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Theo Lawson's Architectural Legacy: Technical Ingenuity, Resilience, and a Socio-Ecological Framework in the Transformation of Freedom Park, Lagos

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Abstract: ***This paper demonstrates how resilient design, architectural ingenuity, and socio-ecological strategies, can convert oppressive historical sites, to vibrant, adaptive public spaces. It is premised on Theo Lawson's transformational improvement of Lagos' Freedom Park. The research focuses on historical preservation, environmental sustainability, community engagement, and technical innovation, and applies a socio-ecological resilience framework, to analyse Lawson's approach. Pivotal innovations, include carbon-fibre reinforcement, modular design, and bioswale systems, illustrating how urban spaces can adapt to population growth, social demands and climate vulnerabilities, in addition to maintaining cultural and historical integrity. This work reveals that Freedom Park, proffers a scalable model for sustainable urban planning in Nigerian cities, facing rapid development pressures, environmental challenges, and socio-cultural transformations, through linking a design that is narrative-driven with engineering solutions.***

Keywords: Adaptive Reuse, Architecture Socio-Ecological Resilience, Cultural Heritage, Sustainable Urban Regenerations

1. Introduction

Public spaces serve as essential infrastructure in urban environments, providing arenas for social interaction, cultural expression, and environmental stewardship. In megacities like Lagos, Nigeria, with a population exceeding 15 million, these spaces are critical to ensuring livability, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability (Dipeolu et al, 2024; Okunola et al, 2024). Lagos faces a combination of rapid population growth, climate vulnerabilities, including flooding, urban heat islands, and coastal erosion, which threaten both human well-being and ecosystem health.

Freedom Park, a one-hectare memorial and leisure site on Lagos Island, exemplifies the transformative potential of adaptive reuse. Originally constructed in 1872 as Broad Street Prison following the British annexation of Lagos in 1861, the site functioned as a colonial detention center for political dissidents and nationalists, including Herbert Macaulay and Obafemi Awolowo. The prison was demolished in 1979 and fell into prolonged neglect. In 2010, it was reimagined as a public park and cultural hub to commemorate Nigeria's 50th independence anniversary, signaling a shift from a site of confinement to one of community engagement, reflection, and recreation (Freedom Park 2025).

The leader of this transformation; Theo Lawson, was born in 1959, and trained at the Architectural Association (AA), in London (1978–1985). Combining architectural philosophy, Lawson's work possesses artistic expression, social consciousness and technical precision. His firm, Total Consult, established in 1990, provides design-build services and leverages experience in innovative construction techniques such as earth-building, evident in projects like the 1987 Bauchi State Museum (Supple Magazine, 2020). Lawson's role in the Creative Intelligence Agency (CIA-Lagos), founded in 1998, was instrumental in catalysing Freedom Park as a landmark urban regeneration project (Ogunlesi, 2020).

This paper examines Lawson's work through seven themes: historical context, design principles, technical strategies, community engagement, environmental sustainability, cultural significance, and policy frameworks. By evaluating how technical innovation, narrative design, and socio-ecological resilience converge, this study highlights Freedom Park as a replicable blueprint for sustainable, inclusive urban development in Nigeria.

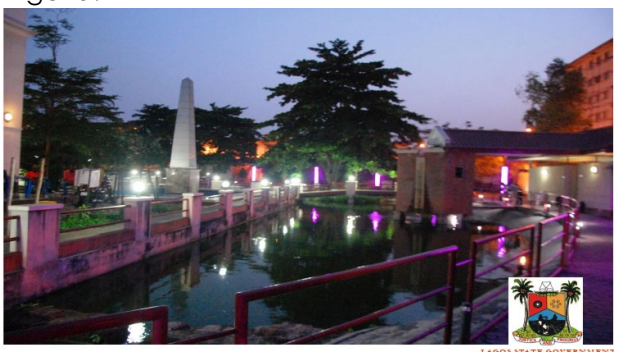

Figure 1: Freedom Park
Source**:** Total Consult (2025a)

2. Framework: Socio-Ecological Resilience

This study is motivated by the socio-ecological resilience framework, which asserts that resilient systems; natural, social, or built, can adapt, absorb shocks, and undergo transformation, in addition to maintaining essential functions. Central principles consist of connectivity, diversity, redundancy, and modularity (Folke et al., 2010). While traditionally established in ecological sciences, resilience theory has extended to urban planning; to define how cities can adapt, to environmental, social, and economic disturbances (Walker & Salt, 2006).

