

Chapter x

The International Style in Nigerian Architecture

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Summary

This paper critically assesses contemporary modern Nigerian architecture, and in particular the International Style. It presents the International Style as a style dominating the urban landscape in Nigeria. This is a style with its history reaching pre-independence time and its peak-period in the seventies and early eighties. This impersonal style has its own distinct characteristics. It is best represented by buildings with simple geometrical forms often with exposed parapet walls, with the free plan as a preferred option. It uses the flat roof and curtain walls. The buildings are devoid of decorations. They have little regard for Nigerian culture or climate. Its trends are: High-Trop, Pure Modern and Low Trop. The style has both the positive and the negative impact on the environment. Despite the positive fact of producing remarkable landmarks in Nigeria the paper concludes that imported technologies in the long run do not promote the progress of the indigenous building sector. This exclusive architecture is for the wealthy while the masses are left in poor conditions.

1.0 Introduction

The term 'International Style' was coined to denote the modern style in architecture. It first came into existence in Central Europe in the 1920s and had its classical period in the 1930s and the late 1940s. This impersonal style suited the development of the early 20th century. Cubes and groups of cubes were very characteristic of the 1930s. This uniform style spread fast because of easy traveling, and the well illustrated cheap printing and technical press. The years 1930-50 witnessed a spectacular change from a style of pioneer countries to a style succeeding with works all over the world. In Nigeria it started in the 1930s and became popular in the 1950s and the 1960s.

The International Style was able to influence Nigerian architecture mainly through the change from personal to impersonal client. In the case of high-rise buildings, government parastatals, firms and universities were suited to this impersonal



Plate x: Independence House, Lagos (1960). Source: GHK archives.



Plate 1: Independence House, Lagos, by Federal Ministry of Works, 1960 (left) and Western House, Lagos, by Nickson and Borys, 1960 (right). Source: Postcard by SANANDA.

and universal style. Initially buildings in this tradition were designed on purely functional lines. This was however misused and led to monotonous architecture particularly recognisable in low-cost housing schemes in Nigeria. The belief that form would follow of its own accord often led to low aesthetic value of the buildings. Architects eventually realized that it is not enough to design efficiently functioning buildings and precisely calculated structures but that special attention should also be paid to form and elevation.

This presentation is not about progress by genuine transformations of tradition but rather a story of a style imposed on cultural tradition by the desire for modernity. The International Style is not the only existing style but it is a dominating style represented by about thirty percent of buildings in Nigeria (Prucnal-Ogunsote, 1993).

2.0 Brief History of the International Style in Nigeria

In Nigeria motifs of the modern movement such as the flat roof or clean forms became popular by the late 1930s. The first modern houses were built in Ikoyi, Lagos even before the Second World War. Among the first modern houses in Lagos can be found **Godwin and Hopwood Building** (1958) and **Architecture House** (1958) by Olumuyiwa and Associates. However the most prestigious were the first tall buildings including **National House**, **Co-op Bank**, **Independence House** (1960) and the 17 storey **Western House** (1960). See Plate 1.

This style was able to satisfy the Nigerian consumer in one important way. It was basically used as a symbol of progress. The buildings with asymmetrical composition, absence of mouldings and large windows often in horizontal bands became a part of the architectural landscape. It was immediately after the end of the civil war that many of the famous indigenous practices got registered. These include Archcon Nigeria, Egbor and Associates, Ella Waziri Associates and Niger Consultants – all established in 1970. Others are Deji Oyenuga and Partners (1975), Mcanto Madubuko Associates and Towry-Coker Associates – both established in 1976. The ‘Oil Boom’ in the late



Plate x: Co-op Bank, Ibadan. Source: GHK archives.

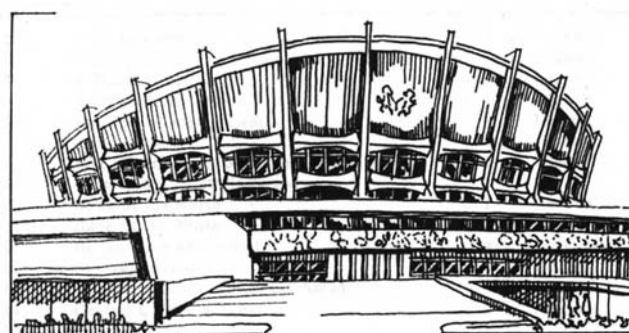


Plate 2: National Arts Theatre, Iganmu, Lagos by Techno-Export. Source: Author's sketch.

seventies had indisputable influence on developments in Nigerian architecture. At that time the competition and the race for modernity was at its peak. The building industry depended a lot on imported building materials and finishes. Buildings from that period include **Murtala Mohammed International Airport** and **National Arts Theatre**, Iganmu, Lagos. See Plate 2.

The foreign influence was strong because the manpower was not sufficient in Nigeria and because there were many foreign architects. In a few instances, the designs were sent abroad. It was then justified economically but now strongly criticised. From the mid-1980s the economy has been very poor. Architects had to cut down the cost of buildings and simplicity of buildings was maintained due to the cost constraints.

3.0 Characteristics of the International Style in Nigeria

The International Style in Nigeria is categorised as High-Trop, Pure Modern and Low-Trop trends (Prucnal-Ogunsote, 2001a). They all have common characteristics. The trends represent buildings that can be constructed anywhere in the world, often with disregard to climate and social conditions.

High-Trop represents buildings using high technologies, reflective glass and central air-conditioning. They are usually tall buildings often designed as glass boxes

