

## Western influence on the architecture of multi-functional hotel structures in post-colonial cities: a case study of City and Cape Sierra hotel in Freetown, Sierra Leone

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**Abstract:** This study's objective is to assess the extent to which Western architecture influences the design of hotel structures in post-colonial cities using Freetown as a case study. Using a qualitative approach, this study draws on historical records of post-colonial hotel buildings, interviews with architects, and employs a comparative case study to compare colonial hotel projects in Freetown. Most hotels built after colonization still maintained properties of Western influence. Some designs were transcended by architects, others by the owners of the projects themselves, asking architects to replicate the same designs they saw abroad. Theoretically, this study suggests and provides evidence of a borrowed model of architecture of hotels largely influenced by western architectural design styles for which this is not sustainable and Sierra Leone needs to find its own architectural language. This research adds to the cultural theory of transcending architecture, where hotels built in a post-colonial era still retain designs passed on from colonial masters. Not enough research has examined the postcolonial effects on the architecture of hotels in past-colonized cities.

**Keywords:** post-colonial, hotel design, western influence, architecture

### Introduction

Hotel identity is a major component of numerous architectural styles. A significant architectural identity is linked to a high perception of a place. The cultural impact in Sierra Leone of borrowed hotel architectural identity brings into perspective the concepts of new construction and aesthetic definition, which are much more inclined towards western architectural norms.

Many styles of architecture, like neoclassical, brutalist, and modern architecture, were mainly forced or taken to signify global progress in many cities across Asia, Africa, and Latin America [1]. Formal design patterns in the construction industry mostly derive influences from Western imperialist

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architecture in post-colonial cities. This often overshadows the notion of what should be imminent in the architecture of hotels in Freetown.

Previous studies mentioned an ideology of nationalist architecture adopted by emergent post-colonial elites [2], while other studies focus on the dominance of colonial architecture [3]. However, fewer studies highlighted the historical dominance of western architecture on hotels in post-colonial cities, with a few exceptions like Tillotson, who described the influence of British Empire architecture to the present [4], but still not within the context of hotel architecture.

Even though there is a major movement in shifting from colonization footprints of building design, many post-colonial cities lack a replacement for better design concepts to sway away from the norms of Western imperialist designs. Just as the time of slavery wherein the offspring of a slave automatically became a slave [5], the historical trajectory of western architectural influence takes a transition from colonial to a post-colonial path in architecture [6]. The emergence of western sourced materials (mainly glass and steel) and the continuous adoption of borrowed architectural styles in the conceptual design of hotel buildings raises a question of to what extent should western architecture influence post-colonial cities? How do we bring out the cultural authenticity of hotel architecture in post-colonial cities? This study investigates the role of western influence on architectural styles in the design of hotels during the post-colonial era. The research builds of an analysis of post-colonial hotel projects to understand the ideology behind the persistent adoption of western architectural styles. From popular views of globalised cultural preservation of our cities through its architecture, this study contributes to debates on how we can better adopt sustainable architecture to suit our hotel design needs.

## 1. Western architecture

A type of architecture that is geographically located in Europe and cultivated within regions that carry European traditions, this type of architecture is

characterised by different architectural styles and influenced by western culture [7]. Architecture in itself carries a language that helps in distinguishing between people, and it is a scope for the identity of places and buildings [8]. Western architectural history has a profound influence on art, culture, and philosophical theories. [9]. In essence, historic architectural elements are a symbol that drives residents' sense of community and social attachment to a place or area [10]. Despite African architecture having a different building design appeal [11], western architecture has dominated its design since the arrival of colonial imperialists.

According to Xiaoxia Wang, who delved into the architectural culture of China and western countries, he mentioned that architecture is embodied in culture and both China and western countries are shaped by the traditional and cultural aspects of architecture. [12]. Some scholars like Jeyaradha outlined the socio-cultural changes that western architecture brought to Tamil Nadu and how that became a major factor in losing most of its traditional community spaces. [13]. Even religious societies like Islam have also been influenced by western architectural norms [14] however African authors like Jekot explained the perspective of co- existence rather than the dominance of western architecture that has always existed in most African societies. [15].

## 2. Research methodology

The research method used comparative case studies method of 2 hotels, "City Hotel and Cape Sierra Hotel". Both within the urban area of Freetown, the urban setting is a main criterion for the selection of our 2 prototypes. Our research focuses on hotel structures in the urban setting of Freetown, an urban heritage built by colonisers from continuous migration of Sierra Leoneans towards larger cities seeking better opportunities. Urban heritage is the cumulative effect of movement of people from rural areas and according to Alamari and Alzubaidy urban heritage is a reflection of a man's cultural identity [16]. Also, we made use

of architectural theories grounded in visual observations of key colonial-inherited architectural structures. And, to gather data, we conducted interviews with cultural observers, including on-site visits, and from personal archives of people within the community.

