

CRAFTING AND DRAFTING: SPATIAL NARRATIVE AS CULTURAL PRAXIS IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN INTERIOR DESIGN

Esimike, Uche¹ & Ekhoegbe, Michelle²

¹Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Delta, Agbor

²Department of Architecture, University of Delta, Agbor

esimike.uche@unidel.edu.ng / michelle.ekhoegbe@unidel.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how African oral traditions and cultural narratives are translated into the material and spatial dimensions of contemporary living environments through the dual practices of crafting—the hand-based making of culturally encoded objects—and drafting—the thoughtful architectural planning of inhabited space. Grounded in the premise that the modern African interior constitutes a critical site of cultural continuity and memory production, the study interrogates how indigenous knowledge systems embedded in textile patterns, pottery traditions, sculptural practice, and spatial typologies can be responsibly and innovatively integrated into the design of present-day domestic environments. Employing an exploratory qualitative methodology drawing on the Afrocentric design criticism, material culture studies, and spatial phenomenology, the study analyses specific interior zones—the threshold, the living space, the nourishment space, the rest space, and the purification space—as discrete narrative chapters within the home as a whole. Findings reveal that when crafting and drafting are approached as mutually reinforcing epistemic practices rather than as discrete professional activities, the resulting living spaces function simultaneously as functional domiciles and as active archives of cultural memory, transmitting ancestral knowledge to younger generations through daily embodied experience. The study concludes that a design praxis centred on material intelligence, spatial storytelling, and ethical curation offers a viable and culturally necessary framework for the development of African interior design as a globally distinctive discipline. The implications of this research extend to scholars and practitioners in ethnography, anthropology, architecture, art history, and applied design.

Keywords: African Interior Design, Crafting, Cultural Memory, Drafting, Living Spaces, Material Culture, Spatial Narrative.

INTRODUCTION

The home, in virtually every cultural tradition, is far more than a container for the biological activities of shelter, sleep, and nourishment. It is a meaning-laden environment in which individual and collective identity are continuously negotiated, affirmed, and transmitted. In African cultural contexts, the domestic environment has historically served this narrative function with particular density and sophistication: walls were painted with protective and cosmological symbols; thresholds were marked with applied arts that encoded social hierarchy and spiritual significance; furnishings were crafted objects whose material, form, and surface carried layered cultural meanings; and spatial organization reflected cosmological principles and social values with a precision that architectural historians are only beginning to fully appreciate (Ibrahim, 2024; Traoré, 2022).

The rapid urbanization of African cities over the past half-century, accompanied by the mass importation of standardized housing typologies and furnishing systems designed for Western domestic contexts, has placed this tradition of culturally embedded spatial narrative under severe pressure. The proliferation of generic apartment blocks, imported flat-pack furniture, and globally marketed interior design aesthetics has produced domestic environments in which African cultural knowledge is present, if at all, only as superficial decoration—a carved mask hung on an otherwise neutral wall, a kente print cushion on a IKEA sofa—rather than as the structural organizing principle of the entire domestic environment (Diabaté & Boafo, 2025; Adeyemi, 2023).

This paper argues for a fundamentally different conception of African interior design: one in which the practices of crafting and drafting are understood as integrated epistemic activities, both rooted in a common body of cultural knowledge and directed towards a common goal—the creation of living spaces that function simultaneously as functional domiciles and as active archives of cultural memory. Crafting, in this framework, refers not merely to the production of decorative objects but to the full body of knowledge and practice through which culturally encoded meanings are materialized in specific forms, textures, surfaces, and objects. Drafting refers not merely to technical drawing but to the thoughtful architectural planning through which space is organized to support specific patterns of social life, ritual practice, and environmental experience (Mbachu, 2021; Nzomiwu, 2022).

The paper is organized around the principal spatial zones of the contemporary African home, treating each—the threshold/forecourt, the living space, the nourishment space, the rest space, and the purification space—as a distinct narrative chapter in the home's larger story. For each zone, the analysis examines both the depth of the indigenous design tradition and the most promising strategies for its contemporary translation. The aim is to contribute to the emerging discipline of African interior design studies both an analytical framework for understanding the cultural dimensions of domestic space and a practical design philosophy grounded in material intelligence, spatial storytelling, and ethical responsibility.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Material Culture and the Epistemology of Making

The theoretical foundation for understanding crafting as an epistemic practice rather than a merely technical activity draws from the rich literature on material culture and the anthropology of skill. Ingold's (2013) concept of "making" as a process of dwelling—of attending to the material world with care, skill, and cultural knowledge—is particularly valuable in the African design context, where the artisan's knowledge encompasses cosmological orientation, social hierarchy, material intelligence, and environmental responsiveness simultaneously. In West African traditions, as Salami (2023) has documented in the specific case of Yoruba sacred space, the master craftsman is simultaneously technician, narrative artist, ritual specialist, and spatial designer—categories that the Western professional division of labour holds artificially separate.

