

Biblical Architecture and Sacred Writings in Contemporary Church Structures in Nigeria: A Hermeneutical-Semiotic Study

Ajibade Adedayo Adeyemo¹, Olasunmbo Adhuze², David Oluwabukunmi Ogunbiyi³, Israel Temitope Oyebanji⁴, Oyekunle Martins Olajugbagbe⁵, Adediran Idowu Segun⁶

^{1,2} Department of Architecture, Lagos State University of Science and technology Ikorodu

^{3,4,5,6} Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy, Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State

Email: ¹adeyemo.a@lasustech.edu.ng, ²adhuze.oo@lasustech.edu.ng, ³ogunbiyi13825@run.edu.ng,

⁴oyebanji13826@run.edu.ng, ⁵olajugbagbe16072@run.edu.ng, ⁶segun13822@run.edu.ng

Abstract

This study examines church architecture in Nigeria through a theological and semiotic lens, exploring how biblical models and scriptural traditions shape, or fail to shape, contemporary church buildings. It considers the tension between sacred architectural patterns—such as the Old Testament Tabernacle and Solomon's Temple—and modern constructions influenced by financial constraints, cultural changes, and denominational practices. Using qualitative methods, including site visits, interviews, and interpretive analysis, the research explores how symbols, inscriptions, and spatial arrangements reflect or distort theological meaning. The findings show a growing shift from biblically rooted architectural forms to more utilitarian and stylistically secular structures, particularly in Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches. Nonetheless, traces of sacred symbolism endure, especially in older Anglican and Catholic cathedrals designed in traditional European styles. The study also notes the decline in the use of scriptural texts within church buildings, replaced in many instances by digital signage and commercial-style branding. Additional issues such as substandard construction, poor acoustics, and unsustainable design are also discussed. The paper recommends a renewal of the theological purpose of church architecture, urging church leaders to integrate sacred symbolism, cultural identity, and sustainable practices. Ultimately, it argues that church buildings should not be reduced to functional halls, but should embody and express the sacred truths of the Christian faith.

Keywords: Architecture, Biblical Analysis, Church, Nigeria, Sacred Writings

1. Introduction

Architecture is a complex art and science that involves designing and constructing structures that reflect cultural values, technological advancements, and human needs. Vitruvius, an ancient Roman architect, identified three fundamental principles: *firmitas* (durability), *utilitas* (functionality), and *venustas* (beauty). Architectural styles have evolved over time, influenced by societal changes, material innovations, and aesthetic preferences. Gothic architecture emphasizes height and light, while Modernism focuses on minimalism and functionalism (Koolhaas 2014, 102). Contemporary architecture integrates sustainability and smart technology to address environmental concerns and urbanization challenges. Architects play a crucial role in shaping the built environment, balancing aesthetics, functionality, and sustainability.

Throughout history, there has been a close relationship between architecture and religion, with religious ideas

affecting architectural styles, functions, and symbolism. Churches, mosques, temples, and synagogues are examples of places of worship that are built to support religious activities as well as to represent cultural and spiritual values. The capacity of religious architecture to inspire awe and transcendence is one of its most important features. To illustrate the relationship between heaven and earth, Gothic cathedrals, for example, use ribbed ceilings, towering spires, and stained-glass windows to lead the eye upward (Fazio et al., 2013:405).

At creation, God established order and form out of chaos, setting a precedent for architectural structuring seen throughout biblical history. The Garden of Eden, meticulously arranged and cultivated (Genesis 2:8-15), reflects early principles of landscape architecture, while Noah's ark serves as an example of divine specification in construction. Genesis 6:13-15 provides a clear architectural blueprint, detailing materials, spatial arrangement, and construction methods: "Make

yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out." Similarly, Solomon's temple was built according to precise divine specifications (2 Chronicles 4:7), reinforcing the biblical tradition of detailed architectural guidance. However, human-led projects, such as the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:2-4), lacked divine oversight, leading to fragmentation rather than unity. This contrast highlights the theological distinction between divinely inspired and self-directed architecture. White argues that God, as the first architect, not only created space but also mandated humanity to shape and define it (1980). Likewise, Hebrews 11:10 affirms God's ultimate authority in architecture, portraying Him as the divine builder of an eternal city. Over time, biblical architecture transitioned from strict divine blueprints to human interpretations, with ecclesiastical structures serving as both symbolic and functional spaces for worship (Barie 2010).

The transition from orthodox architectural traditions to contemporary church structures reflects broader theological and societal shifts. Historically, sacred architecture adhered to symbolic and spatial typologies, emphasizing hierarchical structures, sacred geometry, and the use of materials that conveyed religious significance. Gothic cathedrals, for example, employed pointed arches and verticality to evoke a spiritual ascent toward heaven, a semiotic representation of divine aspiration. However, the rise of denominational diversity, economic constraints, and evolving theological perspectives have contributed to the flexibility of modern church spaces, leading to the use of unconventional venues such as rented halls, repurposed buildings, and even temporary structures. Rapoport asserts that architecture extends beyond mere shelter, functioning as an expression of cultural, social, and spiritual values (1969). Similarly, Chakrabarti describes architecture in the Hindu worldview as *Vastu-Vidya*, or "the science of dwelling for the gods," underscoring the intersection of built environments and sacred symbolism (1999). The biblical tabernacle, as described in Exodus 25:40, was constructed according to a divinely revealed pattern, reinforcing the sacred function of architectural design. In contrast, contemporary church architecture often prioritizes functionality over theological meaning, reflecting a broader shift in religious spatial practice. The diminishing emphasis on structured architectural theology raises questions about the evolving role of sacred space in worship, as modern churches

increasingly adopt pragmatic and economically viable solutions at the expense of traditional ecclesiastical aesthetics.

