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INDIGENOUS BUILT FORMS AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY: A QUALITATIVE REVIEW OF ARCHITECTURE AS MATERIAL CULTURE IN NIGERIA.

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Abstract

Architecture gives durable form to social relations, environmental knowledge and collective memory. This qualitative integrative review examines how indigenous built forms in Nigeria connect material culture with collective identity, and how their principles may inform contemporary design. Sixteen purposively selected scholarly and institutional sources were compared thematically, with Igbo compounds and Mbari, Yoruba courtyard houses, and Hausa earthen architecture providing contrasting cases. The selection prioritised traceable works addressing Nigerian or African built forms, cultural meaning, materials, spatial organisation or environmental response; the corpus is illustrative, not exhaustive. Thematic coverage was summarised descriptively: social organisation appeared in 15 sources (94%), local material systems in 14 (88%), climate response and identity continuity in 13 each (81%), ritual symbolism in 12 (75%), and craft knowledge in 11 (69%). These percentages describe only the selected sources. The synthesis shows that cultural meaning rests in relationships among enclosure, thresholds, shared spaces, making, maintenance and use, not appearance alone. It proposes a five-stage translation cycle from contextual reading through contemporary reconstruction. Reliance on published sources limits claims about present community perceptions and measured building performance.

Keywords: collective identity; cultural heritage; indigenous architecture; qualitative integrative review; material culture; Nigeria; vernacular built form

1.0 Introduction

Buildings are physical objects, but societies also use them to organise kinship, authority, work, worship, hospitality and memory. A compound wall identifies membership and exclusion; a courtyard places everyday encounters at the centre of domestic life; a reception space orders relations between household and visitor; and an earthen surface records cycles of repair through which knowledge passes between generations. Architecture therefore participates in culture through material, spatial and temporal practices. It does not merely provide a background for culture.

This proposition has a long intellectual lineage. Rapoport (1969) argued that house form cannot be explained by climate, technology or economics alone because social and cultural values shape choices within those constraints. Oliver (1997) documented vernacular traditions as knowledge embedded in community practice. In African contexts, Denyer (1978), Dmochowski (1990) and Elleh (1997) showed how settlement patterns, compounds, palaces, shrines and

construction systems encode political organisation, cosmology and environmental adjustment. Recent studies continue to examine the distance between inherited knowledge and contemporary practice. Ikudayisi and Odeyale (2021) identify a weakening connection between traditional and contemporary architecture in Nigeria; Adenaike, Fadamiro, and Opoko (2024) trace changes in Yoruba architectural elements in Abeokuta; and Adetoro and Gambo (2025) document professional engagement and barriers to mud construction in Lagos Island.

Urban growth, standardised construction products, changing household structures and the declining social status of earth and thatch are transforming indigenous environments. Change itself is not evidence of cultural loss. Built traditions have always absorbed trade, migration, religion, new tools and new materials. The problem arises when design change severs the intelligible link between a community and the spatial practices through which it recognises itself. A copied motif applied to an otherwise placeless building may signal ethnicity, but it does not necessarily reproduce the social or environmental logic of the tradition.

The Nigerian scholarship documents regional forms, material transitions and professional attitudes, but the relationships among spatial order, material practice, use and collective identity are often discussed separately. A comparative synthesis is needed to show how these relationships work across culturally and climatically distinct settings and how they can guide design without reducing tradition to imitation. This paper asks: (1) which attributes of indigenous built form carry collective meaning; (2) how do Nigerian examples connect spatial order, materials and social identity; and (3) how can contemporary practice translate these relationships without reducing tradition to imitation? The study contributes a comparative interpretation and a proposed design-translation framework. It does not claim to represent every Nigerian group or replace community-based fieldwork.

2.0 Statement of the Research Problem

Contemporary Nigerian development increasingly relies on standardised materials and spatial models, while indigenous built forms and craft systems are altered, marginalised or retained as surface decoration. This shift matters because indigenous architecture connects material choices and spatial arrangements to social obligations, environmental knowledge and shared memory. When only a motif is copied, the practices and relationships that gave it meaning may be lost. Existing studies document regional traditions and current changes, but a comparative account linking built form, material culture and collective identity across Nigerian cases remains limited. Without that synthesis, architects and conservation professionals have little guidance for adapting inherited principles to present requirements while respecting cultural agency. This study addresses

the gap through a qualitative comparison of selected published sources and proposes a design-translation cycle. It treats the cycle as a conceptual proposal requiring community and performance-based testing.

3.0 Aim, Objectives and Research Questions

The aim is to examine how selected Nigerian indigenous built forms express and reproduce collective identity, and to develop a context-sensitive framework for translating their principles into contemporary architecture.

The specific objectives are to:

(i) identify spatial, material and social attributes associated with collective meaning in the selected literature; (ii) compare how these attributes appear in Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa examples; and (iii) formulate a proposed process for translating relevant principles into contemporary design while testing cultural and environmental implications.