This embedded, embodied knowledge, transmitted through immersive apprenticeship rather than formal documentation, constitutes what Mbachu (2021) describes as "the artisan's blueprint": a comprehensive system for organizing space that is inseparable from the cultural context in which it is deployed. The knowledge includes not only technical competences—how to work with specific materials, how to achieve specific structural outcomes—but also symbolic knowledge: which materials are appropriate for which social and spiritual purposes, which geometric patterns encode which meanings, which spatial arrangements support which social practices. This holistic character of artisanal knowledge in the African tradition means that the act of making a domestic object or space is simultaneously a cultural act, a spatial act, and a social act (Traoré, 2022).

Spatial Narrative and the Semiotics of Domestic Space

The concept of spatial narrative—the capacity of architectural space to tell stories through the organization of movement, threshold, material, and light—has been developed in the architectural theory literature primarily in relation to Western canonical buildings. Hall's (1966) proxemics provides foundational insight into the cultural specificity of spatial experience; what constitutes an appropriate threshold between public and private space, between intimate and formal gathering, between the sacred and the profane, varies enormously across cultural traditions and cannot be assumed to be universal. In the African architectural context, this cultural specificity of spatial meaning is expressed through the compound typology—a spatial organization in which the progression from public forecourt through communal courtyard to private family quarters enacts a

social grammar of graduated inclusion and exclusion that is culturally specific and deeply meaningful (Ojo, 2019; Olayiwola & Adeyemi, 2024).

Osasona (2021) has argued that these native spatial designs create what she terms a "living narrative"—a spatial sequence through which movement enacts, rather than merely represents, the rhythms and values of local social life. The threshold is not merely a door but a site of social negotiation; the courtyard is not merely an outdoor space but a stage for communal performance; the sleeping space is not merely a private retreat but an intimate altar for the renewal of personal and ancestral identity. This conception of spatial narrative as an active social practice, rather than a passive representational system, is central to the design philosophy developed in this paper.

Contemporary African Interior Design: Emerging Discourse and Practice

The scholarly discourse on African interior design as a distinct discipline is relatively recent but rapidly expanding. Diabaté and Bofo (2025) have documented the emergence of a new generation of African designers who are actively engaged in what they describe as "designing sustainable urban living models" that draw on indigenous spatial knowledge to address the challenges of rapid urbanization. Adeyemi (2023) has argued for what she terms "epistemic translation"—the responsible and rigorous process through which indigenous symbolic and spatial knowledge is translated into contemporary design languages without loss of cultural depth or specificity. Olayiwola and Adeyemi (2024) have examined the impact of African art aesthetics on sustainable decorative design, demonstrating that the integration of indigenous artistic traditions into domestic environments produces measurable improvements in both environmental performance and occupant well-being.

Yahaya (2024) has explored how African architectural traditions can serve as a source of inspiration for contemporary interior design practice, arguing that the principles of communal space organization, material authenticity, and narrative density embedded in African building traditions offer the basis for a genuinely distinctive and globally relevant design identity. These emerging voices collectively point towards the consolidation of African interior design as a discipline grounded in material intelligence, cultural specificity, and ethical engagement with indigenous knowledge—precisely the framework this paper seeks to develop and articulate.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs an exploratory qualitative methodology appropriate to the interpretive and critical nature of its research questions. The primary methodological approach is Afrocentric design criticism, which, following Asante's (2003) Afrocentric methodological framework, positions African cultural values and epistemologies as the primary lens through which design objects, spatial environments, and design practices are evaluated. This approach differs from conventional architectural criticism in that it explicitly privileges African knowledge systems rather than treating Western modernist aesthetics as the neutral standard against which all design is measured.

