

Residential property developers' satisfaction and selection of architectural service providers

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Residential property developers often commission architects to provide services for their project. In selecting their architects, they use diverse criteria which may not have any bearing with their projects. Are clients who use some criteria more likely to be satisfied with services obtained? In this study, the correlations between the criteria residential property developers use in selecting architects and their satisfaction with services provided are investigated. A sample of residential property developers in Lagos, Nigeria were asked to fill a questionnaire, which elicited their views on a five-point Likert scale. The analysis of the data obtained revealed that there is correlations between the criteria used in selecting architects and the satisfaction of the residential service providers with services obtained by the residential property developers. The need for residential property developers to use objective criteria in selecting their architectural service provider for higher satisfaction is emphasized.

Keywords: Architectural service; Residential property developer; Service provider Selection criteria, Satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

The development of residential properties often requires the services of architects. With each service desired, a prospective client sets expectations, which may often determine where and from whom he obtains the service. Architectural services are professional services which are characterized by intangibility and heterogeneity (Kugyte and SliburYTE, 2005). In addition, the product is often not available at the time the architect is commissioned, and prospective clients cannot compare alternatives before purchase is made. In this respect, prospective clients often have to make decisions based on factors other than the quality of the product. The case is often simpler for public clients who often have documented services providers' selection criteria (Sporrong, 2011). More so, with public clients, experts are often part of the selection process. The case is similar with private organizations. In addition, private clients who have been involved in building projects before may also have the benefit of hindsight in determining the criteria to be used in selecting architects subsequently.

However, anecdotal evidence and previous study by one of the authors show that most of the clients of architects in Nigeria are individual clients who commission the architect for the first time for their home design services (Oluwatayo, 2013). The satisfaction of clients with architectural services is often only known during or after the services have been delivered, prior to which financial commitments would have been made. What this suggests is that the wisdom in the selection criteria used by these clients can only be ascertained after a commitment is made. The scenario of first-time residential property developers in search of architectural services provides the impetus for this study. One primary question is answered: which relationship(s)

exist between the criteria that first-time residential development clients use in selecting their architectural service providers and their satisfaction? This is in the light of the dearth of empirical studies on this subject. A study of this nature is important for three reasons. First, it could inform decisions of residential property developers on how their selection criteria could determine their satisfaction. Second, it would elicit the diverse criteria used by first-time residential property developer clients of architects, providing information for architects to position themselves to attract such clients. Third, it would empirically add to the body of literature on client's satisfaction with professional services in general and architectural services in particular.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Architects carry out various roles in the construction process ranging from design to renovation and refurbishment of existing structures. These services are rendered to clients who expect to be satisfied with the services received. A client is different from a customer in that while a client is one to whom professional service is rendered, a customer is one who purchases tangible goods. In carrying out tasks as specified by the clients, an agreement is first signed which specifies the scope of services, the fees and terms of payment. The implication of this is that the client is yet to receive the services being committed to, implying a high level of perceived risks. The process of rendering architectural services is often dotted with series of interaction and education. In which case, the clients may need someone who is not only competent but also agreeable. It may therefore be important for such a client to be well informed before commissioning any architect. This is however not often the case because information about architects is rarely public knowledge. The personal nature of the service often rendered may also limit the choices of the client to the architects around the vicinity of the client.

A report by American Institute of Architect (2008) indicates that clients would select architect they like or trust. Duhan, Johnson, Wilcox and Harrell (1997) and Chappell and Willis (2000) noted that clients would often begin their selection of architects from the recommendations of family and friends. Other criteria that have been reported to be used by clients in selecting professional service providers in literature include reputation (Scott and Watt, 1995; Almossawi, 2001; Cheung, Kuen and Skitmore, 2002; Razzouk, Siez and Webb, 2004; Araloyin and Olatoye, 2011), personalization of service (Scott and Watt, 1995), reputation of service provider (Cameran, Moizer and Pettinichio, 2010), interpersonal skills and personality (Razzouk, Siez and Webb, 2004; Day and Barsdale, 2003), perceived competence (Day and Barsdale, 2003), qualification and experience (Cheung, Kuen and Skitmore, 2002). These were summarized by Kugyte and Sliburyte (2005) as pre-purchase knowledge, experience/relational aspect and credence criteria.

