

African Pentecostal churches in Britain's urban spaces

Richard Burgess looks at a Nigerian Pentecostal church in the London borough of Islington and finds that the church's ability to occupy a permanent and dedicated space has influenced its visibility in the public sphere.



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In recent decades, London's religious landscape has undergone significant changes due to the presence of African Pentecostal churches. Many are located in post-industrial estates or share spaces with other religious and secular groups indicating their marginalized social status. In their search for a permanent place of worship, African Pentecostal churches often have to move from place to place, which seriously hampers their organisational structures, their numerical growth, and their capacity for civic engagement. Invariably, financial constraints and planning regulations are the **main obstacles** to obtaining a building of their own. Once they do so, congregations are sometimes left with heavy debts and the added financial burden of renovation and refurbishment.

One of those whose fortunes have fluctuated as a result of forced relocation is **House on the Rock**, a transnational Nigerian Pentecostal church which recently purchased a former Church of England building in the London borough of Islington. It serves as an interesting example of how place-making practices and transnational processes can influence the civic activities and social location of African Pentecostal churches in Britain's urban spaces.

House on the Rock was started in Nigeria in 1994 by former architect Paul Adefarasin. Its Lagos headquarters has over 7,000 members, and it has planted churches in 26 Nigerian states, the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Africa, Amsterdam, Dublin and London. Adefarasin is a cosmopolitan pastor, who travels widely in Africa, Europe and the USA. House on the Rock's London church plant was started by Michael Efueye, who was sent as a missionary to London in 1996. Since then it has relocated many times in its relatively short history. It started as a house fellowship before moving to a community centre, where it stayed for several years, growing to over one thousand members. After several further moves, it gained a measure of stability by renting a hall in the Quaker Friends' House, Central London. By this time, it had lost many of its members.

Finally, in 2003, it purchased its present facility, the former St. George's Anglican Church in Tufnell Park, which it renamed the Rock Tower.

St George's is a Grade II listed building. In the 1960s, it was de-commissioned as a place of worship due to its dwindling congregation. In 1973, the building was bought by a retired actor who converted it into a commercial theatre. However, when the building was later acquired by House on the Rock, it had been left unused for several years and was in a state of disrepair. It took another six years before the church could move into the new building. Delays were caused by the prolonged process of gaining planning permission for change of use, opposition from an environmental group called the Circle Community, and difficulties acquiring the necessary funds for refurbishment and extension.

By gaining the support of local power brokers, House on the Rock was able to obtain planning permission for change of use despite opposition from community activists. Since the church moved into the Rock Tower in 2009, the building has become a hub of the Tufnell Park community. As such, it occupies a very different social position to those African Pentecostal churches renting rooms in secular or religious buildings or those located in industrial warehouses.

As a multi-functional space, the Rock Tower has acquired a range of meanings for its members. First and foremost, it is a place of worship. The state of the art auditorium, where the Sunday service takes place, is by far the largest space in the building. The Rock Tower's identity as a place of worship is influenced by the interplay between the local and the global. In Lagos, House on the Rock is well-known for hosting **The Experience**, the largest international gospel concert in Africa. Members of the London church sometimes travel to Lagos to attend, an act of pilgrimage that reinforces the identity of House on the Rock as a transnational Pentecostal community. The event is also broadcast live in the Rock Tower, an example of how 'online religion' enables people to participate in religious practices via the Internet. Worship is one of the core values of House on the Rock, and this is reflected in the vibrant singing during Sunday services in the Rock Tower, led by the resident Hill City Mass Choir.

Secondly, the Rock Tower is a centre for civic engagement. Here it is very different from those African Pentecostal churches occupying former industrial warehouses or temporary space in rented buildings, whose mobile existence makes it difficult for them to connect with their surrounding communities. House on the Rock's ownership of the Rock Tower has enabled it to host a variety of civic activities to cater for residents of Tufnell Park. Currently, it runs a youth club and a food bank, and holds gospel concerts, theatre and film productions which are open to the public. Other initiatives include an arts event called 'Islington's Got Talent', modeled on the popular TV talent show, and the 'F-Factor', described on the church's website as a 'day of fun, food and entertainment for the community'. These initiatives form part of the church's "Touching the Community" programme, which it developed through consultation with community representatives.

While House on the Rock's civic activities in London are geared towards local engagement, transnational relations with its Lagos headquarters have reinforced its paradigm of civic engagement. The church's recently-completed **Rock Cathedral** in Lagos combines as a place of worship and a 'Centre for Social Justice and National Transformation'. The building currently hosts a hospital, and has facilities to accommodate a primary school, a secondary school, a Bible training centre, a leadership institute, and an artisan school. The church also runs a holistic outreach to street children, prostitutes and drug addicts in Lagos.

Acquisition of the Rock Tower has enabled House on the Rock to reposition itself in relation to indigenous churches in the vicinity, and in particular the dominant Anglican Church, which has many parishes in Islington. Formerly invisible in the public sphere due to its mobile existence, the church is now recognized as an important ecumenical partner. Interestingly, the church has also become a provider of worship space for other diaspora churches. In terms of its position in relation to secular institutions, the Rock Tower is sometimes used to host local council meetings, and in 2015 hosted the MP for North Islington Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters following his **election** as Labour Party leader. House on the Rock's civic activities are partly intended to attract **members**

from indigenous British and non-African ethnic minority communities. However, despite its aspirations to build a multi-ethnic congregation, the church's demographic composition remains predominantly African.

About the author



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Note: This piece gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Religion and the Public Sphere blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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