviews from journals, previous works, books, internet, libraries and past research on this topic.

This is not a pre-defined subject and it is based on an extensive research in the field, a thesis based on postgraduate studies and research in addition to the practice in stage design and activities in a theatre. Besides professional practice, a wide range of performances have been critically viewed and studied in detail and the aspects of the use of stage space have been examined; likewise the general spaces around the theatre. These performances were chosen in the light of the advices of professionals: architects, stage designers and directors. Being staged in various venues, these performances varied in style and in the use of performance space and theatre buildings. First-hand experience contributed to the development of this study is seen in the various case studies, library research that includes a wide range of sources on visual culture, architecture, history of theatre, and stage and theatre design was crucial in the development of the terminology and the understanding of the issues in this research project. Bookstores having books specializing in theatre have also been a rich source. Online magazines such as “Expanding the Performances Area: the Nigerians Artistes’ ordeal”, “Performing arts spaces” and several web sites were searched in order to receive daily information about recent works. Written sources dealing with the relations of architecture and theatre mostly focus on the historical development of theatre space. The structure of the performance and its relation to the stage and theatre space; the evolution of theatre architecture; changing intentions in the way of staging; the relationship of the audience and the actors and its effect on the shaping of the stage space have also been studied in these publications. Just to name a few, Architect’s data by Ernst Neufert, The Second Book on Architecture by

Sebastiano Serlio, Ten Books on Architecture by Vitruvius, The Origin of Perspective by Hubert Damish, Essays, Scenarios and Designs by AdolpheAppia and On Theatre by E. Gordon Craig, Designing for the performing arts by Ian Appleton, Space in Performance by Gay McAuley, Architecture, Actor and Audience by Iain Mckintosh, Places of Performance by Marvin Carlson, Dennis Sharp's essays Theatre Spaces and Performances and City as a Stage were the most influencing sources for the development of this study. This study drew on the knowledge accumulated in the sources mentioned above, but it also made use of them to develop a terminology.

The Modern Movement in performing arts has challenged the notion of decorative elements designed visually for the stage and which have no function. This can be defined as a break-through from the production of mimetic compositions on the stage. Theories of theatre give shape to both the architecture of the building and the use of stage space in addition to the architectural aspects of the stage-set. There is one more definition that has to be given, which is that of the word "scenography" or used in particular as "scenery". The term refers to the visual composition of the stage space. The composition includes the elements such as performers, costume, lighting and stage set.

Findings

Anambra **S**tate was created from the former East Central State, created on 27 May 1967 from parts of the Eastern Region and existed until 03 February 1976. Under the former administrative division of Nigeria East Central State and was divided into the separate states of Anambra and Imo. Anambra and Imo States were further divided into many states, now comprises five states Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Ebonyi and Abia (East Central State, 2006).

Over the years, **Awka** Town has attracted people from other states in Nigeria and has a significant number of immigrants from northern Nigeria, Delta, Enugu states, Cameroon, Ghana, etc. now comprising more than 60% of residents in the town.

Land use in Awka

Awka Territory covers 10 km, which is rapidly developing into a mass of urban areas growing to merge with each other. The land uses and urban forms of Awka are slightly different, exhibiting the dual character deriving from its two major components – the first a new town grafted onto the old city separated by the express way. The older part reflects the urban elements peculiar to traditional Igbo settlement, with a palace and market square at the centre, providing ample open spaces for recreation, religious, economic and socio-cultural activities. Informal activities are carried out within the curtilages of buildings, with every inch of the spaces around the homes, for air circulation and ventilation almost built over, housing is very dominant, most uses here are very mixed as commercial activities. The areas not built upon has been due to certain natural barriers for development such as several water/flood courses, erosion sites, ravines, deep valleys, shrines, religious forests and traditional sites. It is observed that formal recreational areas are not in Awka Territory except the Awka stadium, in the central core, an appropriate space for indoor and outdoor games and recreational facilities. Awka land use is distributed over residential, industrial, commercial, administrative, agricultural areas, however an addition of a well-located park in the core will provide adequate recreation open

space for most people in the city particularly during festive periods, as these incidental open spaces where people occasional relax would foster communal gathering and thereby preserve the cultural heritage of Awka community.



