

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Exploring the Influence of El Anatsui Art on Architecture

AJAYI Adewale Olusegun

*Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo, Nigeria.*

Received: 11 December 2025 Accepted: 26 December 2025 Published: 29 December 2025

**Corresponding Author:** AJAYI Adewale Olusegun, Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo, Nigeria.

## Abstract

“El Anatsui” born Emmanuel Kwami Anatsui is an international artist whose professional practice took its root from indigenous akan and asante of his native homeland of Ghana, with uli and nsibidi traditions of Nigeria, his land of sojourn. He believes the creative acumen of an artist could still flourish by engaging locally sourced materials for artistic explorations, hence his choice of materials ranges from wood, to discarded items such as screw-top caps from alcohol bottles, rusted zincs, copper wire etc. He is one of African’s most celebrated artists globally, whose creative presence can be felt in world popular museums and galleries like Tate Modern London, Centre Pompidou, Paris, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin, El-Badi Palace, Morocco, Haus der Kunst, Munich, etc. Though his area of discipline is sculpture, his art practice had influenced many other creative projects within and beyond the visual arts; such as architecture, engineering etc. This paper ruminates on El Anatsui’s art practice and its influence on architecture both in context and structure. His techniques and philosophy could be seen reflecting African identity in contemporary architecture; it was also discovered that his practice has great cultural significance and contextual relevance in same.

**Keywords:** Professional Practice, Artistic Methodologies, Contemporary Architecture, Cultural and Contextual Influence.

## 1. Introduction

The position of Art as a catalyst for reshaping spatial experiences, particularly within the realm of architecture cannot be overemphasized, it’s been a point of convergence between visual aesthetics and structural functionality. This paper investigates the profound influence of El Anatsui’s innovative metallic sculptural juxtapositions of discarded materials such as rusted roofing zincs, thereby creating transformative appeal on contemporary architectural structures, it also draw emphasies on his unique synthesis of traditional African textiles and modern materials in solid form. A critical examination of a selection from a few imposing works and installations within Anatsui’s body of works, reveals that his artistic methodologies extend beyond mere visual representation; they evoke

a dialogue surrounding a unique cultural identity, sustainability, and the reinterpretation of space. Such themes resonate deeply with architectural discourse, prompting a reevaluation of design principles that prioritize not only structural integrity but also the narrative potential of materials. A good example that easily comes to mind is “Broken Bridge II”, a tapestry of pressed corrugated rusting roofing tins interlaced with mirrored panels in such a manner that invoke creativity, were used to adorn the walls of the steel and glass buildings situated within the High Line Art Project site. Highline art project is a sponsored program usually commissioned to reputable artists globally. La Farge 2013 informs “...all the installations and exhibitions in the High Line Art program are on display for a limited time - they range in duration

**Citation:** AJAYI Adewale Olusegun. Exploring the Influence of El Anatsui Art on Architecture. Journal of Fine Arts. 2025;7(2): 11-18.

©The Author(s) 2025. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

from a month to a year – but there’s one thing that set Broken Bridge II apart: even the building that served as its canvas was a temporary structure....” It was a site-specific masterpiece project that exemplarily and that all through the season it existed, defined the New York landscape. (fig. 1). The entire neighborhood was transformed into exciting and elating landscape, resonating the context of waste to beauty (fig. 3 and 4)

In addition to reflecting the harder realities of the city, Broken Bridge II also reflected the trees and greenery of the High Line (fig. 2). Like the plants in the park, this wholesome work was beautiful and interesting to look at throughout the year, because it presented a varied mix of textures and colours that changed constantly, depending on the angle of the sun and the condition of the sky” (fig. 3 & 4) (La Farge, 2013).



**Figure 1.** El Anatsui “Broken Bridge II, Source: <https://www.livintheline.com>



**Figure 2.** “Broken Bridge II” reflecting the green environment

Source: <https://www.livintheline.com>

Indisputably, this interaction between Anatsui’s art and architectural practices vivifies the pathways for creating spaces that embody both aesthetic and socio-cultural significance, redefining our understanding of the built environment. It is also important to note that as significant and gratifying “Broken Bridge II” was, it only exists in memorial because it was ephemeral. The beauty and glamour it created lasted for only twelve