### **3. Western-influenced architectural features, a representation of the hotel's identity in Freetown.**

#### **3.1 City Hotel Case Study**

City hotel- a symbolic landmark of a multi-functional hotel in Freetown, Sierra Leone. This building was mentioned as a “Bedford hotel” written in a beautiful novel by Graham Greene piece of work named “the heart of the matter”, an urban multi-functional hotel located right in the heart of Freetown city, adjacent to the “texaco” fuel station.

A hotel that catered to the most influential within society and tourists visiting Freetown. A “meet and greet” location (fig 1.), where people could go. As an informal communication method during post -post-independence, people went to check if their friends had arrived from the provinces by physically going to check for the arrival of a particular guest.

City hotel was an integral part of hotel architecture in Freetown. The architecture of the city hotel reflected both the post-colonial history and the modernist ambitions of urban Freetown. The hotel represented an ideological architectural framework of a borrowed concept of design, which showed the progress made within Sierra Leone’s architectural sector. Mainly with the use of modern construction materials and the design concept, most aspects of the building represented a symbol of modern westernized building pattern.

A pivotal shift for post-independence designs, the construction of the City hotel gave an aesthetic appeal to the urban architectural framework of Freetown. Through incorporating several design elements from western architectural styles,

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City hotel was a leisure sensational destination and provided fulfilling services that catered to guest expectations.

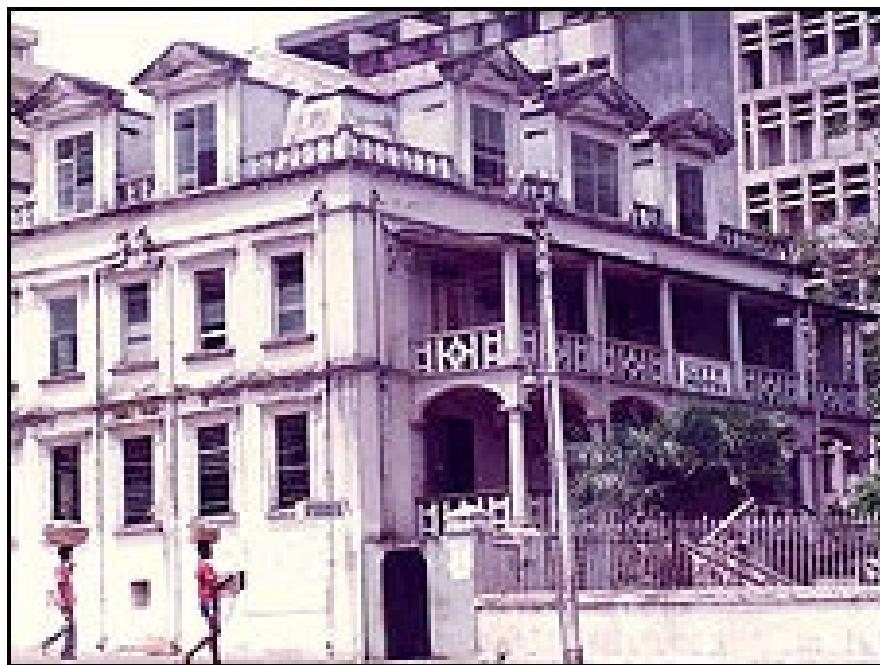


Figure 1: The photograph of city hotel [17].

There is a pressing need to understand the classical elements of buildings in urban townships [18]. Classical architecture has been developed over time [19], for which Freetown's urban architecture has also progressed in many forms with colonial influence.

The city hotel, a combination of classical forms with elements of symmetry, columns, and rectangular windows, was a foundation of borrowed architectural styles in Freetown.

A 19<sup>TH</sup> century design, this style of architecture was very prominent in Freetown's neighbourhoods, where houses were traditionally made from timber or metallic sheets. The city hotel used a more conventional material, which is concrete for walls and glass for windows. Analysis of the facade revealed open verandas, which were not a conventional feature of African architecture but an interpretation of a style of construction from the West. The 3-story building is

adorned with two prominent entrance stairs, a double-sided staircase that leads to a wide covered veranda (fig 2.).



Figure 2: The façade showed a double-sided staircase that led to a wide covered veranda [20].

