

# Backwards and Forwards

From Jeremy Till's lecture series, it is clear that to sufficiently speculate what the future of the architect is and what their role in society will be we must first look to the past and see what they have been. As my Lab B project centres in Nigeria, West Africa. I have chosen to research a specific era in history and analyse the role of the architect and the wider implications of their professional ambition. This time period is the Cold War era, specifically 1964-1977. The architect whose role and contributions I have chosen to research is Polish architect Zbigniew Dmochowski. This time in history is particularly important in West Africa, as many countries across the African continent, including Nigeria, rallied for independence from European colonial powers. Following independence and the end of a subsequent civil war, Nigeria's military leader Yakubu Gowon encouraged collaboration with Eastern Bloc countries, specifically Eastern European construction companies in order to bolster Nigeria's construction industry. This was a deliberate move by Gowon's regime to nullify the influence of the British colonial administration in newly-independent Nigeria. This led to an influx of architects, engineers and contractors from the "Second-World", with ambitions to implement the socialist development model in the Global South (Łukasz Stanek 2020). Dmochowski, however, differed from his contemporaries as he took a deep interest in the vernacular architecture of Nigeria. He travelled the country extensively researching and documenting the traditional architecture of Nigeria—its forms, materiality, programme, climatic control etc.

Unlike neighbouring Ghana, who eagerly adopted socialist ideals under Kwame Nkrumah's leadership a decade prior (he saw the socialist model of development as the most viable route to post-colonial development); the Nigerian political elites were naturally apathetic towards socialism (Łukasz Stanek 2020). This attitude persisted throughout the Cold War years despite positive Nigerian-Soviet relations during the previous decade due to the military and financial support rendered by the Soviet Union during the Biafran War. Despite this sentiment, collaboration with the second world was still seen as the more equitable form of partnership on the road to development, industrialisation and the viable route towards postcolonial cultural emancipation (Darnton 1976). This is important to note, as I would go as far as to compare this attitude to Nigeria's current relationship with the decarbonisation and climate justice movement. Socialism had a global impact with notable leaders and far-reaching political implications. Climate justice mirrors this movement with organisations like Extinction Rebellion and charismatic leaders and activists like Greta Thunberg. Despite these global waves, Nigeria is left largely unchanged and unmoved by the issue of climate change (despite being at the receiving end of its harshest consequences in the form of flooding, drought and deforestation). This is not too dissimilar to attitudes towards socialism fifty years ago. Whilst the rest of the world was experiencing the Red Scare— Nigeria, then and now, remains stoic and alarmingly indifferent (Das and Agbo 2019).

I know this from my professional experience working in Lagos, Nigeria. In 2018, I worked for an architecture firm based in Ikoyi, Lagos. The types of projects I worked on differed largely from affluent residential Villas on Lagos Island, public space redevelopments in the city centre as well as pro bono designs for charities and NGOs. Despite being able to work with local artisans well-skilled in carpentry and masonry, many of these projects (especially the high-end residential builds), resorted to importing much of the elements of the building- thus driving up the carbon footprint of its construction. Bulletproof windows made with armoured glass were imported from Germany. Portuguese tiles were shipped in (along with a whole team of Greek tilers to install the porcelain). Doors were frequently purchased from Italian manufacturers at the request of our clients. This experience was discouraging as I had moved to Nigeria with the intention of expanding my professional knowledge of indigenous technology and materials such as traditional cooling methods, adobe & rammed earth, traditional iron casting etc. However, such projects were incredibly rare. Instead, I worked on projects that only perpetuated class and colonial confines within contemporary Lagosian architecture (Heinrich Böll Stiftung 2016). To overcome this obstacle, I began to write, research and create architectural collages in my spare time. I often ventured to the sketchier parts of the City to explore and photograph the neglected architecture of Lagos. I eventually came across the International Trade Fair in the outskirts of Lagos. This complex was yet another product of the Nigerian-Eastern Bloc collaboration; designed by Serbian architect and engineer Zoran Bojovic in 1977 (Chimurenga and Diop 2019). This monumental building is an example of brutalist Yugoslavian architecture in Lagos which arguably hints to the socialist ambition gaining favour in Sub-Saharan Africa at the time. I was particularly drawn to this building as it embodies Nigeria's attempt at forging a distinct postcolonial identity (Łukasz Stanek 2020). A few months later, and the art I had created from roaming Lagos on the weekends eventually led to a joint exhibition with artist Katrin Winkler and architectural filmmaker Dane Komljen in Berlin, Germany. The exhibition, commissioned by the Goethe Institut, explored the significance of the market place in the process of decolonisation and climate injustice.

On reflection, the work of Zbigniew Dmochowski and his fellow collaborators from the Socialist Bloc countries provided inspiration for my own deviation from architect to architectural artist (and aspiring architecture historian). Dmochowski's surveys of Nigeria's spatial traditions meant architecture and its documentation was used as a means of decolonisation. A process that is needed today as much as it was fifty years ago. Though they may not have used this exact terminology at the time, the work of these architects led to the restoration and preservation of vernacular architecture in the region. The building surveys illustrate the climatic, cultural and geographical diversity of the country through its architectural language and the blueprints of the survey were subsequently used for the design of a number of Museums in Northern Nigeria, taking inspiration from traditional Kanuri architecture indigenous to the land (Łukasz Stanek 2020). Much like how these architects arguably aided decolonisation during the Cold War era is how future architects could aid the process of decarbonisation in the Global South.

# Abstract

I have a number of collaborative projects I am working on as part of my summer placement programme. Two of them take place in the virtual realm, while the other two take place in Lagos, Nigeria. To summarise, each project is essentially a collaboration with local artisans to either digitise their work, document their process and/or teach these skills to the next generation of craftspeople. Working in Nigeria in 2018, gave me an introduction to working with local carpenters, stonemasons, ceramicists, textile weavers, blacksmiths, leathersmiths etc. This heightened my awareness of the role of The Artisan in the future of architectural practice on the continent. I believe artisans are integral to the [re]development of a rich and vivacious West African architectural language. Defining this clear language, I believe, would in turn influence the rest of society to embrace indigenous solutions to our current environmental, political and social challenges. I have been invited to coordinate a Roaming Design School which will facilitate the teaching of traditional and contemporary artisanal craft in addition to providing professional development and design knowledge. During a series of workshops in led by notable artist, designers, writers and craftspeople from all social backgrounds, we hope to elevate the importance and understanding decarbonisation and decolonisation within design as well as support young artists and designers in Lagos in their professional endeavours.

In addition to the Roaming Design School, I am also working on a series of architectural papers to be published in the Late-Spring/Summer 2021. The current research paper I am drafting is on the architectural style brought to Nigeria by the emancipated Afro-Brazilians who migrated to Lagos and neighbouring cities in the mid-nineteenth century following the abolition of slavery. I have drafts for a number of other papers on the history of architecture in a number of West African cities including Accra, Ouagadougou, Bamako and Dakar. This relates to the main Summer placement as it is yet another means of documenting the architectural and artisanal design legacies of formerly colonised cities in West Africa.

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