Culture as a Medium for Expressing Architectural Identity

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Abstract
The increasing homogenisation of contemporary architectural expression has weakened the connection between built form and the cultural values that distinguish places and communities. This study examines culture as a medium for expressing architectural identity and investigates how cultural values are translated into identifiable architectural characteristics. A qualitative documentary research design was employed, drawing evidence from peer-reviewed publications, books, architectural records, historical documents, institutional reports and documented architectural cases. Relevant documents were purposively selected and systematically analysed through thematic coding and synthesis, focusing on cultural values, social practices, building form, spatial organisation, materials, construction techniques, symbolism and ornamentation. The findings indicate that cultural values and social practices shape architectural form, spatial configuration, material selection and symbolic expression, creating distinctive relationships between buildings and their cultural contexts. They further establish that architectural identity derives from the combined influence of physical attributes, cultural meanings and relationships with place, rather than from visual form alone. Culture therefore operates as a generative basis for architectural expression, influencing both the physical character and meaning of the built environment. The study contributes a conceptual basis for culturally responsive architectural practice, supporting contemporary design approaches that accommodate technological and social change while maintaining meaningful connections to cultural values, place and architectural character.

Keywords: *Culture; Architectural Identity; Cultural Expression; Building Form; Architectural Character; Cultural Continuity.*

1.0 Introduction

Culture provides the values, beliefs, knowledge, customs and social practices through which communities understand and organise their lives. These attributes influence not only social behaviour but also the physical environments in which people live. Architecture is consequently more than the provision of shelter or the resolution of functional requirements; it is a product of social values and a means through which those values acquire physical and spatial expression (Naghizadeh, 2000; Madadpoor, 2000; Parhizgar, 2003). The relationship is particularly evident in traditional environments, where patterns of living, belief systems, social organisation, environmental knowledge and available materials have historically influenced building form, spatial organisation and construction practices (Rapoport, 2021; Salama, 2020). Architecture therefore provides an important means of understanding how cultural values are translated into

the built environment. Architectural identity is closely associated with this relationship because identity concerns the characteristics through which individuals, communities and places are distinguished and recognised. In architecture, identity is expressed through the combined character of form, space, materiality, construction and symbolic meaning rather than through appearance alone (Mahdavinejad et al., 2010; Salama, 2020). The spatial organisation of buildings can reflect social relationships, privacy requirements, religious practices and patterns of communal interaction, while materials, forms and symbols can communicate historical associations, beliefs and collective values (Rapoport, 2021; Eco, 2020). Architectural identity is therefore not an isolated visual quality but a product of relationships between people, culture, architecture and place. The relevance of this relationship has increased under conditions of rapid urbanisation, technological development and global architectural exchange. The widespread circulation of standardised building forms and construction technologies has expanded architectural possibilities but has also contributed to concerns about the weakening of local character and the homogenisation of the built environment (Jencks, 2021; Frampton, 2021). At the same time, culture itself is not static. Social practices, technologies, economic conditions and environmental circumstances continually alter how cultural values are expressed (Smith & Campbell, 2023). Maintaining architectural identity therefore cannot depend solely on reproducing historical forms. Contemporary architecture requires approaches through which culturally significant values can be interpreted within present-day functional, technological and environmental conditions (Al-Kodmany, 2023; Smith, 2022). This positions cultural integration as a matter of architectural decision-making rather than the superficial application of traditional motifs. Existing scholarship has highlighted the influence of culture on architecture and has examined cultural expression through building form, spatial organisation, materiality, symbolism and place. However, these dimensions are often considered separately, making it necessary to clarify the process through which intangible cultural values become identifiable architectural characteristics. The central concern of this study is therefore not simply whether culture influences architecture, but how cultural values and practices are translated into architectural form and meaning, and how this translation contributes to architectural identity. Accordingly, the study examines how cultural values and social practices influence architectural expression, assesses the role of form, spatial organisation, materials and symbolism in communicating cultural meaning, and shows how these elements contribute to architectural character and identity within changing contemporary contexts. A qualitative documentary research approach is adopted to synthesise relevant scholarly and architectural evidence and develop a framework for understanding culture as a generative source of architectural identity.