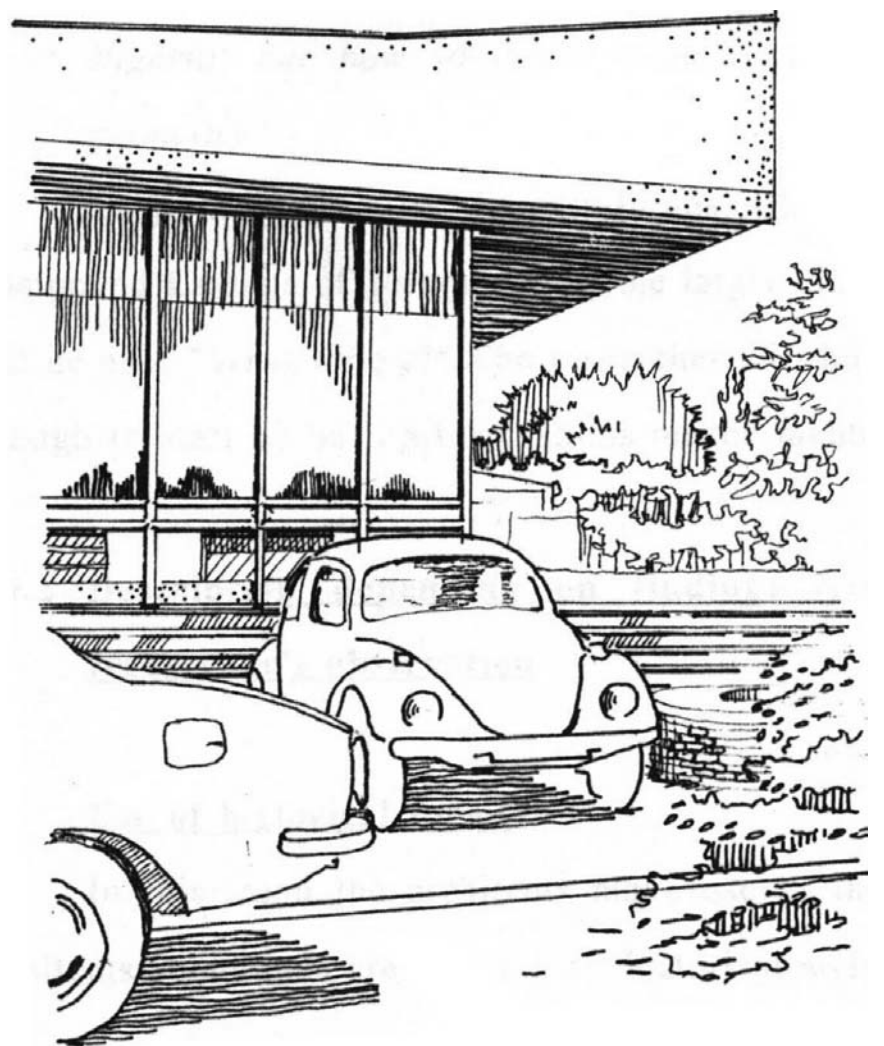


Plate 3: Bookshop at University of Ibadan, Ibadan, by Design Group Nigeria, 1960s. Source: Author's sketch.

or very elegant structures and extremely expensive. The buildings here depend on imported technologies.

Pure Modern is mainly the architecture created by architects of the older generation who were trained in modern ideas. Their architecture often represents an idealistic approach.

Low-Trop represents housing for the low-income group with lack of good aesthetic and low standard of living. It is presented not as a helpless situation but rather as the most challenging area for architects. The major characteristics of the International Style in Nigeria are examined below.

3.1 Free plan

In this style there is a tendency to use the free plan as in IMB Building and Broking House. Also in the **Mobil Building** there are big open spaces for the offices. The load bearing pillars permit any arrangement of the partition walls but generally the internal arrangements are very simple. They explore the ideas of

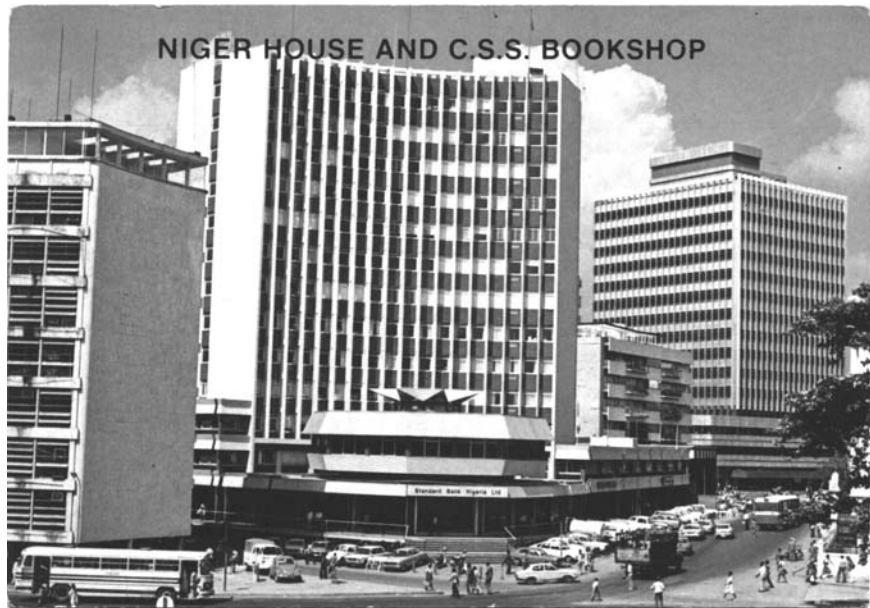


Plate 4: Niger House and C.S.S. Bookshop, Lagos by Godwin Hopwood. Source: Postcard by Jolufeso Pictures



Plate 5: IBRU Building, Apapa, Lagos, by Femi Majekodunmi Associates. Source: Femi Majekodunmi Associates Brochure.



Plate x: CSS Bookshop, House, Lagos (1965) by Godwin Hopwood. Source: GHK archives.

simplicity and functionality.

3.2 Use of pure geometrical forms

The buildings are characterised by monotonous cubic general shapes. Examples are *Bookshop at University of Ibadan* (Plate 3); **National Oil and Chemical Marketing Company Building (Eagle House)** and **C.S.S. Bookshop House** (Plate 4).

There are also instances where the building form consists of combinations of polygonal shapes like in **Broking House** or **IBRU Building** (Plate 5). Most often the plan is simple and consists of a single square or rectangle often with a projected entrance as in **Kashim Ibrahim Library** (Plate 6), **Faculty of Health Sciences at Obafemi Awolowo University** in Ife or **Management House** in Lagos. Sometimes it is a simple semi-cylinder with a combination of rectangular shapes that is used as in the former Federal Secretariat, Lagos.

3.3 Parapet wall and flat roof

The parapet wall is often used to enhance the modern look of a building. In this style architects “hide” the roof behind the parapet wall and also most of the time propose a flat roof. Technically a flat roof is a bad solution often resulting in leakages. Similarly problematic are the internal gutters that often develop leakages. This combined with the poor maintenance culture led often to crisis situations.

To close the composition a



Plate 6: Kashim Ibrahim Library, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria by Egbor and Associates. Source: Author's photograph, 2005.