Often there are differences in the procurement process of architectural services with respect to public and private clients. In public projects, the procurement process for architectural services usually follow well-established guidelines (Sporrong, 2011). Similarly, private organizations do have established criteria for selection of consultants such as architects. In addition some professional service providers have guidelines aimed at assisting both public and private clients in selecting architects for their intended projects (Architects Council of Europe, 2005; California Architects Board, 2012). However, for first-time clients, the challenge of selecting an architect

can be enormous largely because information about architects is restricted as a result of the architectural practice code that prohibits the general form of advertisement (Kolleeny and Linn, 2002).

The focus of this study is first-time clients that commission architects for residential development services. These clients are often characterized by little knowledge about the services they seek. These clients may not even be sure about the spaces they may require as well as the statutory requirements of the projects they desire, meaning that their expectations are often not articulated. This is in addition to the fact that they may not also have knowledge of any technical criteria that they may use in selecting their architects. This may impact on their satisfaction. Little study however exist to confirm or refute this.

Client satisfaction, according to Masrom and Skitmore, (2010), is the response of clients to a service received. Satisfaction is the attitude of clients towards a product or service that meets their expectation (Angelova, 2011). Satisfaction connotes value-added service and it is important in all facets of the building procurement process because of the huge resource outlay associated with it (Mbachu and Nkado, 2006). Although client satisfaction studies serve as feed back to professional service providers so they could improve their services, comparing service provider selection criteria with clients satisfaction may additionally serve as a feedback to clients on how their decisions influence their satisfactions with the services they obtain.

RESEARCH METHOD

A survey of residential developer clients of architects in Nigeria was carried out using questionnaires. The sample of respondents was obtained from the firms that have been registered to practice in Nigeria (ARCON, 2010). Firms in Lagos, Nigeria were considered for the survey. This is because 213 of the 613 registered firms were Located in Lagos, Nigeria. The formula derived by Frankfort-Nachimias and Nachimias (1992) gave a sample size of 137. These 137 firms were approached but only 44 firms agreed to participate in the survey, giving a list of their first- time residential developer clients in the last two years. From the list obtained, four private, first-time residential developer clients were randomly chosen, making a total of 176 clients surveyed. Only 125 of the clients filled and returned the questionnaires, which were administered.

The first part of the questionnaires gathered data on the criteria the clients used in selection the architects. The respondents were asked to indicate the level of significance of the criteria to their selection of architects on a five-point Likert Scale, where 1 represented completely irrelevant and 5 represented very important. The second part of the questionnaire contained questions on the satisfaction of the clients with the services obtained. A single question was used to measure the level of satisfaction with services obtained according to the study of Mbachu and Nkado (2007). The data obtained were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The descriptive analysis carried out on the level of satisfaction of the first-time residential developer clients reveal that most of the clients were satisfied with the services received.

Table I: Level of satisfaction with architectural services

Measures	Items	Percentage (%)
Level of satisfaction	not satisfied at all	2.4
	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	13.6
	satisfied	62.4
	completely satisfied	21.6

To find out if any relationship exists between the clients' satisfaction and the criteria for the selection of architectural services providers, the data obtained on the criteria for the selection of architects were first reduced using principal component analysis. The results of the analysis showed that six factors accounted for 72.5 of the variance in the data. The factors as presented in Table III include responsiveness of, acquaintance with, perceived professional competence of, and personality of the architect. The other factors are the cost and the reputation of the architect. Reliability tests were carried out to test the internal consistency of these factors. The results obtained were acceptable as the values ranged between 0.607 and 0.71 (George and Mallery, 2003). The factors suggest that in line with the assertion of Kugyte and Sliburyte (2005), the factors used in selection of architectural services providers may be roughly divided into pre-purchase knowledge, experience/relational aspect and credence criteria.