Providing a lens for analysing urban transformations are adaptive cycles exploitation, conservation, release, and reorganisation. Resilience is explained via multi-functionality, modularity, and feedback loops, that allow user interactions to inform progressive changes, in the context of public spaces (Afriyanie et al, 2018).

Freedom Park's adaptive reuse of historic prison structures, embodies the reorganisation phase, demonstrating these principles clearly. It maintains historical identity, additionally promoting varied social-ecological functions, as biodiversity, promotion recreation and cultural events. Structural diversity, including permeable surfaces and native vegetation, and redundancy, buffer against environmental hazards such as floods and tremors, through parallel load-bearing systems. Community engagement allows the park to evolve, in response to social and environmental changes (Ekoh & Teron, 2023), establishing feedback loops. This study connects technical design solutions, with environmental, cultural and social outcomes, through anchoring the analysis, in a socio-ecological resilience framework that offers insights for scaling similar interventions, across Nigerian urban centers.

Figure 2: Freedom Park Lagos as an Example of a Socio-Ecological Resilience System
Source**:** Total Consult (2025a)

3. Historical Context and Transformation

Nigeria's wider socio-ecological path, from colonial subjugation to contemporary cultural empowerment, is what Freedom Park's transformation embodies. Built in 1882, Old Broad Street Prison, detained political activists and was a tool for social control. Its first mud-and-thatch structures, necessitated brick construction, in 1885 for £16,000, due to its being repeatedly sabotaged; highlighting colonial priorities of order over education (Houreld, 2014; Pulse Nigeria, 2024). The prison's demolition in 1979 and later neglect, reflected a 'release' phase; marked a social, political, and structural deterioration (Archnet, 2010.), through the late 20th century.

Lawson's conception of Freedom Park began, during CIA-Lagos brainstorming sessions, in 1999. It retained the 2.5-metre-high brick walls and other heritage elements, for cultural and leisure purposes; preserving about 60% of the main site. Officially, in 2010, the park was opened; under Governor

Babatunde Fashola. It attracted hundreds of visitors, daily and reactivated a previously derelict urban space (Commonwealth Walkway, 2022). With his father's residence a short distance away from the prison, Lawson's personal link to the site, imbued his design with historical fidelity (Pulse Nigeria, 2024). In the transformation of industrial or restricted sites into public spaces, that blend history, community, and ecology, this adaptive reuse, mirrors projects like New York's High Line. Freedom Park embodies resilience in urban planning; shifting from exploitation and neglect, to conservation and dynamic reorganisation, maintaining historical narratives, while integrating innovative design solutions (Solomon et al, 2025).

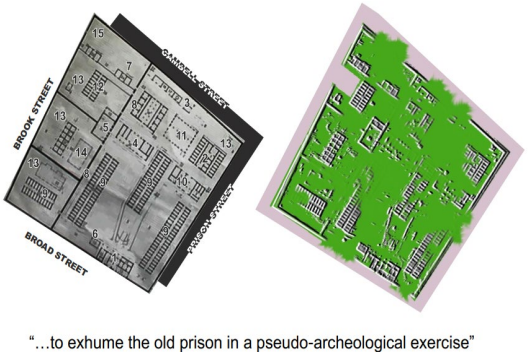

Figure 3a Plan of the ruin of the old Prison
Source: Total Consult (2025a)

Figure 3b Freedom Park Layout
Source: Total Consult (2025a)

