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Lydia Waithira Muthuma

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# MAMBO!

Recent research findings in Eastern Africa

## Political Identity in Nairobi's CBD

A Visual Exploration of Kenya's capital city

*Lydia Waithira Muthuma*

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This is the story of the interaction between governance and physical space in Nairobi, Kenya's capital city. It is an analysis of the built environment in order to ascertain who it belongs to and how this identity has been manifested. The story begins with the British immigrants inscribing colonial rule into Nairobi's Central Business District (CBD), the area enclosed between Moi Avenue and Uhuru Highway today. The story then gathers pace to culminate with the bouncing back, into central position, of the indigenous community; the re-possession of this central space by those who are native to it. It is the story of who owns and commands —symbolically— the space that is CBD.

### Exploring Nairobi's Identity

In engaging Nairobi's identity, academicians have often overlooked the visual exploration into the city as a historic site. This study views, selects and compares the built form in Kenya's capital city, with the aim of progressing from a formal analysis of visual elements to a stylistic critique with its embedded social-political and cultural values. The underlying assumption is that an analysis of perceivable visual elements furnishes the prevailing style, and also insinuates its underpinning cultural inspirations.

What does Nairobi's built environment signify today; what does it say to current Nairobians? History cannot make past events into something present today; it is for this reason that I augmented the historical approach to the city with an aesthetic hermeneutic, making this study an artistic critique of Nairobi's built environment. And for this artistic appreciation, I rely on visual language because

it is the basic text in the plastic arts. Compiling the visual narrative takes precedence over the reconstruction of yesteryear's society.

To the question: what is a city, there can be no simple answer because of the entity's complexity. Salient factors are its territorial circumscription and the human culture within. Yet, what among the multiplicity and confusion of its inessentials is perennially valid and lasting? What constitutes a city's very life? It is in this light that we ask what Nairobi is.

### Kenya's Early Railway

Before 1899, Nairobi's Central Business District (CBD) had no boundary; the railway laid claim to it, declaring it its headquarters. It could claim ownership owing to a previous happenstance: "[since] an Arab *shamba* at the Coast had been purchased by a European who foresaw that the land would be indispensable to the Railways (...). He

was heavily compensated, but the Chief Engineer was given *carte blanche* to lay his railway over any land irrespective of ownership or occupation and to reserve a mile-wide zone on each side of the line for railway purposes. At Nairobi, the effect of these powers was to secure to the Railways the whole of the plain on the south side of the swamp [the CBD triangle], which came under the absolute ownership and complete control of Railway authorities".<sup>1</sup>

To make their claim tangible the Railways erected an imposing station. A London newspaper of those days described it, saying: "(...) the railway station is a splendid building with ... an enormous clock that can be seen and heard almost to the utmost limits of the town"<sup>2</sup>. By 1927 a headquarters building, which still stands, had also been erected. The Railways paraphernalia was imposing in scale, size and style. This headquarters building is an expression of their power and legend has it that it was constructed solely by railwaymen<sup>3</sup>.

### The Colonial Central Government

The whole point of establishing a railway line was to usher in British political dominance; so what more natural than the government factotum moving into Nairobi? But on arrival, he discovered that there was no room for him in CBD— since it belonged entirely and absolutely to the Railways. He settled in Ngara beyond the Railways territory. So

1 Smart, J. Nairobi. *A Jubilee History*. London, His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1950, p. 13.  
2 op.cit. p. 20.  
3 Martin, K., *Historic Nairobi*. Nairobi, Space Sellers Ltd, 1992.



Photo 1.1: Nairobi Railway Station in 1906. Made out of *mabati* (corrugated iron sheets) and wood, this building has since been demolished (source: Railway museum).

irked by this arrangement was the Commissioner that he declared "he would not tolerate playing second fiddle to the railway authorities."<sup>4</sup> London solved this problem by shifting the affairs of British East Africa (Kenya) from the Foreign to the Colonial office. The move gave the Commissioner precedence and he immediately moved his offices, declaiming, in March 1901, "Nairobi Township as the area comprised within a radius of one-mile-and-a-half from the present office of the Sub-Commissioner."<sup>5</sup> 'Gazetting' this boundary, the legal birthday of Nairobi Township, comprised the first official step towards establishing Pax Britannica. And the next government building, the District Commissioner's (DC's) office (later the PC's.) was sited in the middle of CBD. It was built in 1913 for the Ministry of Native Affairs; it was the new dominance —the symbol of political authority.