The side elevations of the building punctuated a series of rectangular frame windows drawn symmetrically, a historic piece of architecture that reveals in depth an influence that dominated most hotels in terms of architectural design in Freetown.

The features of the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor showed three protruding dormers with a larger dormer centrally located high above the main entrance, with two other dormers symmetrically positioned from one another. On the side of the building, there are three dormers on the roof projecting vertically.

The large parallel verandas had railings with concrete balusters, written “City hotel” at the centre. A typical colonial architectural form of building that was mainly appropriate for warm climate areas.

The hotel was built within a relatively warm climate zone with a period of rain that is only between July to August. The rest of the year usually consisted of high temperature levels.



Figure 3: The classical elements of the City hotel. Illustration by the author

The legacy of classical architecture and its widespread use in Western architecture [21], became one of the essential characteristics for its widespread extension to Africa and in Freetown. Classical architectural orders have a substantial influence on art [22], the use of some of its principles in the construction of the “city hotel”, represents the artistic nature of the building. These elements comprise of a dressing of several arched openings beautified with parallel supporting columns (fig 3.), and these components represent the way our eyes visibly perceive the beauty aspect of classical architecture [23].

Classical architecture is perceived as a visual language that has its own rules [24], the interpretation of those rules in elements of proportion, symmetry and columns which are all visible elements of the main façade of the hotel. The main

facade of the building reflects the effects of colonial influence that has long existed in African architectural language. Many decorative elements on the façade usually contribute to the aesthetic components of the structure [25]. This style of architecture was a stylish concept from western influence. The railings had decorated balusters, ornate decor of concrete material design (fig.4), which looked like structures in similar colonial areas like Suriname, Paramaribo, and the Port of Spain, Trinidad. The 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of the hotel is a floor that had rooms in the roof with gabled dormers that are vital elements of historic colonial architecture. The windows had high rectangular heights and were made of glass. The concrete parapet on the roof gave an aesthetic appeal of colonial architecture.

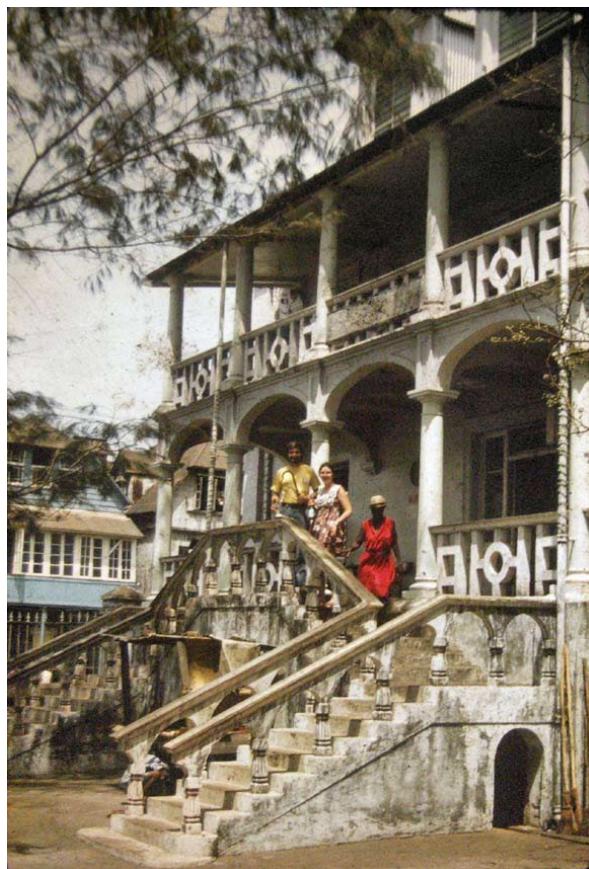


Figure 4: Photograph of city hotel with foreign guests [26].

### **3.2 The architecture of the Cape Sierra multifunctional complex.**

The complex stems from a style that was also popular in the 1960s, with flat roofs, fewer decorative elements, and concrete walls. The walls of the fence were

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created with a pattern on the upper-side that looks like a lace-like brick model design. A luxurious edifice built by Dov and Ram Karmi situated at the touristic heart of Freetown next to the Lumley beach Dov Karmi and Ram Karmi were architects from the Karmi-meltzer-Karmi firm in Israel. Dov Karmi is one of the most prominent Bauhaus architects known for his designs in Tel Aviv mainly around 1930, his son Ram Karmi however became known more as a brutalist architect around independence [27].



Figure 5: The 1968 photograph of Cape Sierra hotel [27].