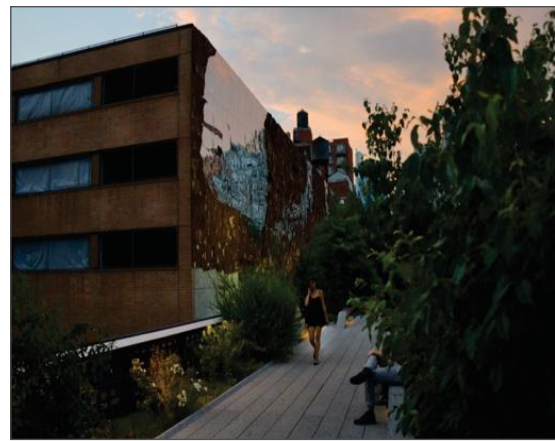
months, between November 21, 2012 and October 31, 2013, before it was dismantled, figures 5 and 6 shows workmen taking down “Broken Bridge”, giving way for another project. But while it lasted it was a perfect sight specific master piece, whose images would last long in the minds of the neighboring inhabitants of 510 along West 21st and West 22nd Streets in New York City.





**Figure 3.** “Broken Bridge II” in winter.

Source: <https://www.livinthehighline.com>



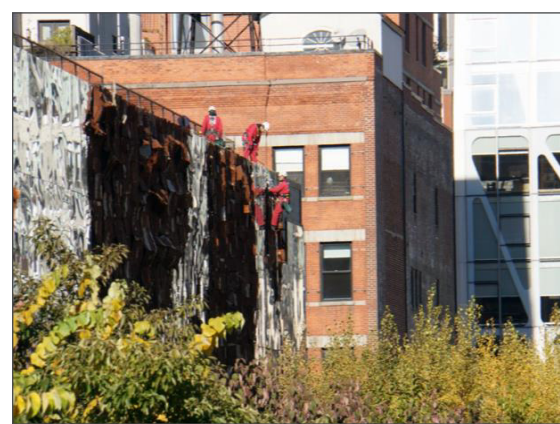
**Figure 4.** “Broken Bridge II” at dusk

Source: <https://www.livinthehighline.com>



**Figure 5.** Workmen dismantling “Broken Bridge”.

Courtesy: <https://www.livinthehighline.com>



**Figure 6.** Workmen dismantling “Broken Bridge”

## 2. El Anatsui: The Artist's Biography



**Figure 7.** Photograph of El Anatsui

Courtesy: Artist

Emmanuel Kwami Anatsui was born in Ayako province on February 4th, 1944 in the former British colony of the Gold Coast, which later became an independent nation called Ghana to this day. His artistic talents could be said to have been inherited from his father who doubled as a master weaver of Kente cloth and also a fisherman. At a point in his career, He adopted “El” meaning divine, as his first name. Anatsui exhibited a gift for drawing at a tender age and pursued a career as an artist, specifically the

field of sculpture. He studied at the Kwameh Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi Ghana where he obtained a bachelor's degree in 1968, and later a postgraduate diploma in Art Education in 1969. After graduating, Anatsui taught at the Specialist Training College (now University of Education, Winneba) in Kumasi, Ghana. In 1975, he began teaching at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN). As a member of teaching staff at the department of Fine Arts at the University, he started to incorporate

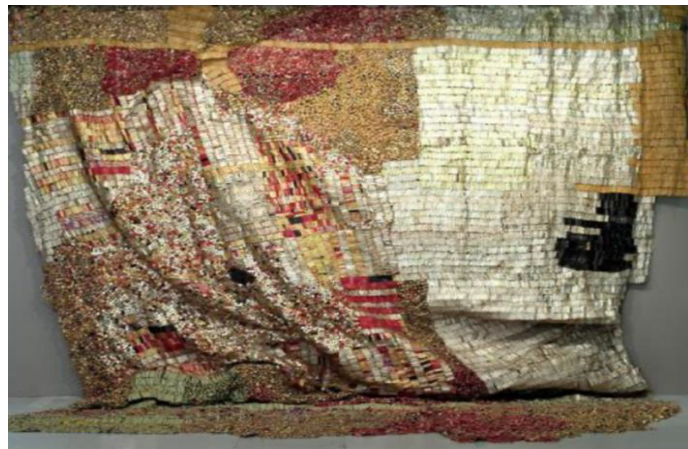
“Uli” and “Nsibidi” motifs of Southeastern Nigeria into his work alongside of his indigenous “Adinkra” symbols and other Ghanaian motifs and ideographic symbolism. He taught at UNN for over four decades as a Professor of Sculpture. Anatsui eventually retired from teaching and opened a studio in Nsukka and also work spaces in Tema, Ghana.