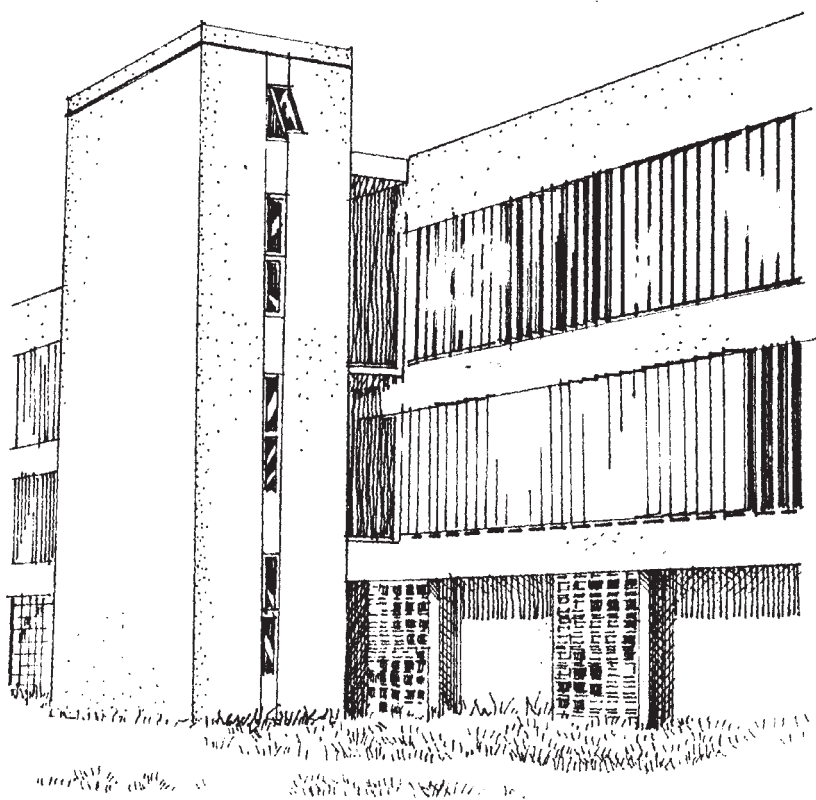


Plate 6: Kashim Ibrahim Library, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria by Egbor and Associates. Source: Author's sketch, 1990.

parapet wall was used in the **National Oil and Chemical Marketing Company Building (Eagle House)**, in the **Benue State Secretariat, Cabinet Office** and in the **Bookshop at University of Ibadan**. In the eighties architects still maintained the cube-like shape of a building but sometimes had the courage to add a roof. Chellarams Building in Lagos has a small pyramid as a roof while the parapet wall is also more stylish (Plate 7).¹

3.4 Curtain walls

The new approach of making the elevation independent of the structure of the building was frequently exhibited by the use of curtain walls as in **IMB Building** (Plate 8) or **Broking House**. Such buildings with mullions and in-fill panels or tinted glass windows are difficult to maintain. The external surfaces have to be washed periodically and also the air conditioning cost increases due to lack of sufficient insulation resulting from the characteristics of the materials used. It is also characterized by structural honesty and clarity expressed by big glass surfaces as in **First Bank Headquarters** (Plate 9). The surface is often very plain and sometimes with regular and monotonous rhythm of mouldings as in **Independence House**, or in **IBWA House**, Lagos (Plate 10).

3.5 Ornamentation

The Modern Movement with its most representative International Style rejected decoration. Architects

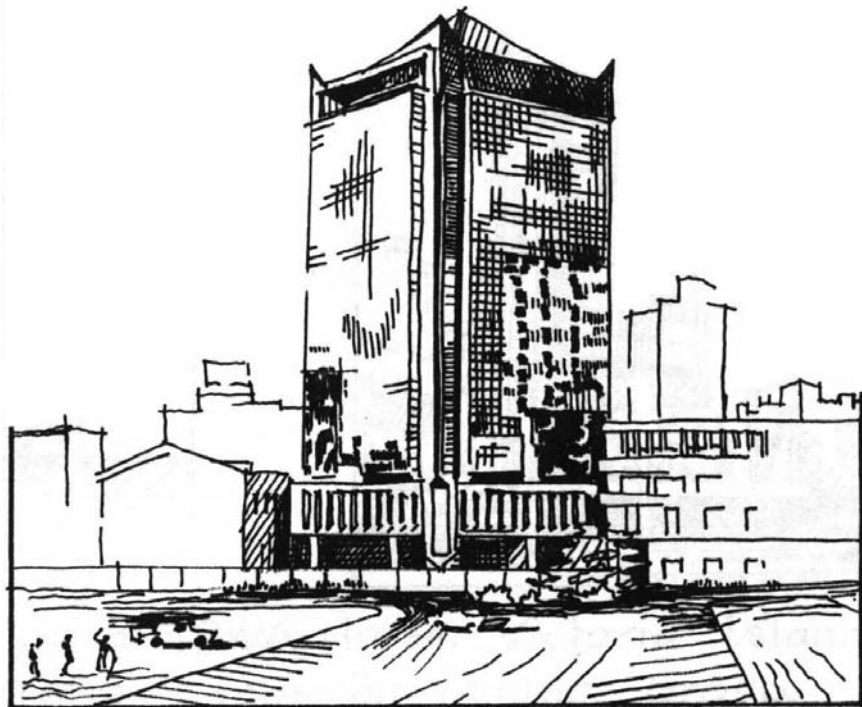


Plate 7: K. Chellarams Building, Marina, Lagos by James Cubitt & Partners. Source: Author's Sketch.

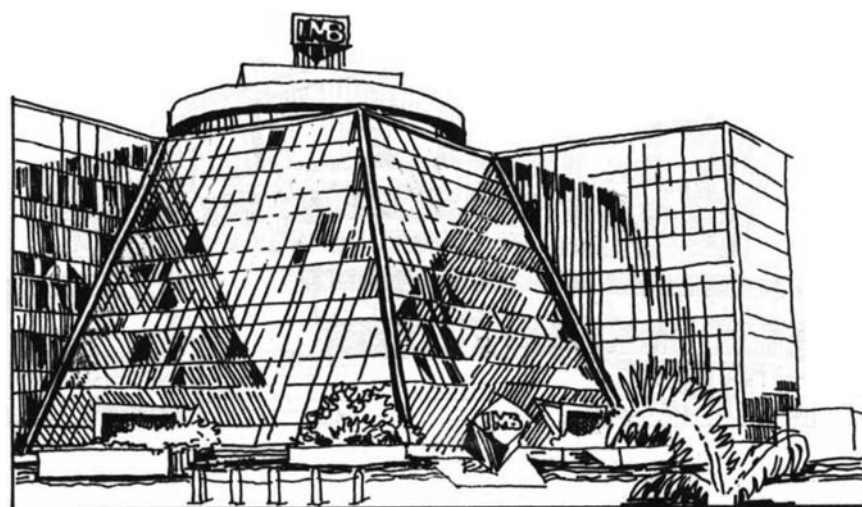


Plate 8: IMB (International Merchant Bank), Victoria Island, Lagos by Inchscape Architects, 1985. Source: Author's sketch.

followed the Miesian formula for tall buildings and Le Corbusier's concepts of impersonal style.