Data were gathered through three primary channels. First, an extensive documentary review of peer-reviewed literature in African art history, design studies, material culture studies, and architectural theory provided the theoretical foundation for the analysis. Second, a systematic survey of published design projects, both historical and contemporary, that engage with African spatial and material traditions was conducted, with projects selected for their relevance to the specific interior zones under analysis. Third, the paper draws on the authors' own professional practice and field research experience in the design and spatial analysis of contemporary African interiors.

The analysis is organized thematically around the principal spatial zones of the contemporary African home, with each zone treated as a case study of the opportunities and challenges for spatial narrative in that specific context. Findings from the documentary review and design survey were subjected to thematic analysis guided by the framework of material intelligence, spatial storytelling, and ethical curation. The study acknowledges the limitations inherent in its focus on West African

design traditions and the diversity of African design heritage that cannot be fully represented within the scope of a single paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Threshold as Narrative Prologue: Crafting the Woven Entry

The threshold—the transition from public to private space—emerges from the analysis as perhaps the richest site for spatial narrative in the African domestic interior. In the compound typology that structures domestic space across much of West Africa, the threshold is never merely a door but a complex social and spiritual zone, a site of negotiation, screening, and gradual revelation (Chukwu, 2021; Okoro, 2024). The applied arts of the threshold—painted murals, woven mats, ceramic vessels, carved entry screens—function as what Mensah (2023) describes as "a narrative gallery of heritage," setting the cultural and spiritual tone of the home before any words are spoken.



Plate 1a: A modern threshold with a sense of culture in every surface.

Source: Author's work – drafted and rendered drawing (2026)

Contemporary translation of this tradition offers rich design opportunities. The Ndebele tradition of geometric mural painting, applied historically to exterior walls as a form of cultural assertion and household identity, can be reinterpreted in the contemporary foyer as a custom entry screen of woven metal or CNC-cut wood—what Dlamini (2023) describes as a modern ileke or beaded curtain—that filters light and views while displaying cultural knowledge. The traditional practice of placing a ceramic vessel at the threshold, signifying welcome, cleansing, and spiritual protection, finds contemporary expression in the thoughtful placement of a hand-thrown terracotta pot holding specific plants beside the entry. These are not merely decorative gestures; they are the first sentences of the home's spatial narrative, establishing cultural context and inviting the visitor into a specific worldview (Adeyemi, 2023).

The Assembled Hearth: Communal Space as Cultural Stage

The living space, analysed through the lens of African spatial tradition, is most productively understood not as a Western lounge organized around a television screen but as what this study terms "the assembled hearth": a communal gathering space organized around the human activities of conversation, hospitality, and collective storytelling. The design logic that produces this space is

fundamentally different from the object-centred, display-oriented logic of the Western living room: it prioritizes the quality of human interaction over the showcasing of possessions, the creation of face-to-face conversational arrangements over the orientation of seating towards a single focal point, and the narrative density of crafted surfaces and objects over the minimalist aesthetic of the globally marketed interior (Okafor, 2023; Njoku, 2024).



Plate 1b : The living room designed with the concept of "community" and "culture"..

Source: Author's work – drafted and rendered drawing (2026)

The material palette of the assembled hearth speaks this cultural logic through specific substances and forms. Textiles—Adinkra-stamped cloth with its stamped symbols encoding philosophical meanings, Kente cloth with its intricate woven patterns signifying status and historical memory, Aso Oke with its rich colors and vertical stripe patterns—function not merely as decorative fabric but as what Sow (2021) terms "art with architectural purpose": they define spatial zones, manage acoustics, and encode narrative meaning simultaneously. Lighting becomes a crafted element rather than a technical afterthought: the warm, dappled glow cast by a lamp made from a perforated calabash or a woven raffia shade evokes the quality of hearth light and firelight, creating an intimate atmosphere conducive to the storytelling and communal gathering that are the primary social functions of this space (Ibe, 2022).

The Nourishment Space: Ceramic Intelligence and the Culture of Food

The kitchen and dining area, analysed as "the vessel and the hearth," emerges from the study as a site of profound cultural narrative potential that contemporary design has largely failed to realize. In African cultural traditions, the preparation and sharing of food is an act of enormous social and spiritual significance: it is an expression of abundance, hospitality, and generational knowledge; a site of intergenerational transmission; and a ritual of community binding (Okafor, 2023). The material culture of the nourishment space—the ceramic storage vessels, the calabash bowls, the wooden mortars and pestles, the bronze cooking vessels—constitutes a rich lexicon of culturally encoded form and meaning that offers extraordinary resources for contemporary design.