At the beginning of his career, his quest to be purely indigenous African artist made him deviate from the “foreign” school curriculum system of the University of London that was adopted by his almamater, KNUST. He engaged creatively with local materials to achieve these feats. Zelazko 2025 wrote,

He began collecting the circular wooden trays used in local markets and embossing the surfaces with adinkra symbols. Anatsui described adinkra as an “attempt to give visual form to very abstract concepts like ‘the soul,’ ‘anger,’ and consciousness.” Adinkra symbols are used by the Akan people of Ghana to enrich fabrics, walls, pottery, and other surfaces.”

Anatsui adoption of local material came to a peak when his art shifted from wood sculptures to metal

tapestries made from aluminum bottle caps. The artist claimed this medium came about by accident, that in 1998, he found a trash bag on the side of the road near Nsukka filled with the screw-top caps from alcohol bottles. The seemingly ‘ordinary’ contents were loaded with meaning to Anatsui. He brought the bag back to his studio and began experimenting. He would cut, pound, and fold the bottle caps, allowing some of the labels and colours to show, and thereafter stitched the metal pieces together using copper wire (Zelazko 2025). This creative exploration was to come out as a “malleable” sculpture that resembled an enormous, colourful, and glittering cloth. One of such Anatsui metal works created is titled “Sasa (Manteur)” (fig. 8), and “Between Earth and Heaven” (fig. 9). He later graduated into monumental art pieces engaging exterior of buildings like the Royal Academy of Arts building, London, with the work titled “TSIATSIA-Searching for Connection”. (fig. 10), thereby showcasing the interrelatedness of visual arts and architecture. Anatsui worked with the University of Nigeria Nsukka, until his retirement as a Professor of Sculpture in 2011.



**Figure 8.** *El Anatsui “Sasa (Manteur)” 2004,*  
Courtesy: <https://www.centrepampidour.fr>



**Figure 9.** *El Anatsui. Between Earth and Heaven, 2006, Aluminium (liquor bottle caps) and copper wire,*  
Courtesy: El Anatsui Source: <https://www.elanatsui.art>



### 3. Reflection on El Anatsui's Artistic Philosophy and Techniques

El Anatsui's artistic philosophy is deeply rooted in the interplay between materiality and conceptual depth, reflecting a profound dialogue within African history and contemporary societal issues. His use of discarded materials, such as bottle caps and aluminum to create artworks, for example, "TSIATSIA Searching for Connection" (Fig. 10), as well as rusted roofing zincs employed mainly on "Broken Bridge II" (Fig. 11), allows for a transformative approach, where everyday objects are repurposed into intricate, large-scale installations that evoke a sense of heritage and

memory. Anatsui's work serves as a visual metaphor for the complexities of identity and globalization, inviting beholders to critique the material culture that surrounds them. This intersection of found objects and artistic expression aligns with a broader narrative of postmodernism, particularly in Nigerian art schools, where students increasingly explore subjective interpretations of sculpture through unconventional materials (Kalilu et al., 2023). Additionally, Anatsui's emphasis on viewer interaction with his work reinforces the idea that art can be a means of social representation, sparking dialogues about cultural continuity and historical narratives in a rapidly changing world (Agujiobi-odoh, 2022).



**Figure 10a.** El Anatsui, *TSIATSIA Searching for Connection*, 2013, (Aluminium and Copper, Wire 15.6m x 25m. Installed on the facade of Royal Academy of Arts. Courtesy: Jonathan Greet



**Figure 10b.** *TSIATSIA* (close-up)



**Figure 11.** El Anatsui "*Broken Bridge II*", (close up).

Source: <https://www.livinthehighline.com>

### 4. The Aesthetic Integration of Anatsui's Art in Architectural Design

El Anatsui's art embodies a profound dialogue with materials that transcends aesthetic boundaries, creating a tapestry of cultural narratives that resonate deeply in architectural design. The fluidity inherent in Anatsui's large-scale installations invites architects to rethink conventional materials, embracing the concept of repurposing everyday objects. This integration of found materials, often considered waste, into both his art and architectural practices fosters a sense of

sustainability and ecological awareness, prompting a reevaluation of how spaces can be visually and environmentally impactful. The intricate patterns and textures found in Anatsui's work can serve as inspiration for architectural facades and interiors, offering innovative design approaches that are both cohesive and evocative, as it reflected in "Perspectives" 2015 (Fig. 12). Therefore, his aesthetic not only enhances the visual language of architecture but also cultivates a deeper emotional connection between the structure and its surrounding context, celebrating the intersections of art, culture, and environment.