2.0 Literature Review

The literature links culture with architectural expression through values, social practices, spatial organisation, materiality, symbolism and place. These dimensions provide the theoretical basis for examining how cultural meaning is translated into architectural expression and subsequently associated with architectural identity. The review therefore focuses on the relationship between culture and identity, cultural values and architectural expression, form and spatial organisation, materials and symbolism, and the influence of place and contemporary change.

2.1 Culture and Architectural Identity

Culture provides the social and intellectual conditions within which architecture is conceived, produced and experienced. It includes beliefs, knowledge, customs, values and established ways

of life that influence social behaviour and the organisation of the built environment (Naghizadeh, 2000; Madadpoor, 2000). Its elements include language, religion, traditions, customs, social organisation, values and artistic expression, which can influence both the physical and social dimensions of architecture (Brown & Lewis, 2020). Architecture consequently reflects more than physical and functional requirements; it also records the values and practices of the society that produces it (Parhizgar, 2003). The distinction between material and non-material culture is particularly relevant to architectural identity. Beliefs, values, norms, religion, knowledge, language, customs and social practices constitute non-material dimensions, while buildings, artefacts, crafts, materials and other physical products constitute material dimensions. Architecture connects these dimensions by translating cultural values and practices into physical and spatial decisions. Cultural rules and behavioural patterns can influence functional organisation and spatial hierarchy, while memories and beliefs can acquire architectural meaning through symbols and other forms of representation (Shayan, 2011).

Architectural identity can therefore be understood as a distinctive quality through which a building, group of buildings or place becomes recognisable within a particular cultural and spatial context. It involves the relationship between physical characteristics, cultural meanings and the experiences associated with a place (Mahdavinejad et al., 2010; Relph, 2020). This perspective provides a basis for examining how cultural values acquire architectural expression without reducing identity to visual appearance alone.

2.2 Cultural Values and Architectural Expression

Cultural values influence architectural expression by shaping expectations concerning social behaviour, privacy, communal interaction, religious practices and patterns of everyday life (Johnson, 2023). Social organisation can establish spatial hierarchy and relationships between individual, family and communal spaces, while religious beliefs and traditions can influence orientation, spatial arrangement and the treatment of significant areas (Salama, 2020; Adeyemi & Ogunleye, 2024). Culture therefore influences architecture through both the activities accommodated by buildings and the meanings attached to those activities.

Language, religion, art, symbols and traditions provide additional channels through which cultural values acquire architectural expression. Artistic traditions can inform motifs and decorative patterns, while religious and cultural beliefs can give particular forms or spaces symbolic significance (Johnson, 2023; Eco, 2020). African architectural traditions, for example, may employ spatial arrangements, motifs and patterns associated with kinship, ancestry, spirituality and communal values (Adeyemi, 2022; Okafor, 2022).

Cultural values should therefore not be treated as fixed architectural prescriptions. Changes in social practices, technology, economic conditions and environmental circumstances can alter how these values are expressed in the built environment (Smith & Campbell, 2023). Cultural expression is consequently capable of continuity while its physical form changes.

2.3 Architectural Form and Spatial Expression

Architectural form and spatial organisation provide important means through which cultural values acquire physical expression. Form responds to functional requirements, environmental conditions, technology and cultural influences, while spatial organisation can reflect social interaction, privacy, hierarchy and communal activity (Salama, 2020; Johnson, 2023). Cultural rules and behavioural patterns can consequently influence functional organisation and spatial hierarchy (Shayan, 2011). The courtyard illustrates how spatial organisation can accommodate

both environmental and cultural requirements. Its configuration can support daylighting and ventilation while also providing a setting for gathering and communal interaction (Salama, 2020; Adeyemi & Ogunleye, 2024). Entrances, façades and roof forms can similarly contribute to architectural character through their configuration, material treatment and cultural associations (Smith, 2022; Salama, 2020). Contemporary architecture need not reproduce traditional forms literally. Traditional spatial principles and formal characteristics can be reinterpreted through contemporary technologies and functional requirements while retaining meaningful relationships with cultural identity (Al-Kodmany, 2023; Smith, 2022). Form and space therefore provide important architectural means through which cultural values can be expressed within changing contexts.