Architects of the older generation in Nigeria were educated in the mainstream of Modern Movement and they rejected decoration. The architecture of Deji Oyenuga is devoid of cosmetics. Arc. Egbor's buildings are characterized by simple solutions with no use of decoration. Arc. Oluwole Olumuyiwa preferred the simplicity of forms. His buildings demonstrate his belief that the form of buildings should not be meaningless (**Management House, Eko Holiday Inn**, Plate 11). Similarly Ella Waziri Associates' designs are simple and no ornaments or decorations are used (buildings at Bayero University in Kano). In this trend decoration is considered an apology in architecture. Other examples are the earlier works of Fola Alade, Habitat Associates, Design Group Nigeria and Godwin Hopwood. Generally these architects do not like much decoration. They prefer to work with the form of the building. However it soon became obvious especially in the United States that this impersonal style can lead to crime and to vandalization of housing estates (Venturi, 1977). Nigerian architects then started exploring more original and individual approaches that resulted in a regionally-sensitive Modern architecture of their own referred to as The New West African Style and the Regional Trend (Prucnal-

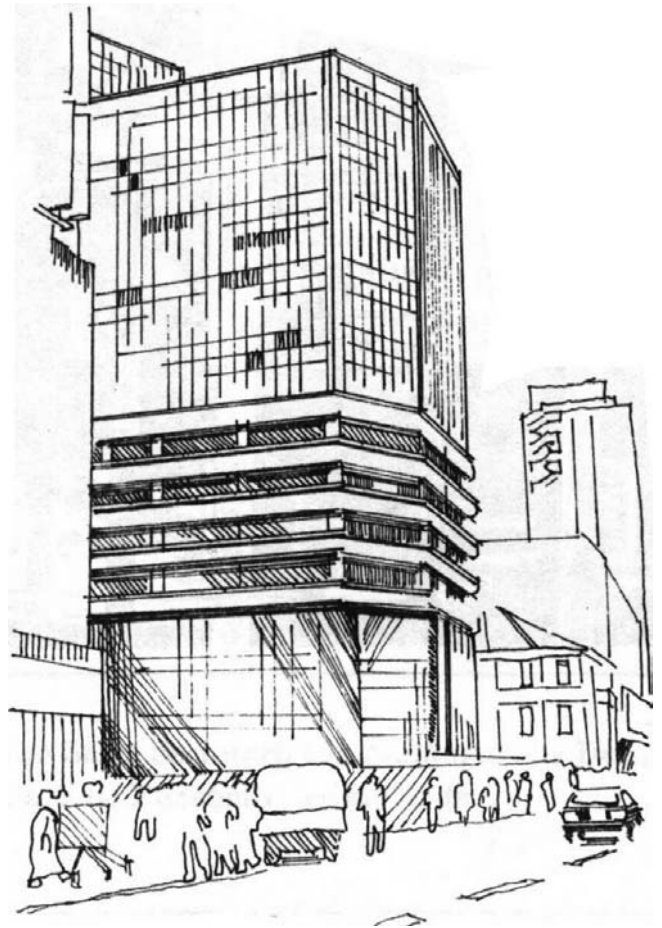


Plate 9: First Bank Headquarters, Marina, Lagos by Ronald Ward & Associates, 1982/83. Source: Author's sketch.

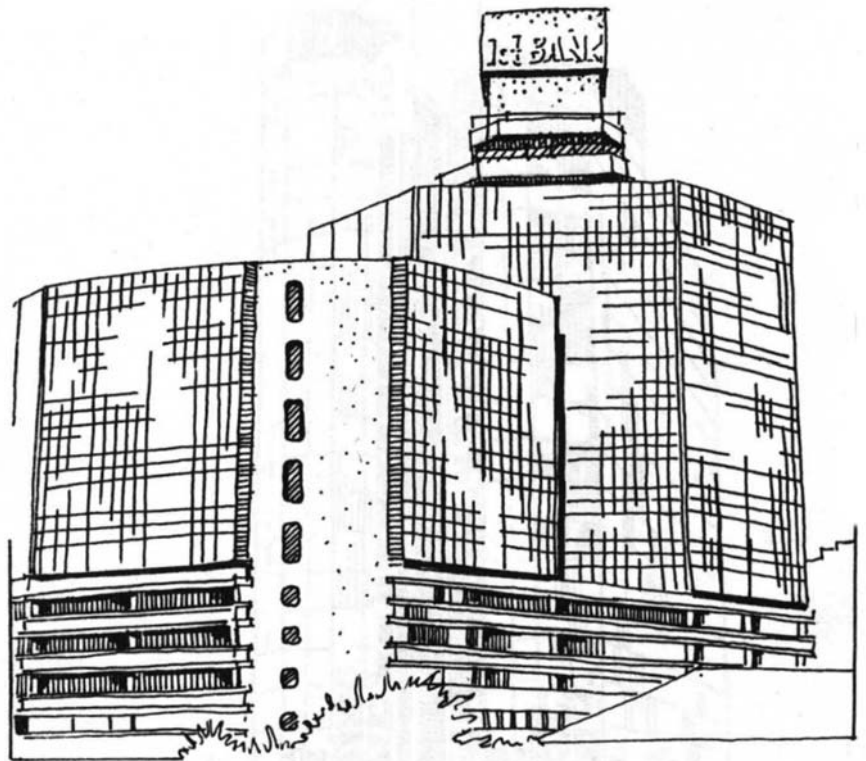


Plate x: First Bank Headquarters, Marina, Lagos by Ronald Ward & Associates, 1982/83. Source: Author's sketch.



Plate 12: The Panorama of Marina, Lagos in the mid eighties. Source: Postcard by Elizabeth Seriki Cards.

Ogunsote 2001a; Prucnal-Ogunsote 2001b).

3.6 Disregard for climate and social conditions

Buildings in this style usually do not respect local conditions concerning weather and culture. They often depend entirely on artificial means of cooling. They are not appropriate because of the constant power failures and high maintenance cost (**IMB Building, IBRU Building, Chellarams**). High-Trop buildings depend on imported technologies and this makes them very expensive. Buildings stay unoccupied for long periods due to high rent. The buildings use imported finishes that are now difficult to replace when damaged. The limited maintenance efforts are rather ineffective due to lack of substitutes in the country.

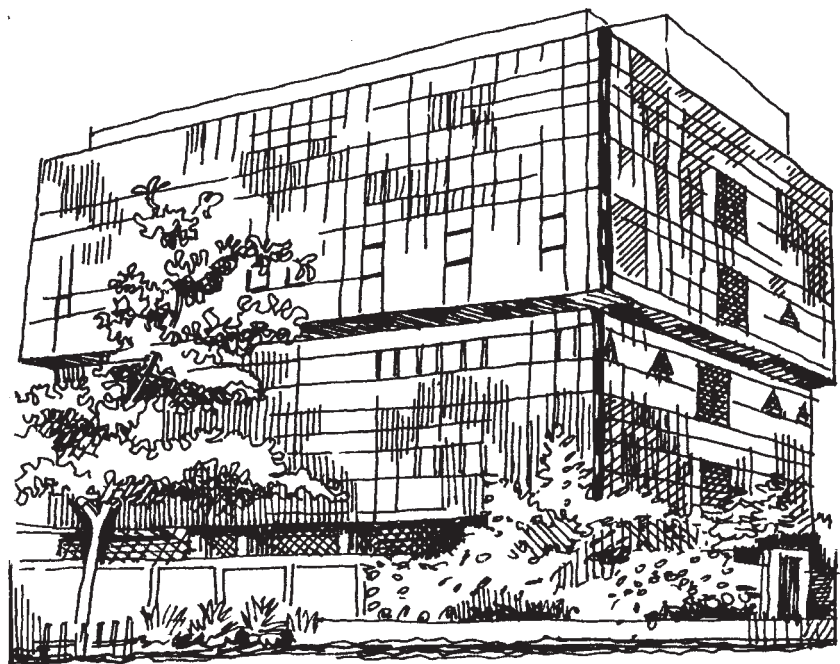


Plate 10: IBWA House, Victoria Island Professional Centre, Lagos by Modulor Group. Source: Author's sketch.