**Figure 12.** “Perspectives” 2015, Aluminium (liquor bottle caps) and Copper Wire  
 Courtesy: Keizo Kioku 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan.  
 Source: <https://www.elanatsui.art>

## 5. Case Studies of Architectural Projects Inspired by Anatsui’s Work

El Anatsui’s transformative approach to materials and forms has profound implications for architectural projects that draw inspiration from his work. Notably, many architects have begun to explore the aesthetic and conceptual dimensions of Anatsui’s large-scale fabric-like sculptures, translating their fluidity and texture into contemporary building designs. For instance, a recent project reinterpreted Anatsui’s celebration of recycled materials, akin to his aluminum distillery labels, by incorporating repurposed elements that not only enhance visual appeal but also align with sustainable practices in architecture. This parallels the thesis that architectural spaces can serve as more than mere structures; they can embody purpose and

function, much like Anatsui’s art which supports local economies through collaborative crafts and practices (Reintjes 2009).

Moreover, as evidenced in the examination of thrift store spaces, innovative designs can drastically shift perceptions and engage communities in multifaceted ways, indicating a profound relationship between art and architectural expression (Francpourmoi 2010.) (fig. 13) In this light, the case studies reveal that integrating Anatsui’s principles enriches architectural storytelling and fosters a deeper community connection. El Anatsui’s works further influenced technicalities and rudiments of the use of elements and principles of design as reflected in architectural concepts of Salome Francpourmoi (figs. 14 and 15).



**Figure 13a.** Gallery space with installation from condensed milk can by El Anatsui.

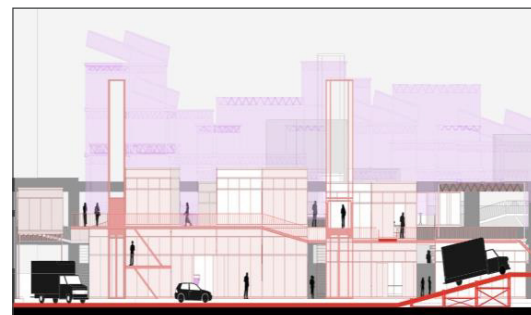
Source: <https://www.dspace.mit.edu>



**Figure 13b.** (close up)



**Figure 14.** Salome Francpourmoi, Architectural sketches  
 Source: <https://www.dspace.mit.edu>



**Figure 15.** Salome Francpourmoi, Architectural sketches



## 6. Cultural Significance and Contextual Relevance

El Anatsui's art exemplifies a profound intertwining of cultural significance and contextual relevance, vividly reflecting postcolonial narratives while challenging mainstream architectural practices. His installations, which utilize discarded materials like bottle caps and aluminum, resonate deeply with African history and identity by transforming objects of waste into symbols of resilience and innovation. This echoes the exploration of identity articulated in Ekow Nimako's metal sculpture, "World on a Camels Back", 2019, an art piece where Lego-like metal

cubes were engaged, (Fig. 16) which leverage non-traditional materials to address colonial legacies and envision a future enriched by black agency (James 2023). Moreover, the emergence of postmodern approaches in Nigerian art schools, as detailed in the study of sculptural practices, mirrors Anatsui's fusion of contemporary aesthetics with traditional narratives; it highlights the growing impulse among artists to explore sociocultural conditions through innovative mediums (Razaq & Oladugbagbe 2022). Such intersections illuminate how Anatsui's work not only enriches the discourse of architecture but also fosters a broader understanding of cultural identity and the transformative power of art.



