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[Adeola Ajayi](#)^{*} and Babafemi Gegesleso

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Article

Sacred Architecture and Community Well-Being at the Chapel of the Resurrection, University of Ibadan

Adeola Ajayi * and Babafemi Gegeleso

Department of Architecture, University of Ibadan

* Correspondence: ayangadeanthonia@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines how religious architecture contributes to community well-being, using the Chapel of the Resurrection as a case study. Although the theological significance of worship spaces is well documented, limited empirical research exists on how specific architectural elements—particularly natural light and spatial arrangement—affect the social and psychological well-being of users within African academic environments. The study adopts a convergent parallel mixed-methods approach that integrates qualitative thematic analysis and site observations with quantitative data collected through 80 structured questionnaires administered to members of the university community. Drawing on theories of architectural phenomenology, emotional atmospheres, and place attachment, the Chapel is examined not merely as a ritual space but as active social infrastructure that shapes human experience and interaction. Findings reveal that the Chapel's tropical modernist design functions as a restorative environment. A large majority of respondents (89.4%) reported that natural light creates a calm atmosphere, while 87.2% indicated that the space helps reduce stress. The spatial configuration also promotes inclusivity, with 93.6% agreeing that movement within the space is easy and 89.4% feeling included during services. Notably, 93.6% stated that the Chapel fosters a strong sense of belonging, demonstrating a clear connection between thoughtful architectural design and communal cohesion. The study concludes that the building effectively translates indigenous African ideals of egalitarian gathering into a contemporary institutional form and offers evidence-based design recommendations for community-supportive religious spaces in Nigerian universities.

Keywords: sacred architecture; community well-being; Chapel of Resurrection; light; space; social cohesion

1. Introduction

Sacred buildings (also known as religious buildings) have long served as important social and cultural institutions, functioning not only as places of worship but also as spaces where faith, culture, and community life intersect. Historically, religious architecture has expressed shared beliefs and reinforced collective identity, often becoming communal anchors within societies [1]. Beyond ritual activities, these spaces foster togetherness, mutual support, and cultural continuity, thereby contributing to the social and psychological well-being of their users.

Architecture plays a crucial role in shaping these experiences. The construction industry is undergoing a transformative shift towards sustainable practices [2–4]. Elements such as light and spatial configuration influence perception, movement, and interaction within religious spaces. The deliberate manipulation of light can evoke transcendence and guide attention, while spatial organization structures ritual movement and encourages communal participation. Scholars have therefore emphasized that architectural environments significantly affect emotion, memory, and collective experience, making design an essential factor in facilitating shared religious encounters. In African contexts, where religious life is deeply communal, religious centers frequently serve as hubs for social cohesion and cultural continuity [5].

Despite this significance, many studies of religious buildings focus primarily on their symbolic or theological meanings, while the experiential qualities created by architectural design remain underexplored. Yet architectural environments strongly influence human emotions and behaviors, particularly within sacred spaces where communal worship and social interaction occur [6,7]. In Nigeria, the rapid development of religious buildings has sometimes led to the adoption of architectural models that insufficiently respond to local cultural patterns, communal practices, and environmental conditions [5]. This highlights the need to examine how specific architectural elements contribute to meaningful communal engagement and well-being.

University campuses provide a particularly relevant setting for such investigations. Religious buildings within universities offer spaces for reflection, shared identity, and emotional support within academically demanding environments [8]. At the University of Ibadan, the Chapel of the Resurrection serves as a prominent spiritual and communal landmark. Designed to accommodate congregational worship and broader community activities, the chapel illustrates how architectural design can facilitate both spiritual experience and social interaction.

This study therefore examines how the design of religious architecture contributes to community well-being. Focusing on the role of light and spatial arrangement in the Chapel of the Resurrection at the University of Ibadan, the research explores how these architectural elements influence communal worship, social engagement, and shared identity within the university community [9]. By doing so, it contributes to broader discussions on the role of architectural design in fostering socially supportive and spiritually meaningful environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The Concept of Sacred Architecture*

Sacred architecture can be understood as a purpose-built environment designed to facilitate and embody communal religious practice, operating simultaneously on existential, symbolic, and phenomenological levels to structure ritual, express theological and cultural narratives, and foster collective identity. It can be conceptualized as a form of meta-architecture, in which space, ritual, and community converge to create a “place of human becoming.” The principle of human dignity as the recognition of the inherent human state of being worthy of respect, must not be violated [10][11]. In this sense, religious buildings function as mediating environments that establish transitional thresholds between the mundane and the sacred, guiding communal worship and reflection.