4.0 The International Style as a Technological and Cultural Bridge

The International Style was able to satisfy the people's desire for modernity and it undoubtedly influenced Nigerian architecture by the technological advancements it brought along. Nigeria like the rest of the world looked up to the Western countries which became a yard stick of global progress. The International Style in Nigeria made a very big impact on the townscape of every city especially through its High-Trop trend with sleek and extra-modern buildings and the Pure Modern trend. Pure Modern also represents the idealistic architecture of pioneer architects in Nigeria transforming the new ideas of modern architecture into the Nigerian reality.

4.1 High-Trop as a technological bridge

The publications of famous architectural critics like Charles Jencks, Nikolaus Pevsner, Patric Nuttgens or Kenneth Frampton do not analyse the International Style in third world countries including Nigeria. On the contrary – there are remarkable modern buildings in Nigeria.

The International Style with its High-Trop and Pure Modern trends is actually responsible for the general look of Nigerian cities with many corporate and institutional buildings. See panorama of Lagos from the early eighties (Plate 12). High-Trop introduced modern



Plate x: National Oil and Chemical Marketing Company Building (Eagle House), Lagos. Source: GHK archives.

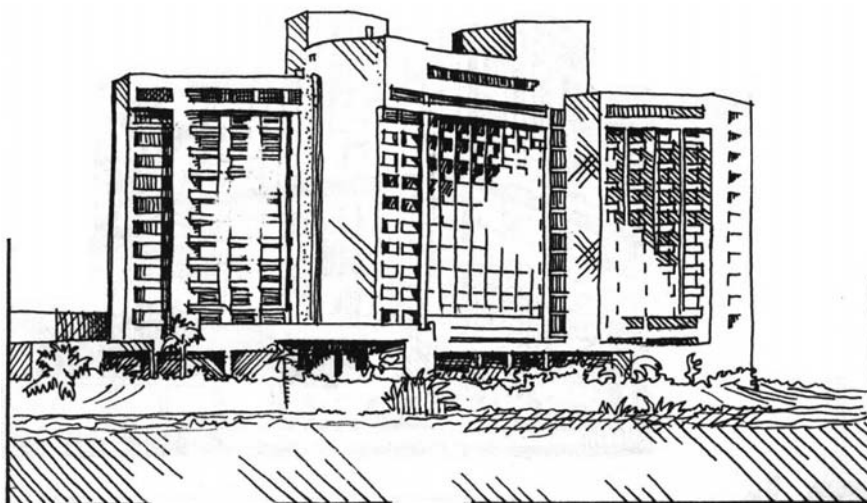


Plate 11: Eko Hotel (Eko Holiday Inn) Victoria Island, Lagos by Oluwole Olumuyiwa and Associates in collaboration with Americans. Source: Author's sketch.

techniques with the use of lighter metals and new construction methods to Nigeria. This architecture expressed the spirit of the times, and is presented on some selected examples below.

The architects James Cubitt and Partners, established in 1957, gained their popularity mainly through **Chellarams Building** and **Senate building at UNILAG**, both in Lagos (Plate 13). The architects are idealistic with their approach of trying to attain a perfect result. One of their achievements is the **Mobil Building** in Lagos (Plate 14). The characteristic features are the four towers at each "corner" of the building. Very attractive is the sky light, which is placed diagonally over the square atrium, which is only slightly smaller than the size of **Chellarams Building** itself. The architects experimented on the site by constructing some portions of the building in search of the best effects. The astonishing effects are not only the results of good ideas but also of very demanding work. This building demonstrates that high-tech could be locally obtained by employing the imagination, by experimenting and by strict supervision.

In case of **Broking House** in Ibadan (Plate 15) the building demonstrates that the quality depends both on the client and the architect. The client Femi Johnson had a desire to have such a building which can be called his monument. Many people know the building as **Femi Johnson House**. The site for the building was very small,



Plate x: Senate Building at UNILAG in Lagos by James Cubitt and Partners. Source: Author's photograph, 2004.

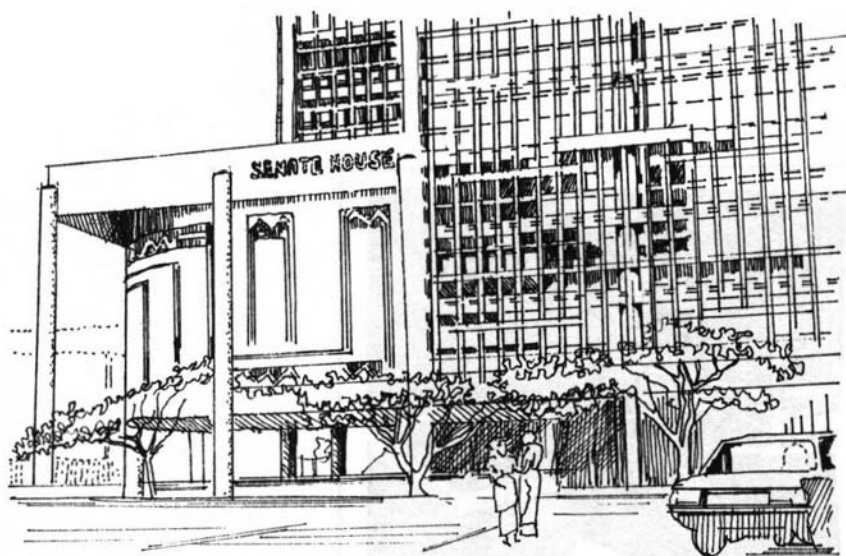


Plate 13: Senate Building at UNILAG in Lagos by James Cubitt and Partners. Source: Author's sketch.

only 60m x 30m. The structure underneath is remarkable, there are two and a half floors for parking and utilities. The structure basically depends on the pillars. The external glazed curtain walls are hung from suspended slabs. While the building is so luxurious outside it is almost ordinary inside. It is designed with the idea of open spaces. If the floor is not occupied it is left with no partitions which are assembled when the need arises. The office areas and corridor are then provided. Most successful is the design of the elevation of the building on the ground and first floor level. In the Nigerian context it still appears as a building more for the future than for the current economic situation. The users complained of the high cost of maintenance, for there are three generators and central air conditioning. In conclusion the building stands as a technological bridge. It proves that Nigeria can produce sleek modern structures and that the maintenance can also be effective.