The research questions are: (1) Which attributes of indigenous built form carry collective meaning? (2) How do the selected Nigerian examples connect spatial order, materials and social identity? (3) How can contemporary practice translate these relationships without reducing tradition to imitation?

4.0 Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

4.1 Principal framework: material culture and the social production of space

Material-culture analysis is the principal framework: it asks how architectural elements are made, used, valued and transmitted. Applied to buildings, it considers a structure as both an artefact and an arrangement of action. The meaning of a doorway lies partly in its shape and ornament, but also in who may cross it, at what time, and under whose authority. A courtyard's meaning lies in its geometry and climatic effect as well as in the meetings, food preparation, childcare, ceremonies and disputes that occur there. Material, form and practice operate together.

Lefebvre (1991) described space as socially produced rather than as a neutral container; Bourdieu (1977) connected domestic organisation to embodied categories and repeated conduct. These ideas support the principal material-culture framework by directing analysis from isolated forms toward spatial relations and everyday practices. Norberg-Schulz's (1980) idea of genius loci, or character of place, helps interpret how material, topography, light and settlement contribute to belonging. The framework therefore guides the coding of spatial organisation, material systems, ritual, climate response, craft and identity continuity. Plans and sections reveal spatial relations, while published accounts of use and meaning help interpret them.

Collective identity is used here to mean a socially negotiated sense of belonging sustained through shared narratives, symbols, institutions and practices. Architecture contributes by making those elements visible and repeatable. It can stabilise identity through familiar spatial sequences, but it can also contest identity when state, religious or commercial institutions replace local meanings. Built form is thus neither a passive mirror nor an autonomous cause. It is one medium through which groups construct, rehearse and revise who they are.

4.2 Indigenous, vernacular and traditional architecture

The terms vernacular, traditional and indigenous overlap but are not identical. Vernacular architecture generally refers to buildings shaped through local knowledge, available resources and customary practice, often without formal professional authorship (Oliver, 1997). Traditional architecture emphasises continuity with inherited forms or techniques. Indigenous architecture additionally foregrounds the knowledge and agency of peoples with enduring relationships to place. None of these categories implies stasis. The ICOMOS Charter on the Built Vernacular Heritage states that vernacular heritage expresses the culture of a community, relates to territory and develops through adaptation (ICOMOS, 1999).

This paper uses indigenous built forms for spatial types and construction practices whose meanings arise from locally transmitted knowledge. The analytical emphasis is on principles: how parts relate, how resources are assembled, how boundaries are managed and how use changes over time. This avoids judging authenticity solely by whether a roof is thatched or a wall is made of unstabilised earth. A culturally continuous building may use contemporary technology if communities can still recognise, inhabit and transmit its underlying relationships.

5.0 Materials and Methods

5.1 Review design and theoretical approach

The study used a qualitative integrative review combined with comparative interpretive analysis. The review brings historical, theoretical, architectural and empirical sources into one analytical frame because the research question crosses disciplinary boundaries (Snyder, 2019). Document analysis was appropriate for examining recurring meanings and design principles across published accounts rather than estimating causal effects in a population (Bowen, 2009). The analysis distinguishes evidence reported by source authors from the present paper's comparative interpretation and proposed design framework. Thematic coding followed the recursive logic described by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, review, definition and synthesis.

5.2 Source identification, selection and scope

A targeted bibliographic search was undertaken for this revision in September 2026 through publisher and journal websites and web-based bibliographic searches, followed by citation chaining from relevant books, articles and institutional documents. Search phrases included "indigenous architecture Nigeria," "vernacular architecture Nigeria," "architecture cultural identity Nigeria," "Nigerian traditional building materials," "mud construction Nigeria," and "vernacular climate response." The search was purposive rather than exhaustive: the original project did not retain a database-level search log or counts for all records screened, so no claim of systematic coverage or PRISMA completeness is made. Sixteen core sources published between 1969 and 2025 were retained for the descriptive thematic synthesis. Methodological sources (Bowen, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Snyder, 2019) informed the review process but were not part of that 16-source coding corpus. Three recent Nigerian studies were added as contextual literature and comparative checks, not retroactively included in the frequency denominator. Sources were retained when they had a traceable bibliographic record and directly addressed one or more of these dimensions: indigenous or vernacular built form; Nigerian or African spatial and material practices; cultural meaning or identity; or environmental response and contemporary adaptation. Foundational works were retained where they established concepts or documented regional traditions; peer-reviewed contemporary studies and institutional sources were included for current evidence and conservation principles. Sources were excluded from the core corpus when they lacked traceable publication details, had no clear relevance to the research questions, or duplicated an already represented account without adding a distinct case or concept. The corpus is purposive and illustrative; it does not represent a statistically sampled body of buildings or communities.

Table 1. Source inclusion and exclusion criteria

Decision	Criteria
Include	Traceable scholarly or institutional publication; addresses indigenous/vernacular built form, Nigerian/African cases, cultural meaning, materials, spatial organisation or environmental response.
Include	Foundational sources that establish concepts or document regional traditions; contemporary peer-reviewed studies used to contextualise change and current practice.
Exclude	Untraceable publication details; no material relevance to the research questions; duplicative sources that add no distinct case or concept.