Fundamentally, religious architecture is grounded in communal and existential engagement. While accommodating individual devotion, its spatial forms are primarily shaped by the requirements of collective ritual and shared experience. Such spaces address existential questions, offering a shared spatial framework through which communities explore meaning, mortality, and transcendence together.

Beyond their liturgical role, religious buildings also function as important social and civic infrastructures. Contemporary scholarship recognizes them as identity-defining places within the urban and cultural landscape, serving as stable communal anchors that provide platforms for social interaction, reflection, and collective gathering. Through this broader social function, religious architecture contributes significantly to community cohesion and well-being.

2.2. *Elements of Sacred Architecture and Their Impact*

The experiential quality of spiritual architecture is shaped by key elements: light, acoustics, spatial arrangement, and structural form, which mediate the spiritual, emotional, and social experiences of users. These components function not merely as physical characteristics but as orchestrated tools that enhance the sacred experience, emphasizing that the power of sacred architecture lies in its design as much as in its symbolism.

2.1.1. Light as Symbol and Experience

Light is one of the most influential elements in spiritual architecture, functioning both as illumination and as a symbolic medium. It conveys transcendence, purity, and the divine, guiding worshippers from the mundane toward the metaphysical [12]. Research shows that lighting quality directly influences psychological and spiritual outcomes. For instance, contrasts between shadow and brilliance in sacred spaces have been linked to users' perceptions of spiritual connection and inner peace.

The manipulation of light is achieved through architectural control and filtration. Spiritual buildings act as "frames for perception," using light to slow time and evoke reflective silence. In the Chapel of the Resurrection, natural light entering through high windows and stained glass creates an immersive environment that separates the interior from external chaos, fostering reverence. Light also generates dynamic "emotional atmospheres" [9], interacting with spatial geometry and materials to produce a sense of liveliness and visual calm. For the university community, this contributes to restorative experiences that enhance mental clarity, emotional well-being, and a sense of spiritual connection. Figure 1 below shows a layout illustrating various daylighting approaches (from clerestory to light wells), which help show how light enriches sacred spaces and supports visual and emotional well-being.

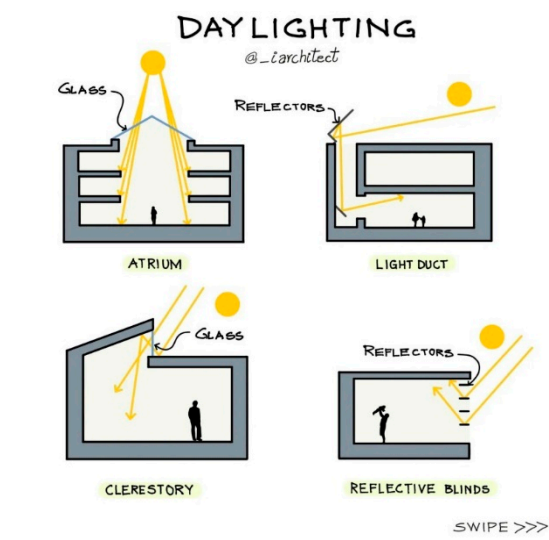


Figure 1. Approaches to Daylighting.

2.1.2. Spatial Arrangement and Communal Well-Being

Spatial arrangement in religious architecture refers to the deliberate organization of volumes, circulation paths, boundaries, and focal points that structure how communities occupy and experience sacred spaces. Through this configuration, architecture facilitates ritual activities, expresses theological ideas, and shapes social interaction, thereby contributing significantly to communal belonging and well-being [13,14]. By directing movement, framing attention, and defining zones of sacredness, spatial design influences how individuals relate to the collective worship experience [15,16].

In many religious buildings, spatial arrangement functions as a framework for ritual practice. Architectural sequencing—such as the longitudinal basilica plan in Christian churches—guides processional movement from entrance to altar, reinforcing shared participation in worship [17,18]. Similarly, central plans found in some Orthodox and Islamic traditions emphasize communal unity by organizing worshippers around a sacred focal point [19].

