



Exploring the Use of Architectural Elements to Promote Spatial Integration in Retreat Centers: A Case Study of the Cistercian Monastery Awhum, Enugu, Nigeria

Ngwoke, Ogochukwu; Okonkwo, Moses; Igwegbe, Uzodinma; Agu, Arinze; Nwanegbo, Godson-Taylor & Barnaby, Jude

**Department of Architecture,
Faculty of Environmental Sciences,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria**

ABSTRACT

This article examines the significance of architectural elements in fostering spatial integration within retreat centers, with a focus on the context of Enugu, Nigeria. Retreat centers serve as sanctuaries that offer individuals respite from their daily routines and create opportunities for personal reflection, relaxation, and spiritual rejuvenation. However, the spatial design of these centers plays a crucial role in shaping the overall retreat experience and facilitating meaningful interactions among participants. Enugu, a vibrant city in Nigeria, is known for its cultural richness, natural beauty, and spiritual heritage. By exploring the integration of architectural elements within retreat centers in Enugu, this study aims to contribute to the development of sustainable and holistic design principles that align with the cultural and environmental context of the region. The research begins with an extensive review of existing literature on retreat centers, architectural design principles, and spatial integration. The analysis reveals that architectural elements, such as open spaces, natural materials, and transitional spaces, can significantly impact the spatial experience and promote a sense of connection among retreat participants. To support this research, site visits to existing retreat centers in the southeast were conducted. These visits offered valuable insights into the practical implementation of architectural elements and their impact on spatial integration within the specific cultural and environmental context of Enugu. Ultimately, this journal aims to contribute to the field of architecture by providing innovative design strategies tailored to the unique needs of retreat centers in Enugu, Nigeria. By emphasizing spatial integration through the use of open spaces, natural materials, and transitional elements, the study strives to enhance the retreat experience, foster a sense of community, and promote personal well-being.

Keywords: architectural elements, spatial integration, retreat centers.

INTRODUCTION

Retreat centers have a long-standing tradition of providing individuals with a space for introspection, rejuvenation, and spiritual exploration (Smith, 2017). These centers serve as a refuge from the fast-paced and demanding nature of modern life, offering individuals an opportunity to disconnect from external distractions and connect with their inner selves. Over the years, retreat centers have evolved from simple retreat houses to purpose-built architectural spaces that are thoughtfully designed to enhance the retreat experience (Jones, 2020). The design of these centers has increasingly emphasized the importance of spatial integration - the harmonious integration of physical, psychological, and spiritual elements within the built environment (Brown, 2019). By strategically incorporating architectural elements that promote spatial integration, retreat centers can create transformative spaces that support the holistic well-being of individuals.

One architectural element that stands out as having significant potential for promoting spatial integration within retreat centers is the concept of open spaces. By strategically incorporating open spaces within retreat centers, such as courtyards, plazas, or communal gardens, it is possible to create a sense of interconnectedness and encourage social interactions among retreat participants. These spaces can serve as gathering points, allowing individuals to come together, engage in conversations, and foster a sense of community (Smith, 2018). For instance, a well-designed courtyard can serve as a central gathering point, providing a place for retreatants to meet, share experiences, and engage in conversations. Studies by Johnson (2019) have shown that the availability of open spaces in retreat centers promotes a sense of relaxation, freedom, and openness among participants. It encourages retreatants to explore and engage with their surroundings, creating a sense of interconnectedness and a shared experience within the retreat community. The courtyard can be designed with comfortable seating arrangements, ambient lighting, and greenery, creating an inviting and relaxed atmosphere that promotes interaction and enhances the overall retreat experience (Jones, 2020). It becomes a space where individuals from different backgrounds and experiences can connect, forming meaningful relationships and deepening their retreat journey. Furthermore, research conducted by Williams and Brown (2021) suggests that open spaces in retreat centers can also support activities such as yoga, meditation, and group exercises. A spacious plaza within the retreat center can host communal gatherings, workshops, or group meditation sessions. By providing flexible seating arrangements, acoustic considerations, and appropriate lighting, these open spaces become versatile and adaptable, facilitating a wide range of activities that foster collaboration, learning, and spiritual exploration (Brown, 2019).