Source: Author's review protocol.

Table 2. Sixteen-source analytical corpus and contribution

Source	Primary contribution to this review

Source	**Primary contribution to this review**
Rapoport (1969)	House form, culture and social choice.
Fathy (1973)	Local materials, climate-responsive design and craft.
Denyer (1978)	Regional African architectural forms, settlement and construction.
Norberg-Schulz (1980)	Place, meaning and environmental character.
Dmochowski (1990)	Documented Nigerian regional traditions and building systems.
Elleh (1997)	African architectural history, cultural meaning and transformation.
Oliver (1997)	Comparative vernacular knowledge and community practice.
International Council on Monuments and Sites (1999)	Vernacular heritage, continuity and adaptation.
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2003)	Intangible heritage, practice, knowledge and cultural space.
Osasona (2007)	Nigerian residential traditions and their transformations.
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2011)	Historic urban landscape and the wider social context of heritage.
United Nations Environment Programme and Global Alliance for Buildings and Construction (2023)	Built-environment emissions context.
Bourdieu (1977)	Practice theory and embodied social relations.
Lefebvre (1991)	Social production of space.
Adetoro and Gambo (2025)	Professional engagement with mud construction in Lagos Island.
Sultana et al. (2023)	Peer-reviewed synthesis of indigenous resource-efficiency practices.

Source: Author's synthesis. Ikudayisi and Odeyale (2021), Adenaike et al. (2024), and Jegede and Enwonwu (2025) were added as contextual comparisons and were not included in the 16-source frequency calculation.

Figure 1. Review source identification and selection sequence

1. Targeted search	2. Relevance screening	3. Core corpus	4. Comparative analysis
Bibliographic web searches, journal/publisher pages and citation chaining; September 2026.	Apply relevance, traceability and case-coverage criteria; retain no unsupported record counts.	Sixteen purposively selected sources for thematic frequencies; recent contextual studies kept separate.	Code six themes, compare Igbo/Yoruba/Hausa cases, then interpret contemporary design implications.

Source: Author's review protocol. Screening counts were not retained, so the diagram represents the documented process rather than a PRISMA count flow.

The source-selection pathway is shown in Figure 1. One researcher conducted the screening and coding; no inter-coder reliability statistic is reported. To limit interpretive overreach, theme frequencies are treated as descriptive counts, and case interpretation is distinguished from source-reported evidence.

5.3 Comparative case selection

The comparative cases are the Igbo compound and Mbari tradition in south-eastern Nigeria, the Yoruba courtyard house in the south-west, and Hausa earthen domestic and monumental architecture in the north. The cases were selected for analytical variation in ecology, settlement form, construction and social organisation. They are not presented as internally uniform. Regional labels contain local differences, and colonialism, religion, migration, conflict, income and regulation have produced hybrid forms.

Table 3. Analytical case matrix

Case	Recurring spatial attributes	Material and craft attributes	Identity-bearing practices
Igbo compound and Mbari	Distributed buildings around shared open space; graded thresholds; reception and ritual nodes	Earth, timber, bamboo, palm and painted or modelled surfaces	Kinship, hospitality, title and ritual association, communal making
Yoruba courtyard house	Rooms and verandas organised around internal courts; layered access	Earth walls, timber structure, later corrugated roofing and masonry adaptations	Extended household organisation, craft, trade and domestic ceremony
Hausa earthen architecture	Inward-looking compounds; controlled entrances; hierarchical reception spaces	Thick earth walls, timber reinforcement, moulded and painted relief	Privacy, status, Islamic social practice, specialised guild knowledge

Source: Author's synthesis from Denyer (1978), Dmochowski (1990), Elleh (1997), Oliver (1997) and Osasona (2007).

5.4 Coding and descriptive synthesis

Each core source was read against six predefined but revisable themes: social organisation, local material systems, ritual or symbolic meaning, climate response, craft knowledge and identity continuity. A theme was counted once per source when it formed a substantive part of the source's argument or documented case. Frequency therefore indicates coverage within this purposive corpus, not prevalence among buildings or populations. Percentages use sixteen as the denominator and are rounded to the nearest whole number. The procedure provides a modest quantitative view of the qualitative evidence while keeping interpretation primary.

5.5 Research quality and limitations

Credibility was strengthened by comparing architectural histories, cultural theory, conservation charters and recent sustainability research. A case matrix made similarities and differences explicit, and negative cases were retained where cultural continuity did not depend on literal material survival. The principal limitation is reliance on published documents. The analysis cannot establish how present-day residents evaluate particular buildings, nor can it measure indoor performance without field data. English-language publication also privileges documented traditions and formal scholarship. The proposed framework should therefore be tested through measured surveys, interviews, participatory mapping and post-occupancy evaluation.