A hermeneutical-semiotic analysis of biblical architecture reveals that sacred structures historically functioned as both theological expressions and spatial narratives. Barie suggests that biblical architecture serves as a "copy and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary," demonstrating the interplay between physical worship spaces and divine presence (2010). Aldo van Eyck supports this notion, asserting that "a building is a small city; a city is a large building," highlighting how architecture encapsulates broader societal structures (qtd. in Rapoport 1969). This perspective underscores the interconnectivity between sacred space and communal organization, emphasizing the semiotic significance of spatial arrangements. Goodman differentiates between simple buildings and architectural masterpieces, drawing from Pevsner's claim that "a bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture" (2014; Pevsner 1963, 15). This distinction becomes increasingly blurred in contemporary Nigerian church architecture, where economic limitations and denominational freedom have led to non-standardized worship spaces. While architectural adaptation is necessary for modern worship needs, it is crucial to maintain theological and symbolic integrity within sacred spaces. A balanced approach that integrates both tradition and modern functionalism ensures that sacred architecture continues to reflect spiritual depth while accommodating contemporary congregational dynamics. Church architecture has long served as a theological expression, embodying the sacred through design, spatial arrangements, and inscriptions. In Nigeria, contemporary church buildings reflect a dynamic interplay between biblical models, cultural influences, and modern aesthetic choices. This paper employs hermeneutical and semiotic frameworks to analyze how these structures convey theological messages, examining the symbolism embedded in their architecture and sacred writings.

2. Statement of the Problem

In Nigeria, many modern church buildings, especially those connected to neo-Pentecostal movements, frequently deviate from traditional biblical architecture in favour of contemporary, occasionally minimalistic designs. Even though some churches use Christian symbols, the focus is more on practicality and designing

areas that accommodate sizable congregations and contemporary worship styles than on traditional architectural designs. Furthermore, some research indicates that these churches' emphasis on materialism and prosperity gospel teachings may have shaped their architectural decisions, possibly overshadowing more profound theological or symbolic components present in conventional church designs (Kwanneri, et al, 2023:1-12). While some churches strive to uphold the architectural principles of ancient biblical architecture, others prioritise African and modern practicality over sacred symbolism. As a result, recent Nigerian church arts and spaces lack socio-theological depth and identity. Additionally, the incorporation of sacred writings within recent church structures has become inconsistent, raising concerns about the diminishing role of biblical inscriptions, sacred writings and symbolism in reinforcing religious identity and faith formation. Therefore, modern church buildings in Nigeria exhibit diverse architectural forms influenced by economic factors, youth adaptations, technological advancements, and evolving worship beliefs and practices.

3. Objectives of the Study

The central reason of this study is to examine the hermeneutical-semiotics study of Biblical architecture and sacred writings in socio-contemporary Church Structures in Nigeria, other objectives are to:

1. explores the architectural principles of biblical structures in order to be able comprehend their theological and symbolic significance.
2. compares and contrasts Nigeria's modern church architecture with biblical architectural traditions.
3. examines the role of biblical inscriptions and symbols in modern church design, their influence on faith formation and worship experiences among adherents.
4. explore the Influence of Socio-Cultural and Economic Factors – Identify how cultural adaptations, economic constraints, and denominational diversity shape the architectural choices of Nigerian churches.
5. apply Hermeneutical and Semiotic Frameworks – Use hermeneutical (interpretative) and semiotic (symbolic) theories to decode the theological meanings embedded in church architecture and inscriptions.
6. provide Recommendations for Theological and Architectural Integrity – Suggest ways in which

Nigerian churches can integrate biblical symbolism and sacred writings into their designs while balancing functionality, cultural relevance, and economic feasibility.

4. Research Questions

1. To what extent do contemporary Nigerian church structures reflect biblical architectural principles and symbolism?
2. How do cultural, economic, and denominational factors influence the architectural design of modern Nigerian churches?
3. What is the role of sacred writings and biblical inscriptions in Nigerian church architecture, and how do they impact worshippers' spiritual experiences?
4. How can a hermeneutical-semiotic analysis help decode the theological meanings embedded in Nigerian church buildings?
5. What architectural strategies can be adopted to balance biblical symbolism, cultural adaptations, and modern functionality in Nigerian church designs?

5. Theoretical Framework

This study integrates hermeneutics, which involves the interpretation of sacred texts and their architectural implications, with semiotics, the study of signs and symbols in meaning-making. These approaches help decode the visual and textual elements in Nigerian church structures, demonstrating their role in spiritual communication. Hermeneutical theory is the interpretation of texts, particularly biblical writings, and their application in architecture. According to Ricoeur, interpretation theory helps uncover the surplus of meaning in sacred texts, allowing theological narratives to be embedded in architectural forms (Ricoeur 1976). Similarly, White asserts that biblical spaces, such as the Tabernacle and Solomon's Temple, were built according to divine specifications, reflecting theological intent in their spatial arrangements (White 1980).

Semiotics theory examines how architectural elements function as signs that convey religious meaning. Barie suggests that biblical architecture serves as a "copy and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary," demonstrating the interplay between physical worship spaces and divine presence (Barie 2010). In this framework, spatial organization in church buildings serves as a communicative system, where symbols like the altar,

pulpit, and biblical inscriptions function as signifiers of theological concepts (Goodman 2014). Modern Nigerian church architecture incorporates biblical typologies while adapting to cultural and environmental contexts. Rapoport argues that architecture is not merely about shelter but also expresses social and spiritual values (Rapoport 1969). This is evident in the integration of mega-church auditoriums, biblical inscriptions, and indigenous aesthetics in contemporary worship spaces. As the church continues to evolve, maintaining theological integrity in architectural forms remains essential.

6. Theological Framework

The Bible presents architecture as divinely inspired, with specific design instructions given for structures such as the Tabernacle (Exodus 25-27), which functioned as a sacred space with symbolic divisions: the Outer Court, the Holy Place, and the Most Holy Place. Solomon's Temple (1 Kings 6-7) was a highly ornamented and hierarchical space, reflecting divine order. Early Christian worship, as described in Acts 2:42-47, took place in house churches, which later influenced basilica-style church structures. White (1980) asserts that God, as the first architect, established the precedent for sacred spaces, reflecting divine order and human responsibility in shaping worship environments. Hebrews 11:10 affirms this, describing God as the ultimate builder of the heavenly city.

Ecclesiology, the study of the church, provides insight into how church buildings function as theological expressions. According to Rapoport (1969), church structures are not just shelters but reflections of social and spiritual values. Nigerian churches today integrate several theological and architectural elements, including mega-church auditoriums, inspired by biblical gathering spaces like synagogues; biblical inscriptions on walls, altars, and pulpits that reinforce faith; and sacred spatial organization, where the pulpit, altar, and baptismal font serve as focal points of worship. Barie (2010) argues that church architecture is a "copy and shadow" of the heavenly sanctuary, underscoring the sacredness of physical worship spaces.