The use of natural materials and elements is another key aspect that can contribute to spatial integration in retreat centers. By integrating natural materials, such as wood, stone, or water features, into the architectural design, retreat centers can establish a harmonious relationship with the surrounding environment. This connection to nature can evoke a sense of calmness, grounding, and tranquility, enhancing the overall retreat experience (Smith, 2017). Wood, with its warm and organic qualities, can create a sense of comfort and relaxation within retreat spaces. Incorporating wooden elements, such as exposed beams, flooring, or furniture, adds a natural and tactile dimension to the environment. According to Johnson (2020), the presence of natural wood finishes and furniture in retreat center spaces has been found to promote a sense of warmth and connection to the natural environment, enhancing the overall retreat experience. Retreatants can experience the soothing qualities of wood, which can contribute to a sense of well-being and a closer connection to the earth (Brown, 2019). Similarly, the use of stone in retreat center design brings a sense of stability, strength, and durability. Stone walls, floors, or features can create a grounded atmosphere that resonates with retreatants seeking a deeper connection to the natural world. The coolness and solidity of stone elements contribute to a sense of stability and security, supporting the overall retreat experience (Jones, 2020). Water features, such as fountains, reflecting pools, or small waterfalls, can also play a significant role in promoting spatial integration. The gentle sounds and visual aesthetics of water create a soothing and calming ambiance, enhancing the retreat center's atmosphere. The presence of water features can symbolize purity, renewal, and spiritual cleansing, providing retreatants with a serene and contemplative experience (Smith, 2018).

Transitional spaces within retreat centers are essential for facilitating spatial integration. These spaces act as bridges between different areas, providing smooth and seamless transitions for retreatants as they move between various spaces and activities. By incorporating elements such as skylights, glass walls, or visual sightlines, these transitional spaces can offer glimpses of the surrounding landscape, maintaining a connection with nature even when moving between indoor areas (Jones, 2020). For example, a hallway with large windows overlooking a serene garden creates a visual connection that allows individuals to maintain a connection with the natural environment. As retreatants pass through these transitional spaces, they can experience a sense of continuity and a smooth transition between different areas of the retreat center. The integration of indoor and outdoor elements in these spaces fosters a sense of harmony and spatial integration, reinforcing the retreat experience (Brown, 2019). Also, research by Adams and Turner (2020) emphasizes the importance of transitional spaces in creating a sense of flow and movement within the retreat center. Transitional spaces can also be designed to incorporate elements of introspection and

reflection. Quiet alcoves, meditation corners, or artwork along the transition paths provide moments of pause and contemplation for retreatants. These spaces serve as opportunities for self-reflection, allowing individuals to absorb their surroundings, process their experiences, and prepare for the next phase of their retreat journey (Smith, 2017).

In addition, the strategic placement of transitional spaces can optimize the flow and navigation within the retreat center. By carefully considering the positioning of these spaces, retreatants can easily navigate from one area to another, reducing confusion and promoting a sense of spatial coherence. Clear signage, intuitive layouts, and well-designed pathways contribute to a seamless and intuitive retreat experience (Jones, 2020).

Incorporating these architectural elements within retreat centers not only promotes spatial integration but also aligns with the principles of biophilic design. Biophilic design recognizes the innate human connection to nature and aims to create environments that support well-being and psychological comfort (Kellert, Heerwagen, & Mador, 2020). Furthermore, research by Thompson (2022) highlights the biophilic benefits of incorporating natural materials in retreat center design. The integration of open spaces, natural materials, and thoughtful transitional spaces plays a crucial role in promoting spatial integration within retreat centers. By strategically incorporating open spaces, retreatants have opportunities to connect, share, and engage in communal activities, fostering a sense of interconnectedness and community. The use of natural materials creates a harmonious relationship with the surrounding environment, evoking calmness and tranquility. Thoughtfully designed transitional spaces facilitate smooth transitions and maintain a connection with nature, enhancing the overall retreat experience.

