4.8 Adaptation of Existing Buildings

To save costs existing buildings are sometimes adapted, or were adapted in the past, to house public records. Many old archive buildings date back to the beginning of the colonial period. The circumstances, under which the documents were kept, were not ideal. In surveys of African archives and libraries the majority of the institutions, especially archival ones, adapted premises to house their collections. Obviously archival and library materials housed in such premises will not receive adequate protection. Adapted buildings are normally old and sometimes dilapidated structures (Khayundi, 1995; Laar, 1985; Mbaye, 1995). Other reasons to adapt or reuse an old building as an archive building include cultural ones, offering a government a chance to put some important architectural heritage to use (Duchein, 1988).

The attitude of archivists to adaptation has changed. In the 1960s opinions varied. By the 1980s, international opinion had turned against recycling, maintaining it would result in buildings which were either expensive, or unsatisfactory, or both. Conversely, and especially in Latin America, countries face the dilemma that archives are seen as the most suitable institutions to occupy old buildings. Unfortunately, there is often not enough money to permit proper conversions that would solve the problems of unsuitable environment, air-pollution and security. Under these circumstances it would perhaps be better to see scarce resources spent on simple and economical new buildings which are in harmony with the natural environment (Thomas, 1988).

This is in agreement with the experiences in Ghana where a regional chief house was adapted to accommodate the National Museum of Ghana. In effect the whole process of redesigning and adapting this building cost far more and took longer than if a museum built specifically for this purpose had been erected. Additionally, it confirmed the preconceived notion that a museum is the place where old and curious objects are kept (Myles, 1976).

It is noticeable that the modern trend is to build new facilities, and not only in the west. To gauge the quality of an archive building first make a thorough inspection of the proposed facility. Apart from functionality one should look for any signs of possible problems. There are many factors to consider when refurbishing an existing building: exterior, walls/floors, walls/doors, roof, drainage, floors, air-conditioning system, duct-work, fire protection, security protection, electrical system, plumbing system, asbestos, light fittings, pests (Ling, 1998). There are several possibilities for adapting recycled archive buildings to tropical climate zones that will help to protect cultural heritage better. One is the radical thermal insulation of buildings and rooms (Schüller, 2000).

Some of the European experiences in adapting archive buildings were discussed at the ICA/CBQ 1989 Meeting in Turin, published as Janus, 1992(I) and also at the Expert Meeting, Archive Buildings and the Conservation of Archival Material, held in Vienna, Austria October 30 – November 1, 1985 published in Mitteilungen des Österreichischen Staatsarchivs 1986(39), see also Committee on Archive Building and Equipment ICA/CBQ, 1992; Swartzburg et al., 1991 and Teuling, 1994.