2.4 Materials, Symbols and Architectural Character

Material selection contributes to architectural character through physical qualities, availability, construction traditions and cultural associations. Indigenous materials and traditional construction techniques can communicate local environmental knowledge and maintain relationships with established building practices (Adeyemi & Ogunleye, 2024). Materiality can therefore contribute to both the physical character of architecture and its cultural associations (Smith, 2022). Symbols and motifs provide additional means of communicating cultural values, beliefs and historical experiences. Architectural forms, patterns and decorative elements may carry meanings beyond their immediate functional purposes (Eco, 2020; Pallasmaa, 2021). African architectural traditions similarly employ symbolic elements associated with kinship, ancestry, spirituality and communal values (Adeyemi, 2022; Okafor, 2022).

The cultural significance of materials and symbols depends on their relationship with context. Their contemporary use may involve reinterpretation rather than direct reproduction of traditional details, allowing cultural associations to be retained while responding to current functional, technological and environmental requirements (Al-Kodmany, 2023; Smith, 2022).

2.5 Culture, Place and Contemporary Architectural Identity

Architectural identity develops within a particular place. Local history, environmental conditions, settlement patterns, indigenous materials and established building practices provide contextual references through which architecture acquires distinctive character (Smith, 2022; Salama, 2020). Place identity also involves the emotional and symbolic relationships people establish with their physical environments, with buildings and landscapes serving as repositories of memory, experience and cultural meaning (Relph, 2020). Architectural identity is therefore shaped by the relationship between cultural values, physical setting and human experience.

Contemporary architecture operates within conditions of globalisation, technological development and changing social practices. The circulation of standardised forms and international architectural approaches can weaken local character, while contemporary technologies can also provide opportunities for new interpretations of cultural identity (Jencks, 2021; Frampton, 2021). Cultural integration therefore requires more than the attachment of traditional motifs to contemporary buildings. It involves translating relevant cultural principles into current architectural responses (Al-Kodmany, 2023; Smith, 2022).

Contemporary architectural identity can therefore accommodate technological development, changing social practices and external influences while retaining relationships with cultural values and place (Jenkins, 2022; UNESCO, 2021; Frampton, 2021). The literature consequently

supports an understanding of cultural continuity that allows architectural expression to change in response to contemporary conditions.

2.6 Synthesis of the Literature

The literature indicates that culture influences architecture through values, beliefs, social practices, religion, traditions, environmental knowledge and material practices. These influences acquire architectural expression through decisions concerning form, spatial organisation, materials, construction and symbolism (Naghizadeh, 2000; Shayan, 2011; Salama, 2020). Architectural identity is consequently associated with more than visual appearance; it involves relationships between architectural character, cultural meaning and place (Mahdavinejad et al., 2010; Relph, 2020). The literature also indicates that cultural continuity can persist while architectural expression changes. Globalisation, technological development and changing social conditions may alter physical forms without necessarily eliminating culturally significant values and meanings (Smith & Campbell, 2023; Al-Kodmany, 2023). This distinction between cultural continuity and formal continuity is important for contemporary architectural practice.

Despite these established relationships, the literature does not sufficiently bring together the stages through which cultural values and practices are translated into architectural decisions, physical characteristics, architectural character and identity. The present study therefore synthesises these relationships into an integrated analytical framework, developed and discussed in the subsequent sections.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

The study adopted a qualitative documentary research approach to examine how cultural values and practices are translated into architectural expression and contribute to architectural identity. The approach was appropriate for interpreting relationships and meanings within existing scholarly and architectural evidence rather than generating statistical data.

3.2 Documentary Sources and Selection

Data were obtained from purposively selected peer-reviewed publications, academic books, architectural records, historical documents, institutional reports and documented architectural cases. Sources were selected for their relevance to culture, cultural values and practices, architectural identity, form, spatial organisation, materiality, symbolism, place and contemporary architectural transformation. Priority was given to sources providing substantive theoretical or documented evidence relevant to the research objectives, substantive treatment of culture/architecture/identity, scholarly or institutional credibility, and accessibility of sufficient information for thematic analysis

3.3 Data Collection Technique

Data were collected through systematic documentary review and structured data extraction. Relevant information was recorded according to the study's key themes, including cultural values and practices, social organisation, architectural form, spatial organisation, materials, construction, symbolism, place and contemporary cultural integration. Repetitive or peripheral information was excluded to maintain analytical focus.

