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FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, MINNA



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AYUBA PHILIP

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**HELD AT THE FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY,
MINNA, MAIN CAMPUS GIDAN KWANO
ON 28TH FEB – 2ND MARCH 2007.**

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IMPROVING THE AESTHETICS OF RESIDENTIAL
URBAN CENTRE: A NEED FOR CONSIDERABLE
PART OF AN ENTIRE BUILDING DESIGN

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Abstract

The beauty of an urban centre is a function of the buildings and the infrastructures. A building is considered beautiful when it can be appreciated from outside, this however, is not possible in the residential areas of most urban centres in Nigeria. The beauty of the building is covered up by the fence or distracted by the nature of the fence. The type of fences found in the urban centres tend to hide the entire building from the access road and in most case only the roofs of such houses are visible. This trend gives the urban centre a view best described as a jungle of walls. This paper examines the nature and function of fences in residential areas, it takes a look at the benefits derivable by a change in current fence design. The paper advocates for necessary laws that should govern the construction of fences, it makes a case for Architects to include fence designs as part of building designs. The paper examines the generation of street character using fences. The paper concludes that there is an urgent need for a change so as to improve the beauty of urban centres and general living conditions of the urban dwellers.

Keywords: Residential, Fence, Urban, Beauty, Character

Introduction

The beauty of an environment is a function of the beauty of the smaller units and sections that make up such an environment. In the case of the urban centres we live in today, the beauty of such urban centres is a product of the infrastructures, people and culture of such urban centre. Whereas it might not be very visible to determine how the people and their culture affect the urban centres, it would be much easier to visualize the effects of the various infrastructures in these urban centres. The type, nature and manner of use or arrangement of these infrastructures often help describe how an urban centre is viewed. There are several infrastructures found in the urban centres of Nigeria, however this paper examines the trend of fences in residential areas of the urban centres, with a view of showing the need for greater attention in this aspect of the built environment in order to improve the beauty of Nigerian urban centres.

Urban Centres and Buildings

The major physical make-up of urban centres are buildings, these buildings are used for various activities based on the need of man. These buildings serve as office accommodation, markets, schools, hospitals and many more, but the most important function is that of accommodation. A great percentage of the buildings found in the urban centres serve residential purpose, yet it is still not enough. According to Zubairu (2006) the UN projection of demographic growth of developing countries will add about 2 billion new urban residents in the next twenty years. This projection gives a view of the need of residential houses in the urban centres. The growth of the urban centres in Nigeria could be linked to the concentration of major basic facilities such as schools, hospitals and parastatals. This action creates an erroneous believe for the average person of success as soon as he gets to the urban centres.

The nature of the buildings in urban centres often reflect the type of activity performed in such a building and the in most cases the level of wealth associated with the users. It is

common to find that most private parastals offices are often the finest while that of government public buildings are often times than not in a poor state, this disparity is also visible in their surroundings. The sad thing is that this trend is also revealed in the residential areas within the urban centres though in a different form.

Residential Buildings in Urban Centres

One of the problems of the new millennium facing man today is that of overpopulation (Obi, 2006). This problem translates to various aspects of our society and life, it implies that available resources which hitherto were adequate were becoming inadequate. It is safe therefore to conclude that residential buildings are also a problem for this millennium. According to Olotuah and Adesiji (2006) the growth rate of urban population is more pronounced in Nigeria than most other countries in the African Continent. This is true based on the population of Nigeria, hence it implies that the urban centres in Nigeria are facing a lot of housing problems. Past governments have tried to solve the problem of housing but with little impact, however the common trend now is the provision of housing by private organizations or individuals in various forms. The scheme adopted by most urban dwellers is that of self help housing which intern could lead to the development of slums.

