

Narrative Architecture and Collective Memory: A Conceptual Framework for the Yaoundé Urban History Museum

Effa Yves Mathieu Loïc¹; Dr. Bwemba Charles²; Ndongo Jean-Paul³

¹Department of Architecture, École Nationale Supérieure Des Travaux Publics (ENSTP), Yaoundé, Cameroon

³Doctor of Civil Engineering, Department of Architecture, École Nationale Supérieure Des Travaux Publics (ENSTP), Yaoundé, Cameroon

³Cameroonian Architect, ONAC 565, Department of Architecture, École Nationale Supérieure Des Travaux Publics (ENSTP), Yaoundé, Cameroon

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Abstract: The city of Yaoundé embodies a dialogue between memory, modernity, and cultural diversity. Yet rapid urbanization and real estate speculation threaten its architectural heritage and collective memory. This paper explores how narrative architecture can mediate and revive the city's memory through the design of the Yaoundé Urban History Museum on the Municipal Lake. A mixed-methods approach combining field observations, surveys, and documentary research identifies public expectations for heritage interpretation and proposes a spatial narrative that integrates symbolic, educational, and sustainable dimensions. The resulting design offers an immersive experience in which architecture itself narrates Yaoundé's evolution—from precolonial origins to contemporary identity. The museum functions as both an educational space and a civic landmark, positioning architectural form as a medium for collective memory and citizenship.

Keywords: Collective Memory; Urban Narrative; Museum Architecture; Cultural Heritage; Yaoundé.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Yaoundé, Cameroon's political capital, is a palimpsest city where precolonial, colonial, and post-independence layers coexist. However, modernization has erased much of its architectural collective memory, weakening citizens' sense of belonging. As Bela (2020) notes, Cameroonian built cultural heritage faces deterioration and undervaluation. This research explores how narrative architecture can reestablish a dialogue between the city's spaces and its forgotten past by designing a Museum of Yaoundé's History at the Lac Municipal.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

➤ The Study Draws on Key Theoretical Pillars:

- Built Heritage: UNESCO (1972, 2003) and ICOMOS charters emphasize authenticity and continuity of cultural heritage values.

- Collective Memory: Halbwachs (1950), Nora (1984), and Assmann (2006) view collective memory as socially constructed and transmitted through space.
- Urban Narrative: Scholars such as Rossi (1966), Norberg-Schulz (1980), and Teyssot (2003) see architecture as a spatial narrative medium.
- Museum Architecture: From the Musée Carnavalet (Paris) to the John Randle Centre (Lagos), museums reinterpret history through immersive scenography and symbolism.

Additionally, recent research emphasizes how narrative spatiality strengthens user engagement. Alemu (2023) argues that spatial storytelling in African cultural heritage cities fosters collective identity reconstruction, while Koffi (2024) highlights the relevance of sustainable museum design in tropical contexts. These studies reaffirm that architecture can act as a narrative text articulating cultural identity and spatial collective memory.

Recent research also emphasizes the growing role of digital and interpretive storytelling in museum design. According to Chianese and Piccialli (2022), digital storytelling enhances visitors' emotional engagement and strengthens memory retention in heritage spaces. Similarly, Eghbal-Azar and Fuchs (2023) highlight that interpretive architectural strategies using interactive technologies deepen the experiential connection between space and narrative.

Table 1 Phases and Methods of the Research Process

| Phase | Description | Tools / Methods |
|-----------------|--|--|
| Site Analysis | Historical, topographic and hydrological reconnaissance of the Municipal Lake area | Field observation, mapping |
| Data Collection | Public survey and interviews with MINAC and CUY | Questionnaires, qualitative interviews |
| Design Process | Spatial synthesis integrating narrative symbolism | Revit modeling, conceptual sketching |

A mixed-method approach was adopted, combining field observations, documentary analysis, and public surveys. Findings indicate that 62% of Yaoundé residents are unaware of the city's history (Ngono, 2016), reinforcing the need for heritage interpretation spaces.

Primary data were collected through fieldwork conducted by the author between July and September 2025 in the city of Yaoundé. The survey included residents, local officials, and cultural stakeholders. Quantitative data were obtained from questionnaires, while qualitative insights were derived from semi-structured interviews. A total of 120 valid responses were collected and analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic coding, combining both quantitative and qualitative interpretation. The results presented in this paper therefore originate from the author's own field research. All participants gave informed consent; responses were anonymized and analyzed in aggregate.