Plate 1c: The "Hearth" – built and furnished with materials that can be locally and ethnically sourced.

Source: Author's work – drafted and rendered drawing (2026)

The concept of "ceramic intelligence" developed in this analysis refers to the deep knowledge of clay—its sources, its preparation, its firing, its formal repertoire—that underlies the ceramic traditions of West African cultures and that encodes knowledge of environmental resources, technical skill, and cultural symbolism simultaneously. Contemporary translation of this ceramic intelligence into interior design produces a range of opportunities: backsplash tiling that replicates the textured, imperfect glaze of traditional pit-fired pottery; dining ware whose forms echo the calabash gourd or the communal serving bowl; countertop surfaces that incorporate ceramic pieces in terrazzo compositions referencing the visual archaeology of sherds and fragments (Sow, 2021; Chukwuma, 2024). The metallic hardware of the nourishment space offers a further narrative dimension: cabinet pulls, faucet handles, and pendant light fixtures custom-designed with motifs derived from the lost-wax bronze-casting traditions of Benin and Igbo-Ukwu transform everyday points of interaction into tactile links with centuries of artistic and technical achievement (Traoré, 2023).



Plate 1d: Two options for the "Vessel" of the home – a gentle blend of earthen wares and polished steel wares.

Source: Author's work – drafted and rendered drawing (2026)

The Rest Space and the Purification Space: Intimate Archives of Identity

The bedroom and bathroom, analysed as "the intimate altar" and "the purification space" respectively, emerge from the study as sites where the integration of crafting and drafting must be pursued with particular depth and sensitivity, given the deeply personal and spiritually significant character of rest and cleansing in African cultural traditions. Okonkwo (2023) has argued that the bedroom in an African-informed design philosophy is more than a sleeping space: it is a sanctuary for the renewal of personal identity, a repository of ancestral connection, and a private museum of belonging. Its design should facilitate introspection and self-affirmation, surrounding the occupant with meaningful objects—masks displayed as heritage pieces rather than trophies, textile artifacts used as bedding, sculptural headboards that reference the traditional wooden headrests whose protective spiritual function anticipated their modern descendants.

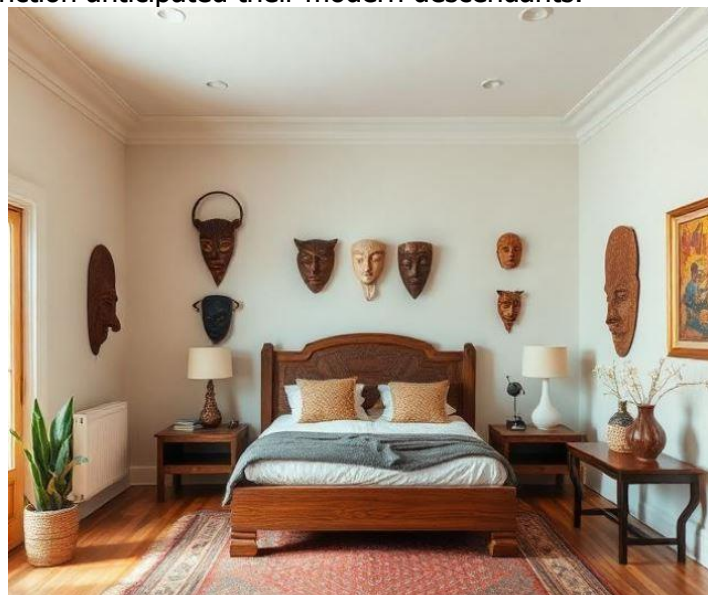


Plate 1e: The bedroom – a space for physical and spiritual healing.

Source: Author's work – drafted and rendered drawing (2026)