Modernism in the architecture of hotels should reflect possibilities of innovation, by exploring an equivocal innovation activity to appeal globally [28]. The role of design is paramount for hotels [29], that is why governments like Sierra Leone needed a facelift by using internationally renowned architects.

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The location of Cape Sierra hotel being close to the beach with breathtaking views, became the ideal project for the government. The design was made with simple, clean lines, a characteristic of Modernism, which became popular in the early 20th century in Europe. A multi-story design, one of the most prominent block-like designs of a hotel in the country. Its lower section of the structure is cladded with a rock-like cladding on the facade. The windows are a great source of natural light.

All the buildings are interconnected by a bridge-like structure. The entire building in the complex has a boxy shape. The roofs of all sections of the building were flat. It also has multiple balconies with a glass covering on the upper part of the concrete railing.

### **Interior.**

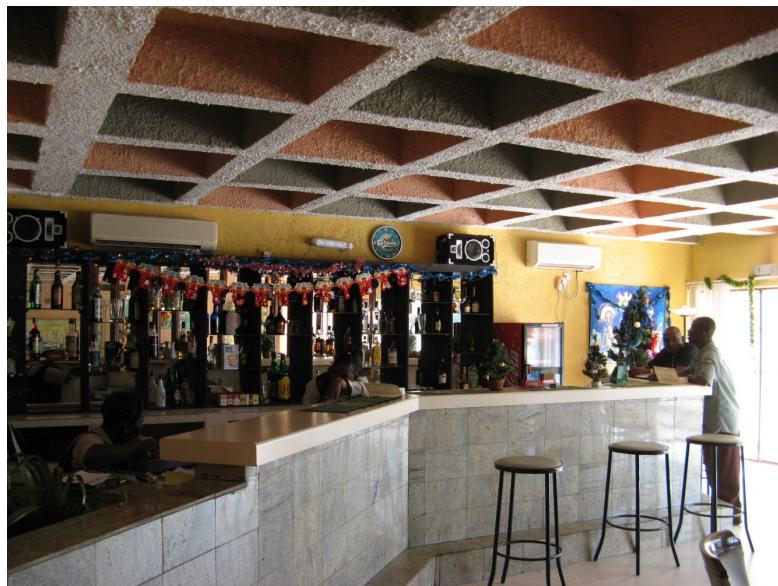


Figure 6: The photograph of Cape Sierra hotel [30].

The interior design had a bar and lounge area. The ceiling design looked like a grid of recessed square pattern made with panels of a typical conference ceiling (a grid-like surface with a textured surface).

The interior walls were concrete walls with a rough textured surface, with interior floors made of smooth tiles.

#### 4. Discussions

City Hotel and Cape Sierra Hotel are an embodiment of two architectural styles representing classical and modernist architectural features that were influenced by Western architecture. These styles of traditional Western architecture made way into our hotel design and adopted as a symbol of Western dominance in Freetown.

These two hotels are now non-existent in Freetown's hotel landscape. The City hotel was reduced to rubble by a fire incident, and the Cape Sierra Hotel was completely demolished in 2012 for a reconstruction project of a new, elaborate, and luxurious hotel. The historical context of these 2 hotels in Urban Freetown is very important and represents a part of Freetown's architectural language.

The value of upholding Freetown's hotel identity remains in its architecture. Past, present, and future designs will remain a major component to determine hotel architectural identity and thus tell a story. The story that the city and Cape Sierra hotels told was that of a post-colonial architectural era. The past tells a very large Western dominance story.

It is great that new design approaches more adaptable to Freetown and Africa at large are emerging. So, it is possible to find an architectural language that is specific to Freetown, while past designs maintain a rich historical value. It will be considered effective to see current and potential hotel construction projects embrace a more sustainable architectural design principle that upholds Freetown's identity.

These two hotels represented an architecture that was more or less characteristic of the colonial rule in Africa.

#### Conclusion

City hotel and Cape Sierra hotel played an important role in the urban touristic hub of Freetown. They both carried purposes of “multi- functionality and

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luxury" in the post-colonial era. They represented a continuation of two types of colonial architectural style that transcended in the hotel tourism industry. The post-colonial construction phase was a systematic developmental period for hotels in Freetown, Sierra Leone. The essence of expanding on the tourism sector in Freetown contributed to the development of multi-functional hotels that derived their inspiration from Western influence. A crucial era for governments that tried to restructure the image of their cities by adopting a very Western architecture.

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**Дата поступления: 30.11.2025**

**Дата публикации: 6.01.2026**