6.0 Indigenous Built Form as a Cultural System

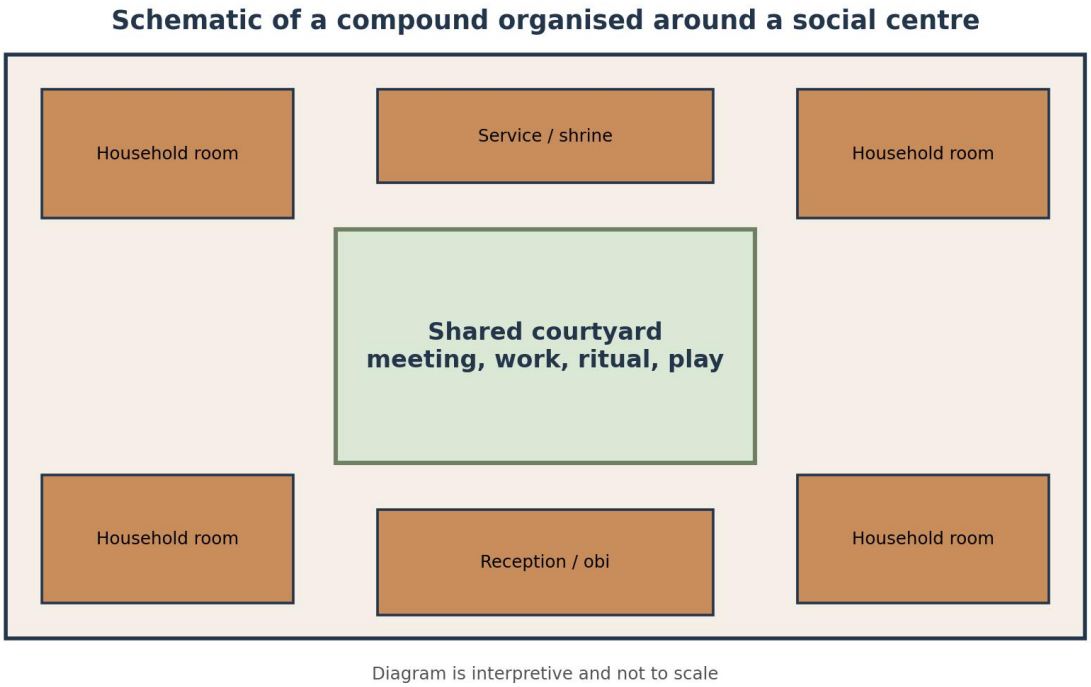
6.1 Spatial order and social relations

Across the cases, space translates social relationships into distances, orientations and sequences. The compound is especially important because it joins autonomous units to a collective centre. In Igbo settings, separate structures may accommodate household, reception, cooking, storage and ritual functions around shared open space. The arrangement allows growth by addition while preserving a recognisable centre. Dmochowski (1990) documented how these ensembles varied by locality and status, cautioning against a single "Igbo house" type. Their common significance lies less in a fixed diagram than in the way built parts make household relations legible.

Courtyard organisation likewise structures Yoruba domestic life. Rooms and shaded circulation address an interior open space, enabling work, interaction and environmental moderation. Osasona (2007) describes the transition of Nigerian residential traditions under colonial and modern influences, including the persistence and transformation of courtyard ideas.

The court can support collective life while layered entrances regulate the relationship between household and street. Its cultural work depends on occupancy and access, not on geometry alone.

Hausa compounds and monumental earthen buildings place strong emphasis on controlled thresholds, privacy and reception. Entrance sequences separate public encounter from protected domestic domains, while decorated surfaces communicate prestige and craft lineage. Denyer (1978) and Dmochowski (1990) show that the inward orientation responds simultaneously to climate and social norms. The same wall provides shade, thermal mass, security and a boundary of social propriety. Treating any one function as the sole cause would miss the integrated character of the form.



a) Figure 2. Compound space as a framework for collective life
b) *Source: Author's interpretive diagram based on Dmochowski (1990), Oliver (1997) and Osasona (2007).*

6.2 Materials as repositories of knowledge

Materials carry culture through their sources, names, preparation, assembly, repair and sensory qualities. Earth is not simply a low-cost substitute for concrete. Its selection and transformation may involve knowledge of soil, water, fibres, compaction, drying, plastering and seasonal maintenance. Timber and bamboo require familiarity with species, maturity, jointing and protection. Thatch requires harvesting cycles, bundling and roof geometry. When these processes are collective, maintenance renews social ties as well as fabric.

The environmental properties of local assemblies reinforce their cultural value without reducing culture to performance. Thick earthen walls can delay heat transfer; deep eaves and

verandas shade walls and outdoor activity; high or vented roofs release warm air; and courtyards can support daylight and ventilation when proportioned for climate. A peer-reviewed review of indigenous architectural practices identifies resource-efficient principles across climatic zones while emphasising the need for further empirical testing before large-scale application (Sultana et al., 2023). The lesson is to test principles rather than assume every inherited solution performs well under current density, occupancy and weather.