3.4 Method of Data Analysis

The extracted data were analysed using thematic analysis and interpretive synthesis. Initial coding identified recurring ideas, which were grouped into broader themes and compared across the selected sources. The resulting relationships were synthesised to explain how cultural values and practices influence architectural decisions and acquire physical and symbolic expression. The synthesis informed a framework linking culture, cultural values and practices, architectural decisions, form, space, materials and symbols, architectural character, and architectural identity, with place, technology and contemporary social change recognised as contextual influences. Analytical rigour was supported through purposive source selection, systematic extraction, thematic coding and comparison of evidence, while all documentary sources were appropriately acknowledged.

4.0 Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Culture as a Basis for Architectural Decision-Making

The analysis indicates that cultural influence becomes architecturally significant through the decisions made in response to cultural values and practices. Beliefs, social organisation, religious practices, traditions, customs and environmental knowledge can shape decisions concerning spatial hierarchy, privacy, communal interaction, orientation, form, materials and construction (Naghizadeh, 2000; Shayan, 2011; Salama, 2020).

This relationship distinguishes cultural expression from the superficial application of cultural imagery. Traditional motifs, colours or decorative elements may communicate cultural references, but their presence alone does not necessarily produce architectural identity. Stronger cultural expression occurs when cultural values influence how spaces are organised, forms are developed, materials are selected and meanings are communicated (Parhizgar, 2003; Salama, 2020). Culture can therefore be understood as an initial influence on architectural decision-making rather than as a direct producer of architectural identity. Its architectural expression becomes apparent through the translation of cultural values and practices into specific design responses.

4.2 Translation of Cultural Values into Architectural Characteristics

The analysis indicates a progressive relationship between cultural values, architectural decisions and physical expression. A cultural value or practice can generate a requirement, preference or meaning; this informs an architectural decision, which produces a physical or spatial characteristic. Where such characteristics acquire sustained cultural and place-based associations, they contribute to architectural character and identity.

For example, social organisation may influence spatial hierarchy, religious practices may influence orientation and symbolic treatment, environmental knowledge may influence form and material selection, while traditions may influence patterns of use and communal spaces (Johnson, 2023; Adeyemi & Ogunleye, 2024; Salama, 2020).

This sequence clarifies the distinction between architectural characteristics, architectural character and architectural identity. Characteristics refer to the physical and experiential attributes produced through design decisions. Character concerns the recognisable qualities that emerge from these attributes, while identity develops when such character becomes associated with particular cultural meanings and places (Mahdavinejad et al., 2010; Relph, 2020).

A courtyard, roof form, material or symbolic element therefore does not automatically constitute architectural identity. Its identity value depends on the cultural meanings, patterns of use, historical associations and place relationships attached to it (See table 1).

Table 1: Relationship between Cultural Values, Architectural Decisions and Architectural Identity

ANALYTICAL STAGE	PRINCIPAL CONTENT	ARCHITECTURAL IMPLICATION
Culture	Beliefs, values, knowledge, customs and traditions	Provides the cultural basis for architectural thinking
Cultural Values and Practices	Social organisation, religion, privacy, communal life, ritual and environmental knowledge	Generate requirements, preferences and meanings
Architectural Decisions	Spatial organisation, orientation, form, materials, construction and symbolism	Translate cultural requirements into design responses
Architectural Characteristics	Form, space, materiality, construction and symbols	Provide physical and experiential expression
Architectural Character	Recognisable physical and experiential qualities	Gives the building or place a distinctive character
Architectural Identity	Cultural and place based recognition and association	Contributes to distinctive architectural identity

Source: Authors' Synthesis of Literature

The sequence in Table 1 clarifies the progression from cultural meaning to architectural expression and identity. Culture provides the broader value system within which cultural practices and expectations develop. These values and practices then inform architectural decisions concerning how spaces are organised, how buildings take form, and how materials, construction methods and symbols are employed. The resulting characteristics provide the physical and experiential qualities through which architectural character becomes recognizable. Architectural identity emerges when these qualities acquire sustained cultural and place-based associations through use, meaning and collective recognition (Mahdavinejad et al., 2010; Relph, 2020).

4.3 Form, Space, Materials and Symbols as Channels of Cultural Expression

Four principal architectural channels emerge from the analysis: form, space, materials and symbols. Their significance lies less in their isolated presence than in the cultural decisions that shape their use. Form can communicate cultural preferences through massing, proportion, geometry and composition. Spatial organisation can accommodate culturally defined patterns of activity, privacy and interaction. Materials can connect buildings with local resources, environmental knowledge and construction traditions, while symbols can communicate beliefs, history and collective memory (Salama, 2020; Smith, 2022; Eco, 2020; Pallasmaa, 2021).