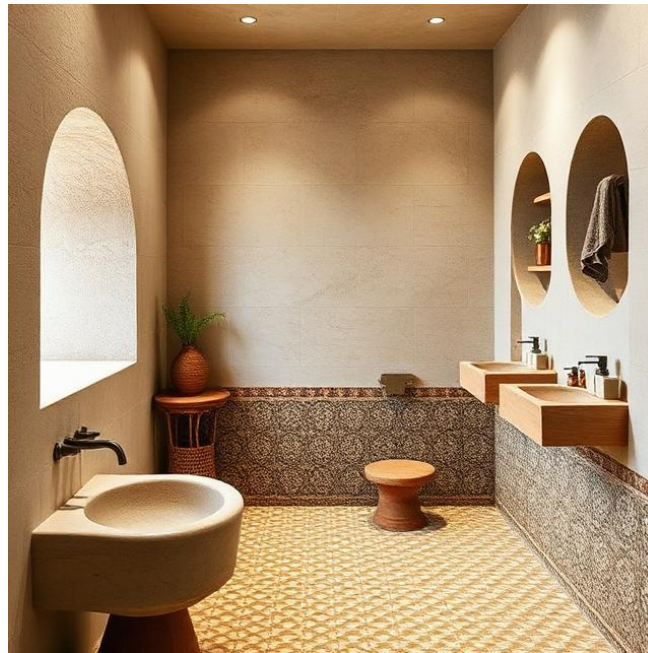


Plate 1f: A modern bathroom fitted with more than basic utilities – it is a space that reconnects the user(s) to their roots through aromatherapy and ablution.

Source: Author's work – drafted and rendered drawing (2026)

The bathroom, reconceived as a ceremonial purification space, draws from the rich tradition of ritual cleansing in African cultures—herbal steam baths, ritual anointing with plant-based substances, the sacred dimension of water as a medium of spiritual as well as physical renewal. Architectural translation of these traditions produces spaces organized around a heightened sensory experience: basins carved from stone or shaped in forms that recall ceremonial vessels; wall surfaces finished with polished lime plaster or textured terracotta that engage the body through touch and temperature; niches and shelving for bars of plant-based black soap, aromatic herbs, and purifying clays; mosaic storytelling through wall and floor tiles whose geometric patterns are derived from the mural traditions of Ndebele or the protective symbolism of Berber art (Njoku, 2022; Okeke, 2023). The entire spatial experience is designed to transform the daily act of washing into a restorative ritual that reconnects the occupant with their cultural heritage and personal identity.

Ethical Dimensions: Curation, Sourcing, and the Politics of Cultural Translation

A significant finding of this study concerns the ethical dimensions of spatial narrative as a design practice. As African design traditions attract increasing global interest, the risk of their reduction to decorative trend—what Bello (2023) terms "exploitative styling"—demands explicit attention. The ethical practice of African interior design requires a commitment to what this study terms responsible curation: sourcing genuine artifacts and materials directly from recognized artisan communities; commissioning new works under creative guidelines that respect cultural traditions and provide fair compensation to their producers; engaging cultural consultants to ensure that symbols and spatial practices are used in contextually appropriate ways; and approaching the design process as an act of cultural interpretation rather than extraction (Sow, 2021). The home that successfully enacts this ethical curation becomes not merely a beautiful space but an instrument of cultural preservation—a living archive that contributes to the transmission of knowledge across generations.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the contemporary African interior design practice, when grounded in a rigorous and ethically responsible integration of crafting and drafting, has the capacity to produce domestic environments of profound cultural significance and genuine architectural innovation. The analysis of specific interior zones—threshold, living space, nourishment space, rest space, and

purification space—demonstrates the extraordinary richness of the indigenous design traditions available as resources for this practice, and the equally extraordinary range of contemporary design strategies through which those traditions can be creatively and respectfully translated into present-day domestic contexts.

The theoretical framework of material intelligence, spatial storytelling, and ethical curation developed in this paper offers a vocabulary for understanding what distinguishes genuinely African-informed interior design from the superficial application of African decorative motifs to decontextualized spaces. Material intelligence means engaging with the full depth of knowledge encoded in indigenous materials—earth, fibre, wood, ceramic, metal—rather than treating them as interchangeable surface finishes. Spatial storytelling means organizing the entire experience of moving through and inhabiting a home as a coherent cultural narrative, in which each spatial zone constitutes a distinct chapter. Ethical curation means approaching the use of indigenous cultural knowledge with the respect, rigor, and generosity that are owed to both the traditions themselves and to the communities whose creativity produced them.

The implications of this research extend well beyond the domestic interior. The principles developed here—deep cultural coding, epistemic translation, narrative authenticity, ethical responsibility—are equally applicable to the design of public buildings, urban spaces, and landscapes. The home, as the most intimate and daily-experienced of all spatial environments, is perhaps the most powerful site for the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations; but it is the beginning, not the end, of the project of creating an African spatial culture that is simultaneously rooted in ancestral wisdom and responsive to the challenges of the present. Future research should examine the measurable impacts of culturally informed interior environments on occupant well-being, cultural identity, and intergenerational knowledge transmission, as well as the potential of emerging digital fabrication technologies for broadening access to culturally meaningful interior environments.