Industrial materials have altered the meaning and performance of indigenous forms. Corrugated metal can reduce labour and improve rain shedding, but an uninsulated sheet may increase radiant heat and rain noise. Cement render may signal permanence and status, yet incompatible render can trap moisture and accelerate decay in earth walls. These conflicts show why "modern" and "traditional" are inadequate performance categories. Design decisions should compare whole assemblies, maintenance capacity and cultural expectations.

A recent survey provides a useful indication of the gap between recognition and use. Adetoro and Gambo (2025) analysed responses from 105 architects practising on Lagos Island. More than 60% reported encountering mud construction in academic or professional settings, while approximately 25% had used it in design projects. The study is geographically specific and based on self-report, so its percentages should not be generalised to all Nigerian architects. It nevertheless supports the qualitative finding that cultural and environmental awareness does not automatically produce adoption when durability concerns, regulation, client expectations and technical capacity remain unresolved.

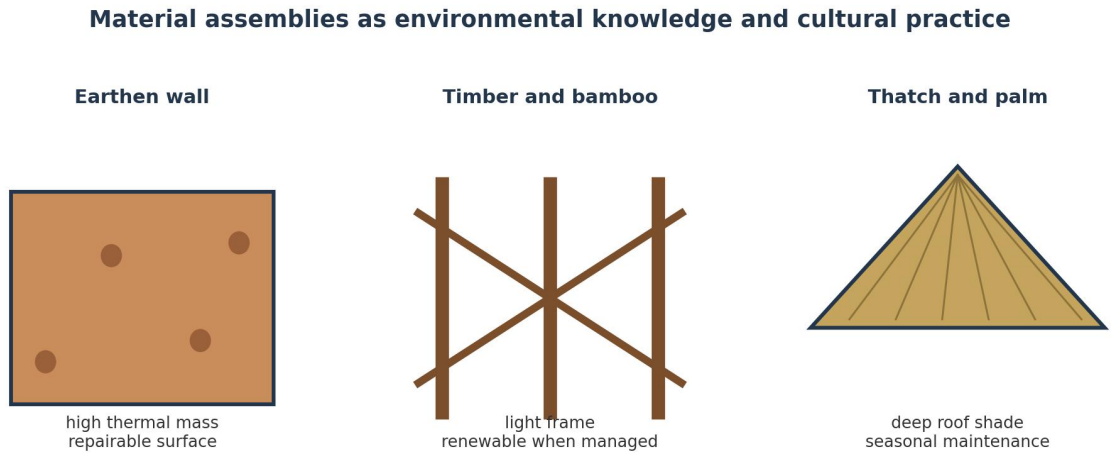


Figure 3. Material assemblies as environmental and cultural knowledge
Source: Author's illustration informed by Fathy (1973), Oliver (1997) and ICOMOS (1999).

6.3 Symbol, ritual and memory

Architecture becomes mnemonic when spaces and surfaces recall events, ancestors, institutions or cosmological relationships. In south-eastern Nigeria, Mbari is a clear example of building as collective artistic and ritual production. The open-sided structure, modelled figures and earthen material are inseparable from the process of commission, making and eventual decay. Its significance cannot be conserved fully by reproducing a concrete shell because material impermanence and communal labour form part of the work's meaning. The example challenges conservation approaches that equate continuity with permanent fabric.

Domestic architecture also carries quieter forms of memory. A family may associate a threshold, tree, courtyard or reception structure with lineage meetings and life-cycle ceremonies. Such meanings may remain invisible to an external surveyor. UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage recognises practices, knowledge and skills, including the instruments and cultural spaces associated with them (UNESCO, 2003). This broadens architectural documentation from objects to the practices that keep them meaningful.

Symbolic identity is neither innocent nor unanimous. Monumental architecture may privilege titled men, ruling lineages or religious authorities; rules of access may encode gender and age hierarchies. Cultural conservation should document these relations without assuming that every inherited arrangement deserves reproduction. Collective identity is constructed through debate as well as continuity. Participatory design can distinguish values that communities wish to sustain from exclusions they wish to change.

6.4 Craft, maintenance and transmission

Built heritage survives through people who know how to diagnose, repair and adapt it. Standard conservation inventories often record age, style and condition while giving less attention to builders, material suppliers, apprentices and maintenance calendars. Yet the loss of a craft network can make a technically intact building difficult to sustain. ICOMOS (1999) therefore links vernacular conservation to the continuity of traditional building systems and skills.

Maintenance is also a design characteristic. Earthen plaster may require periodic renewal, thatch replacement may be cyclical, and painted relief may be refreshed for social occasions. Modern procurement frequently labels these tasks as defects because it values long replacement intervals and standard warranties. A life-cycle view gives a more balanced account: frequent low-energy repair using local labour may be preferable in some contexts, while high labour demands or scarce biomass may make an inherited method untenable in others. The appropriate decision depends on environmental impact, skill availability, affordability and user preference.