IV. RESULTS

- *The Design Proposes a 2,000 m² Three-Level Museum Organized Along a Chronological Narrative Path:*
- Ground Floor: Exhibition dedicated to Precolonial Yaoundé, highlighting the Ewondo cultural heritage, traditional settlements, and early forms of territorial organization.
- First Floor: Space representing Colonial Yaoundé, focusing on German and French influences, administrative architecture, and urban transformations during colonization.
- Second Floor: Area devoted to Postcolonial and Contemporary Yaoundé, illustrating independence, urban modernization, and present-day identity building.

III. METHODOLOGY

➤ *The Project Follows a Three-Phase Approach:*

- Site Analysis – Historical and environmental reconnaissance of the Lac Municipal area.
- Data Collection – Surveys of citizens and interviews with local authorities to assess expectations.
- Architectural Design Process – Spatial synthesis integrating symbolic references (the mountain form, wooden façade, circular strata), accessibility, and sustainability.

A wooden envelope symbolizes Mount Fébé, while the inner strata express temporal layers of collective memory. Sustainable systems (natural ventilation, rainwater reuse, daylight optimization) reinforce environmental adaptation. The project transforms architecture into a storytelling medium, reconnecting Yaoundé's citizens to their urban collective memory.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the project site is located on the shores of Yaoundé's Municipal Lake, as shown in the Google Earth image where the intervention area is highlighted in white.



Fig 1 Site Location of the Yaoundé Municipal Lake Area.
 Source: Google Earth Imagery, Annotated by the Author

As presented in Figure 2, the conceptual form of the museum is inspired by the surrounding hills of Yaoundé and features a wooden envelope whose texture symbolizes the city's natural and cultural layers.

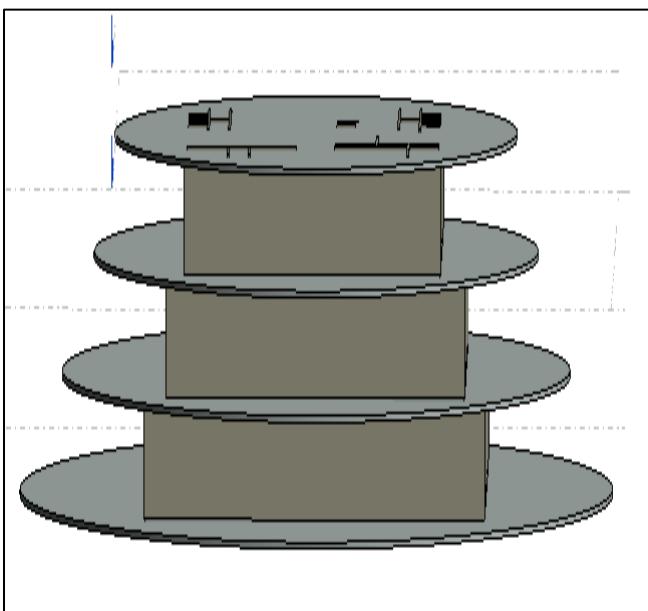


Fig 2 Conceptual form and Wooden Envelope Design.

As shown in Figure 3, the longitudinal section illustrates the narrative journey of Yaoundé's history through three exhibition levels: precolonial (Ground Floor), colonial (First Floor), and postcolonial (Second Floor).



Fig 3 Narrative Path Diagram of the Museum Layout.

Figure 4 displays survey results confirming that 84% of respondents support the creation of a history museum, reflecting strong public interest in heritage preservation.