Figure 3c Freedom Park Concept Elevations
Source: Total Consult (2025a)

Figure 4a Her Majesty's Broad Street Prison
Figure 4b: Transformation to Freedom Park
Source: Total Consult (2025a)

Figure 5a-c: Aerial view of Freedom Park showing development process
Source: Total Consult (2025a)

Figure 6: Concept Model of Freedom Park
Source: Total Consult (2025a)

4. Design Principles

Lawson's design philosophy connects micro-scale elements, like gardens and seatings, with macro-scale landmarks, monuments, and paths to describe multilevel stories, of the site's environment, history and culture (Livinspaces, 2020), emphasising seamless exposition. Early projects, that evaluated African-Western identity, influenced Freedom Park's approach, to storytelling via landscape and spatial arrangement (Theo Lawson, personal communication); these include the "Secret Garden." The "Secret Garden," explored the tension between his Nigerian/African identity and the European education he received, featuring a conceptual space divided by a river with a natural forest on one side (representing learning and understanding nature) and a Victorian garden on the other (representing where one would "publish works" and implement findings). The "secret garden" was a symbolic project with a brief that allowed him to think outside the box. The project influenced his fluid approach, blending micro and macro architectural perspectives to ensure comfort, environmental responsiveness, and resilience. The "60 Doors, 40 Windows North," on the other hand was a symbolic project with a "crazy brief" that allowed thinking outside the box, addressing immigration challenges and racism, with windows representing a seemingly promising world in Africa and closed doors symbolising barriers in Europe, reflecting Theo Lawson's personal northward journey. These projects influenced his fluid approach, blending micro and macro architectural perspectives (Theo Lawson, personal communication).

Figure 7: Sculpture and hardscaped areas
Source: Total Consult (2025a)

4.1 Modular and Adaptive Features

Resting on ex-gallows foundations, are bandstands and elevated structures, capable of passive ventilation and corrosion resistance (50–100 mg/L chloride tolerance), further strengthened with post-tensioned steel frames (yield strength 355 MPa). Integrated lessons from Lawson's Bauchi State Museum project, reveal prefabricated aluminium pavilions, that incorporates laterite-stabilised rammed-earth infills, that offers flexible configurations for events. While reducing environmental impact and facilitating adaptive responses, to changing social needs (Supple Magazine, 2020.; ThisDayLive, 2019), modular framework provides varied utilisations.

Figure 8: Modular pavilion structures at Freedom Park Lagos
Source: Total Consult (2025a)

4.2 Environmental Engineering

Effective management of stormwater runoffs can be handled with porose

pathways, made from recycled granite, with a hydraulic conductivity of 10^{-3} m/s. While provisions for 50 kWp, photovoltaic arrays allow partial energy self-sufficiency, parametric solar screens lower solar gain, by 60% (Livinspaces, 2020). Redundancy is secured by Dual-wythe brickwork and finite element analyses, (Fors et. al., 2021).

Figure 9: Penetrable walkways reduce stormwater runoffs, and promote groundwater recharge.

5. Community Engagement

Participatory urban design is highlighted in Freedom Park. Engaging local artists, sculptors, historians, and residents, through CIA-Lagos workshops, inform park layouts, social policies and programming. Tales by Moonlight, as a monthly event, attracts over 300 daily participants; this promotes inclusion, storytelling, as well as familial knowledge transmission. Community negotiations on accessing park and youth tours negate social elitism, making for participations that are equitable. In supporting socio-ecological resilience, and adaptive governance, resident associations co-manage events and activities, as well as establish iterative feedback loops (Pulse Nigeria, 2024; Freedom Park Lagos, 2024).

Figure 10: School children are part of the engagement through excursions
Source: Total Consult (2025a)

Figure 11: Audience participation during an evening performance at Freedom Park.
Source: Total Consult (2025a)

6. Environmental Sustainability

The use of innovative water management, low-impact materials, and passive energy strategies, integrates sustainability. Cooling loads were reduced, by 30% compressed stabilised earth blocks, with 6% cement content and thermal conductivity of 0.8 W/m·K, compared to current masonry, which coordinates with thermal comfort and ecological efficiency goals (ThisDayLive, 2019).