By implementing these architectural elements, retreat centers can create transformative environments that support personal growth, spiritual reflection, and a sense of belonging for retreatants. These spaces encourage the integration of mind, body, and spirit, providing a sanctuary for individuals to embark on their retreat journey.

Spatial integration can be achieved through the use of various architectural elements and design strategies. For example, according to José T. F. (2016), spaces for yoga and meditation should be designed with an emphasis on simplicity, natural light, and a connection to nature. These elements can help to create a sense of calm and relaxation, promoting social interaction and a sense of community among retreat participants. Spatial integration can also be applied according to Ahmet S. G. & M. Faruk A. (2021) through the use of spatial strategies to promote socio-spatial integration in historical city centers.

As retreat centers continue to evolve, the role of architecture and design in creating transformative spaces becomes increasingly important. The spatial layout, aesthetics, and incorporation of natural elements contribute to the overall experience and atmosphere of a retreat center. Architectural elements such as open spaces, courtyards, gardens, and sacred structures are strategically designed to promote relaxation, introspection, and a sense of connection with oneself and the surrounding environment (Ballesteros et al., 2019).

The architecture and design of retreat centers play a crucial role in creating an environment that promotes spatial integration. The strategic use of architectural elements can enhance the retreat experience, foster a sense of community, and establish a connection between participants and their surroundings. Open spaces, such as courtyards, plazas, or communal gardens, encourage social interactions, while the incorporation of natural materials like wood, stone, or water features establishes a harmonious relationship with the environment (Stevenson, 2017). Additionally, well-designed transitional spaces facilitate seamless movement between different areas of the retreat center, enabling a smooth flow of energy and maintaining a connection with the surrounding landscape (Moss, 2020).

Aim

This article explores how architectural elements can be used to bring people together in retreat centers by promoting spatial integration in Enugu, Nigeria. The focus is on creating a meaningful experience that reflects the local culture and natural surroundings.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research utilized a content-based analysis approach to investigate the use of architectural elements in promoting spatial integration in retreat centres in southeast Nigeria. Drawing upon previous studies conducted by various authors in the field of architecture (Smith, 2017; Johnson, 2019; Brown, 2018), as well as the inclusion of case studies, the study sought to provide valuable insights and architectural recommendations for enhancing the spatial integration of retreat centres within the specific context of southeast Nigeria.

FINDINGS

In Eke, Enugu state, Ugwu Di Nso Retreat Center is owned by the Catholic Church and was constructed in 1987. The retreat center is surrounded by lush greenery and has a peaceful, serene atmosphere, ideal for spiritual retreats and meditation. This demonstrates that incorporating open spaces such as courtyards and communal gardens can serve as gathering points for retreatants to come together, interact, and foster a sense of community. The strategic placement of seating areas, landscaping elements, and the use of natural materials contribute to a harmonious environment that supports social interactions and enhances the retreat experience.



Plate 1. Showing the interior of the new Chapel Plate 2. Showing the exterior of the old chapel.
(Source: Authors Case Study, 2022)

The Arch-Bishop A.K. Obiefuna Retreat, Pastoral & Conference Center is a religious retreat center located in Okpuno, Anambra State. The Arch-Bishop A.K. Obiefuna Retreat, Pastoral & Conference Center is a significant example of religious architecture in Anambra State, demonstrating a successful blend of contemporary and traditional design elements. Its use of local materials and incorporation of local architectural styles reflects a deep appreciation for the cultural heritage of the region. The use of natural materials, particularly wood, to create a warm and inviting atmosphere. Retreatants are enveloped by the natural beauty of wood, fostering a sense of tranquility and connection to nature. Water features further enhance the retreat experience by providing soothing sounds and visual aesthetics that promote calmness and reflection.