The **Bank of the North Headquarters in Kano** by Ella Waziri is the tallest building in the North.² It has a strategic position - it is at the entrance to the city coming from the South. It closes a vista of the main road and is well seen even from a long distance. The main structure seems to be separated from the base. It appears unexpectedly light as if able to turn round its axis. The verticality of the building is enhanced through contrasting elements running across and reaching the very top of the building. It enhances the light appearance of the solid indeed structure. The sculptural elements on the very top form a kind of object pointing to the sky. High quality materials and good finishes add to the aesthetics of this building which is basically an office building. Without the use of high-tech this building would not have been possible. There are negative sides of this development, however. Often problematic is the relevance of such buildings to the Nigerian culture.

4.2 Pure Modern Trend as a cultural bridge

In the case of the Pure Modern trend it embraces the bulk of the works of such pioneer architects as Onafowokan, Olumuyiwa, Vaughan Richards, Fry Drew, Design Group Nigeria or Godwin Hopwood to mention just a few. The

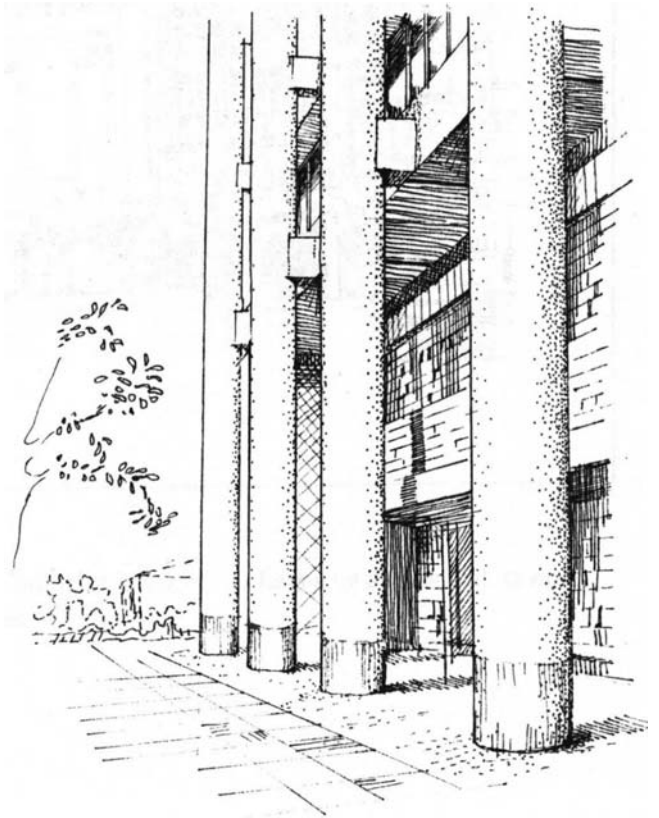


Plate 14: Headquarters for Mobil Oil and Mobil Producing Company (Mobil Building) in Lagos by James Cubitt and Partners, 1991. Source: Author's sketch.

Pure Modern trend stands as a cultural bridge because of the way the modern ideas spread and the architects came up with very original ideas while tapping from the world culture.

Some of the young architects (foreigners) who were behind the first modern buildings came to Nigeria as to an unknown exotic country. All Nigerians practising were also educated abroad. They came with all the hopes and dreams the new generation had about modern architecture. The way they interpreted architecture had some idealistic approach like in the case of **Management House** by Olumuyiwa. There, it is only by working and reworking that the idea of a brain was embodied in architectural form. In this design most characteristic is the concept of the brain presented as a box suspended in space. Despite all difficulties the architect pronounced it in an architectural form and as a result the unique floating feeling was achieved. It can be easily perceived from the atrium. One can sense a particularly important space celebrated in an unusual but pleasant manner. The building looks very ordinary from the outside.

Mcanto Madubuko Associates designed **BCCI Head Office in Enugu** in a way that phase construction was made possible. In this building the architects used curved concrete surfaces externally. This structure also incorporates an external sit out on the roof of the lower portion of the building. It is meant for outdoor recreation (Plate 16). Arc. Madubuko still believes that form must follow function.

In conclusion the Pure Modern Trend stands as a cultural bridge because the modern ideas interpreted by Nigerian masters were incorporated in Nigerian townscape (Plate 17) and brought a modern look to the cities. There are however problems to be overcome here such as the lack of a maintenance culture.

5.0 The International Style as a Cultural Disaster

In the sixties and the seventies the International Style in Nigeria was at its peak. This dominating style brought along a sense of modernity. On the other hand the universal and anonymous architecture lacked relevance to local traditions

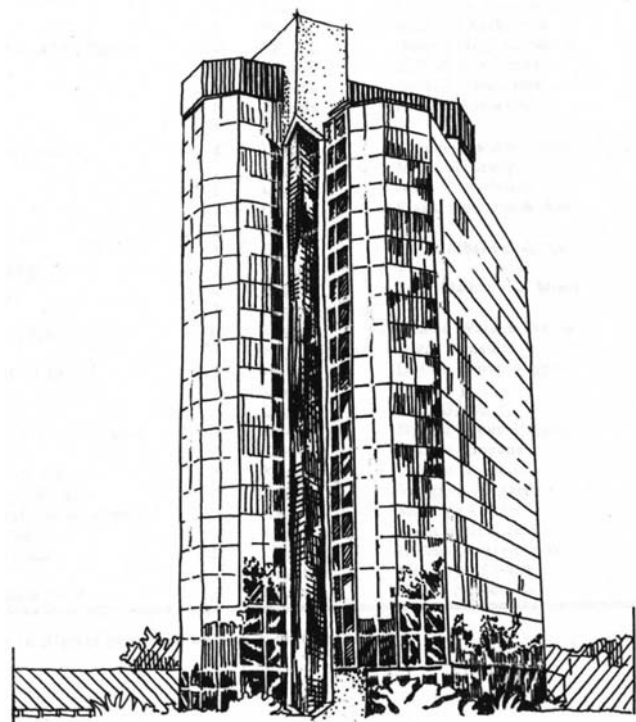


Plate 15: Broking House, Ibadan by Design Group Nigeria, 1983. Source: Author's sketch.



Plate 17: City Centre, Lagos. Source: Postcard printed in Great Britain by J. Arthur Dixon for Leventis Stores Limited, Nigeria.

and it is also behind the low standards of housing estates due to monotonous designs.

