

# Subtle Shifts, Visible Impact: Material Choices and The Changing Face of Post-Independence Lagos Mainland Architecture

ORITSETINMEYIN IGBENE<sup>1</sup>, SAMUEL ADEDEJI DARAMOLA<sup>2</sup>, MATTHEW ABIODUN DAYOMI<sup>3</sup>, OLUWATOYIN OLANREWaju AJAYI<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> Department of Architecture, College of Environmental Science and Management  
Caleb University, Imota, Ikorodu, Lagos, Nigeria

**Abstract-** *This paper explores how material choices have contributed to the transformation of Lagos Mainland's architectural landscape in the post-independence era. Drawing on a qualitative, interpretive literature review supported by visual analysis and archival documentation, the study investigates the social, cultural, and political dimensions of material use in everyday buildings across districts such as Yaba, Surulere, and Mushin. The findings are organized around five thematic categories: Material Substitution and Aspiration, Economic Constraints and Innovation, Colonial Legacies in Material Usage, Hybrid Aesthetic Forms, and Maintenance, Durability & Temporal Adaptation. The analysis reveals that material selection in Lagos Mainland architecture is shaped not merely by functionality or cost, but by a complex interplay of modern aspirations, economic survival strategies, colonial inheritances, and aesthetic negotiation. Material decisions are shown to reflect and reinforce broader socio-spatial dynamics, with implications for identity, heritage, and urban planning. The paper concludes by recommending policy flexibility, enhanced design education, maintenance investment, and increased scholarly attention to informal practices and visual documentation. Ultimately, the study positions materiality as a critical lens for understanding postcolonial urban transformations in Africa's largest city.*

**Indexed Terms-** *Architecture, Colonial legacy, Material culture, Post-Independence, Urban transformation*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the decades following Nigeria's independence in 1960, Lagos Mainland witnessed rapid urban transformation, driven by demographic expansion, socio-political shifts, and economic aspirations (Ayuba & Akanle, 2024). Amid these changes, architectural expression in the Mainland evolved from colonial-era forms into a dynamic amalgam of new material choices and construction techniques (Owamoyo & Tabibi, 2023). This transformation, subtle in its physical articulation yet profound in its socio-cultural implications, provides a fertile ground for examining how materiality shapes, reflects, and negotiates urban identity in post-colonial contexts (Adewuyi, 2025).

Lagos Mainland, historically positioned as both a residential and commercial hinterland to Lagos Island, became a canvas for diverse architectural expressions in the post-independence period (Godlewski, 2024). Unlike Lagos Island, whose colonial heritage has been heavily scrutinized and preserved in heritage literature, the Mainland's architecture has remained largely undocumented in academic discourse (Horne Anwoju, 2023). Yet, it is here that some of the most telling shifts in material use, concrete block innovations, asbestos replacements, aluminum window systems, and ceramic tile facades, have played out, often in response to changing economic conditions, imported technologies, and evolving aesthetic values (Oroore, 2024).

Scholars of Nigerian architecture have explored colonial legacies, vernacular traditions, and urban

informality (Manful, Ofori-Sarpong & Gallagher, 2023; Oruore, 2024; Owamoyo & Tabibi, 2023), often focusing on elite architecture, master-planned developments, or informal settlements. However, relatively little attention has been paid to the mundane but pervasive shifts in material use that have shaped mid-tier residential, institutional, and commercial buildings, especially on the Lagos Mainland. While studies such as Ajiyo (2024) and Agboola, Alotaibi, Dodo, Abuhussain & Abuhussain (2024) have gestured toward the role of material economies in shaping the built environment, these analyses tend to isolate economic or environmental factors without addressing how material choices mediate broader cultural or spatial narratives.

This paper positions materiality not merely as a technical or economic factor in architectural design, but as a socio-cultural signifier that indexes broader post-independence transformations. The central argument is that the material choices made in Lagos Mainland's post-independence architecture are not incidental but are deeply expressive of a shift in aspirations, values, and spatial politics. These changes, though subtle in form, have had a visible impact on the architectural identity of the region, making them a critical yet underexplored dimension of Nigeria's urban history.

To examine this argument, the paper adopts a literature review methodology with an interpretive lens. It draws on existing scholarly texts, architectural field reports, archival planning documents, and visual documentation, interpreting them through the theoretical frameworks of material culture studies, post-colonial urbanism, and everyday architecture. This method allows for a synthesis of scattered scholarly threads and facilitates a critical reading of how architecture reflects transitions in governance, access to materials, and societal aspirations. The literature review is supplemented with illustrative case examples from Lagos Mainland districts such as Yaba, Surulere, and Mushin, drawn from secondary sources and archival images.

