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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Doctoral research on architecture in Nigeria: Exploring domains, extending boundaries



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## Abstract

This paper explored through a literature review, the domains of research in Architecture and the nature of doctoral research, with a view to contributing to the evolving research agenda in the Nigerian context. The research method involved a descriptive and thematic analysis of the titles and abstracts of completed doctoral theses in Architecture in Nigeria, in the last 26 years (1990-2015), complemented by semi-structured interviews with six key informants. The study revealed an emphasis on Housing-related topics (34%) relative to other research modules, such as 'History and Theory' (20%) and 'Design and Production' (18%). It also reflected the limited coverage and scope of current research, relative to the global terrain, as evidenced in the article titles and contents of 45 Architecture-related Journals. The results of the interviews indicated the strong influence of supervisors' areas of interest in the choices of thesis titles. It highlighted reasons for the perceived focus on Housing, which reflect its unique place and multi-disciplinary nature. It concluded that extending the boundaries of architectural research at the doctoral level could be beneficial to the discipline and profession in Nigeria in order to align with global trends, while keeping cognizance of the local contexts.

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## 1. Introduction

The post-Renaissance intellectualization of architecture has witnessed a paradigm shift from knowledge on the material

reality of buildings, building types, and construction techniques and materials to embrace an array of non-material discourses. This trend emerged from the influences of extant disciplines, such that the knowledge base of architecture now depicts a broad constituency and extensive roots into the physical and social sciences, the humanities, and fine and applied arts (Amole, 2004). Essentially, the discipline has advanced through research by engaging with and adding to this knowledge base. However, to what extent

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this condition reflects the state of architectural research in Nigeria is unclear.

Although architecture has been mainly a practice discipline in which graduates typically begin their career in practical settings for several years before contemplating academic pursuits, the trend is changing rapidly. The internationalization of the doctorate has created a global demand for a sustainable supply of researchers and for nurturing of productive doctoral students who are vital to the health of academic disciplines (Powell and Green, 2007). At present, few departments of architecture in Nigeria actively engage in the production of PhDs; however, the number of candidates is increasing steadily. The recent upsurge may be partly attributed to the PhD being more widely required as a basic qualification for entry and career advancement within academia, as well as the institutional pressure for research productivity as reflected in the “publish or perish” view (McGrail et al., 2006; Stoilescu and McDougall, 2010). For example, a preliminary survey revealed that among the 22 professors of architecture produced in Nigeria to date, 13 obtained doctorate degrees, 9 of these post-1990, indicating the relative recency of the PhD in architecture.

Architecture as a discipline and profession could benefit from the production of PhDs because such a standard can contribute significantly to developing the discipline through research, scholarship, and global linkages. Examining the status of architectural research in Nigeria is expedient because the country needs more architectural educators to meet the challenge of nurturing new generations of architects for academia, industry, and practice. This study reports on the preliminary stage of a multi-staged study on doctoral architectural research in Nigeria. The aim is to explore the research terrain with a view to understanding the coverage, scope, and depth, as well as to relate these aspects to global trends in the field. This objective could enable us to identify gaps and potential areas for further research, which may enhance the extension and setting of research agenda in the future. Following the literature review on the domains of research in architecture and doctoral research in particular, the research method is described. The thematic analysis of architecture doctorates in Nigeria and relevant journals in the field, complemented by informal interviews with six key informants, provide the basis for discussing the research findings. The study identifies and explains the factors that appear to have influenced the choice of doctoral themes, and concludes on the ample room available to extend the boundaries and deepen the effect of architectural research in Nigeria.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Domains of research in architecture

Conceptualizations of research domains vary in the literature. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) identified five generic classes of phenomena from which researchable problems originate, namely, people, things, records, thoughts/ideas, and dynamics/energy. These categories have broad ramifications for research possibilities. However, the search for facts to solve research problems seldom fits into such neatly packaged disciplines. Research originating in one field may

more often than not cross the artificial academic boundaries in pursuit of the factual data needed to resolve problems.

Architectural research has been conducted covertly throughout the history of architecture. For example, over the centuries, the development of specific structural forms and building materials was derived from trial-and-error experimentation, observation, and application of emergent building principles to building projects. However, conducting architectural research outside the confines of specific building projects is a recent phenomenon (Fraser, 2013). Globally, much of the research in architecture has been multi-disciplinary; thus, a wide array of research problems is germane to architectural research, and a range of research designs and methods are applicable to such problems. Examples are the following:

- climate, thermal comfort, and structural studies, which dominated in the 1950s;
- a broader range of issues in the 1960s and 1970s, including socio-behavioral issues, design methods, sustainability, and energy conservation (energy-efficient technologies);
- architectural history (art/esthetics, theory and criticism, and historical preservation);
- evaluation studies, research on computer-aided design, and building material studies; and
- housing, urban design, landscape architecture, interior design, and specialized areas.

Groat and Wang (2002) posit that research on architectural realities is necessarily an interdisciplinary matter: architectural research engages with what diverse disciplines have to offer. It harnesses their strategies and tactics to achieve its own ends in gaining knowledge on how built environments could enhance human life. Architectural research can also be viewed through the lens of product, process, and practice. Although significant research focuses on the physical outcomes (products) of design from the scale of building components, to a room and a building, to neighborhood and urban design, research on the processes of design and the practices (structure and scope) of architectural firms are just as vital and valid. Further domain classifications can be derived from the literature on architecture and allied disciplines, examples of which are presented through the thematic analysis in this study.

### 2.2. Doctoral research

Doctoral education aims to develop disciplinary stewards who conserve ideas, develop new knowledge, and engage in scholarly efforts (Golde, 2006; Gardner, 2009). Undertaking a PhD is a major life commitment and research training exercise aimed at transforming a research beginner into a professional. The literature addresses a range of issues: conceptual, psychological, personal, contextual, procedural, and institutional (Jones, 2013). The conceptual issues include the meaning, value, types, and purposes of the doctorate (Mason, 2012). The psychological issues examine the motivations and psychology of doctoral candidates and supervisors Huisman and Naidoo (2006). The socio-personal issues focus on doctoral dilemmas such as identity, financial concerns, time demands, rewards, socialization, relationships, key competences, and requisite skills Jairam

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