The residential houses provided by government in the urban centres are often mass type of housing with basically one design. The areas where these houses are often located were serviced with good supporting facilities and where often allocated to a particular class of urban dwellers. This trend created a social stratification order, with the increase in population and the inadequacy of government to meet the demand in housing, urban dwellers who could afford to build their personal houses began to build and vacate government owned house and hence the quality of such house began to drop. Gradually government withdrew from housing and as is the case presently in Nigeria government is selling the houses it used to own. This act has forced many people to build, buy or rent a house. The visible change in housing that accompanied this trend was the introduction of fences within in the residential areas, several reasons could be adjudged for it. Worthy note here is that fences were not part of government form of housing in the urban centre but rather it is a product of the individuals who dwell in these urban centres.

Nature of Fences in Nigerian Urban Centres

The type and nature of the fences found in urban centres of Nigeria vary both in design and function. The growth of the urban centres has brought along a lot of problems that require adequate consideration. People of questionable character are found in the urban centres, hence it was not longer enough to have barriers in form of flowers and hedges around a building to stop people from trespassing and committing crime. Buildings based on their level of significance and function/activity carried out within them required various level of security. It is common to find low fences around buildings that have security personnel who man their premises, in other cases you find high fences around buildings leaving the passer by with no clue as regards what goes on inside such buildings.

Fences in most civil buildings are a combination of low walls, pillars and iron rods. They are used to achieve various patterns and allow for view of the building from the access roads. The same can not be said for that of factories and some other buildings, here high walls are used as fences and in some cases electrocutable wire mesh are fixed on top of the fences. The basic desire of these owners is simple and that is to keep as many intruders away from their property or activity. It is worthy of mentioning that these fences add to the appearance of our urban centres, however the function of these fences is being called to question as is evident with the level of crime experienced in the urban centres. The nature

of fences found in residential areas is one that calls for immediate attention, because the nature of residential areas is taking a new look.

Fences in Residential Areas

Residential areas are made up of houses meant to serve as accommodation for the occupants and some other supporting facilities such as corner shops. The process of owning a home starts from acquiring the land, securing it, building and protecting it from trespassers. This need to protect one's home in the urban centre has brought about the type of fences we see in most residential areas. The nature of fences varies amongst individual location. In urban centres where there is high crime rate you find fences that cover up the whole house. In other urban centres where the crime rate is not so high the fences are still high often just allowing the view of the roof alone from the access road. It is common sight to find beautiful houses with plain high walls as fence, these fences rather than complementing the beautiful houses most times take away from it or simply hide it. According to Zubairu (2006) the early architect was known as the master builder, he was in charge of practically of everything on the construction site. The question is how many of these fences are designed by architects in the residential area. The answer is very few; this assertion is made because you would not find any architect who would want to knowingly hide his work. The type of fence found around any house is a function of the desire and fears of the occupants. The sad story is that most of these high fences are found within the residential areas housing those in the middle and high class of the society in the urban centre. The slums which houses the poor is often without any fence and in places where they are found, they are very low of about 750mm high, used basically to demarcate plot.

Problems of Fences in Use in Residential Areas

The major function of a fence is that of security for the occupants of the house, this is why their design and nature vary. It is observable presently that these fences do not offer the required security as evident in the level crime in the urban centre. According to Okpoechi (2005), in recent years urban areas have become very complex and difficult to control. This is reflected in the height at which fences are built. This trend has its problems associated with it.

Aesthetics: Aesthetics as an important objective of design is a way of securing attractive solution by the choice of materials, size and other relevant factors. (Fadamiro & Atolagbe, 2005). This objective is often not reflected in the fences in residential areas because the importance of fence design is often neglected. The plain appearance of these fences robs the main building of its beauty, because it hides the main building which attention is often concentrated on. The type of fence in use in residential areas of urban centres end up making the urban centres have an appearance of what could be termed as a jungle of walls.

Ventilation: The sizes of plot sold in the urban centres are such that when fences are erected in the form practiced today, the movement of air around the building becomes a problem. The walls (fence) in relation to the building often create a wind valley, such that wind is deflected up and just before it gets down it encounters the building roof. The windows based on their height are in the valley hence air does not come into the building.