Semiotics in theology examines how signs and symbols convey spiritual meaning. Nigerian church architecture employs specific symbolic elements to enhance worship experiences. The altar serves as a place of divine encounter, mirroring biblical altars used for

sacrifice and prayer. The pulpit, often elevated, symbolizes scriptural authority, reinforcing the centrality of God's Word. Biblical inscriptions function as faith markers, with verses such as Matthew 16:18 ("Upon this rock, I will build my church") reinforcing theological identity and purpose. Goodman (2014) emphasizes that architecture communicates theological truths, shaping worshippers' understanding of sacred space.

Modern church architecture in Nigeria combines biblical theology, youth adaptation, technological innovation, hospitality, and economic realities. This theological study integrates biblical models, cultural heritage, and contemporary worship practices; assesses the role of sacred writings and symbols in faith formation; and shows how church architecture is profoundly theological, influencing congregations' religious experiences.

7. Architectural Framework

The Tabernacle (Exodus 25–27), Solomon's Temple (1 Kings 6-7), and synagogues are among the foundational examples of sacred architecture and structures found in the Bible. These structures combined intricate ornamentation, divine will, sociohierarchical spatial arrangements, and sacred inscriptions. These biblical buildings established historic architectural ideas that shaped church architecture for centuries around the world. From the homes of the disciples, synagogues, and open areas (Acts 2:42–47) to basilica-style buildings, Christian worship spaces changed during the New Testament. In the Ancient Near East and other Roman territories, this transition was from private meetings to imposing structures.

Architecture functions as a symbolic and functional entity within religious spaces. Rapoport (1969) argues that architecture is more than just shelter; it embodies cultural, social, and theological values. Nigerian church buildings reflect this perspective by integrating mega-auditoriums, biblical inscriptions, and localized design aesthetics. Semiotic principles play a key role in sacred architecture, where spaces and structural elements convey spiritual significance. Barie (2010) suggests that biblical architecture is a "copy and shadow" of the heavenly sanctuary, reinforcing the role of sacred buildings as theological statements.

The spatial organization of church buildings follows functional and theological hierarchies. Key architectural elements include altars, pulpits, and

baptismal fonts, each serving as a signifier of religious meaning. The altar symbolizes divine presence and sacrifice, while the pulpit signifies the authority of the Word. Baptismal fonts are strategically placed to represent purification and rebirth. These elements are arranged to facilitate liturgical practices, ensuring that architecture complements worship experiences.

Contemporary Nigerian church architecture blends traditional ecclesiastical forms with modern adaptations. Economic constraints and denominational diversity have led to the use of non-traditional venues, such as converted halls and multipurpose spaces. However, despite these adaptations, the retention of theological and symbolic integrity remains a key concern. White (1980) emphasizes that sacred architecture must balance functionality with spiritual depth, ensuring that worship spaces remain meaningful and effective. Key features include the sanctuary, which holds services or masses, the chancel, which is the front part of the church, the nave, the aisles, the transept, the altar, the pulpit/lectern, pews, the sacristy, and the baptismal font. These structures have evolved over time, with distinct features and styles. The sanctuary is the area where the service or mass is held, the chapel is the front part where the pastor and choir are located, and the cathedral is the main part where the congregation sits. Church architecture has evolved over centuries, reflecting religious, cultural, and artistic influences. Various styles have emerged, each with distinct features that cater to spiritual and functional needs. Some of the most prominent church architectural designs include the Basilica, Gothic, Romanesque, Baroque, Modern, and Byzantine styles.

1. Basilica Style: The Basilica style originated in ancient Rome and was later adapted by Christians. These churches have a longitudinal floor plan with a central nave, side aisles, and an apse at one end. The Old St. Peter's Basilica in Rome is an example of this style (Fletcher 203).

2. Romanesque Style: Emerging in the 10th century, the Romanesque style is characterized by thick walls, rounded arches, and barrel vaults. This style was designed to create a sense of strength and permanence. Notable examples include the Abbey Church of Saint-Étienne in France (Krautheimer 45).

3. Gothic Style: Gothic architecture, which flourished in the 12th to 16th centuries, is known for pointed arches, ribbed vaults, and flying buttresses. These elements

allowed for taller structures and large stained-glass windows. The Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris exemplifies this style (Wilson 88).

4. Baroque Style: The Baroque style, which developed in the late 16th century, is known for its grandeur, dramatic use of light, and elaborate ornamentation. This style aimed to inspire awe and devotion. St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City is a prime example (Blunt 112).

5. Byzantine Style: Byzantine architecture is recognized for its domes, mosaics, and intricate geometric patterns. The Hagia Sophia in Istanbul is a famous representation of this style (Mango 156).

6. Modern Church Architecture: Contemporary church designs often feature minimalistic aesthetics, unconventional shapes, and the use of modern materials like glass and steel. An example is the Church of the Light in Japan, designed by Tadao Ando (Curtis 290).

8. Church Architectural Designs in Nigeria

There have been multiple instances of church building collapses in Nigeria due to inadequate construction practices. For example, the collapse of a guesthouse within the Synagogue Church of All Nations in Lagos in 2014 resulted in 115 fatalities. Investigations revealed that the building had structural deficiencies, including inadequate reinforcement and failure to obtain proper building approvals (Akinyemi and Olasunkanmi 2016). Similarly, in 2016, the roof of the Reigners Bible Church International in Uyo collapsed during a service, causing many casualties. Reports indicated that the building was still under construction and had been hastily completed for the event (Adeyemi and Oyeyemi 2017). Many churches in Nigeria experience poor acoustics due to architectural designs that often neglect sound distribution principles. The worship and teaching experience in Nigerian churches may suffer from issues including echo, sound waves, reverberation, and difficulty recognising speech due to hard surfaces like concrete, irregular shapes, and stone that promote uneven sound dispersion (Ogunbayo 2021; Anyanwu, 2024; Samuel & Pepple, 2021).