Spatial design also shapes social dynamics and patterns of engagement. It positively influences stress, anxiety, mood, perception, cognition and social well-being [20]. Axial planning highlights

liturgical focal points such as altars or pulpits, concentrating congregational attention during ritual activities [21]. Seating configurations further influence participation: linear arrangements encourage leader-focused worship, while circular or flexible layouts promote mutual awareness and interaction among congregants [22,23]. Transitional areas—such as narthexes, courtyards, and atria—serve as informal gathering spaces that support social interaction beyond formal worship [24,25]. Figure 2 shows a structural diagram demonstrating how geometric shapes like circles, squares, and star polygons guide spatial order in sacred architecture, anchoring spiritual meaning through sacred geometry.

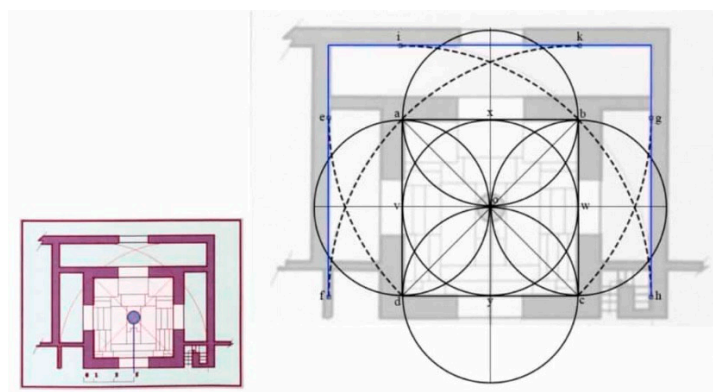


Figure 2. Geometrical Shapes in Guiding Spatial Order.

Moreover, spatial arrangement establishes a hierarchy of sacredness through thresholds that guide movement from public exterior spaces toward more sacred interior zones, reinforcing communal identity and participation [26,27]. Collectively, these spatial strategies enhance social cohesion, facilitate ritual engagement, and strengthen shared identity, demonstrating that spatial order is a fundamental architectural factor in promoting communal well-being within religious environments [28,29]. Figure 3 shows a schematic section highlighting how form and spatial hierarchy operate, useful for visualizing how spatial arrangements guide movement, focus, and spiritual mediation.

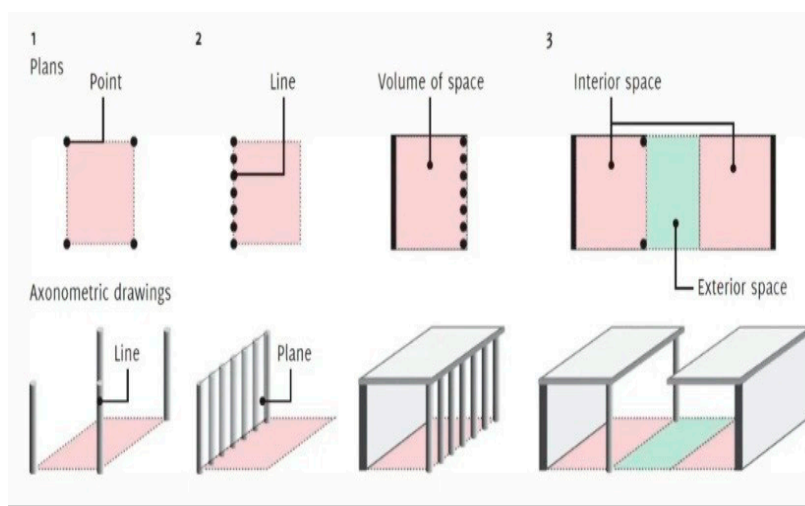


Figure 3. Operation of Form and Spatial Hierarchy.

2.3. University of Ibadan Chapel of Resurrection and Community Life

University chapels serve as important architectural and social spaces that connect the intellectual, social, and spiritual dimensions of campus life. Beyond functioning as places of worship, they act as communal hubs where members of the academic community cultivate shared identity and

social cohesion. The justifications for this study at the University of Ibadan are multifaceted [30]. At the University of Ibadan, the Chapel of the Resurrection exemplifies this role as a purpose-built religious and communal landmark. Designed in the mid-twentieth century, the chapel features an inclusive spatial arrangement, natural ventilation, and a prominent roof form that symbolically communicates openness and transcendence. Its interdenominational character, reinforced by multiple entrances and a spacious unified nave, enables participation from a diverse university community.

