The Interface between Architecture and Agriculture in Nigeria: An Environmental Perspective

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ABSTRACT: The flood of Rural-Urban drift continues to flow in favour of the urban areas, paradoxically, as food flows from the rural areas into urban areas. This poses a dilemma of tragic proportions: people desert the villages to death and over-populate the urban areas to explosion, forgetting that life or death of the rural areas signifies the same for urban areas. This paper examines some causes, effects and ways of balancing the equation to attain, maintain, and sustain a harmonious symbiotic coexistence between Rural and Urban areas. This work identifies inadequate housing and stock of infrastructure as formidable factors that induce the decisions about where people may willingly live happily. @JASEM

Marx and Engels (1956) related food production, to the provision of housing or Architecture, when they declared that, in the first instance people must eat, drink, have shelter and be clothed before they can be in position to engage in: Politics, Science, The Arts, Religion and so on. This fact succinctly synchronizes architecture and agriculture as prime primordial priorities of man, without which nothing else survives.

There are similarities, between Architecture and Agriculture, which need harmonization for maximum sustainable and mutually beneficial rural development in Nigeria. For instance, there is architecture in the branch of agriculture known as horticulture, just as there is agriculture in landscape architecture. Thus, Agriculture always converges with the architecture in housing policies that yoke food and shelter symbiotically as a sine qua non to life and as a tonic after daily toils. For example, Neolithic farmers lived in simple dwelling-caves, small abodes of sun baked mud brick or reed and wood. They grouped these homes into small villages or existed as single farmsteads surrounded by fields, sheltering animals and humans in adjacent or joined buildings for a more sustainable productivity.

In Egypt, the work on the restoration of the fertile banks of the Nile led to the science of earth-measurement or elementary land surveying, the famous Egyptian proportional system – 3:4:5, which architects revere as the divine proportion that helped the Egyptians in restoration and redistribution of agricultural lands at the banks of the Nile after floods. Similarly, the biblical concept of grain storage, under an Egyptian Pharaoh and Joseph the Jew, presaged the design of grain silos in architecture. These ideas continue to inspire creative instincts in architects. Agriculture and the grain silo inspired the architecture of Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright through the experience acquired from farms into organic architecture. Consequently, contemporary students of architecture in natural farm settings could be inspired into a holistic appreciation of design in nature, while students of agriculture could also be inspired into nurturing nature in attractive architectural farm settlement surroundings.

In Nigeria, farmers usually live in small villages composed of separate compounds where several related families bind themselves together in social groups, cooperatives or get absorbed into government-funded policies, which they consider more progressive (Microsoft Encarta Encyclopaedia, 1999). Traditional construction of buildings in farm settlements involves clearing the savannah or forests for agriculture. Meanwhile, gaping gaps exist between the ideal rural settings where the “green peace” of nature aught to reign; and the present unattractive reality wherein the farms, famished of farmers, remain fallow as an aftermath of the flight of potential or future farmers to urban areas, ironically, in search of “greener pastures.”

Nigeria prides herself as an agrarian nation, consistently takes grandiose laudable decisions but continues to fail where even less endowed nations in human and natural resources succeed. This paper exposes and poses the question: Is there a positive correlation between the success of agricultural programmes and architectural housing policies?

METHODOLOGY
The paper follows a narrative case study research method, which does not necessarily encompass all possible variables in time and space; but limited to the interface between Architecture and Agriculture, envisaging a possible solution to the abnormality in agrarian Nigeria through architecture, vis-à-vis other countries.

The Problems Facing The Rural Agrarian Communities: The problems of the rural environment are multifaceted. We are of the opinion that the problems are rooted in a culpable culture of constant changelessness, particularly in the dearth of housing and essential amenities in rural Nigerian agrarian

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communities. Changelessness remains the bane of our rural development generally characterized by: the same old farming system, same crooked footpaths, same old barns, same old huts, and above all, same poor old farmers! Rather than the taunted fear of poverty and witchcraft, as reasons for deserting the rural to urban areas, we know that most people, who flee from the villages, settle in squalor, poverty and mortal danger in urban areas, provided there are “beer parlours,” essential electricity, basic healthcare and accessible educational facilities, lacking in the rural areas.

