

# THE LYCEUM COMPETITION 2010:

The Lyceum Competition invites architecture students to submit design proposals in response to a program entitled “The International Community Center” in Abuja, Nigeria authored by Steven Ehrlich of Ehrlich Architects in Los Angeles and to compete for prestigious travel grants and recognition awards. For more information on the Lyceum and to see past competitions, visit the website ([lyceum-fellowship.org](http://lyceum-fellowship.org)).

Note: While all 4/584 studio participants will complete an individual design proposal in response to this program, competition awards are available only to students having at least one year of study remaining so that a travel award may be completed prior to the final year of study.

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## International Community Center in Abuja, Nigeria

*“Architecture is a social act and the material theatre of human activity.” Spiro Kostof*

### Introduction

During the global building boom of the last decade, western architects were hired in large numbers to design in countries with very different cultures and architectural traditions. As economies surged in places as diverse as China, United Arab Emirates and India, top American and European firms took the lead in creating large-scale public buildings. Today the skylines and urban fabrics of Shanghai, Dubai and Bombay bear the imprint of these international architectural “brands”.

Despite the current recession, the demand continues for 21st century architects to “go global.” How should architects-in-training prepare themselves to address design challenges anywhere in the world? Should they evolve an architectural vocabulary and choose high-tech materials that “work” in any context? Or should they design in response to specificities of site, culture, climate, and local materials? Should a building in Beijing look like a building in Boston? The Design Problem presented here challenges students to dig deep for a design solution that is simultaneously local and global, contemporary and mindful of the past. It asks what is culturally and socially appropriate, so that the building will resonate with meaning for the people who will use it.

### Background

This is a moment of great excitement and energy in Nigeria. Along with other Africans, Nigerians rejoiced over the election of Barack Obama. They eagerly anticipate how the new American president will deliver on his pledge to African nations to accelerate their integration into the global economy, promote democracy and fight poverty. "Across the continent, younger Africans have embraced Obama as not only a hero but as a model for Africa's future," writes the Kenyan Nobel Peace Laureate Wangari Maathai. A new generation of leaders, inspired by Obama's call for change, is poised to inherit the country.

Nigerians refer to their homeland, the most populous on the continent with 140 million residents, as "the giant of Africa." A former British colony and military state, Nigeria has been a democracy for just ten years. Its free press openly debates the country's struggles to lift itself out of entrenched corruption, political instability and economic mismanagement. Yet its potential as an emerging world power is huge: it is the seventh-largest producer of petroleum in the world and the 5th-largest supplier of oil to the U.S. Oil wealth has not benefitted everyone: more than half of the country's 140 million citizens live in poverty.

Abuja is the country's jewel, the repository of Nigeria's dreams for a better future. "The Center of Unity," as proclaimed by local license plates, Abuja was established as the nation's capital in 1991, replacing the much-larger and more-congested southern port of Lagos. A planned capital like Canberra and Brasilia, Abuja lies at the hilly crossroads between the heavily Christian south, with its tropical climate, and the savannah of the Muslim north. Combining the topography of both, it symbolically knits Nigeria's sometimes fractious population together.

Modern Nigeria is a kaleidoscopic jostling of contemporary and traditional cultures, vibrant with art, dance, drama, music, literature, and film. The Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba and Ibo peoples account for 60% of a population in which some 350 tribes have been identified. Each ethnic group is culturally distinct, varying in dress, social custom, food, rituals etc. English is Nigeria's official language and is spoken in cities along with tribal languages. Nigerians are people of great warmth and exuberance who embrace modernity and change, and have incorporated outside influences into their traditional practices with panache.

The built elements of Abuja's master plan are in the Central Area, which serves as the seat of the federal government and the business district. Extending to the south of Aso Rock, a 400-metre monolith that is the city's geographic signature, is the Presidential Complex, National Assembly and Supreme Court. The National Mosque and National Christian Center anchor each end of Independence Avenue. Under construction are the controversial 558ft. Millennium Tower, which will be the tallest building in Nigeria, the Nigerian Cultural Centre and the National Square, all to be completed in 2011.

While the Nigerian government is proud of its strides toward making Abuja an international business and cultural mecca, there is much work yet to be done. Extremes of wealth are evident in the city, with affluent neighborhoods inhabited by government ministers and entrepreneurs contrasting with workers' shantytowns in outlying areas. There is an urgent need for affordable housing and infrastructure. To stimulate economic growth the Federal Government, which believes the private sector is the key to Abuja's development, is actively soliciting domestic and foreign investment with a package of incentives and deregulation.

## **The Design Problem**

Within these socio-economic and political parameters, the Nigerian Federal Government has deemed it important to create *The International Community Center* in Abuja. The project's objective is to celebrate Nigerian culture, serve as a gathering place for local residents and visitors, and foster a sense of civic pride and nationalism. It must also

be a world-class modern and sustainable building that embodies Nigeria's fierce aspiration to take its place on the global stage.

The project should:

- explore what a new African architecture can be, given the context of Abuja as a new city in a post-colonial, democratic country. How can a building be local and global simultaneously?
- create space for the free expression of multiple aspects of Nigerian culture through dance, music, film and other art forms
- embody national pride
- encourage spontaneous interactions and cross-cultural exchange
- incorporate sustainable features that embrace the wisdom of indigenous Nigerian architecture while also utilizing new materials and technologies