The chapel also plays a central role in the ceremonial and social life of the university. In addition to regular worship services, it hosts convocations, concerts, and memorials, demonstrating the value of multifunctional religious spaces in supporting both ritual and communal activities. Architectural elements such as filtered natural light and favorable acoustics create an atmosphere of serenity and reflection, offering students and staff a restorative environment within the pressures of academic life. Through its inclusive design and multifunctional use, the Chapel of the Resurrection serves not only as a religious facility but also as a vital social infrastructure that strengthens community identity, cohesion, and well-being within the University of Ibadan.

The Chapel of the Resurrection at the University of Ibadan serves as a compelling example of how religious architecture can anchor a diverse academic community. Designed as an interdenominational space, its theological inclusiveness is reflected in an architectural openness that encourages shared use and collective identity. Rather than functioning as a segregated religious enclave, the chapel acts as a unifying social infrastructure where different groups gather within a common spatial environment, reinforcing community cohesion and belonging.

Architecturally, the building reflects principles of Tropical Modernism by integrating symbolic form with climatic responsiveness and communal function. Its steep-pitched concrete shell both directs visual focus upward and enhances natural ventilation, ensuring environmental comfort during congregational activities. Over time, the chapel has adapted to contemporary needs by incorporating spaces for counseling and small-group interactions while maintaining its architectural integrity. As a venue for major university ceremonies such as matriculation and convocation, it also sanctifies key academic milestones, providing a psychological and social sanctuary that supports emotional well-being, social cohesion, and a shared sense of identity within the university community. Figure 4 shows the University of Ibadan Chapel of Resurrection.



Figure 4. University of Ibadan Chapel of Resurrection.

3. Methodology

This study employs a convergent parallel mixed-methods research design that integrates qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine how the architectural elements of the Chapel influence community well-being. Qualitative data were obtained through site observations and semi-structured interviews to capture users lived experiences, including feelings of belonging, inclusivity, and communal atmosphere, while quantitative data were collected through structured

questionnaires to assess broader perceptions of how design elements such as light and spatial arrangement contribute to social and psychological well-being. Data sources included both primary data gathered from questionnaires and observations and secondary data from scholarly literature, architectural drawings, and historical records of the chapel. Participants were purposively selected from the University of Ibadan community, including students, staff, clergy, and visitors who regularly interact with the space. The research instruments consisted of a structured questionnaire and an observation checklist, which were validated for content, construct, and criterion validity and tested for reliability through internal consistency. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics alongside thematic analysis of qualitative responses and observations, allowing for triangulation of findings and a comprehensive understanding of how the chapel's architectural design supports communal experience and well-being.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Lighting Perception

The manipulation of light emerged as a critical architectural tool shaping the communal atmosphere and individual well-being within the chapel. The data revealed overwhelmingly positive perceptions of the chapel's lighting design. The highest mean score (4.45) corresponds to light enhancing architectural beauty, with 93.6% agreement, demonstrating that users recognize light as an active architectural element rather than merely functional illumination. Natural light creating a calm atmosphere achieved 89.4% agreement (mean: 4.32), validating the phenomenological framework that light shapes collective emotional atmospheres.

Notably, 76.6% of respondents agreed that light enhances spiritual experience, establishing the empirical link between architectural manipulation of light and communal religious practice. The dynamic quality of daylight received 74.4% agreement regarding its impact on the space's feel, supporting the theoretical concept that the chapel functions as a "living" environment whose temporal light variations maintain user engagement.

4.2. Spatial Arrangement Perception

Spatial configuration emerged as the primary mechanism orchestrating communal interaction and inclusive participation. Clear visibility of the altar/pulpit achieved the highest mean score (4.34), with 89.4% agreement, demonstrating that the spatial hierarchy successfully directs collective focus without creating oppressive segmentation. The layout's facilitation of easy movement received 93.6% agreement (mean: 4.30), validating the design's success in creating accessible communal infrastructure rather than imposing barriers to participation.

Critically, 89.4% of respondents felt included within the space, empirically supporting the theoretical framework that spatial arrangement actively constructs social dynamics of belonging. The chapel's seating configuration fostering togetherness achieved 87.2% agreement, confirming that the design successfully translates indigenous principles of egalitarian gathering into modern institutional architecture.