REFERENCES

- Adebayo, T. (2022). The screen as veil: Reinterpreting privacy and aesthetics in the contemporary Nigerian entryway. *Interiority*, 5(2), 67–84.
- Adeyemi, P. (2023). Beyond motif: Epistemic translation in contemporary African interior design. *Journal of Design History*, 36(1), 45–62. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epac045>
- Asante, M. K. (2003). *Afrocentricity: The theory of social change* (Rev. ed.). African American Images.
- Bello, A. (2023). Custodians of culture: Ethics in the curation of African design. *Design Issues*, 39(2), 80–95. https://doi.org/10.1162/desi_a_00711
- Chukwu, N. (2021). Object rituals: The material culture of thresholds in Igbo homesteads. *Journal of Material Culture*, 26(3), 28–45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13591835211018874>
- Chukwuma, N. (2024). Earth and fire at the table: Ceramic aesthetics in the contemporary African dining space. *Interiority*, 7(1), 80–95.
- Diabaté, I., & Boafo, A. (2025). African voices changemakers: Designing sustainable urban living models. *CNN World*, 1–4. <https://www.cnn.com>
- Dlamini, S. (2023). Ndebele mural art and the architecture of announcement. *African Arts*, 56(1), 108–117. https://doi.org/10.1162/afar_a_00669

- Hall, E. T. (1966). *The hidden dimension*. Doubleday.
- Ibrahim, F. (2024). Material memory and spatial narrative in Sahelian domestic architecture. *African Arts*, 57(2), 24–39. https://doi.org/10.1162/afar_a_00700
- Ibe, G. (2022). The aesthetics of abundance: Display, styling, and the performance of hospitality. *Home Cultures*, 19(2), 149–165. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17406315.2022.2044812>
- Ingold, T. (2013). *Making: Anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture*. Routledge.
- Mbachu, C. (2021). The artisan's blueprint: Craft knowledge as architectural epistemology. *Design Issues*, 37(4), 12–28. https://doi.org/10.1162/desi_a_00649
- Mensah, K. (2023). Curating the entrance: The foyer as narrative gallery in the diasporic home. *Design and Culture*, 15(1), 85–102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2022.2154332>
- Njoku, C. (2022). Earth, steam, herb: Designing for sensory purification. *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, 39(4), 128–145.
- Njoku, C. (2024). Fluid assemblages: Furniture and the choreography of congregation. *Design and Culture*, 16(1), 25–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2023.2280341>
- Nzomiwu, K. (2022). Collaborative tectonics: Reshaping professional practice through indigenous making. *Architecture and Culture*, 10(3), 95–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20507828.2022.2045021>
- Okafor, G. (2023). Hearth and vessel: The nourishment space as a cultural core. *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, 40(3), 65–80.
- Okeke, G. (2023). Critical synthesis: The unfinished project of African interior design. *African Arts*, 56(4), 52–65. https://doi.org/10.1162/afar_a_00692
- Olayiwola, A. T., & Adeyemi, O. (2024). The impact of African art aesthetics on sustainable decorative designs. *Review of Contemporary Philosophy*, 23(2), 45–60.
- Okonkwo, G. (2023). The bedroom as intimate altar: Space, rest, and identity in African-inspired interior design. *Interiority*, 6(2), 51–68.
- Osasona, C. O. (2021). *Nigerian traditional architecture: A living cultural resource*. Obafemi Awolowo University Press.
- Salami, A. (2023). The architect-artist continuum in Yoruba sacred space. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 82(2), 115–132.
- Sow, A. (2021). From granary to backsplash: The architectural translation of ceramic knowledge. *Architectural Theory Review*, 26(1–2), 40–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13264826.2021.1943312>
- Traoré, K. (2022). Geomantic foundations: Ritual cartography and built form in West Africa. *Landscape Research*, 47(6), 720–735. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01426397.2022.2046213>

Traoré, K. (2023). Metal as memory: Integrating casting heritage into modern interiors. *African Arts*, 56(3), 130–142. https://doi.org/10.1162/afar_a_00685

Yahaya, S. (2024). African architecture: A source of inspiration for modern design. *Safiya Yahaya Design Journal*, 8–11. <https://safiayahaya.com>