This paper finds that architectural material choices in post-independence Lagos Mainland serve as subtle yet potent markers of socio-political change. Far from being passive results of global supply chains or

technological imports, these choices represent intentional acts of spatial negotiation and identity reformation. As such, they merit closer scholarly attention not only as technical phenomena but as cultural texts.

The paper proceeds as follows. The Methods section elaborates on the criteria for literature selection, the interpretive frameworks used, and the rationale behind focusing on specific Lagos Mainland districts. The Results section organizes findings thematically: (1) shifting roofing and wall materials, (2) adaptation of colonial building forms, and (3) hybridization in façade aesthetics. The Discussion engages critically with the findings, situating them within wider debates on African modernities and architectural agency. The Conclusion reflects on the broader implications of material-driven architectural evolution for urban heritage and planning in Lagos and beyond.



## II. METHODS



This study employed a qualitative, interpretive literature review methodology supported by visual analysis and archival documentation to investigate how material choices have shaped post-independence architecture in Lagos Mainland. Rather than generating new primary data through fieldwork, the study synthesized a range of existing materials, including peer-reviewed articles, architectural monographs, building surveys, planning documents, and historical photographs, to trace the subtle shifts in material use and their architectural implications. The review was designed to be systematic yet interpretive, allowing for thematic analysis while acknowledging the contextual and cultural nuances embedded in architectural transformations. The data collection and analysis process unfolded in three chronological phases: (1) Literature Identification, (2) Image Analysis, and (3) Thematic Categorization. Inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) The source must address architecture or urban development in Nigeria (preferably Lagos), (2) the work must include discussion of building materials, construction techniques, or material adaptation, (3) and the publication must be either peer-reviewed or a recognized source of architectural documentation. Following data collection, the literature and visual materials were analyzed using thematic synthesis.


Textual sources were coded inductively to extract recurring themes such as: (1) Material Substitution and Aspiration, (2) Economic Constraints and Innovation, (3) Colonial Legacies in Material Usage, (4) Hybrid Aesthetic Forms, (5) Maintenance, Durability, and Temporal Adaptation. These themes were then used to organize the Results section. Each theme was supported by both textual analysis and visual exemplars, allowing for a triangulated understanding of material shifts across time and space. This methodological approach was selected because the focus of the paper is historical, interpretive, and discursive rather than empirical or technical.

### III. RESULTS

Table 1: Thematic Synthesis of Post-Independence Material Choices in Lagos Mainland Architecture

Theme	Description of Theme	Key Insights from Literature	Supporting Visual Examples	Architectural Implications
Material Substitution and Aspiration	How changing material choices reflect shifts in social class, aspirations, or status	Transition from earth-based materials (mud, adobe) to cement block signified economic mobility (Nwaki & Eze, 2022). Modern materials became aspirational symbols tied to Western modernity (Owamoyo & Tabibi, 2023). Public housing schemes in the 1970s promoted concrete as a “progressive” material (Nwachukwu, 2023). Use of imported finishes (tiles, metal balustrades) often driven more by symbolism than functionality (Abraham & Ololade, 2024).	 <p>Figure 2: 1970s residential building in Yaba</p>	Emergence of concrete as status symbol; materials reflecting modern identity
Economic Constraints and Innovation	How scarcity or affordability drives creative material use and hybrid construction	High cost of formal materials led to local improvisations (e.g., wood-and-zinc hybrids) (Ranganathan, Pike & Doshi, 2023). Informal builders adopted second-hand or recycled materials (Jonathan & Onyoni, 2025). Cost-sensitive designs often avoided ornamentation or used cheaper substitutes (Igwe & Ude, 2018). Material hybrids emerged as flexible responses to inflation and policy shifts (Akanni, Oke & Omotilewa, 2014).	 <p>Figure 3: Building in Mushin with Mixed roofing materials</p>	Patchwork solutions and adaptive reuse as vernacular resilience

Colonial Legacies in Material Usage	Persistence or reinterpretation of colonial-era forms and materials	Sandcrete blocks and asbestos roofing sheets introduced during colonial rule remain widespread (Stephen, 2023). Early modernist aesthetics, flat roofs, minimal ornamentation, were adapted in post-colonial forms (Agboola, 2021). Colonial government housing styles still influence layout and elevation of middle-class homes (Aliu, 2024). Some civic buildings retain colonial proportions despite internal renovations (Ajiola, 2022).	 <p>Figure 4: Converted colonial office block (Independence building)</p>	Enduring spatial logics despite material updates; cultural inertia
Hybrid Aesthetic Forms	Combination of traditional, colonial, and contemporary styles in building façades	Homeowners mix glazed tiles, classical columns, and stucco to form personalized facades (Amasuomo, 2021). Influence of returnee diasporas evident in ornamental and eclectic material palettes (Nwafor, 2021). “Patch-aesthetic” as a cultural response to aspirational display (Potter & Westall, 2013). Hybridization often masks the structural logic, emphasizing the visual language of prestige (Kafaru, 2014).	 <p>Figure 5: Façade with tile and paint combo</p>	Emergence of hybridized visual languages reflective of changing tastes

