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Ontology of Vernacular Interior and Exterior House Decorations in East Africa

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Abstract:

Vernacular architecture evolves over time reflecting the characteristics of the local environment, climate, culture, natural materials, technology and the experience of centuries of community building. Mostly, men build the house and the women decorate the facades. All the figures have a symbolic meaning. This paper studied east African vernacular wall decorations from an art and design point of view. The objective was to document the fast fading cultural practices for posterity and for academics. Conducted in Nairobi, the domain of interest was east African cultures. The study used desktop and field research methods. It formed part of the annual research output seminars and symposia of the school of the arts and design of the University Of Nairobi, Kenya. The papers studied the following museums, heritages and contemporary spaces: King's Palace Museum in Rwanda, the Nubian House, the Rabe family house, various huts decoration and design in Uganda, The church martyrs' museum in Uganda and the Oasis Diani Villa in Kenya.

From the study, it emerged that East African vernacular building styles are culturally rich, and decorating the walls of their buildings is an important part of their cultural legacy. Wall decorating is always a community project done by the women and it's a very ancient practice that dates from the sixteenth century AD.' The study concluded that Interior and exterior decorations in East Africa is one of the African heritage being practiced up to now. This is mainly done by women who pass their skill to their daughters from generation to generation. Although most of them are not being practiced today, there are those that have been turned to museum while others have contemporary influence.

Keywords: Museum, Heritage, Huts, Villa, Exterior and interior decoration

1. Introduction

Numerous varieties of shapes, full of colors have enriched Africa. These things with visually attractive power have arranged Africa. Pattern making is an instinctive thing. The throbbing of maize in a bowl provides the same feeling as the trampling of tincture on fabric. The interlacing of hair braids is the same soft rhythmic exercise as plucking at an mbira (Evans, 2010).

Throughout everywhere, patterns can be visualized and conceptualized. Insight of patterning can be obtained from every elements of a plant like leaves, pods, seeds etc. Innovative patterns got generated in the shadow of trees during the afternoon. It creates a hiding shield on animals, birds and insects (Evans, 2010).

In East Africa, house decorations were mainly done by women and girls and passed from generation to generation as illustrated in figure 1 below. They mainly used what was available at a particular time and place. But due to influence of the modern design, there is the introduction of new materials like paint and brushes. They draw their inspiration from nature and use vibrant colors to come up with the designs. Although the traditional decoration is being lost, some have been preserved as museum while others have an additional contemporary touch. But one can still get the feel of the vernacular decorations. Few of the decorations have been documented since they are not long lasting. For the purpose of this study, selected case studies were analyzed from preserved wall decorations around East Africa.