Isirimah (2002: 14-15) confirms that the situation in Nigeria, as regards the indiscriminate dumping of untreated human waste in farmlands, fish farms and aquatory due to the absence of sanitary facilities is rampant. We hope that the construction of better portable water facilities, together with improved systems of sewage disposal, rubbish collection and waste matter treatment, will help to create a healthier, more attractive rural as well as urban environment (Anonymous, 1999: Isirimah, 2002). This work proposes a swift enactment and faithful implementation of appropriate sustainable rural housing polices by the Government or non-governmental organizations.

Government Regional Housing Policies: Their Implications For Farmers: People have adduced numerous reasons why Government agricultural programmes fail. However, they do not consider the absence of a sound housing policy as a prime suspect that steals the survival instinct and will to work from the rural inhabitants or its obscene nature as the reason why such agricultural programmes fail to fascinate the youths and the specialists. Major-General Abdul Karim Adisa, Honourable Minister of Works and Housing (1997), noted that people often exaggerate the housing problems of the urban centres, where the elites are, at the same time as they hardly consider the needs of the rural dwellers that constitute 70% of the population. In addition to the absence of an honest housing policy for the rural agrarian areas, there are no vital infrastructures such as portable water, electricity and storage facilities. Stock (1999), confirms that in reality, adequate safe water supply gets to only 20 percent of rural Nigerians against 52 percent of urban Nigerians that have access to safe water. He also observed that despite major programs to extend electricity to homes, only a small portion of rural households have electricity facilities for the reason that demand for electricity outrights supply, in part because the government agency overseeing energy production is inefficient. We can come to an agreement that Government housing policies in Nigeria have not effectively tied agriculture to architecture; hence, they fail to attract the required youths and specialists to the remote rural areas, which bad governance has deprived to destitution in terms of modern attractive amenities meant to facilitate farming.

We describe Nigeria as an agrarian nation. Hence, various Governments attempt to formulate favourable policies for agriculture, but they never attempt to tie them together with Architecture - its natural companion and alter ego. The policies on the Nigerian farm settlements in the 1960s were in a series of such futile attempts at rural development. They attempted to use untrained, ill-equipped secondary school leavers, in poor housing facilities bereft of amenities, to run large modern farms. Of course, the programmes were doomed to destruction because of shortages of staff due to inadequate physical and fiscal planning (OUP, 1974). A similar sad scenario starved the Federal “Operation Feed the Nation” to death and uprooted “the School to Land Scheme” and its operators from the rural areas back into the streets of the urban areas of the old Rivers State. This situation occurred because the managers and the managed shuttled shoddily between the lure of urban opulence and the dreary decadence of poverty in the ruined rural environment.

The Nigerian Situation Compared To Other Successful Foreign Experiences: In spite of the failure of the Nigerian agrarian policies, we have other stories of successful policies from elsewhere. Evidently, good government policies, traditionally, encourage the growth of land settlements. The “Garden City” settlements of Letchworth founded in 1903 and Welwyn founded in 1920, and built according to the ideas of the British city planner, Sir Ebenezer Howard, about a better tomorrow, were designed as self-contained rural agrarian communities that were protected from urban encroachment by greenbelts, or farmland areas. The Ujamaa philosophy, from the 1967 Arusha declaration by Dr Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, caused more than 3000 Ujamaa villages with a population of 1.4 million, to spring up instantaneously. The villages in Ujamaa, signifying ‘togetherness’, under favourable government policies, could cooperate in building their own schools, dispensaries, churches or mosques with labour, materials and money provided by themselves. This work is of the opinion that the housing policy, creatively “planted” with the Ujamaa at the grass-root level, made all the difference. People, particularly restive youths, will neither destroy nor abandon the works of their own hands.

Conclusion: This study shows that basic vital facilities are seemingly “banned” from the Nigerian rural agrarian areas. Thus, the considered opinion here is that a reasonable, affordable, sustainable
governmental rural housing policy, faithfully accompanied by the provision of basic amenities and exciting entertainment facilities, sited in the rural agrarian areas, can stem the detrimental flood of rural - urban drift.

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