7.0 Results

7.1 Objective 1: recurring themes in the selected literature

For Objective 1, the coded corpus most often addressed social organisation: 15 of 16 sources (94%). Local material systems appeared in 14 (88%); climate response and identity continuity in 13 each (81%); ritual or symbolic meaning in 12 (75%); and craft knowledge in 11 (69%). These are counts of thematic coverage in the selected literature, not estimates about Nigerian buildings or communities. The pattern indicates that the literature most consistently links collective meaning to social organisation, materials and environmental adaptation.

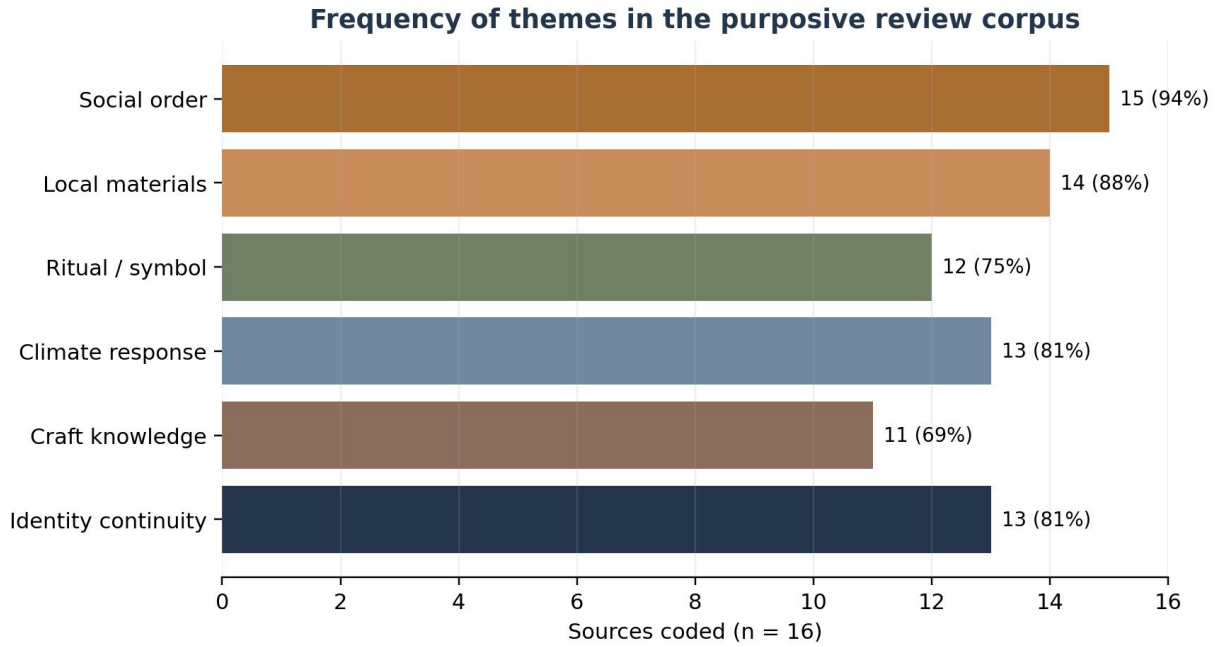


Figure 4. Frequency of themes in the review corpus
Source: Author's coding of sixteen purposively selected sources.

Percentages are descriptive of thematic occurrence in this corpus only, not prevalence in buildings or populations.

Table 4. Descriptive results of thematic coding

Theme	Sources n	Share of corpus	Interpretive finding
Social organisation	15	94%	Spatial sequences and shared centres make roles and relations legible.
Local material systems	14	88%	Meaning resides in sourcing, making, finish and repair as well as appearance.
Climate response	13	81%	Environmental adaptation is commonly integrated with social and material choices.

Theme	Sources n	Share of corpus	Interpretive finding
Identity continuity	13	81%	Continuity depends on recognisable relationships and practices, not exact replication.
Ritual and symbolism	12	75%	Sacred and mnemonic meanings attach to spaces, surfaces and building processes.
Craft knowledge	11	69%	Transmission networks are essential but less consistently documented.

Source: Author's analysis. n = 16; one occurrence maximum per theme per source. Percentages describe this purposive corpus only.

7.2 Objective 2: comparative mechanisms of identity construction

For Objective 2, comparison of the Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa cases suggests four linked mechanisms through which built form may participate in identity construction. First, spatial classification distinguishes public from private, everyday from sacred, and individual from collective domains. Second, repeated use turns these classifications into embodied knowledge: published accounts describe settings for receiving guests, assembling households and conducting rites. Third, materials and craft connect buildings to territory and labour. Fourth, maintenance and adaptation carry settings through time. These are interpretive mechanisms derived from the literature, not findings about the present-day perceptions of residents.

This model explains why visual quotation alone is weak. A façade pattern may communicate affiliation, but if access, collective space, material practice and community use have no traceable relationship to the referenced tradition, the building remains primarily representational. Conversely, a contemporary building may express continuity without traditional ornament when its shared court, threshold sequence, climatic response, local craft participation and capacity for incremental change retain culturally intelligible principles.