4.3. Community Well-Being Outcomes

The data reveals strong correlations between architectural design and multiple dimensions of community well-being. The chapel's contribution to fostering a sense of belonging achieved the highest mean score (4.36), with 93.6% agreement. This empirically validates the theoretical framework positioning religious architecture as social infrastructure that cultivates place attachment and collective identity. Users feeling emotionally uplifted (89.4% agreement) demonstrates the space's success as a restorative environment supporting psychological well-being.

Significantly, 91.5% agreed the chapel encourages interaction and bonding, confirming that the architectural design actively facilitates social capital formation rather than merely accommodating

isolated individual spirituality. The atmosphere reducing stress achieved 87.2% agreement, supporting the biophilic design framework that intentional manipulation of light and space creates therapeutic environments for academic communities facing chronic pressures.

4.4. Integration of Light and Space

The integration of light and space achieved a mean score of 4.36, with 91.5% agreement, demonstrating that users experience these elements not as discrete features but as a unified architectural system. This validates the phenomenological framework that successful religious architecture orchestrates multiple sensory inputs into coherent emotional atmospheres. The chapel's reflection of cultural and spiritual values (91.5% agreement) confirms it successfully bridges global modernist principles with indigenous communal values.

4.5. Most Meaningful Features

Thematic analysis of open-ended responses revealed three dominant categories of meaningful architectural features:

Theme 1: The Dome and Cross-Inspired Form (38% of responses) Representative quotes include: "The dome and the cross design... it speaks the essence of Christianity" and "The shape of the structure" reflecting symbolic resonance. This demonstrates that users interpret architectural form as theological narrative, validating the meta-architecture framework.

Theme 2: Spatial Qualities—Height and Openness (28% of responses) Users emphasized: "The high ceiling, it feels easier to stay inside the chapel for longer" and "The chapel hall, it's so open and has a dome structure." This reveals that volumetric generosity functions as a practical mechanism for sustained communal engagement, creating spatial comfort that extends duration of use.

Theme 3: The Tarmac/Outdoor Prayer Grounds (19% of responses) Multiple respondents identified "The tarmac, provides a good space for prayer" as meaningful. This highlights the importance of transitional, informal gathering spaces as vital communal infrastructure, supporting the framework that religious architecture extends beyond the sanctuary to include "in-between" social zones.

Theme 4: Light and Natural Environment (15% of responses) Responses such as "The light, especially in the dark. It's helpful in the dark" and "The lighting" demonstrate users' conscious recognition of light as an active design element contributing to their experience.

4.6. Usage Frequency and Well-Being Perception

To examine whether frequency of use correlates with perceived well-being impact, a cross-tabulation was performed: Regular users (weekly attendance) demonstrated the strongest sense of belonging (96.5% total agreement, with 53.6% strongly agreeing), supporting the theoretical framework that place attachment and communal identity emerge through repeated ritual engagement within the designed environment. This validates that the chapel's architectural success is realized through sustained communal practice rather than one-time impressions.

5. Conclusions

The quantitative and qualitative data converge to demonstrate that the Chapel of the Resurrection functions as effective social infrastructure through its intentional integration of light and spatial arrangement:

- i. Light Functions as Communal Mediator: Natural light creates calm atmospheres (mean: 4.32) and enhances spiritual experience (mean: 3.96), validating phenomenological frameworks that light shapes collective emotional states.

- ii. **Spatial Configuration Enables Inclusion:** The layout successfully facilitates easy movement (93.6% agreement), clear visibility (89.4%), and feelings of inclusion (89.4%), demonstrating spatial arrangement as the primary mechanism for egalitarian participation.
- iii. **Architecture Directly Supports Well-being:** The chapel promotes belonging (93.6%), provides emotional uplift (89.4%), encourages bonding (91.5%), and reduces stress (87.2%), establishing empirical evidence of architecture's therapeutic capacity.
- iv. **Cultural Translation Succeeds:** Users recognize the design reflects cultural and spiritual values (91.5%), confirming successful integration of indigenous communal principles with modernist institutional architecture.
- v. **Multifunctionality Strengthens Community:** The chapel's ability to function beyond worship (82.9% agreement) validates its role as comprehensive social infrastructure supporting diverse community activities.
- vi. **Usage Correlates with Attachment:** Regular users demonstrate stronger sense of belonging (96.5% vs. 84.6%), supporting theory that place attachment emerges through sustained ritual engagement.

6. Patents

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