Some Nigerian churches are increasingly adopting modern construction styles and materials, driven by globalisation and the need for modern aesthetics and studio-like worship centres. This shift has led to a homogenisation of architectural styles and a reduction in culturally appropriate designs. Modern church buildings often use materials like reinforced concrete,

steel, and glass, replacing traditional materials like mud, thatch, and bamboo, resulting in a loss of cultural identity as churches, once reflecting local culture and craftsmanship, resemble buildings from other parts of the world. Changes in religious ideologies and liturgical practices can also influence church architecture, leading to the adoption of new forms and symbols. Research has shown that earth-based building techniques can be sustainable and adapted for modern construction, despite some arguing that traditional materials are no longer practical or cost-effective (Ajayi, 2019; Osasona, 2017; Owamoyo & Tabibi, 2023; Okpako, 2024; Adeoye, et al, 2024).

Nigerian church architecture and constructions clearly lack sustainable design principles. A lack of knowledge, budgetary limitations, and inadequate government assistance are some of the causes of this. Numerous churches choose non-sustainable building materials and designs because they value economy and beauty over environmental concerns (Fulani & Baiyewu, 2022; Faisal & Bello, 2020). The ignorance of architects, church leaders, and the general public regarding sustainable building practices is a major obstacle to sustainable design in Nigerian churches. Many churches, especially those with limited funding, may find it difficult to make the upfront investment necessary to implement sustainable design elements. The adoption of green architecture is further hampered by insufficient government incentives and policies to support sustainable building practices. Many churches use non-sustainable materials like concrete and plastics because they value appearance and economy over environmental concerns. It is challenging to evaluate the sustainability of church structures in Nigeria since there is no common rating or assessment system for sustainable building practices (Olaniyi and Ibrahim 2020; Amasuomo, 2021).

Churches in Nigeria must scrupulously comply to government construction rules and procedures, use qualified specialists like as architects and surveyors, and seek their views on all parts of the building process (Akinyemi and Olasunkanmi 2016; Adeyemi and Oyeyemi 2017). Also, seek the services of a sound expert who is not affiliated with the contractor for a comprehensive evaluation of the proposed equipment, such as the type of acoustic panels, soundproof doors and windows, sound barriers, and specialised materials such as acoustic foam, mass loaded vinyl, and acoustic sealant; including an acoustic specialist in the

construction design or remodelling process may assist guarantee that the sound is clear and balanced for worship, hymns, modern music, and preaching (Ogunbayo 2021).

Preserving Traditional Architectural Identity: While modern styles are common today, some churches are intentionally keeping in touch with local identity by incorporating traditional design features. This includes elements like open courtyards, wide windows for ventilation, and roofs built in regional styles. Locally available materials such as bamboo, mud bricks, and laterite are also being used—not just for their beauty, but for their sustainability and cost-effectiveness (Ajayi 2019). This approach helps the church building feel more familiar and connected to the surrounding community.

Promoting Sustainable and Energy-Efficient Designs: Churches can reduce long-term running costs and environmental impact by making their buildings more energy-efficient. Features like solar panels, LED lighting, rainwater harvesting, and natural cooling through cross-ventilation are all useful in our climate. Wide windows, shaded walkways, and ceiling fans also help reduce dependence on generators or air conditioning (Olaniyi and Ibrahim 2020). These measures show a commitment to stewardship of the environment and can inspire members to think sustainably as well.

Enhancing Accessibility for All Worshippers: Church buildings should be designed so that everyone can access them comfortably, including people with disabilities, the elderly, and parents with young children. This means having ramps, lifts, accessible toilets, and seating areas that accommodate various needs. Making churches accessible is not just a legal or design matter—it's a way of showing that everyone is truly welcome and valued in the worship community (Balogun and Adebayo 2022).

Improving Parking and Traffic Flow: With growing congregations, parking has become a major issue for many urban churches. Poorly planned parking can cause congestion and inconvenience for members and neighbours alike. Churches need to provide enough parking space, clear signage, and coordinate with traffic officials where necessary. In some cases, shuttle buses or encouraging carpooling can help ease pressure during big services or events (Eze and Uche 2021). Thoughtful planning in this area helps worshippers arrive and leave with less stress.

9. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the hermeneutical and semiotic analysis of biblical architecture and sacred writings in contemporary Nigerian church structures. The methodology integrates interpretive, descriptive, and analytical methods to explore how biblical architectural principles and religious inscriptions influence modern church designs in Nigeria.

10. Research Design

The study follows a hermeneutical-semiotic framework, which involves the interpretation of religious texts (hermeneutics) and the analysis of symbols and signs (semiotics) in architectural spaces. This approach allows for a theological and cultural reading of Nigerian church architecture, linking biblical precedents with contemporary design adaptations. A case study method is also utilized, focusing on selected churches in Nigeria that represent different architectural styles and theological traditions.

11. Data Collection Methods

The study relies on primary and secondary data sources, including:

- **Archival Research:** Examination of biblical texts, historical church designs, and theological literature related to sacred architecture.
- **Field Observations:** Site visits to selected churches to document architectural features, spatial organization, and the presence of religious inscriptions.
- **Interviews:** Structured and semi-structured interviews with architects, theologians, and church leaders to gain insights into the design choices and theological significance of church buildings.
- **Photographic Documentation:** Visual analysis of church structures, emphasizing architectural details, inscriptions, and spatial arrangements.

12. Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data is analyzed using:

- **Thematic Analysis:** Identification of recurring themes related to biblical architectural influence, semiotic symbolism, and contemporary adaptations in Nigerian churches.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Cross-examination of traditional ecclesiastical architecture and modern

church structures to determine continuities and deviations from biblical models.

- **Interpretive Analysis:** Application of hermeneutical and semiotic theories to understand the theological meanings embedded in church architecture and inscriptions.

13. Scope and Limitations

The study focuses on Christian church architecture in Nigeria, particularly examining churches with strong biblical influences in their design and spatial symbolism. While it provides a comprehensive analysis of architectural theology, the study is limited by:

- The availability of historical records on early Nigerian church structures.
- The subjective nature of architectural interpretation, as meanings of symbols may vary across denominations and cultural contexts.
- Constraints in accessing certain church premises for field study.

14. Ethical Considerations

The research adheres to ethical standards by ensuring that participants' identities are protected, obtaining informed consent for interviews and observations, and maintaining objectivity in data interpretation.