7.3 Objective 3: environmental and contemporary design implications

For Objective 3, reviewed sources repeatedly associate cultural practice with environmental adjustment. Sultana et al. (2023) synthesise resource-efficiency principles across indigenous architecture, while Nigerian studies document current interest and constraints around mud construction (Adetoro & Gambo, 2025). These sources support design hypotheses—shade, ventilation, compactness, thermal mass, local material cycles and adaptable compounds—that require project-specific testing. The global estimate that buildings and construction accounted for 37% of energy- and process-related CO2 emissions in 2022 (United Nations Environment Programme & Global Alliance for Buildings and Construction, 2023) establishes sectoral context; it is not evidence of the performance of the Nigerian cases.

Cultural and environmental goals can diverge. Larger glazed openings may satisfy a contemporary image while increasing heat gain; deeper compounds may support privacy but restrict cross-ventilation at higher densities; and local bio-based materials may face durability, fire or supply constraints. These are design risks to evaluate, not measured outcomes of this review. Simulation, prototypes and post-occupancy measurement can test performance, while interviews and participatory evaluation can test meaning and use.

8.0 Discussion

8.1 From imitation to translation

Literal revival treats the past as a catalogue of forms. Translation asks which relationship a form established and how that relationship can work under present conditions. A courtyard, for example, may be translated as a shaded common room, a ventilated atrium or a cluster court, depending on density, security and household structure. Earthen craft may become stabilised blocks, prefabricated panels or a repairable finish after material testing. A decorated entrance may inspire a contemporary threshold made with local artists rather than a generic applied motif.

Recent Nigerian evidence is consistent with the review's concern about superficial continuity, while also showing that architectural adaptation is already taking place. Ikudayisi and Odeyale (2021) describe a weak connection between traditional and contemporary architecture; Adenaike et al. (2024) examine acculturated elements in Yoruba buildings in Abeokuta. In Lagos, Adetoro and Gambo (2025) report professional interest alongside regulatory, technical and client-related barriers to mud construction. Jegede and Enwonwu (2025), using 110 valid responses across three cultural centres, find that users generally perceive neo-vernacular architecture as contributing to cultural and sustainability benefits, with differences across settings. Their perception data do not establish measured environmental performance. Together, these studies support an approach that documents the cultural source, tests practical performance and checks the resulting design with users.

Translation must retain evidence of lineage. If every inherited principle is abstracted until it becomes universal language—"community," "sustainability," "place"—the specific culture disappears. The design brief should therefore name the source practice, the people who interpret it, the element being translated, the change introduced and the reason for that change. This record allows users and reviewers to judge whether adaptation is respectful, legible and useful.

8.2 Proposed five-stage translation cycle

The proposed cycle begins with contextual reading. Designers document settlement patterns, social groups, daily and ceremonial uses, climate, resources and contested meanings. The second stage abstracts relationships rather than shapes: enclosure gradients, shared centres, additive growth, shade, repair cycles or craft roles. The third stage tests environmental and functional performance through measurement, simulation and prototypes. The fourth stage returns options to community members, users and craftspeople for co-design. The fifth stage reconstructs the selected principles with contemporary materials, regulations and building services while documenting what was retained and changed.

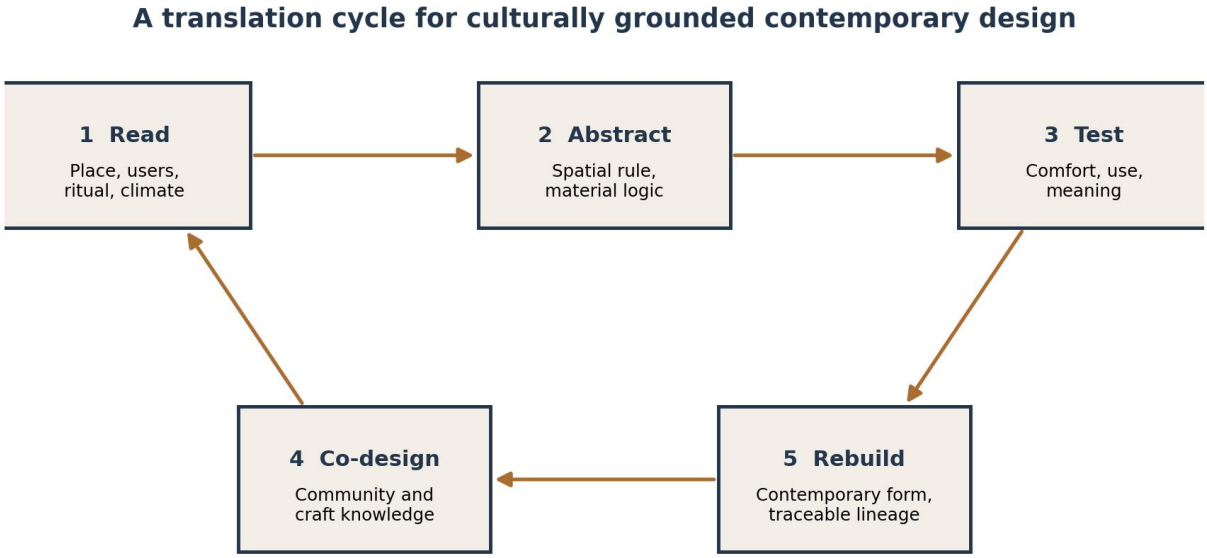


Figure 5. Proposed conceptual/design framework: five-stage translation cycle
Source: Author's proposed conceptual/design framework; not empirically validated.