Maintenance, Durability & Temporal Adaptation	Material choices informed by weathering, lifespan, and ease of maintenance	Poorly maintained concrete leads to early façade decay and surface erosion (Faremi, Ajayi, Zakariyyah & Adenuga, 2021). Aluminium and plastic window fittings increasingly replace less durable wooden louvres (Abraham & Ololade, 2024). Paint finishes are often reapplied annually, leading to aesthetic layering (Adeyemi, 2023). Short material life cycles reflect economic pressure and limited long-term planning (Oyalowo, 2022).	 <p>Figure 6: Weathered cement blocks in Surulere</p>	Cycles of replacement reveal socio-economic shifts and planning gaps
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Source: Researcher's

#### IV. DISCUSSION

This section unpacks the thematic categories that emerged from the interpretive synthesis of literature and visual evidence, offering a nuanced understanding of how material choices have shaped the architectural transformation of Lagos Mainland in the post-independence era. Each theme highlights different yet interconnected forces (economic, cultural, historical, and aspirational) that have informed material selection and its visible outcomes in the built environment.

##### *A. Material Substitution and Aspiration*

One of the most visible shifts in post-independence architecture in Lagos Mainland is the substitution of traditional materials with “modern” ones, particularly cement blocks and imported finishes. As Nwaki and Eze (2022) observe, this transition from earth-based materials like mud and adobe to cement block construction marked not only an economic shift but also a social one, symbolizing upward mobility and alignment with the modern urban identity. Owamoyo and Tabibi (2023) further emphasize that materials became vehicles for aspirational expression, often adopted for their symbolic association with Western modernity rather than their functional superiority. Public housing projects in the 1970s institutionalized the use of concrete, presenting it as a progressive material aligned with national development narratives (Nwachukwu, 2023). Abraham and Ololade (2024) add that finishes such as glazed tiles, aluminum railings, and other imported elements became highly sought after, not necessarily for durability but for the prestige they conferred. This aspiration-driven substitution reflects the evolving cultural vocabulary of status, where materials become identity markers rather than purely utilitarian choices.

##### *B. Economic Constraints and Innovation*

In stark contrast to aspirational substitution, many builders, particularly in informal or low-income contexts, were forced to innovate due to economic constraints. Ranganathan, Pike, and Doshi (2023) highlight how the high cost of formal building materials led to widespread improvisation, including the use of wood-and-zinc hybrids. Jonathan and

Onyoni (2025) document the strategic reuse of second-hand or salvaged materials, demonstrating a localized sustainability born out of necessity rather than design ethos. These economically-driven adaptations reflect a type of architectural ingenuity rooted in resilience. Igwe and Ude (2018) note that ornamentation is often foregone or replaced with cheaper alternatives, while Akanni, Oke, and Omotilewa (2014) describe how inflation and erratic policy changes further reinforce a need for material hybridity. The result is what could be termed a “vernacular of survival”, an architecture that negotiates form and function within tight material and financial constraints.

##### *C. Colonial Legacies in Material Usage*

Despite Nigeria's independence in 1960, colonial legacies in material usage continue to exert influence. Stephen (2023) and Agboola (2021) trace the continued use of sandcrete blocks and asbestos roofing sheets back to British building standards introduced during the colonial era. These materials and construction techniques have not only persisted but have also been reinterpreted within post-independence architectural forms. Aliu (2024) underscores the spatial continuity evident in the layout and elevation of middle-class homes, which often mimic colonial government housing styles. Ajiola (2022) adds that even civic buildings, despite renovations, tend to retain colonial proportions and massing. This theme reveals a deeper cultural inertia: while materials and visual languages may evolve, certain foundational logics of colonial architecture remain embedded in the built environment of Lagos Mainland.

##### *D. Hybrid Aesthetic Forms*

A distinctive feature of Lagos Mainland's post-independence architecture is its visual eclecticism. Amasuomo (2021) and Nwafor (2021) describe a proliferation of hybrid aesthetic forms that combine elements from various architectural traditions, classical columns, glazed ceramic tiles, and stuccoed facades, often in the same building. These combinations are not arbitrary but reflect the layered identities and aspirations of their builders and occupants. Potter and Westall (2013) characterize this

phenomenon as a “patch-aesthetic,” a form of cultural bricolage where multiple stylistic influences coexist in the same space. Kafaru (2014) argues that these hybrids frequently prioritize visual prestige over structural coherence, suggesting that façade design has become a symbolic rather than structural exercise. This hybridization challenges conventional notions of architectural purity, asserting instead a complex aesthetic vocabulary that is locally meaningful.