6.1 Water Management

Designed at a 1:50 slope and lined with vetiver grass, bioswales trap 70% of site runoff, infiltrating water to irrigate native vegetation and recharge groundwater reservoirs. In dry seasons, rainwater store tanks (500 m³ PVC-lined ferrocement) aid irrigation. Vegetation expanding over 40% of the park area, in addition to acacia and oil palm, give carbon sequestration (5–7 t CO_2/ha), stabilises soil on gentle slopes (Fors et al., 2021) and promote biodiversity (Shannon index ~2.5).

Figure 12: Water fountains at Freedom Park, for stormwater management.
Source: Total Consult (2025a)

6.2 Energy and Maintenance

While using polycarbonate skylights and ventilation stacks, daylight optimisation lowers energy use, by about 50% (Supple Magazine, 2020.). Operational reliability is ensured, through annual structural audits, to consists ultrasonic testing and soil moisture monitoring (Pienhardt, 2019.). Bioswales lowered site inundation, by 60%, during the 2019 floods (500 mm in 48 hours), (Afriyanie et al, 2018). Future interventions may establish the park as a net-zero energy prototype, consisting greywater recycling, with 80% efficiency and solar microgrids (Ekoh & Teron, 2023).

Figure 13: Solar-powered lights at Freedom Park
Source: Odetoyinbo (2013)

7. Cultural Significance

Serving as a cultural and creative hub for Lagos, Freedom Park hosts Afrobeat concerts, community events that reclaim colonial narratives, exhibitions, and heritage tours. While intergenerational engagements promote social strength, monuments honoring imprisoned nationalists, nurture collective identity. The Red Line exhibition, one of Lawson's curatorial interventions, merges art, architecture, and history; reinforcing adaptive capacity, against urban marginalisation and cultural networks (TtRed Line, 2025).

Figure 14: The Redline outdoor exhibition at Freedom Park
Source: Total Consult (2025b)

8. Policy and Governance

The transformation of Freedom Park was enhanced by policy frameworks. While private management by LORK Enterprises, enabled long-term sustainability (PM News, 2019), the site preservation was ensured by Lagos State heritage laws, public-private partnerships, and Fashola's revival of CIA-Lagos proposals. The significance of incorporating community feedback in governance, was highlighted by Lawson's advocacy, emphasising adaptive policies, that promote urban resilience, through iterative cycles (Fors et al., 2021).

Figures 15a and 15b: "Kongi's Harvest" designed specifically for Prof Wole Soyinka's art collection to honour him, provides office space for him in Lagos and hosts seminars and exhibitions.
Source: Total Consult (2025a)

9. Future Directions

Future strategies to enhance resilience include BIM-enabled adaptive reuse, AI-driven predictive maintenance, and sponge city-inspired bioswales (100 mm/hour infiltration). Hybrid structures integrating compressed stabilised earth blocks with 3D-printed reinforcement (50 MPa tensile strength) may foster green corridors that reduce urban heat by 2–4°C. Policy incentives, including tax credits under Nigeria's 2021 Climate Change Act, could

expand the replication of these resilient design principles nationally (Afriyanie et al., 2018).

Figure 16: Freedom Park's future green and cultural spaces conceptual rendering.
Source: Total Consult (2025c)

10. Output Framework

A socio-ecological and technical resilience framework, which translates Theo Lawson's design philosophy, at Freedom Park into a replicable model for sustainable urban regeneration forms the result of this work. This framework explicates the adaptive reuse, environmental engineering and community participation, that has the capacity to collectively transform; historically repressive spaces into vibrant, climate-responsive, public spaces. Through connecting historical progress, social inclusion, technical innovation, with future-oriented resilience strategies, this framework offers an all-inclusive structure, for cities seeking balance in heritage conservation.