5.1 *Low-Trop as a cultural disaster*

The Low-Trop trend represents the architecture of the masses, the architecture of draughtsmen, and low income estates reminiscent of monotonous housing estates in Eastern Europe. Very disastrous are the rentable residential apartments commonly referred to as “face me, I face you”. The family unit is usually contained in two-room apartments (room and parlour) while the service areas with the kitchens, toilets and laundry areas are located at the rear of the corridor (Izomoh, 1997). It is a fact that the landlord is able to maximise his profit while such conditions limit privacy and are climatologically not advisable. Generally conditions of living are poor. They were never that poor in the traditional settings which catered for material and spiritual needs and was sensitive to the

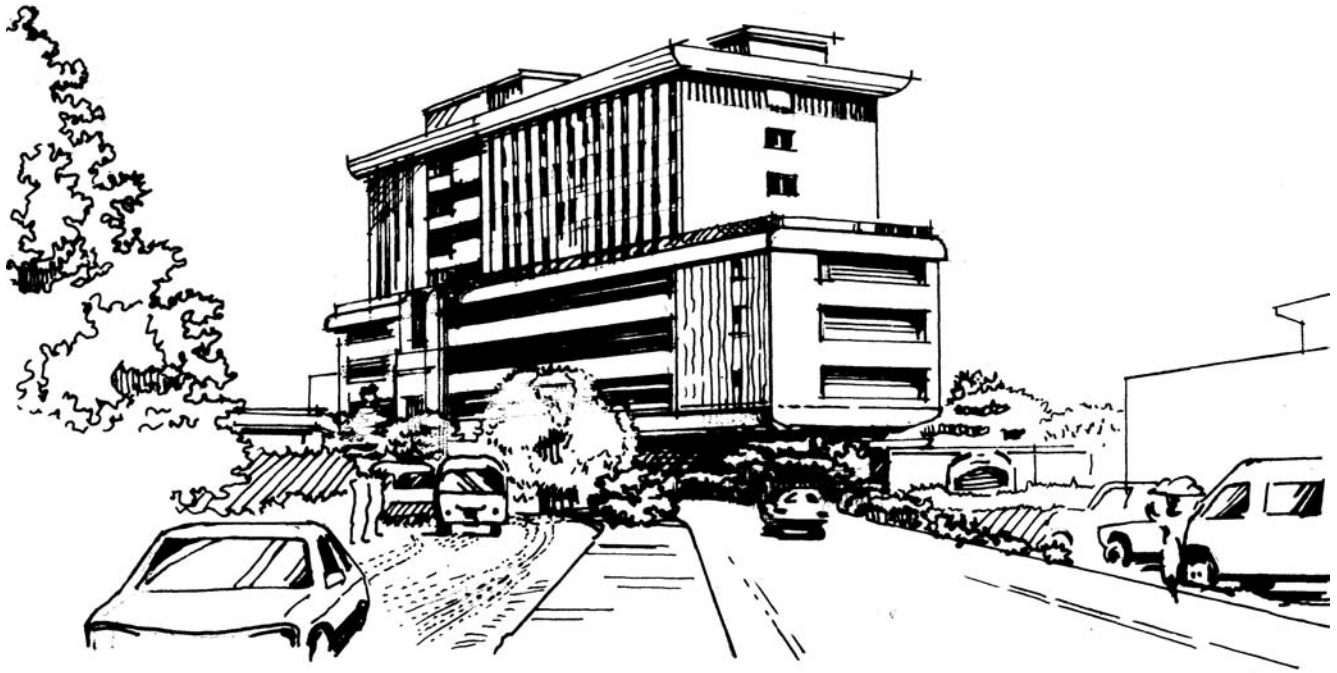


Plate 16: BCCI Head Office, 28 Okpare Avenue, Enugu by Mcanto Madubuko Associates. Source: Researcher's Photograph.

microclimate of a given region.

The design and orientation of the family houses and rentable blocks of flats are influenced by the shape of the plots and the position of the main access roads. The architectural designs of such buildings are handled too often by draughtsmen and other allied professionals in the building industry. The designs are often not functional.

The way of life among the people of third world countries is constantly changing. Small family model contrasting with the extended family is just one example of modern way of life. It is also embodied in architecture and in people's desire for Western architecture. Imported technologies do not help in solving housing problems. They are affordable only for the elite, and in some cases for big administrative bodies such as parastatals, governments, et cetera. Affordability is a very important factor in case of increasing demand for housing. Here the cost of housing construction is still too high while it can be reduced by use of available local building materials and changes in techniques.

In Nigeria there are researches going in search of local building materials and new techniques. There is however a problem of propagating these findings. Adesina (1985, pp. 278-285)

demonstrated a good example of constructing three different experimental models of low cost houses. They were three to four times cheaper than houses where the contractor used conventional construction methods. There are good efforts made as in the case of The Nigerian Building and Road Research Institute (NBRRI, 1997) or in the case of the low-cost row prototype house designed and built by Prof. Olusanya in Lagos. There are other problems related to security issues. People tend to build very high fences which are of low artistic value and constitute ugly elements in the urban landscape and in addition reduce the street ventilation. The expectation from the architects here is to make this architecture more humane.

5.2 Fire hazards in tall buildings

The height of buildings in Nigeria is very limited compared to other skyscrapers in the world. The tallest buildings in the world, the **Petronas Towers** in Malaysia are a spectacular 452m tall. Nigerian buildings can not also compare to the collapsed **World Trade Centre** before the crash of the hijacked planes into each of the towers which caused about three thousand deaths. Despite the limited height of tall buildings, Nigeria also experienced its horrors when **NET Building** in Lagos (Plate 18) and **Cocoa House** in Ibadan were set ablaze. In the event of fire fighting, tall buildings are much more dangerous in developing countries. Here the degree of damage is even greater due to lack of required equipment and skilled personnel.