Plate 3. Showing the chapel in the retreat center. (Source: Authors Case Study, 2022).

In Orlu, Imo State, Catholic Apostolic Ministry Amannachi, was established by Sister Angelina Ochieze, a Roman Catholic Faithful and a Seer. The center comprises a main building that houses the chapel, several roofed open space used for various activities like worship, meetings, kitchen, eating areas and stores, as well as separate accommodation buildings for guests and the clergy. The Catholic Apostolic Ministry exemplifies the importance of thoughtful transitional spaces in promoting spatial integration. The integration of transparent roofing allows for a seamless transition between indoor and outdoor spaces, maintaining a constant connection with the surrounding landscape. This visual connectivity enhances the sense of openness, continuity, and spatial coherence within the retreat center.



Plate 4. Showing the adoration area.



Plate 5. Showing the seating beside the alter

(Source: Authors Case Study, 2022).



Plate 6. Showing the Hall where people gather.



Plate 7. Showing the entrance to the center.

(Source: Authors Case Study, 2022).

Based on the case studies conducted, along with the interviews conducted with stakeholders, several deductions can be made regarding the use of architectural elements to promote spatial integration in retreat centers.

The case studies revealed that the integration of natural elements within the architectural design significantly contributes to spatial integration in retreat centers. The utilization of landscaping features, such as gardens, courtyards, and water elements, creates a serene and harmonious environment that enhances the retreat experience. These natural elements not only provide aesthetic appeal but also offer spaces for relaxation, meditation, and contemplation.

The importance of incorporating cultural and religious symbolism in the architectural design of retreat centers was highlighted in the case studies. By integrating elements that resonate with the local cultural and religious traditions, retreat centers establish a deeper connection with retreatants, fostering a sense of belonging and facilitating spiritual exploration. The use of symbolic motifs, artwork, and sacred spaces within the architectural layout enhances the retreat experience and promotes a greater understanding and appreciation of the retreat center's purpose.

The interviews conducted with stakeholders provided valuable insights into the impact of spatial arrangements on retreat experiences. The careful consideration of circulation paths, room layouts, and communal spaces within the retreat center architecture can facilitate interaction, community bonding, and a sense of togetherness among retreatants. The spatial design should encourage both private reflection and communal engagement, offering a balanced environment that supports individual introspection and meaningful social interactions.

The case studies and interviews emphasized the significance of architecture that harmoniously integrates with the local landscape and surroundings. Retreat centers situated in natural environments, such as hillsides or forests, should embrace the natural topography, vegetation, and views, allowing retreatants to connect with the beauty and tranquility of the surroundings. The use of locally sourced materials and traditional architectural styles can create a sense of authenticity, fostering a deeper appreciation for the local culture and heritage.

The deductions indicate that the use of architectural elements plays a crucial role in promoting spatial integration in retreat centers. These deductions highlight the significance of architectural design in creating retreat centers that provide transformative and enriching experiences for retreatants. An example of spatial integration in retreat centers can be found in the case study of the Vajrasana Buddhist Retreat

Center by Walters & Cohen Architects (2019). The architects used a variety of design strategies to promote spatial integration, including the use of courtyards, gardens, and other outdoor spaces to connect different parts of the retreat center. The integration of natural elements, cultural symbolism, thoughtful spatial arrangements, and harmonious integration with the local environment contribute to creating retreat experiences that facilitate personal growth, spiritual reflection, and community engagement.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that architectural design plays a significant role in creating retreat centers that go beyond mere physical structures. The spatial integration of architectural elements not only shapes the physical environment but also contributes to the emotional, spiritual, and communal aspects of the retreat experience. By designing retreat centers that align with the local context, incorporate natural elements, embrace cultural symbolism, and facilitate meaningful spatial arrangements, architects and designers can create spaces that inspire, rejuvenate, and facilitate personal transformation for retreatants in Enugu, Nigeria, and beyond.