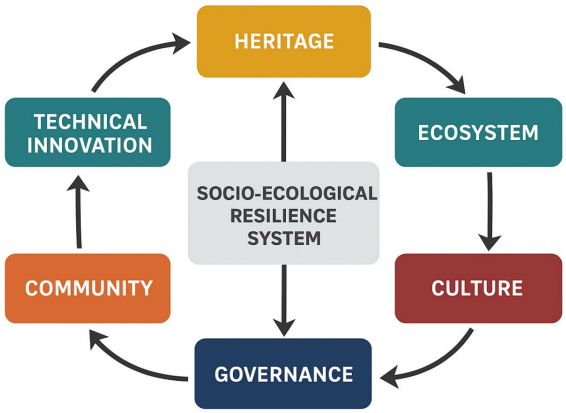

Figure 13: Socio-Ecological Adaptive Cycle

In synergising to sustain Freedom Park's adaptive capacity and cultural vitality, this framework highlights seven operational interconnected dimensions. These include:

a. Historical progression–preserving cultural identity, to sustaining colonial-era framework.
b. Technical creativity– application of modular retrofitting, for structural resilience and carbon-fibre reinforcement.
c. Environmental sustainability – merging permeable surfaces, solar systems and bioswales, for ecological balance.
d. Community engagement– enhancing storytelling, co-design, and participatory governance.
e. Cultural revival –generate performance, art and heritage spaces, for general recollection.
f. Policy and governance – for an enduring management, institutionalise adaptive PPP models.
g. Future adaptation– For continuous evolution, incorporating smart technologies and AI-driven maintenance.

This result, offer an adaptable blueprint, for a strong, inclusive, and ecologically responsive, urban development across African cities, positioning Freedom Park, as both a model and a methodology.

11. Conclusion

An exemplification of the convergence of technical innovation, cultural narrative, and community engagement is Theo Lawson's Freedom Park, a project that has succeeded in creating resilient, adaptive urban spaces where none seemed possible. Structural reconstruction, low-impact materials, adaptive climatic systems, and participatory governance have together transformed a historically oppressive site – the old Broad Street Prison – into a thriving public realm (Freedom Park Lagos, n.d.). In Nigeria, where rapid urbanisation, recurrent flooding, and the lingering shadows of colonial injustice press hard against daily life, Freedom Park offers something rarer than beauty: it offers proof (Houreld, 2014).

Proof that memory need not be buried to make way for progress. The prison walls still stand, scarred and deliberate, now softened by climbing plants and shaded by canopies of native trees (Archnet, 2010). The gallows remain visible, no longer instruments of terror but quiet witnesses to resilience. Children chase each other across lawns laid over what were once exercise yards for political

prisoners; musicians tune their instruments beneath the same iron gratings that once held Herbert Macaulay (Ogunlesi, 2020). History is neither erased nor sentimentalised – it is lived with, argued over, danced through.

Theo Lawson's guiding belief, forged over decades of practice, is simple yet radical: architecture must confront the past it inherits and hand the future back to the people who will inhabit it (Lawson, 2016). Freedom Park is the fullest expression of that conviction. Rainwater is captured and reused, solar lanterns replace diesel generators, permeable paving keeps the island from drowning in its own storms, and every decision – from the choice of local timber to the programming of the open-air stage – has been shaped by the voices of residents rather than distant consultants (Feferity, 2023).

More than a park, it has become a living argument for what African cities can still be: places that remember honestly, breathe cleanly, and belong unequivocally to their citizens (Wikipedia contributors, 2025). In an era of generic glass towers and privatised plazas, Freedom Park quietly insists that the most revolutionary act a city can perform is to heal itself – one reclaimed prison yard, one shared story, one shade tree at a time. For Lagos, and perhaps for many other cities carrying heavy pasts, it is not only a public space. It is a manifesto.

Figure 17: Freedom Park's testament to social and economic resilience in urban green space design
Source: Total Consult (2025a)

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