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HOUSE

The

Indifference Built

David Aradeon

As a work of art, *Soja Idumota*, the colonial monument to our collective memories, never succeeded in exciting the affection of indigenous Lagosians. Even though it became a landmark and a node at Idumota, it had no emotional connection with our personal or national ethos. Like the graveyard statues in marble erected to the memory of so many illustrious sons of the land at the Ikoyi cemetery, it did not fall into any of our traditional



Preceding page: Three White Cap chiefs at Lagos' old toll gates, Shangisa.
 Statue of Herbert Macaulay, C.M.S. Lagos. © Glendora Review

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cultural references. We could neither embrace the monument as we would the grave of our ancestor in the family compound, nor be suffused with pride at the mere mention of our ancestor's *oriki*. Moved beyond our reach to the Tafawa Balewa Arcade and later to the place of national heroes in Abuja, *Soja Idumota* has finally been confined to the graveyard museum.

The genre of African art or art by Africans commissioned for public buildings during the 1950 decade was used as embellishment to buildings that were designed by British expatriate architectural firms during the period of intense African nationalism and assertiveness. Felix Idubor (1928-91) carved the *Entry Doors* to the House of Representatives in 1960. The bronze statues of Ben Enwonwu, (1921-94) the

NATIONAL



Ben Enwonwu, *Sango*, NEPA Building, Marina. © Glendora Review

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most famous Nigerian sculptor, were placed on major public buildings: *Sango*, the monumental sculpture on the south facade of the Nigerian Electric Power Authority (NEPA) Building on the Marina; the *Mermaid Rescue* (1961) on the contiguous Nigerian Ports Authority (NPA) Building; *Anyanwu* (1958) mounted on a cantilevered pedestal on the entry facade of the Nigerian Museum at Onikan; and *Knowledge* (1967) at

the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs in Victoria Island.

A study of the location/placement reveals that none of these monumental sculptures was conceived as part of or within the context of the architectural spaces. The sidewalk placement of *Shango* and *Mermaid Rescue* does not create the time/distance scale critical for the appreciation of these

remarkable works of art. In the 1960 and 1970 decades, resident British architects, notably Alan Vaughan-Richards (1926-87) and Robin Atkinson (b. 1930), encouraged and promoted active collaboration with Nigerian artists. For example, the *Art of Understanding* (1967) by Erhabor Emokpae (1934-84) in relief screen wall, is a group of stylized, elongated figures on a free-standing concrete wall at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, which was designed by Design Group in 1960.

During this period of artistic productivity, mosaics, beadworks and fiberglass relief works were some of the most important favored media. These include mosaics by Yusuff Grillo (b. 1934) in the Lagos City Hall (AMY Architects, Haifa) and the extensive fiberglass relief by Emokpae on the frieze of the National Arts Theatre, (1976). Elsewhere, I have discussed the heavy dosage of Africanness that the panels of fiberglass relief conferred on the National Arts Theatre, which was the major venue for the second Black and African Festival (FESTAC) in 1977.¹

Metal gates of elaborate scale and decorative motifs continue to enliven the architecture of the public domain. They provide the index to the periodization of stylistic elements, as well as to the taste of the client-patron. The wrought-iron gates and balusters were symbols of the wealthy professional and the merchant class during the colonial period when stone or cement sculptures of the lion adorned two-storey Brazilian houses. The lion, according to Bastide became "a symbol of the new African elite, the newly-rich colonial bourgeoisie, which made use of the lion as a counter to the royal leopard spotted by traditional kings and chieftains."² (Marianno da Cunha; 85, 100). The pair of lions atop the masonry gates of Elias da Silva's house on Odufege and Da Silva streets in Itafaji, Lagos, is the most articulate of this genre of adornment. The lion cast in cement as adornment on domestic architecture spread throughout the Yoruba country as far west as Oyo, and as far east as Epe, spreading northward to Ilorin. With the passing of the generation of Afro-Brazilian craftsmen and builders, the flower motifs of the wrought iron architecture of that period have now given way to the linear work of welders who work with mild steel. The metal gates of Olu Amoda (b. 1959), affirm the artist's extraordinary power to recycle old materials which he endows with new meanings in holistic compositions that bubble with vitality.

The memory of Murtala Mohammed in 1976 was commemorated by a number of public sculptures. The monumental polished aluminum sculpture in Ramat Square in Benin City by Billy Omabegho (b. 1942) introduced a completely new medium and process of artistic creation into the country. By the 1990s, State governments began to commission a spate of artistic public monuments that were freely located in public spaces and places. On the outskirts of Lagos, for example, there is the *Three White Cap Chiefs* at

the old toll gates at Shangisha. There are also the two statues of Herbert Macaulay: the one at the transportation node at CMS and the other at the vehicular roundabout in Sabo. The statue of Obafemi Awolowo stands at the second roundabout on a street named after him at Ikeja. At the point of traffic convergence on Murtala Muhammed Way, the statue of Tai Solarin can be seen. The appreciation of works of art in those locations and under the traffic conditions is most impossible and unsafe. However, the choice of these locations highlights the process of decision making as well as our shared sense of values about public spaces.

In the city of Ibadan as well as most other urban centers throughout the country, sculptures dominate the vehicular traffic roundabouts. In those locations, the proliferation of signage by private business organizations as well as clubs with international affiliations (such as the Rotary and Lion Clubs) furiously compete for our visual and emotional attention. This pattern of random location of artistic public monuments follow the pattern earlier set in. the 1950-1960 decade. Also, it betrays our perception of roundabouts as part of that continuum of public spaces and places that can be made to serve yet another function. Sure enough, life in our new urban centers, a melting pot of sorts, is dominated by our mutual and intense desire for the appropriation of public spaces and places for personal use, regardless of their symbolic significance.

The anonymity we enjoy in the big city allows us this freedom to violate norms of behavior in a heterogeneous community. In the village or the autochthonous city, several factors compel our conformity to norms: our individual as well as our family's visibility; the sanctity of traditional cultural places and spaces suffused with its religious taboos, as well as sanctions for its violation. These are the factors that continue to shape and reshape our acculturation, ensure the sanctity and the preservation of shrine spaces and places, as well as the serenity of their landscape. Until artistic monuments dedicated to the memories of our national heroes are enshrined within the context of our cultural ethos, the spaces and places of national heroes will continue to be debased in our large urban centres. GR

1 See David Aradeon, "Lagos, Art and Organisation," in Dictionary of Art. (London: Macmillan, 1996), 638-640.

2 See Marianno da Cunha, *M. Da Senzala ao Sobrado Livraria*. (Nobel: S.A Brasil, 1985), 100.