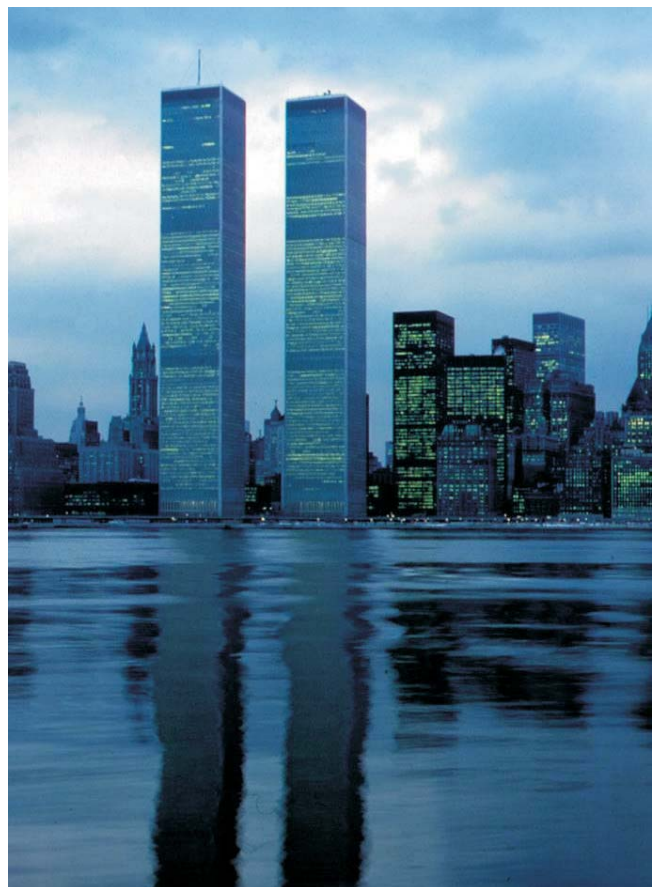
6.0 Conclusion

The International Style in Nigeria has a very rich history starting from the thirties with its peak in the late seventies and early eighties. It is characterized by the free floor plan, use of pure geometrical forms, parapet walls, flat roofs and the use of curtain walls. Its buildings have little regard for climate and social conditions. See Table 1.

This paper has revealed the positive and the negative sides of this architecture. The positive is the fact that it forms a cultural and technological bridge by linking this developing country with the more advanced ones by means of modern technologies and exchange of ideas. It also



Petronas Towers, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Source: <http://www.arrakeen.ch>.



World Trade Centre, New York. Source: <http://www.Greatbuildings.com>.

Table 1: Details of buildings in the International Style referenced in the paper.

Building	Location	Architect
Architecture House	Lagos	Olumuyiwa and Associates (1958)
Bank of the North Headquarters	Kano	Ella Waziri Associates
BCCI Head Office	Enugu	Mcanto Madubuko Associates (1st phase 1978 / 2nd phase 1984)
Benue State Secretariat, Cabinet Office	Makurdi	Archcon Nigeria
Broking House (Femi Johnson House)	Ibadan	Design Group Nigeria (1983)
Buildings at Bayero University	Kano	Ella Waziri Associates
C.S.S. Bookshop House	Broad Street, Lagos	Godwin Hopwood (1965)
Eko Hotel (Eko Holiday Inn)	Victoria Island, Lagos	Oluwole Olumuyiwa and Associates in collaboration with Americans
Faculty of Health Sciences	Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife	Deji Oyenuga and Partners
Federal Secretariat	Lagos	Fola Alade/ Federal Ministry of Works
First Bank Headquarters	Marina, Lagos	Ronald Ward Architects (1982/83)
Godwin and Hopwood Building	Boyle Street, Lagos	Godwin Hopwood (1958)
IBRU Building	Apapa, Lagos	Femi Majekodunmi Associates
IBWA House	Victoria Island, Lagos	Modulor Group
IMB (International Merchant Bank)	Victoria Island, Lagos	Inchscape Architects (1985)
Independence House	Lagos	Federal Ministry of Works (1960)
K. Chellarams Building	Marina, Lagos	James Cubitt and Partners (1985)
Kashim Ibrahim Library	Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria	Egbor and Associates
Management House	Idowu Taylor Street, Victoria Island, Lagos	Oluwole Olumuyiwa and Associates
Mobil Building	Lagos	James Cubitt and Partners (1991)
NAL Towers (NAL Merchant Bank Headquarters)	Lagos	Femi Majekodunmi Associates
National Arts Theatre	Iganmu, Lagos	Techno-Export (Bulgarian Architects)
NET Building	Marina, Lagos	Nickson & Borys
Senate Building	UNILAG, Lagos	James Cubitt and Partners
University Bookshop	University of Ibadan, Ibadan	Design Group Nigeria (1960)
Western House	Lagos	Nickson and Borys (1960)

satisfies the desire for modernity.

The disaster lies in the lowered standard of living due to non-affordability of decent dwelling units by the common man compared to the traditional settings. The buildings are unsatisfactory climatologically and depend on mechanical means of ventilation and artificial light despite the ever-present NEPA failures.

The tall buildings although generally admired are not suitable for the country because of the maintenance costs and uncontrollable fire hazards. The imported technologies in the long run do not promote progress because they suppress the development of the local industry.

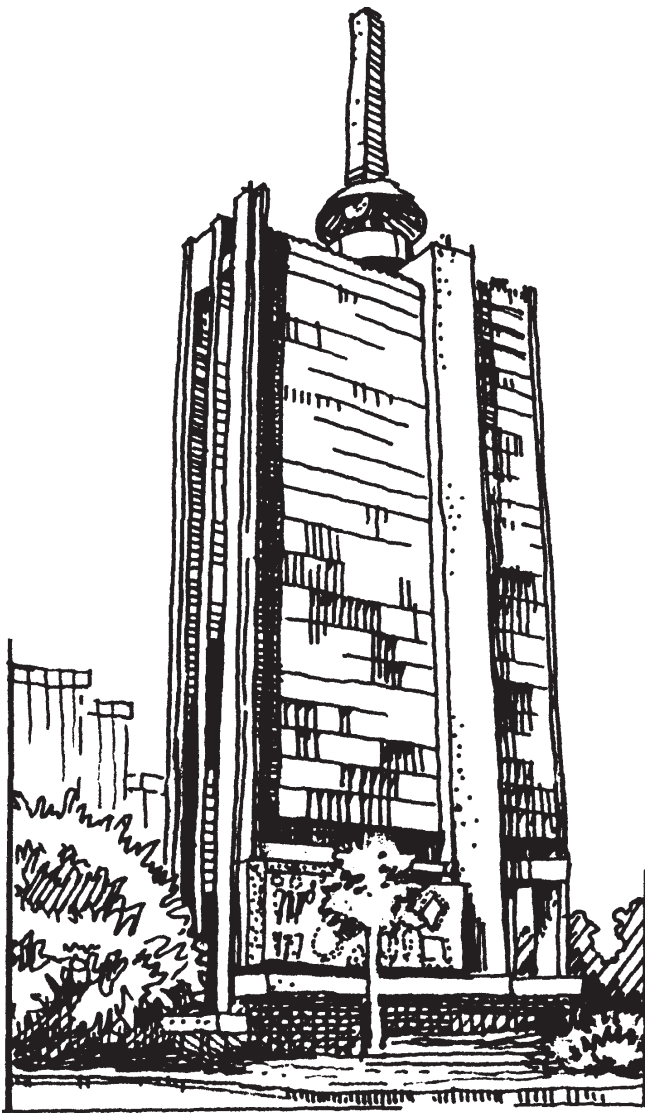


Plate 18: NET Building, Marina, Lagos by Nickson & Borys.
Source: Author's sketch.



Cocoa House, Ibadan. Source: GHK archives.

7. Notes

1. The roof design of this building also places it in the Post Modern Trend.
2. The plan of the building – the Northern Knot also places it in the Post Modern Trend.

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