The cycle is iterative. Performance testing may show that a remembered form no longer provides comfort under current occupancy. Co-design may reveal that a spatial hierarchy conflicts with present expectations of gender equity or accessibility. Reconstruction may expose material supply constraints. Returning to earlier stages is therefore evidence of responsible design, not failure.

8.3 Implications for architectural practice and education

Architectural briefs should include cultural-use requirements alongside accommodation schedules. For a civic project, these may cover forms of assembly, welcome, deliberation, ceremony, informal trade and intergenerational use. Site analysis should map social thresholds

and movement as carefully as sun and drainage. Material specifications should record maintenance skills and supply chains. Post-occupancy studies should ask whether users recognise intended meanings and whether spaces actually support the practices claimed for them.

Schools of architecture can support this approach through measured drawing, oral history, material laboratories and design studios conducted with communities. Students should learn to distinguish documentation from romantic reconstruction. A measured survey records dimensions and fabric; an ethnographic account interprets use and meaning; a performance study measures environmental behaviour; and a design proposal makes a new claim. Combining these methods produces stronger evidence than presenting a picturesque image as complete knowledge.

Professional institutes can develop regional case archives with drawings, photographs, interviews, material tests and permissions. Such archives should include contemporary adaptations and failed experiments, not only exemplary monuments. Procurement policies can enable small craft enterprises to participate through training, mock-ups and performance-based specifications. Building regulations can permit tested earth and bio-based systems without waiving structural, health or fire requirements.

8.4 Implications for conservation and policy

Conservation policy should identify the cultural system associated with a site. For some places, retaining original fabric is paramount. For others, continued ritual use, craft transmission or periodic rebuilding may carry equal weight. The UNESCO historic urban landscape approach encourages attention to the wider urban context and social values rather than isolated monuments (UNESCO, 2011). This is relevant where indigenous compounds are fragmented by roads, plot subdivision or incompatible development.

Documentation should record custodianship and consent. Cultural knowledge is not automatically public design material. Communities may restrict images, meanings or access to sacred spaces. Researchers and architects should agree how information will be stored, credited and reused. Benefit sharing can include paid expertise, apprenticeships, local procurement, joint authorship or community control over archives. These measures treat knowledge holders as collaborators rather than sources to be mined.

9.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This review answers the first research question by identifying spatial organisation, materials, ritual and symbolism, climate response, craft knowledge and continuity as recurring themes in the selected sources. It answers the second by showing, through Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa examples, how shared spaces, thresholds, material practices and maintenance connect built form with social

relations and memory. It answers the third by proposing translation of these principles through contextual reading, abstraction, performance testing, co-design and contemporary reconstruction. The frequency figures describe only the purposive 16-source corpus. The study supports a relational account of cultural continuity rather than judging buildings by visual resemblance alone.

The main contribution is the proposed five-stage design-translation cycle. It offers architects a way to adapt indigenous principles while recording what is retained, changed and why. The cycle is conceptual and has not been validated through field application.

Recommendations follow directly from the findings. Because shared spaces and thresholds carry social meaning, project briefs should record cultural uses and access patterns before design begins. Because local material systems and craft knowledge recur in the literature but face practical barriers, architects and public agencies should test assemblies for safety, durability, comfort and maintenance, and involve craftspeople in prototyping. Because continuity depends on use and interpretation, communities should participate in decisions about which meanings to retain or change, with consent and compensation. Universities and professional bodies should support regional documentation that combines measured surveys, oral histories and material records.

10.0 Limitations and Areas for Further Research

The review relies on published English-language sources and a purposive, non-exhaustive corpus; the original screening log did not record database-level retrieval or exclusion counts. Regional scholarship and community accounts may therefore be underrepresented. No interviews, direct observations or building-performance measurements were undertaken, so statements about social meaning and environmental response are interpretations of published evidence or design hypotheses rather than empirical findings of this study. Future research should test the proposed cycle through field surveys in Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa settings, interviews with residents and knowledge holders, participatory mapping, material and environmental performance testing, and post-occupancy evaluation of contemporary projects.

10.2 Acknowledgements

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10.3 Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares no competing interest.

10.4 Data Availability

The source inventory and thematic frequency summary are provided in Tables 2 and 4. No personal or confidential data were collected.

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