These channels frequently operate together. Social organisation, for instance, may influence spatial hierarchy and movement patterns at the same time. Religious practices may affect both spatial arrangement and symbolic treatment, while environmental knowledge may influence form and material selection simultaneously (Shayan, 2011; Johnson, 2023; Adeyemi, 2022).

The courtyard illustrates this combined relationship. Its environmental functions, including daylighting and ventilation, may occur alongside culturally significant patterns of gathering and

interaction (Salama, 2020; Adeyemi & Ogunleye, 2024). Its significance consequently derives from the relationship between physical configuration, environmental performance and cultural use. Materials and symbols operate similarly. Indigenous materials can maintain associations with local resources and building traditions, while symbolic elements can communicate beliefs, ancestry, history and collective memory (Adeyemi & Ogunleye, 2024; Eco, 2020; Pallasmaa, 2021). Cultural expression is consequently stronger where these elements support a coherent architectural response rather than operate as isolated decorative references.

4.4 Architectural Character and the Formation of Identity

Architectural character concerns the qualities through which a building or place is physically and experientially recognised. These qualities may arise from form, spatial organisation, materiality, construction and symbolic treatment. Architectural identity develops when such character acquires particular cultural, historical or place-based associations (Mahdavinejad et al., 2010; Relph, 2020). The distinction explains why similar architectural elements can possess different identity values in different settings. A courtyard, for example, does not inherently belong to a particular cultural identity. Its significance depends on its organisation, use and association with the people and place in which it occurs. Local materials may similarly contribute to identity where they are connected with local knowledge, history or environmental conditions.

Architectural identity should therefore not be equated with visual distinctiveness. A visually unusual building may have limited cultural identity, while a relatively simple building may possess strong identity where its architectural character is closely associated with cultural values and place. Identity consequently depends on the meanings associated with architectural character as well as its physical qualities.

4.5 Cultural Continuity and Contemporary Transformation

The analysis indicates that cultural continuity can persist without formal continuity. Changes in lifestyles, technology, economic conditions and social relationships can alter architectural expression while culturally significant values remain relevant (Smith & Campbell, 2023).

Contemporary architecture can therefore retain cultural principles while modifying their physical expression. Traditional spatial relationships may be adapted to current requirements, indigenous materials may be combined with modern construction systems, and culturally significant symbols may be reinterpreted through contemporary architectural language (Al-Kodmany, 2023; Smith, 2022; Adeyemi & Ogunleye, 2024). This distinction is particularly relevant under conditions of globalisation, where standardised forms and international architectural practices can weaken local character when applied without sufficient consideration of cultural and environmental context (Jencks, 2021; Frampton, 2021). Contemporary technology, however, can also provide opportunities for cultural reinterpretation. Cultural continuity is therefore better maintained through the adaptation of relevant values, spatial principles, environmental knowledge and meanings than through the literal reproduction of historical forms.

4.6 Culture, Place and Architectural Identity

The final relationship concerns the role of place in giving cultural expression a specific geographical and experiential reference. Cultural values are translated within particular historical, environmental and social conditions, including climate, topography, material availability, settlement patterns, historical experience and collective memory (Relph, 2020; Smith, 2022; Salama, 2020). The same cultural value may consequently produce different

architectural responses in different locations. Architectural identity is thus associated not with culture alone but with the relationship between cultural meaning, architectural character and place.

This relationship also accounts for the changing nature of architectural identity. Technological development, social change and external influences can modify architectural expression while cultural and historical associations remain relevant (Jenkins, 2022; UNESCO, 2021; Frampton, 2021). Architectural identity can therefore be understood as an evolving relationship between cultural values, architectural character and place rather than as a fixed physical image.

5.0 Proposed Framework for Cultural Expression and Architectural Identity

The findings establish that architectural identity develops through a process in which cultural values and practices are translated into architectural decisions and subsequently into recognisable architectural characteristics. The proposed framework represents this relationship as a progression from culture to cultural values and practices, architectural decisions, architectural characteristics, architectural character and architectural identity, while recognising place, environment, technology and social change as contextual influences (See fig. 1).