**Figure 16.** Ekow Nimako "World on a Camels Back", 2019.

Source: <https://www.aml.ca>

## 7. Significant Role of Anatsui's Art in Reflecting African Identity in Contemporary Architecture

Through the lens of El Anatsui's vibrant works, a nuanced understanding of African identity and its manifestation in contemporary architecture emerges, revealing a deep interconnection between artistic expression and cultural heritage. Anatsui's assemblages, often constructed from recycled materials, reflect the complexity and dynamism of African identity, serving as a reminder of the continent's past and present in the face of globalization. These artworks resonate with the rich tradition of craft and communal storytelling, akin to the traditional African art forms discussed by Holdstock

(2000) and Kimmerle (2015) that emphasize community healing and interconnectedness (Parris 2021). Moreover, contemporary architecture that draws inspiration from Anatsui speaks to an aesthetic that is syncretical in nature, embracing modernity while honoring indigenous practices, much like the

artistic expressions found in Nigerian art schools, which celebrate ethnic identity through regional forms (Abodunrin, 2021). Thus, Anatsui's art plays a crucial role in shaping an architectural narrative that not only acknowledges African heritage but also redefines it for modern contexts.

## 8. Anatsui's Lasting Impact on Architectural Practices Setting Future Standards

El Anatsui's innovative fusion of traditional craftsmanship with contemporary art has fundamentally reshaped architectural practices, encouraging a more profound engagement with materials and cultural narratives. His work, characterized by the use of discarded materials, challenges architects to rethink sustainability in design, prompting a reevaluation of how recycled elements can invoke deeper connections to history and community. Furthermore, Anatsui's installations often evoke spatial fluidity, inspiring architects to explore dynamic forms and adaptive structures that transcend

rigid boundaries. These influences manifest in rising trends within architecture that prioritize environmental responsiveness and social commentary, reflecting a global shift towards more integrative and contextually aware design approaches. As future architectural directions increasingly emphasize inclusivity and ecological sustainability, Anatsui's lasting impact serves as a guiding framework, urging designers to harness cultural significance while innovating through the interplay of form and function. His legacy ensures that architectural practices will continue to evolve, fostering a dialogue between materiality and identity.

## 9. Conclusion

In synthesis, the exploration of El Anatsui's art reveals a profound dialogue between contemporary artistic practices and architectural design, emphasizing the transformative power of materiality and cultural narratives. Anatsui's works, characterized by the use of repurposed materials, challenge conventional aesthetics and encourage a reevaluation of waste in the context of creativity, mirroring broader trends within African art as noted in the surge of modern practices that embrace found objects (Mwanse & Dateba 2021). This incorporation of eclectic, unconventional materials into both art and architecture not only reflects local and socio-cultural conditions but also fosters a deeper engagement with the environment, promoting sustainability. Furthermore, the shift towards making art that provokes intellectual inquiry, as highlighted by the increasing subjectivity in sculptural practices within educational frameworks (Razaq & Oladugbagbe 2022), indicates that such innovations in art can significantly inform architectural philosophies, leading to spaces that resonate with both historical and contemporary narratives.

## 10. References

1. Abodunrin, J. A. (2021) "Artistic Forms and Ethnic

Identity in Nigerian Painting." *SCIENCELINE* (2021): 01-05

2. Agujiobi-Odoh, N. (2022) "A Creative Engagement with Space, Metaphors and Memory", *IJSRETH* 10 (2022): 162-166 [http://internationalpolicybrief.org/journals/international-scientific-vol\\_10\\_no2-november-2022c](http://internationalpolicybrief.org/journals/international-scientific-vol_10_no2-november-2022c) (accessed February 22, 2025).
3. Anatsui, E. (2012) <https://www.elanatsui.art> (2012).
4. Francpourmoi, S. (2010). "Salvation Army: The Next Generation". Thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2010.
5. Kandra, J. (2023) "Unveiling Identity: Exploring Afrofuturism in Ekow Nimako's Contemporary African Diasporic Sculptural Art." *Digital Commons* (2023).
6. La Farge, A. (2013) "Livin' the Highline." 2013. <https://www.livintheline.com> (accessed November 14, 2024)
7. Mwanse, R. K., Dateba M. T. (2021). "Re-Awakening Education Through Art in the 21st Century for Economic Development." *Nigeria Academic Forum* (2021)
8. Parris, J. (2021). *African Aesthetics and the Everyday: Community, Healing and Living*. Phd diss., University of Central Lancashire, 2021.
9. Razaq, O. K., & Oladugbagbe, F. E. (2022) "An Examination of Postmodernism in Sculptural Practices in Some Nigerian Art Schools." *ITB* (2022): 191-209
10. Reintjes, B. (2009) "Installing Anatsui: the politics of economics in global contemporary art". ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository, 2009
11. Zelazko, A. (2025) *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 8th ed., s.v. "El Anatsui." Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/bio> (accessed February 20, 2025).