The correlation analysis showed that none of the factors correlated with one another. However, the Table II shows that the satisfaction of the clients was positively correlated with the use of the perceived professional competence and personality of the architect as criteria for architect selection but negatively correlated with the cost of the service as architect selection criterion. What this suggests is that clients who rated perceived professional competence and personality of the architect as very important criteria in the selection of their architects were more satisfied with the services they obtained than those who rated those criteria as less important. On the other hand, clients who rated the cost of the service high as a criterion for selecting their architects were less satisfied with the services obtained, than those that played down on cost as a criterion. It would thus appear that selection may have been biased in favour of the least price, in which case, quality of service may have been compromised, according to Sporrang (2011).

Although, Chappell and Willis (2000) suggested that clients of architects often begin their search for architects from the recommendations of family and friends, it would appear that the category of clients in this study are neither better or worse for it. This is because this factor plays little role in ensuring their satisfaction with services provided. It is also interesting to note that the adoption of the reputation of the architects as service provider selection criterion did not significantly influence the satisfaction of the residential property developer clients. Several studies have however shown that reputation is a key criterion for the selection of professional service providers (Cameran, Moizer and Pettinichio, 2010). This probably suggests that

reputation may only ensure that the architect is visible to be selected, but the benefit(s) to the clients in using this criterion need to be further investigated.

Table III: Factors that represent the criteria used for the selection of architects by the residential property developers

Factor (Percentage of variance)	Variables	Component Loadings
Responsiveness of architect (14.0%)	looks for my best interest	0.871
	special attention to my needs	0.787
	friendliness	0.592
Acquaintance with the architect (13.8%)	variety of services offered	0.797
	understanding	0.751
	previous relationship	0.674
Perceived professional competence of architect (12.9%)	competence in particular project areas	0.795
	capacity for innovation	0.770
	quality of previous projects	0.630
	experience in the industry	0.563
Personality of architect (11.3%)	personal relationship	0.823
	pleasantness of my service provider	0.802
Cost of service (10.9%)	ability for timely delivery	0.875
	cost of service	0.848
Reputation of architect (9.7%)	availability to attend to me	0.750
	reputation in my area of need	0.687
	popularity in the field	0.522

Table II: Correlation between criteria used in selection of architects and the satisfaction of the clients

		Responsiveness of architect	Acquaintance with the architect	Perceived professional competence of architect	Personality of architect	Cost of service	Reputation of architect	level of satisfaction
Responsiveness of architect	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	1						
Acquaintance with the architect	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	.000 1.000	1					
Perceived professional competence of architect	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	.000 1.000	.000 1.000	1				
Personality of architect	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	.000 1.000	.000 1.000	.000 1.000	1			
Cost of service	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	.000 1.000	.000 1.000	.000 1.000	.000 1.000	1		
Reputation of architect	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	.000 1.000	.000 1.000	.000 1.000	.000 1.000	.000 1.000	1	
level of satisfaction with architectural service provider	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	-.144 .109	-.077 .391	.436** .000	.417** .000	-.198* .027	.051 .575	1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

CONCLUSION

Very little is hitherto known about the relationship(s) between the criteria used by first-time residential property development clients in selection their architects and their satisfaction with services obtained. The results show correlations between satisfaction with services obtained and the use selection criteria such as of cost of service, perceived profession competence, and personality of architects. There is however no significant correlation between the use of acquaintance with, responsiveness of, and reputation of architects, as criteria for the selection of architects and subsequent satisfaction of the residential property developers with the services they obtained. One implication of this is that residential property developers may be able to enhance their chances of being satisfied with architectural services by selecting architects based on their credence, and interestingly, personality. Such clients may need to play down on their use of cost of service as a criterion for architect selection.

It also appears that the display of competence not only enhances an architect's chances of being selected but also enhances the chances that the client would be satisfied. It may therefore be important that architects invest in developing competence and delivering quality service on every project. The need for experience is evident from the results of the study, suggesting that internship may be necessary even in schools of architecture. The teaching of human relations may also be imperative as personality of the architect as a selection criterion led to higher satisfaction of the clients in the study.

There are limitations to this study in that only first-time residential property developers were sampled. Other studies may sample the experienced clients with other projects. In addition, samples were taken from only Lagos, Nigeria. Future studies may adopt wider coverages.

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