Plate 1. *Awka township stadium fc. Harkdove, from access gate.*
Source: authors field work



Plate 2. *Awka township stadium fc. Harkdove, view of site, presently used as a temporary community football pitch.*
Source: authors field work

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Plate 3. *Awka township stadium fc. Harkdove, view of entrance to site from major road. Source: Goggle earth map.*

Awka indigenous festivities: In ancient Awka community every month has a feast attached to it except for the fourth month. Awka people lay so much emphasis on season because it guides and directs their cultural activities.

Festivities in Awka traditional community extends beyond the religious ritual to physical entertainment. In this vein, Ogbalu (1973) observed that "the last days is dominated by display of masquerade, dances and presentation of citizens in the squares...celebration is a form of eating and drinking". Festive merriment helps in relaxation yet if care is not taken during such moments traditional norms might be broken as a result of excesses. Traditional festival as celebrated in Awka, apart from eating and drinking, encourages relaxation and entertainment through music and dancing. Festival is nothing but a fété with dancing, music, feasting and general manifestation of pleasure, enjoyment with congratulations for previous years, and good wishes for the year ahead, as music, dance and song to the community are instrument for creating social emotional and aesthetic solidarity, Basden (1960).

Despite, the idleness as a result of the relaxation which accompanies festivities it enhances community life as Mbiti (1970) outlined in the following benefit: "through festivals the life of the community is renewed. People are entertained and their tension finds outlet. It also brings together the people as a group, thus strengthening their unity and cohesion. Religious and secular values are repeated and renewed through communal festivals. Artistic talents are utilized, drama and oral communication. Where the festival involves beliefs concerning the unseen world, the link between human beings and the spirit is renewed".

Analysing the above literature one would agree with me that festival is one of the key factors that has helped in cementing community life in traditional African community especially Awka town. On this note Nwuneli (1987) using the mmonwu festival of Anambra state brought to light the objectives and salient achievement of the festival in the following words "it was an attempt to link those who have often driften from rural to the urban areas for many years without seeking their root...the mmonwu festival has succeeded in reviving

our cultural heritage, boosted tourism and was a great significance to the national pride".

Flexibility Concept

Flexible theatre format, is the way in which theatre spaces can be adapted to suit the various challenges that modern performances demand are categorised into:

A. Stage requirements for multi-purpose halls; stage design, simple staging seating adaptation.

B. Basic flexible systems**;** adaptable courtyard theatre.

C. Compartmentation of spaces; modular portable relocatable wall, operable individual panels, folding partition.

D. Space dividing elements; moving walls, and furniture, moving ceiling.

E. Major mechanised system

Theatre Space for Multipurpose Uses

A multiform theatre can be reconfigured to change the actor-audience relationship and the seat count. By moving large architectural elements, the one-room form of the concert hall can be transformed into a two-room theatre: an auditorium and a stage with a proscenium. Side wall seating towers can be positioned to narrow the room or otherwise change its proportion. Often, the orchestra floor (stalls) can be levelled and the seats removed to create a large, flexible, flat floor area. As a special field of room acoustics, concert hall acoustics focuses in the design of spaces for live music events, typically unamplified, with audience capacity ranging from 300 to 2500 seats.

Form Analysis

There are four key matters to be established in the initial stages of planning, namely, the size of the hall, its plan shape, whether the floor is to be made level or raked to give a stepped incline, and if a stage house is to be installed. To some extent these are all inter-dependent to plan shape, as a major consideration in achieving effective spatial flexibility in a performing art theatre.

Conclusion

The design of performing art theatre, Awka, would proffer solutions to the crises of diversification of thoughts, create a unified community, and also enhance communal gathering, through one activity or the other, as performers perform, and the user interfere with the spaces, both within the facility, and on site. Through planning and construction, of the ideas gathered from literature review, case studies and their constituent analysis, this would go a long way in the designing an ideal performing art theatre.

Recommendations

By this research, it is clear that theatre can be flexible, to incorporate activities of both co-operate, modern, traditional and social gatherings, through architectural strategies such as, flexible spaces both on site and multifunctional spaces in facilities, and also enhance the effective impact of the performing art on users and the society at large. The use of low-lying landscape shrubbery and beautiful trees, and seat-out on site, will encourage meeting point for users and also outdoor art performances etc. The design has also provided lettable spaces option, for temporary and permanent renting, to improve capital productivity to sustain the facilities, and the societies, as it also attract tourist to the city.

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