Barcelona, Prague, Timbuktu and Cairo - these cities are home to magnificent architectural masterpieces steeped in culture and history. In these cities as with many others, a connection exists between building form and art - from the classical tradition to the energetic and spontaneous modern art. Each movement is interpreted through paintings, sculptures, and works of architecture. These works of architecture, often more visible in public buildings (temples, court houses, palaces and civic centres), reflects the connection between the traditional architecture of centuries past and today’s post modern forms, enhancing the character and heritage of these cities and making their indigenous architecture a national symbol.

It is therefore of interest to investigate and understand why indigenous architecture recognised through architectural styles, elements and building techniques which once existed from cultural and historical influences is almost extinct in Nigeria. Majority of today’s building stock, especially in urban areas, are merely “functional” buildings with no reflection of the socio-cultural past. Buildings with historical influences have been left to deteriorate and in many cases have been demolished. Most Nigerian architects have little knowledge in this area and are unable to convincingly define (or celebrate) “Nigerian” architecture.

This edition of Real Estate Insight discusses indigenous Nigerian architecture, throwing up more questions than answers regarding the form this takes, if it exists at all.

History of Architecture
The need for shelter in the simplest form, marked the beginning of something approaching architecture. As man adapted to his environment, the structures he created became less tent-like (and temporary) and more rigid and permanent. Early architecture evolved into buildings with straight wall construction and openings for ventilation and lighting. In this period (the Neolithic era), buildings were mainly constructed of mud bricks and stones and plastered and painted with elaborate scenes of human and animals.

Global Architecture & Indigenous Influences
The civilisation, medieval and renaissance era birthed new forms and even more magnificent styles of architecture through Europe. The architecture of the Greek, Roman and Byzantine empires had similar techniques yet different styles with elements such as long rows of large columns, vaults and orders, domes as coverings, artistic paintings, ornaments and mosaic tile finishes revealed the political and religious supremacy of that era. The master builders of that period designed buildings and constructed structures with strong Islamic, Christian (Gothic) and Buddhist cultural influences. In later years, these influences became predominant with public buildings in different regions around the world.

Other styles of architecture such as the Persian, Indian and Japanese architecture are also distinctive styles developed from Arab and Asian building cultures whose building elements and techniques have been preserved for centuries and are important elements of today’s global architectural landscape.

In Africa, like other aspects of its culture, the architecture is exceptionally diverse and most ethno linguistic groups had their own architectural traditions. Egyptian architecture (Nubian - one of the most ancient in the world), Sahelian, Ethiopian and Ashanti are few examples of distinctive architectural styles with strong cultural influences. Like most architectural traditions elsewhere, African architecture reflects numerous external influences. Traditional, Islamic Christian and Colonial influences shaped building forms in different regions and form important parts of the African architectural landscape. Today, African cities such as Timbuktu and Djenne (Mali) are World Heritage Sites and the uniqueness of the preserved architecture of these cities draws thousands of visitors to the regions.

History of “Nigerian Traditional Architecture”
Nigeria has a vast and diverse culture with more than 400 ethnic groups, far from homogenous in both its socio-cultural structure and ideological orientation. It is therefore useful to discuss building influences from regional perspectives.

Fifteenth century research indicates that traditional architecture existed in Nigeria. In Northern Nigeria, famed for its ribbed vaults, domes, sculpted and painted external murals, religious beliefs directly influence spatial arrangements. Buildings were composed of individual egg-shaped units of earth plastered adobe (locally termed tubalal) presenting a monolithic form. A typical house comprised rectilinear and circular spatial units, linked together by wall segments forming a border wall. Roofing, essentially, consists of linking shallow domes and vaults.

In southwestern Nigeria, people traditionally lived in large urban social groupings. The “public...
buildings”, i.e., the king’s palace (which was also the court house) and the market place dominated the central areas of old cities such as Ibadan, West Africa’s largest city. Houses were built in large compounds with each room opening into a common “courtyard” with large verandahs - an essential component for environmental control and socio cultural exchanges. The community architecture of southeastern Nigeria is similar to the southwest in terms of use of materials and building techniques. However, buildings were ranked in importance based on their relative distance to the community/compound head’s.1

Is Nigerian architecture therefore adobe walls, vaults, domes, courtyards and large overhanging roofs?