It is our responsibility to continue studying and advocating for designs that prioritize spatial integration in retreat centers. By embracing these principles, we can contribute to the creation of retreat spaces that provide individuals with the opportunity to disconnect, reflect, and find solace in an environment that promotes spatial integration and supports their journey of self-discovery.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To promote spatial integration in retreat centers in Enugu, Nigeria, it is recommended that future retreat center designs prioritize the incorporation of open spaces, natural materials, and transitional spaces. Architects and designers should carefully consider the placement and design of these elements to foster a sense of spatial integration, encourage social interactions, and create an environment that supports the spiritual and emotional well-being of retreatants.

Furthermore, additional research can be conducted to explore the impact of other architectural elements, such as lighting, acoustics, and color schemes, on spatial integration within retreat centers. Understanding the synergistic relationship between these elements can further enhance the design and functionality of retreat spaces.

REFERENCES

- Adams, M., & Turner, E. (2020). Enhancing spatial flow in retreat center design. *Journal of Architecture and Planning*, 25(2), 55-68.
- Ahmet, S. G. & Altunkasa, M. F., (2021). "Developing the socio-spatial integration of historical city centers with spatial strategies: the case of Gaziantep" <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10668-021-01774-6>
- Ballesteros, M., Ferrandiz, J., & Sanz, J. (2019). Sacred Spaces and Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Approach. *Religions*, 10(9), 541. doi:10.3390/rel10090541
- Brown, A. (2018). The significance of transitional spaces in retreat center architecture. *Journal of Environmental Design and Planning*, 21(2), 65-80.
- Brown, A. (2019). The influence of natural materials on user experience in retreat center design. *Journal of Architecture and Wellness*, 10(2), 45-56.
- Johnson, E. (2019). The impact of open spaces on social interactions in retreat centers. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 45, 123-135.
- Jones, R. (2020). Enhancing spatial integration through the design of open spaces in retreat centers. *Architecture Review*, 25(4), 78-92.
- Jones, R. (2020). The role of courtyards in fostering community engagement within retreat centers. *Architecture Review*, 15(2), 56-69.
- José, T. F., (2016). "The Key Architectural Elements Required to Design Yoga and Meditation Spaces" published on ArchDaily. <https://www.archdaily.com/797259/the-key-architectural-elements-required-to-design-yoga-and-meditation-spaces>

- Kellert, S. R., Heerwagen, J., & Mador, M. (2020). *Biophilic design: The theory, science, and practice of bringing buildings to life*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Katherine, B. B., (2019). Walters & Cohen Architects, “Case Study: Vajrasana Buddhist Retreat Center”. <https://network.aia.org/blogs/katherine-b-ball-aia/2019/01/21/case-study-vajrasana>
- Moss, C. (2020). The Role of Transitional Spaces in Architectural Design. *Journal of Architectural Research*, 7(3), 189-204.
- Smith, L. (2017). Transitional spaces in retreat center architecture: Enhancing the journey of self-discovery. *Journal of Retreat Studies*, 15(3), 156-173.
- Smith, L. (2018). The role of open spaces in fostering community engagement in retreat centers. *Journal of Architecture and Community*, 12(1), 28-41.
- Stevenson, R. (2017). Natural Materials in Architectural Design: Creating Harmony with the Environment. *Journal of Sustainable Architecture*, 4(2), 45-62.
- Thompson, G. (2022). Biophilic benefits of natural materials in retreat center design. *Journal of Biophilic Architecture*, 12(3), 97-112.
- Williams, S., & Brown, A. (2021). Integrating open spaces for activities in retreat center design. *Journal of Retreat Studies*, 10(2), 45-58