Security: The fences are meant to offer security to the people behind it, this it does to some extent, however with the level of sophistication in crime and the call for community policing it shows that fence alone can not offer the level of security it is assumed to offer. The high fences found in Nigerian urban centres hide

activities behind it, this makes it difficult for anybody outside the fence to offer any form of assistance if there is any intrusion by intruders.

Fire escape: The height of the fence and gate make it difficult for quick response in the case of fire out break within the premises. This is because it becomes difficult for anyone to jump the fence either from within the premises or from outside to offer help.

Structural stability: The foundations of the fences are often not as deep as that of the main building, yet they are built to be quite high. The fence is exposed to wind load and this causes a form of concern in the periods of stormy winds. The bending moments of these fences are also high because their centre of gravity is high.

The Architect and Fence Design

The problems associated with the nature of fences in residential areas could be traced to the neglect of fence design in the entire scheme of building design process. This has created a vacuum, which is filled by the client as he so wishes. This paper believes that if the study and design of fences is included in the training of architects the nature of the fences will begin to change. The architect by training is expected to proffer solutions through his designs. The aspects which the architect should consider in the design of fences should aim at solving the problems highlighted above.

Aesthetics: Special attention should be paid to appearances of fences so that they complement and reflect the character of the building.

Ventilation: Fences should not be built completely solid walls alone rather a combination of iron grills or perforated blocks could be used so as to allow for air to flow with minimum deflection.

Security: Rather than rely solely on the height of fence as the major form of security other options should be examined. Enhance visibility from outside should be encouraged as a form of security.

Fire escape: The method employed in the case of ventilation could be employed, the benefit is that fire could easily be detected from outside and it would be easy to escape and offer assistance to the occupants.

Structural stability: If the height of the fences are reduced and more light weight materials are used the dead load of the fence is reduced. The foundation of fences should also be considered and treated like that of the main building

Street Character of Residential Areas

The nature and type of street outlook is a function of the fences and houses that make up the street. According to Eneh (2006), since ancient times designers looked at nature for solutions to their design problems because they saw in nature a perfect model. A careful examination of this statement makes us understand and know where to look for certain things nature has to offer because of peculiar characters. It is like looking at and trail of ants you will notice its character, everything in nature has character, however in urban centres in Nigeria attention is not paid to developing characters for our built environment. According to Motloch (2001) visual overload is a stress on the aesthetics of the environment, the practice in residential areas of urban centres in which the fence design is left to the client's decision gives rise to chaos in appearance of the streets which these fences line which best describes visual overload.. This paper views fences as a major way of developing characters for the streets where they are located. They could be of same height, design, material or colour. These characters when developed fully would help in improving the beauty of the street and in turn the environment.

Need for Laws Governing Design

It is a usual saying that where there is no law, there is no crime. This implies that if there is no law to govern the design and construction of fence as regards approval by the various urban development boards, it would be wrong to blame anyone for this present trend. According to Uji (2004), when people relate or interact with one another, such interaction or interrelationship is regulated by various aspects of the law circumscribing the element exigencies of the interaction. It is obvious from the required drawings to be submitted at the different planning authorities in urban centres in Nigeria, that a vacuum has been created as regards fences design and construction in residential areas.

There is a need for the appropriate bodies and professionals concerned with building development in urban centres in Nigeria to fashion out adequate laws regulating our fence design and construction. The authorities should also ensure that there are ways of enforcing such laws and providing adequate penalties for defaulters.

Conclusion

The design of fence should be given a second look and adequate consideration. This particular aspect which speaks a lot about the aesthetics of an urban centre should not be left at the discretion of the clients alone without any professional input. The benefits of properly designed fence far out weigh the problems of with most fences in-use within residential areas. Fence design should be taught in Nigerian schools of architecture and town planning, semester designs should also comprise fence design along with the main project design. This would make the students get used to such a practice and hence apply it during practice, this would help improve our urban centres in Nigeria.

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