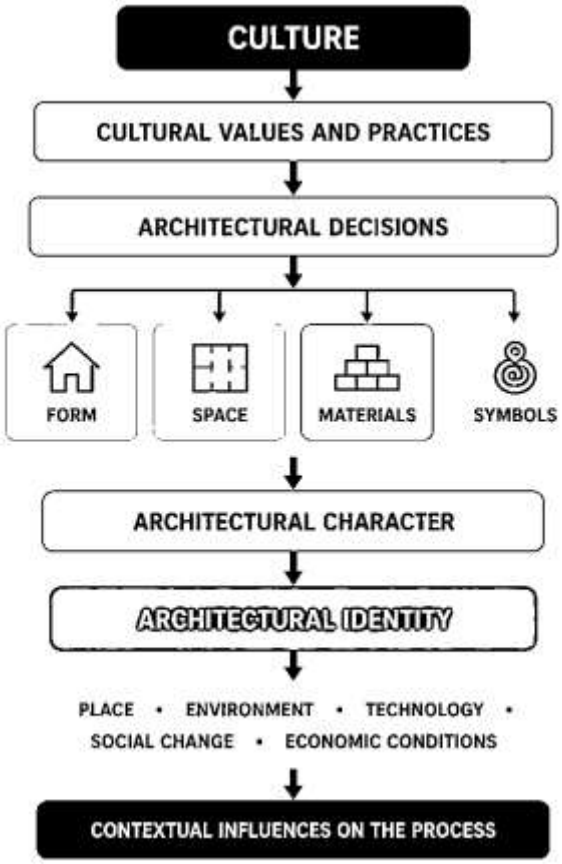

Figure 1: Framework for the Translation of Culture into Architectural Identity
Source: Authors' Synthesis of Literature

The framework explains that culture does not directly produce architectural identity. Rather, cultural values and practices provide the basis for architectural decisions, through which cultural meaning acquires physical and spatial expression. Form, space, materials and symbols

consequently establish architectural characteristics that contribute to architectural character. Architectural identity develops when this character becomes associated with cultural meaning and place (Shayan, 2011; Salama, 2020; Mahdavinejad et al., 2010; Relph, 2020).

The framework also indicates that cultural continuity does not require the reproduction of historical forms. Place, environmental conditions, technology, social change and economic circumstances influence how cultural values are translated into contemporary architecture. Cultural identity can therefore be maintained through the reinterpretation of culturally significant values and practices rather than through formal replication (Smith & Campbell, 2023; Al-Kodmany, 2023; Smith, 2022). The central proposition is that architectural identity emerges when cultural values and practices are translated through architectural decisions into recognisable architectural character associated with a particular cultural and spatial context.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The study shows that culture provides a significant basis for architectural expression and identity, but its influence is not direct. Cultural heritage is translated through architectural application of form, spatial organisation, materials, construction and symbolism. These applications produce identifiable architectural characteristics that collectively shape architectural character, while cultural and place-based associations give that character architectural identity. Architectural identity is therefore better understood as the outcome of a relationship between cultural meaning, architectural character and place rather than as a matter of visual appearance alone. The study further indicates that cultural continuity does not require the reproduction of historical architectural forms. Contemporary architecture can retain culturally significant values, spatial principles, environmental knowledge and symbolic meanings while adapting their physical expression to current technological, social and environmental conditions. The proposed framework consequently positions culture as a generative basis of architectural decision-making and identifies the translation of cultural values into architectural characteristics as the principal process through which architectural identity develops. For architectural practice, culturally responsive design should begin with the identification of relevant cultural values and practices rather than the selection of traditional motifs. Architects should translate these values into appropriate spatial, formal, material and symbolic decisions while considering local environmental conditions, technology and contemporary patterns of use. This approach can support architectural identity without restricting contemporary architecture to historical replication. Architectural education and research should similarly give greater attention to the relationship between culture, architectural decision-making and identity. Design processes should encourage students and practitioners to investigate local social practices, environmental knowledge, materials, construction traditions and collective meanings before developing architectural responses. Further empirical studies across different Nigerian cultural settings are recommended to test and refine the proposed framework and examine how particular cultural values are translated into contemporary architectural characteristics.

In summary, culturally meaningful architecture is not produced by reproducing the appearance of the past; it is produced by translating significant cultural values into appropriate architectural decisions that acquire character, meaning and identity within place.

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