Observational Analysis of Selected Church Buildings in Nigeria

National Ecumenical Center, Abuja

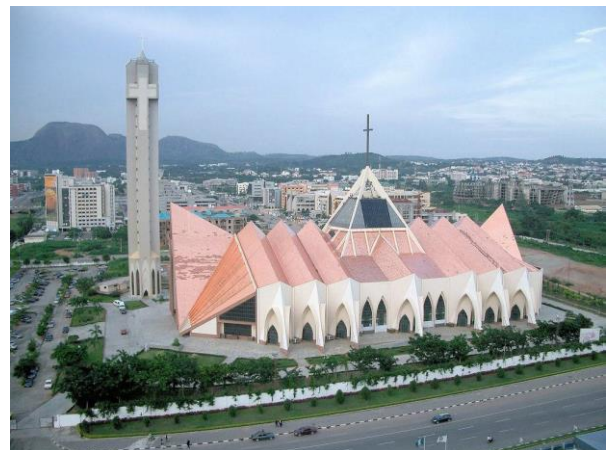




Figure 4.1. National Ecumenical Center, Abuja

The National Ecumenical Centre in Abuja, Nigeria, is a landmark designed to provide a shared place of worship for Christians from various denominations. Despite initial construction in the 1980s, the project was completed in 2005, led by Nigerian firm Darchiwork Group under architect Dipo Ajayi. The building combines neo-Gothic influences with modern construction methods, connecting historic church design with modern engineering and materials. The central dome symbolizes unity among Christian groups in Nigeria. The interior is spacious, with seating arranged on multiple levels to accommodate a large congregation. Structurally, the Centre uses reinforced concrete and steel for durability, while the exterior and interior are finished with natural stone, glass, and aluminum. Stain-glass windows along the perimeter depict Bible stories and symbols, linking the building with traditional church aesthetics. The Centre's unique incorporation of Nigerian cultural designs gives it both a global Christian identity and a distinctively African character.

The Cathedral of Christ Church, Marina Lagos

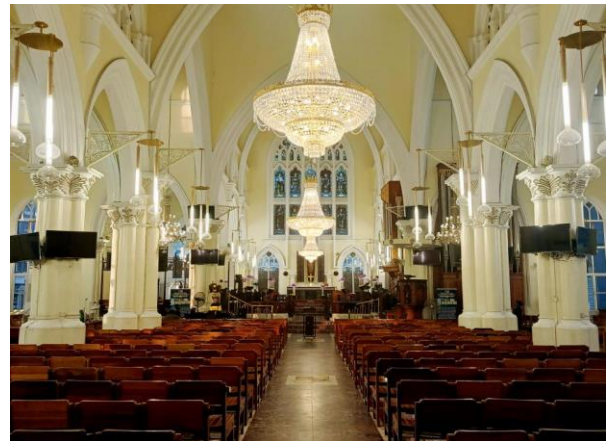


Figure 4.1. Cathedral of Christ Church, Marina Lagos

The Cathedral Church of Christ, Marina, Lagos, is one of the most historic and recognizable church buildings in the city. Shaped like a cross and built in the Romanesque tradition, it is the oldest Anglican cathedral in Nigeria and serves as the headquarters of the Diocese of Lagos. Though designed with a Neo-Gothic style—popular among Anglican and Catholic churches during British colonial times—the cathedral blends this with local adaptations suited to Nigeria's climate. Its design includes features like pointed arches, ribbed ceilings, buttresses, a tall bell tower, and beautiful stained-glass windows that depict scenes from the Bible and images of saints. These windows not only add beauty but also inspire worship. Inside, the church has a long central aisle lined with wooden pews, a raised altar richly decorated with religious symbols,

and a pipe organ used during services. Since its dedication in 1946, the Cathedral has hosted many major events, including visits from British royals and Nigerian dignitaries. Today, it remains an important spiritual and cultural landmark—one that reflects both Nigeria's Christian history and the architectural legacy of the colonial era.

Immanuel College of Theology Chapel, Ibadan



Figure 4.2: Immanuel College of Theology Chapel, Ibadan

Melville Hall (Anglican) and the Divinity School of Wesley College (Methodist) merged to form Immanuel College of Theology, a prestigious theological college in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria, which opened its doors in 1958. A dedication to ecumenical theological education is symbolised by this union. As the institution's spiritual

hub, the College Chapel hosts frequent worship sessions, noteworthy occasions, and neighbourhood get-togethers. It promotes spiritual development and harmony among visitors, teachers, and students.

Cathedral Church of St. Barnabas, Ilorin



Figure 4.3: Cathedral Church of St. Barnabas, Ilorin

The Church of St. Barnabas in Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria, is a prominent Anglican church that serves as a hub for communal gatherings and worship. Located in the Sabo-Oke neighborhood, the cathedral blends traditional Anglican architecture with local influences, including Gothic and Colonial styles, pointed arch windows, high vaulted ceilings, a central nave with side aisles, a prominent bell tower, brick and concrete construction, stained glass windows, an altar and chancel area, natural ventilation and lighting, and local adaptations like Yoruba or Hausa influences. The

church is built with durable materials and reinforced structures to withstand Nigeria's climate, with intricate woodwork and stone carvings serving as focal points.

Cathedral Of St. Stephen, Bonny



Figure 4.4: Cathedral Church of St. Barnabas, Ilorin

St. Stephen's Cathedral, founded in 1864 and dedicated in 1889 by Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther, is the first Anglican cathedral in Nigeria and the second in West Africa. Its early colonial church architecture combines Gothic Revival elements with colonial-era construction, featuring cast-iron arches, pointed arches, ribbed vaults, and large stained-glass windows. The cathedral's steeply pitched roof and external buttresses enhance its appearance and structural integrity. The cathedral's tower and spire are prominent external features, while its red brick construction adds to its contrast. Inside, the church features high vaulted ceilings, wooden pews, a carved pulpit, and a raised altar area. The stained-glass windows display biblical

scenes and Christian symbolism, adding to its sacred atmosphere. As one of Nigeria's oldest Anglican churches, the Cathedral of St. Stephen remains a significant religious and cultural landmark on Bonny Island.

Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries Headquarters, Lagos



Figure 4.5: Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries Headquarters, Lagos

The Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM) International Headquarters is located at 13 Olasimbo Street, off Olumo Road, close to the second gate of the University of Lagos in Yaba, Lagos, Nigeria. It's a massive worship centre built to hold a very large number of people — the main auditorium alone can seat over 100,000 worshippers. The building has a semi-dome-shaped roof, several gallery levels, and a layout designed to make the most of the space for large gatherings. Right at the centre is the altar and pulpit, raised up so it's visible from every part of the auditorium. There are also large LED display screens and a powerful sound system, which help people follow the service no matter where they're seated. Apart from the main church, MFM also runs a place called Prayer City. It's a huge facility with space for accommodation,

training, and open-air prayer grounds for special programmes and retreats. The headquarters has multiple entry and exit points, plenty of parking, and even shuttle buses to help people get in and out during big events. The design of the building has a kind of mountain-like shape, with Gothic-style arches, which ties into the church's strong focus on prayer, deliverance, and spiritual warfare. MFM was founded in 1989 by Dr. Daniel Kolawole Olukoya, and it's known for its fervent prayers, deliverance services, and belief in miracles and divine power. The headquarters is the centre of everything MFM does worldwide — from worship and teaching to administration and outreach.

15. Discussion of Findings

The results of this study highlight the intricate relationship between theological tradition, architectural form, and the socio-cultural context in shaping contemporary church buildings in Nigeria. Applying a hermeneutical and semiotic approach reveals that, although modern church architecture has been influenced by changing economic conditions, cultural shifts, and denominational developments, there remains a conscious effort—albeit varied across traditions—to retain sacred meaning and theological consistency in church design.

Clergy authority is vital in church architectural design and construction because sacred spaces are not just physical structures but theological expressions that reflect the faith and liturgical life of the Christian community. This was made clear during discussions with members of building committees in selected churches in Nigeria, where it was agreed that clergy give the final direction on sacred symbols and liturgical functions in architectural planning. From biblical examples such as the God-given instructions for the Tabernacle and the Temple, to the historical role of bishops and priests in cathedral construction, clergy have always provided spiritual oversight to ensure that church buildings serve the purpose of worship and carry theological meaning. Their authority influences key elements like altar placement, processional ways, baptismal fonts, and the orientation of the sanctuary, making sure that beauty, symbolism, and structure work together with liturgical practice (Ogunbiyi, 2025). In Nigeria, this role can be seen in the Cathedral Church of Christ, Marina, Lagos, where clergy guided the placement of the sanctuary and stained-glass windows, and in the Basilica of the Most Holy Trinity, Onitsha, where Archbishop Charles Heerey directed the

alignment of altar and nave to preserve Catholic sacramental meaning. In the Diocese of Lagos Mainland, clergy leadership in churches such as St. Jude's Anglican Church, Ebute-Metta, has ensured that modern designs are blended with Anglican liturgical tradition. In these ways, clergy leadership within building committees balances the technical skills of architects with the spiritual and cultural identity of the church, protecting sacredness and resisting secular influence. Clergy authority therefore safeguards the theological integrity of church architecture while uniting faith, function, and community participation.

Church architecture in Nigeria today reflects a hybrid of modern innovations and historical references. In some instances, churches integrate local architectural motifs and cultural symbols, signaling a commitment to contextual identity and continuity with indigenous heritage. Others, particularly older Anglican and Catholic structures, retain strong influences from European architectural styles such as Romanesque and Gothic, as seen in the use of pointed arches, stained glass, ribbed vaults, and high vaulted ceilings. These styles were especially common during the colonial period. At the same time, many modern church buildings reflect contemporary architectural trends through the use of reinforced concrete, glass facades, verticality, and passive design elements like natural ventilation and sun-shading (Bala & Brisibe, 2022). Additionally, there is a notable re-emergence of traditional African architecture in some churches, with features such as thatched roofs, earth domes, and locally sourced materials (Quirix & Suleman, 2015; Shittu & Odiaua, 2024).

In recent years, a number of newer churches have moved away from traditional biblical spatial models, shifting from the classical basilica form toward more open and multifunctional layouts. These changes often prioritize congregational participation, social engagement, and large-scale gatherings. This architectural evolution has been especially pronounced in churches influenced by Pentecostalism and global trends, where form often follows function rather than inherited liturgical patterns. Notable examples such as the National Ecumenical Centre in Abuja and the Cathedral Church of Christ, Marina, Lagos, demonstrate how traditional church elements—domes, stained glass, pointed arches—are reinterpreted within modern frameworks, using updated materials and structural forms. These buildings maintain theological

significance while also addressing contemporary functional requirements (Curtis 2010, 290; Fazio et al. 2013, 405).

The state of the economy has a big impact on church structural designs because it affects the materials, resources, and viability of construction (Ogunbiyi, 2025). Strong economies may give churches access to a greater variety of materials and skilled labour, enabling the construction of more intricate and elaborate designs, such as those found in Gothic or Baroque stylesuch as natural ventilation systems, locally sourced materials like laterite bricks, and symbolic carvings—is evident in churches like the Cathedral Church of St. Barnabas, Ilorin. Churches in low-income communities might have to use simpler building methods and locally accessible materials, which could lead to more modest designs. The size and complexity of a church building project can be affected by changes in the price of materials like steel, stone, or wood. Modern construction techniques, like prefabrication and energy-efficient systems, can influence church design. Sustainable features like solar panels and green roofs can reduce operating costs. Some churches also incorporate technology for live streaming services or online accessibility, reflecting congregational needs and environmental stewardship (Buringh, et al, 2020; Kihwaga, 2022). Social influences play a significant role in shaping the structural designs of churches in Nigeria. These influences stem from the interplay of religious beliefs, cultural practices, and the socio-economic context of the community. Changes in liturgy, denominational ideologies, and the commercialization of religion also contribute to the diverse architectural styles seen in Nigerian churches.

One of the key findings is the decline in the consistent visibility of sacred inscriptions in contemporary Nigerian church buildings. While historical cathedrals prominently display stained-glass windows and stone-carved Scripture passages, modern megachurches such as the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries Headquarters rely more on electronic media and branding for theological communication (Goodman 87; Ogunbayo 116). Nonetheless, where sacred writings are incorporated, they act as powerful hermeneutical tools, reinforcing theological identity and shaping worshippers' spiritual experiences. Verses like Matthew 16:18, when inscribed on altars or entryways, serve not only as decorative features but also as confessions of doctrinal belief (White 80; Barie 106).