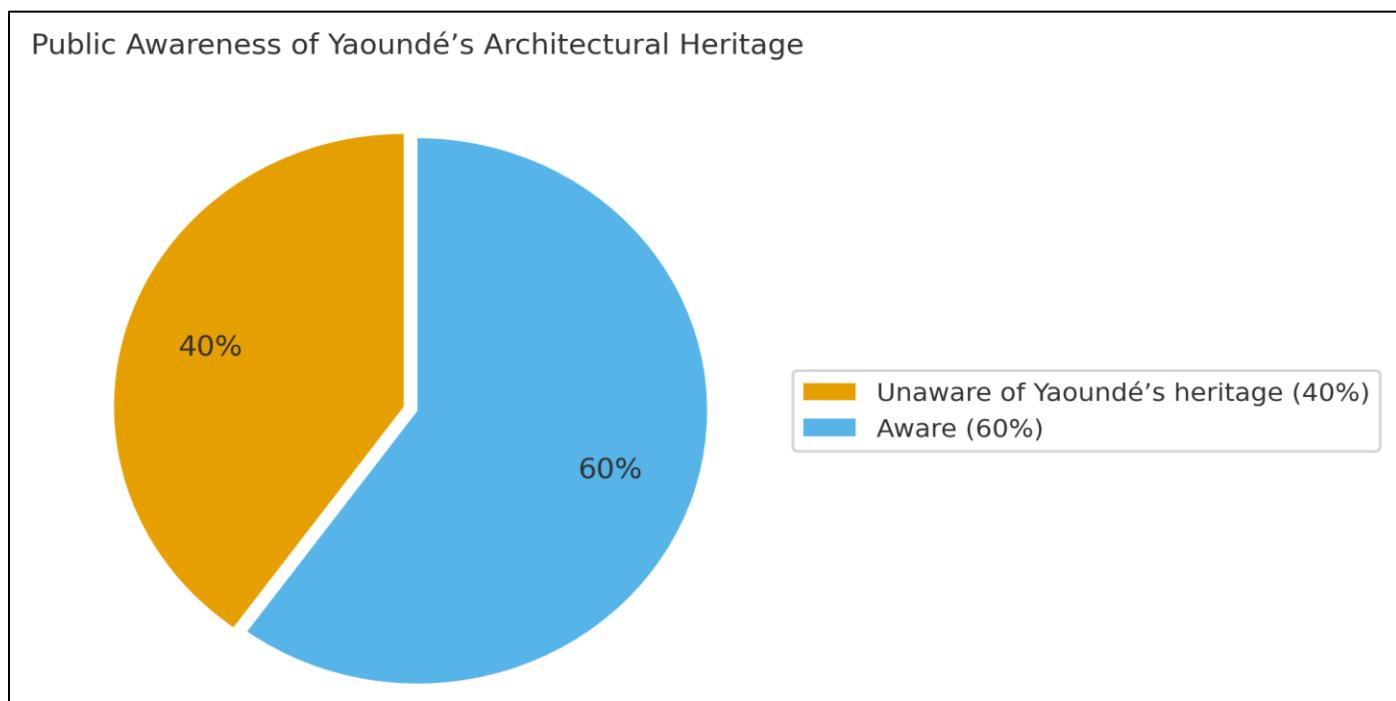


Fig 4 Survey Results on Public Awareness and Interest in a Yaoundé History Museum.
According to ONAC standards, the estimated construction cost is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 Estimated Construction Cost (ONAC, 2020).

| Surface (m ²) | Cost per m ² (FCFA) | Total Estimated Cost (FCFA) |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 2,000 | 500,000 | 1,000,000,000 |

V. CRITICAL DISCUSSION: IMPACTS, LIMITATIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

The Yaoundé Urban History Museum demonstrates the potential of narrative architecture to act as a medium of collective memory and urban regeneration. By translating Yaoundé's historical evolution into spatial layers, the project enhances local identity and reactivates the Municipal Lake as a symbolic civic space. It encourages cultural tourism, educational engagement, and public dialogue on the city's heritage.

However, the project also reveals key limitations. Cameroon's institutional framework for heritage conservation remains weak, with limited funding and coordination among cultural stakeholders. Environmental challenges such as lake pollution and soil instability may threaten long-term sustainability if not properly managed. Moreover, translating memory into architectural form requires a careful balance between symbolism and functionality to avoid excessive abstraction.

Despite these constraints, the project offers promising perspectives. It can serve as a prototype for participatory and digital heritage interpretation in African cities. Integrating new media and community-led initiatives would reinforce its inclusiveness and ensure its relevance over time. The Yaoundé museum thus stands as both a laboratory for narrative urbanism and a call for stronger heritage governance.

These findings align with broader research on narrative and interpretive architecture in heritage design. Alemu (2023) shows that spatial storytelling reinforces collective identity in African cities, while Koffi (2024) and Zhao (2023) underline the value of sustainable and digital strategies for resilient museum experiences. The Yaoundé Urban History Museum therefore integrates global best practices within a localized African narrative framework.

VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Yaoundé Urban History Museum exemplifies how narrative architecture can reconcile cultural heritage, education, and sustainability in African urban contexts. Beyond an exhibition space, it becomes an instrument of civic identity. Future studies should extend this model to other Cameroonian cities, fostering inclusive collective memory-driven urban planning. Policy collaboration between ENSTP, MINAC, and the City of Yaoundé is recommended to ensure long-term governance, funding, and technical maintenance of the museum as a civic infrastructure.

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➤ *Author's Contribution*

The author conceived the research idea, collected field data, designed the architectural proposal, and drafted the manuscript.

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