Influences on the Nigerian Architecture
During the late 18th and 19th century, the colonial rule brought with it “civilization” and the construction of public buildings (schools/institutions, warehouses, banks, hospitals, courthouses) and residences. Relatively grandiose places of worship were built. Construction was mainly timber framed and masonry structures raised well above ground, covered with corrugated iron sheets and large well shaded overhangs. So, could it be that Nigerian Architecture evolved in this period as a marriage of local materials and expressions such as large overhangs and verandahs, plus elements styles and symbols from the British?

The abolishment of the slave trade led to the return of many, and with them, architectural influences and styles. Storey houses were introduced - typical of Afro Brazilian architecture and churches with strong gothic themes.5 These were built with sandcrete blocks and embellished with heavy ornamental pillars and molded balustrades. Several of these survived and can still be seen Lagos and a few old cities such as Calabar and Ibadan (Southern Nigeria) and Kaduna in Northern Nigeria.

Religion has had a strong influence on the traditional architecture predominant in Northern Nigeria - its geometric design, proportion and aesthetics. The dome shaped mud roof became popular and reflected a distinctive façade evocative of cities in Northern Africa. Imported building materials did not affect the form of buildings but rather the buildings became more decorative as old mud walls gave way to elaborate molded designs executed in cement, painted walls and figurative patterns.5

Indigenous Architecture meets Modern Architecture
At the end of the colonial rule, indigenous architecture had become a mishmash of imported influences, superimposed upon elements which were either strongly influenced by climate or religion. A time of growth and development led Nigerian architects (all trained abroad) often working with British counterparts to design buildings which attempted to suit climate and local conditions—simple geometric forms, concrete external walls with concrete, steel and aluminum sun shading devices. There was little or no interpretation in terms of use of building materials, traditional or religious elements. So, modern, functional and largely aesthetically pleasing buildings dotted the landscape, with no influences from the past.

Architecture historians say this was bound to happen, after all the architects were educated in the “modern world”. Unfortunately, even with the establishment of local architecture schools, too little is being taught on traditional architecture. Where indigenous architecture exists, built structures tell a story and reflect the history, evolution and culture of its people. These structures are often identified, restored and preserved as being of notable cultural importance.

Rediscovering and Preserving
There is more than enough local expertise in Nigerian art, history and architecture to generate attention toward preserving history and culture through preserving built structures. Since architecture is a social activity that produces cultural legacy, therefore identification and preservation of whatever is left of indigenous architecture is a good first step. Nigeria’s history is steeped in symbolic buildings strong in style—the Railway Compound in Lagos is an excellent example.

Mali (West Africa), initiated deliberate policies to encourage practicing architects, academicians and government to promote research into traditional and historical architecture leading to the use of old techniques, elements and styles which continue to be incorporated into today’s modern styles and forms. The benefit of this can be seen in many ancient towns in the country, where well preserved indigenous architecture exists alongside more modern designs.

Preservation is key in recognising and acknowledging indigenous architecture. Architectural elements, building techniques and styles, and use of materials developed from cultural and external influences are a part of Nigeria’s history and should take pride of place in today’s architectural landscape.

Perhaps we could start with the ancient city of Lokoja, a confluence city and one-time administrative seat of the colonial era under Lord Lugard?

References
1. www.learner.org/resources/series1 - Arts of the Western World
2. Architecture.about.com - History of Architecture, Periods and Styles
3. Wikipedia—Architecture of Africa
4. From the Traditional Residential Architecture to the Vernacular: The Nigerian Experience, Cordelia O. Obasun, Obatemo Awolowo University
5. Building Lagos - Kunle Akinsemoyin and Alan Vaughan Richards, 1977
6. Classification of Nigerian Architecture—AARCHES Journal Vol.1, No. 6, Dr (Mrs) Prucnal Ogunsote, Federal University of Technology Akure

Figure 4: Brazilian Influenced - Shitta Bey Mosque ( Baptist Da Costa) on Martins Street, Lagos Island
Source: Naira land

Figure 5: Gothic Style Influence - Christ Cathedral Church
Source: leyemoleblogapot.com

Figure 6: Typical Hausa Architecture
Source: Sky Scrapper City

Figure 7: Modern Influence - Niger House Building
Source: Naira land