Semiotic and hermeneutical approaches offer valuable insights into the interpretation of church spaces in Nigeria, examining how symbols, language, and cultural context contribute to meaning-making within religious settings. Semiotics explores how visual elements like church architecture, colours, and religious iconography (e.g., crosses, statues, paintings) function as signs that convey specific meanings within the church and wider Nigerian context. Semiotics also considers non-verbal forms of communication within the church, such as gestures, rituals, and the arrangement of space, which can carry symbolic weight and influence the experience of worshippers. Nigerian churches often utilize distinctive logos and branding to represent their identity and beliefs, and semiotic analysis can reveal the intended messages and cultural associations embedded within these visual representations (Onipede, 2018; Semetsky, 2015).

The study identifies persistent challenges in Nigerian church architecture, including structural failures due to poor construction standards (Akinyemi and Olasunkanmi 47), poor acoustic designs (Ogunbayo 113), erosion of traditional styles (Ajayi 64), and limited sustainable practices (Olaniyi and Ibrahim 28). However, emerging responses include a renewed emphasis on structural integrity, incorporation of acoustic consultancy, use of eco-friendly materials, and cultural revitalization in architectural design. Churches are increasingly integrating solar energy, natural ventilation, and inclusive design for accessibility—addressing both spiritual and practical needs (Balogun and Adebayo 90; Eze and Uche 38).

16. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has demonstrated that church architecture in Nigeria functions as a complex interplay of theology, culture, and socio-economic context. While contemporary designs—particularly in Pentecostal and urban settings—often prioritize functionality and cost-efficiency, the theological symbolism rooted in biblical models and historic ecclesiastical structures remains deeply significant. Sacred architecture is not merely about providing space for gathering; it is also a vehicle for conveying spiritual meaning and nurturing the faith and identity of worshippers. The research reveals a noticeable shift away from theological intentionality in architectural design, marked by a decline in symbolic spatial arrangements and the diminished presence of scriptural inscriptions. However, the application of hermeneutical and semiotic methodologies offers a

promising path toward recovering the theological depth that architecture once embodied. In the face of economic constraints and cultural shifts, the possibility still exists to renew church buildings as spaces that not only serve liturgical functions but also reflect and reinforce the sacred. By reclaiming biblical symbolism, maintaining theological consistency, and fostering a renewed understanding of sacred space, Nigerian churches can once again align their architecture with the spiritual and doctrinal heart of the Christian faith.

Churches in Nigeria should reintroduce sacred texts, symbols, and theological imagery into their architectural environments to foster spiritual depth and reinforce the role of space in Christian worship and identity. They should also encourage contextual theology in church architecture, reflecting indigenous cultural expressions while remaining faithful to Christian theological foundations. Sustainable construction practices should be promoted, using eco-friendly materials, natural ventilation, and energy-efficient systems. Despite stylistic differences among denominations, certain theological constants should be preserved to maintain continuity in Christian witness and liturgical function. Church leaders should be trained to understand the theological and liturgical implications of architectural decisions, enabling more meaningful collaboration with architects and enhancing the spiritual quality of worship spaces. Structural and acoustic standards should be prioritized, and national or denominational architectural frameworks should be developed to promote theological fidelity, aesthetic coherence, and contextual relevance across ecclesiastical buildings. Finally, sacred architecture should be integrated into theological education, preparing future leaders to engage architectural projects with theological insight and cultural awareness.

References

- [1] Adeoye, D. O., Agboluaje, B., Akindele, O. A., & Oladimeji, S. B. (2024). From traditional (vernacular) to contemporary (new) architecture: A lesson from Southwest Nigeria. In M. R. Thomsen, C. Ratti, & M. Tamke (Eds.), *Design for rethinking resources* (pp. xx–xx). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-36554-6_9
- [2] Adeyemi, A., & Oladapo, O. (2017). Building failures and the Uyo church collapse: Lessons for Nigerian architecture. *Nigerian Journal of Building and Construction*, 15(2), 78–92.
- [3] Ajayi, S. (2019). The disappearance of traditional church architecture in Nigeria: Causes and consequences. *African Architecture Review*, 6(1), 56–70.
- [4] Akinyemi, T., & Adewale, O. (2016). An analysis of the Synagogue Church building collapse in Lagos, Nigeria. *Journal of Structural Engineering*, 12(4), 45–58.
- [5] Akinyemi, T., & Adewale, O. (2016). Inclusive church designs: Enhancing accessibility for worshippers with disabilities. *African Journal of Built Environment*, 10(2), 88–103.
- [6] Amasuomo, T. T. (2021). *Barriers to the adoption of environmentally sustainable design methods in residential buildings: The architects' and building owners' perspectives in four Nigerian states* (Master's thesis). Victoria University of Wellington.
- [7] Anyanwu, B. (2024). Effect of forms and shapes on acoustical quality of ecclesiastical buildings in Nigeria. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 9(12). <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14590795>
- [8] Bala, A., & Brisibe, W. G. (2022). Ecclesiastical architecture in Nigeria: Exploring unifying elements in the design of worship centers. *International Journal of Research - Granthaalayah*, 10(10), 88–106. <https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v10.i10.2022.4626>
- [9] Balogun, T., & Funmi, A. (2022). Inclusive church designs: Enhancing accessibility for worshippers with disabilities. *African Journal of Built Environment*, 10(2), 88–103.
- [10] Barie, J. (2010). *Biblical architecture and its theological implications*. Oxford University Press.
- [11] Blunt, A. (1978). *Baroque and Rococo: Architecture and decoration*. Harper & Row.
- [12] Bourdillon, M. F. C. (1993). *Religious symbolism in African churches*. Oxford University Press.
- [13] Chakrabarti, V. (1999). *Vastu-vidya: The science of sacred architecture*. Penguin India.
- [14] Curtis, W. J. R. (2010). *Modern architecture since 1900* (3rd ed.). Phaidon Press.
- [15] Eliade, M. (1959). *The sacred and the profane: The nature of religion*. Harcourt Brace.
- [16] Eltjo Buringh, Campbell, B. M. S., Rijpma, A., & van Zanden, J. L. (2020). Church building and the economy during Europe's 'Age of the Cathedrals', 700–1500 CE. *Explorations in Economic History*, 76, 101316. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eeh.2019.101316>
- [17] Eze, C., & Okonkwo, U. (2021). Urban church parking problems: A case study of Lagos. *Nigerian Journal of Transport Studies*, 7(1), 34–47.
- [18] Faisal, K. A., & Bello, M. (2020). Exploring the factors hindering the use of green architecture in