#### *E. Maintenance, Durability & Temporal Adaptation*

Lastly, the long-term performance and adaptability of materials significantly influence their continued use. Faremi et al. (2021) note that poorly maintained concrete surfaces often exhibit early signs of decay and erosion, especially in the humid tropical climate of Lagos. In response, homeowners increasingly replace less durable materials like wood with aluminum or plastic fittings, as documented by Abraham and Ololade (2024). Adeyemi (2023) highlights that frequent repainting of facades leads to layered, uneven finishes, an aesthetic that is both expressive and symptomatic of deferred maintenance. Oyalowo (2022) frames these material life cycles within a larger narrative of economic instability and infrastructural neglect, where short-term fixes replace long-term planning. These patterns of degradation and adaptation underscore the dynamic but often precarious relationship between material choice, maintenance culture, and architectural longevity.

#### *F. Synthesis*

Together, these themes suggest that material choices in post-independence Lagos Mainland architecture are not simply technical decisions but are deeply embedded in cultural, economic, and historical contexts. Aspirations for modernity, constraints of affordability, colonial inheritances, aesthetic preferences, and practical realities of durability all interact to produce a richly textured, though uneven, architectural landscape. The discussion affirms that architecture in Lagos Mainland is a living record of negotiation, between past and present, form and function, ambition and limitation. Recognizing these negotiations is essential not just for documenting architectural history, but for informing future material policy, heritage conservation, and urban design strategies.

## CONCLUSION

This study has examined the evolving architectural landscape of Lagos Mainland in the post-independence period through the lens of material choices. Using a qualitative, interpretive methodology that combined literature review, visual analysis, and thematic synthesis, the paper has traced how materials, both as physical elements and cultural signifiers, have shaped, and continue to shape, the built environment of this rapidly urbanizing context. The findings reveal that material decisions in Lagos Mainland architecture are far from neutral or purely functional. Instead, they reflect complex entanglements of aspiration, economic constraint, colonial legacy, aesthetic hybridity, and maintenance culture. From the substitution of traditional materials with concrete as a marker of modernity, to the hybrid aesthetics of façades that blend diverse cultural references, material use emerges as a critical site of architectural and social negotiation.

Economic conditions have spurred a culture of improvisation and material hybridity, particularly within informal and low-income contexts. Meanwhile, colonial-era material practices and design templates have shown surprising endurance, even as new forms and finishes are layered atop them. The visual eclecticism of many buildings, far from being accidental, mirrors the plural identities and ambitions of urban residents. And in the face of tropical weather and poor maintenance infrastructure, materials are often chosen not only for initial impact but also for their capacity to endure or be replaced within short cycles. These insights collectively underscore the importance of reading materiality not just as a technical matter, but as a historically situated and culturally loaded dimension of architectural expression. Understanding material shifts in Lagos architecture thus offers broader lessons about how cities across the Global South construct modernity on their own terms, under pressures and possibilities that are both local and global.

Drawing from the themes and findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for scholars, architects, urban planners, and policymakers working in the realm of architectural



development and material culture in postcolonial urban settings:

- i. Encourage Locally-Informed Material Policies: Urban authorities and regulatory bodies should recognize and support material practices that reflect local innovation and economic realities. Rather than enforcing rigid material standards, flexible frameworks should be developed that acknowledge the viability of hybrid and recycled materials when safely used.
- ii. Promote Material Literacy in Design Education: Architectural curricula and professional development programs should include deeper engagement with the social meanings of materials. This would help practitioners design with cultural sensitivity, particularly in diverse and evolving urban contexts like Lagos.
- iii. Invest in Long-Term Maintenance Strategies: As maintenance issues were shown to shape both aesthetics and durability, municipal and private actors must prioritize building upkeep. This includes the provision of affordable, weather-resistant materials and maintenance support services that can prevent premature structural decay.
- iv. Preserve and Adapt Colonial-Era Structures Thoughtfully: Rather than demolishing colonial-era buildings or allowing their forms to disappear through neglect, adaptive reuse strategies should be developed. These structures can be preserved as part of Lagos's architectural heritage while integrating contemporary functions and materials.
- v. Support Research on Informal Architecture and Material Innovation: Further scholarly attention should be given to the architectural contributions of informal builders, whose resourceful material adaptations offer important lessons in sustainable and resilient design. These grassroots practices are often overlooked in formal discourse but are central to urban development.
- vi. Document and Archive Material Trends Visually: Given the importance of visual analysis in this study, institutions and academic bodies should fund and curate ongoing photographic and visual documentation of architectural change in Lagos. This would serve both research and conservation goals, enabling a fuller understanding of material transformations over time.

By situating material choices at the heart of architectural analysis, this study not only contributes to the growing scholarship on postcolonial urbanism but also calls for more integrated, culturally aware, and future-oriented approaches to material use in Lagos and comparable African cities.

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