- Nigeria. IntechOpen. <https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.92403>
- [19] Fazio, M., Moffett, M., & Wodehouse, L. (2013). *A world history of architecture* (3rd ed.). Laurence King Publishing.
- [20] Fazio, M., Moffett, M., & Wodehouse, L. (2013). *A world history of architecture* (3rd ed.). Laurence King Publishing.
- [21] Fletcher, B. (1996). *A history of architecture* (20th ed.). Architectural Press.
- [22] Frishman, M., & Khan, H.-U. (Eds.). (1994). *The mosque: History, architectural development & regional diversity*. Thames & Hudson.
- [23] Fulani, O. A., & Baiyewu, I. V. (2022). An assessment of the implementation of sustainable landscape strategies in selected Pentecostal churches in Lagos-Ogun megacity state. *Covenant Journal of the Built Environment*, XX(5), xx–xx.
- [24] Goodman, N. (2014). *Ways of worldmaking*. Hackett Publishing.
- [25] Kihwaga, T. L. (2022). Economic factors hindering evangelism in the Western District of Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania – Iringa Diocese. *Current Journal of Applied Science and Technology*, 41(34), 37–46. <https://doi.org/10.9734/cjast/2022/v41i343954>
- [26] Koolhaas, R. (2014). *Elements of architecture*. Marsilio.
- [27] Krautheimer, R. (1986). *Early Christian and Byzantine architecture* (4th ed.). Yale University Press.
- [28] Krautheimer, R. (1986). *Early Christian and Byzantine architecture*. Yale University Press.
- [29] Kwanneri, S. J., Sarki, D. S., & Andrew, L. (2023). Christianity or churchianity: The Nigerian contemporary experience. *Advance Journal of Current Research*, 8(11), 1–12.
- [30] Mainstone, R. J. (1988). *Hagia Sophia: Architecture, structure, and liturgy of Justinian's great church*. Thames & Hudson.
- [31] Mango, C. (1980). *Byzantium: The empire of New Rome*. Charles Scribner's Sons.
- [32] Michell, G. (1988). *The Hindu temple: An introduction to its meaning and forms*. University of Chicago Press.
- [33] Ogunbayo, M. (2021). Acoustic challenges in Nigerian worship centers. *International Journal of Sound and Architectural Acoustics*, 8(3), 112–129.
- [34] Ogunbiyi, D. O. (2025). Socio-exegetical interpretation of 1 Kings 17:13b within the context of Nigerian economic vulnerability and clerical authority. *Kwaghe International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Religious Studies*, 2(2), 61–84. <https://doi.org/10.58578/KIJAHRS.v2i2.6354>
- [35] Ogunbiyi, D.O. (2025). The sociological effects of cashless policy on church income in Surulere archdeaconry, Diocese of Lagos Mainland (Anglican Communion). *MAHABBAH: Journal Religion and Education*, 6(2), 100-119 <https://e-journal.mahabbah.org/index.php/mjre/article/view/118>
- [36] Okpako, J. (2024). One and a half centuries of church architecture in Ibadan, Nigeria. *Cultural and Religious Studies*, 12(3), 168–191. <https://doi.org/10.17265/2328-2177/2024.03.006>
- [37] Olaniyi, F., & Musa, I. (2020). Sustainability in church architecture: The case of Nigerian churches. *Journal of Environmental Design and Management*, 9(1), 23–40.
- [38] Onipede, F. M. (2018). A semiotic analysis of selected Nigerian church logos. *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities*, 8(1).
- [39] Osasona, C. O. (2017). Nigerian architectural conservation: A case for grassroots engagement for renewal. *International Journal of Heritage Architecture*, 1(4), 713–729.
- [40] Owamoyo, L., & Tabibi, B. (2023). The impact of globalisation on traditional architecture in Nigeria: A case study of Lagos Island. *Advances in Applied Sociology*, 13, 636–650. <https://doi.org/10.4236/aasoci.2023.139040>
- [41] Pevsner, N. (1963). *An outline of European architecture*. Penguin Books.
- [42] Quirix, W. B., & Suleman, N. E. (2015). Transformation and continuity of architecture in Kaduna City, Nigeria, from 1900–2000. *Journal of Engineering and Architecture*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.15640/jea.v3n1a14>
- [43] Rapoport, A. (1969). *House form and culture*. Prentice Hall.
- [44] Ricoeur, P. (1976). *Interpretation theory: Discourse and the surplus of meaning*. Texas Christian University Press.
- [45] Samuel, I., & Pepple, T. D. (2021). A comparative analysis of acoustic material and effects on event centres in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. *Global Scientific Journals (GSJ)*, 9(1), 2336–2349.
- [46] Semetsky, I. (2015). Edusemiotics and the language of images. In P. Trifonas (Ed.), *International handbook of semiotics* (pp. 965–978). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9404-6_55
- [47] Semetsky, I. (2015). Edusemiotics and the language of images. In P. Trifonas (Ed.), *International handbook of semiotics* (pp. 965–978). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9404-6_55
- [48] Shittu, T. A., & Odiaua, I. (2024). The challenges of earthen architecture from a conservation perspective: St Bartholomew Anglican Church, Wusasa, Nigeria. *Buildings*, 14(10), Article 3117. <https://doi.org/10.3390/buildings14103117>

- [49] Torgerson, M. A. (2007). *An architecture of immanence: Architecture for worship and ministry today*. Eerdmans.
- [50] White, J. (1980). *The language of space: A theological perspective on architecture*. Cambridge University Press.
- [51] Wilson, C. (1990). *The Gothic cathedral: The architecture of the great church 1130–1530*. Thames & Hudson.