The British Government, yielding to the political pressure of about 600 European settlers, created a legislative council (LEGCO) in 1907<sup>6</sup>. With the transfer of the protectorate (Kenya) from the Foreign to the Colonial office, the government of the empire asked

4 op.cit.

5 op.cit.

6 Bennett, G. Kenya. *A Political History. The Colonial Period*. Ibadan, Nairobi, Accra, Oxford University Press, 1963, p 21.



Photo 1.2: Railways Headquarters, a view of the courtyard. (author)

its representative in East Africa to remedy the inequality of the fact that Africans were taxed, but not the immigrants. The European settlers' reply was "no taxation without representation"<sup>7</sup>. They wanted a Crown colony with a legislative council containing elected members from their midst. They wanted a say in how the money was to be spent. They wanted to be empowered so that they could direct Nairobi's (and Kenya's) affairs both politically and economically.

LEGCO meetings were held in Memorial Hall which served as the colonial version of parliament from 1924 to 1954. And it is from the deliberations of this house that the highlands were reserved for exclusive European occupation. It is from this house that they became the politically

7 op.cit., p. 20.



Photo 2.1: East Africa Protectorate (EAP) office in CBD. It is now the principal's office in Moi Avenue Primary School. (author)

charged 'white highlands'. It is also from this house that the idea of establishing native reserves emerged.

Nairobi, then becoming an exclusive European center, was no longer a natural home to Africans who, henceforth, needed authorization to live within its precincts. LEGCO's law and order placed the native not just far from this chamber but very far from justice. Memorial Hall, the symbol of settler legislature, is centrally positioned and on the same axis as the other administrative building —the Ministry of Native Affairs.

### Pax Britannica

Pax Britannica was about establishing the proverbial 'law and order', which fact made court houses a significant feature of the empire. The first court house in Nairobi was in the same premises as the DC's office. It was later transferred to the Town Hall. In 1923 court proceedings were held in the Theatre Royal next to Memorial Hall. To the team charged with the 1948 master plan for a colonial capital, the High Court —this majestic, massive building— presented itself as the obvious centrepiece for a grand Kenya Centre square. The British believed that they had



Photo 2.2: Built in 1913 for the Ministry of Native Affairs this building was later used as the D.C.'s, then P.C.'s office It now belongs to National Museums of Kenya

obtained rights of permanent transfer of land in Nairobi (and the entire Kenya); a belief they had the power to enforce. They also believed that they were the only race fit to govern a mixed population. This Court House, being all-embracing, was to be a point of convergence; the representative icon of imperial rule. It is grand in size, scale, and setting; it proclaims Pax Britannica. The court is as grand as the empire 'where the sun never set' —though this status quo was to change in the latter half of the 20th century. This building, the High Court is the most articulate symbol, the most powerful image, of inscribing colonial law and order into Nairobi.

However, London made a momentous re-discovery: that all the noise about paramountcy had come from some 10,000 Europeans and 23,000 Asians acting before an estimated two-and-a-half million Africans. Wise London reserved for itself sole trusteeship on behalf of the Africans without albeit asking what their wishes were. The European settlers were not acquiescent and in their bid for minority self-government; in their aspiration to build a white man's country, sought a federation of the East African

territories, with Nairobi as the grand regional capital. Its main buildings —Government House, the High Court and City Hall— were outstandingly monumental; as monumental as the settlers' quest for absolute political power. These buildings were designed to show case Nairobi and display how able and ready the settlers were for minority self-rule.

It was further suggested that Nairobi Town should seek city status as a fitting celebration of its golden jubilee. The petition was addressed to His Majesty the King since the municipal council was anxious that a Royal Charter of incorporation be granted. He consented. Nairobi was made a city like any other in Europe; a city basking in the peace bringing character of Pax Britannica. However, the peace was short lived. Just two years after the promotion to city status, the colonised peoples sought to do away with Pax Britannica. The ensuing endeavour is usually referred to as the Mau Mau war of independence. And it brings to a close our appreciation of Nairobi's built environment from the perspective of colonial architecture.



Photo 2.3: Memorial Hall which is today, with a new frontage, the bank of India along Kenyatta Avenue (source: Agip magazine n.d.)

## Symbol of Indigenous Independence

On his return to Kenya from his long sojourn in England, Jomo Kenyatta received a hero's welcome. The year was 1946. Kenyatta, one of the continent's nationalist leaders, had joined others in the fifth Pan-African Congress, in declaring that "racial discrimination must go, and then the people can perhaps enjoy the right of citizenship, which is the desire of every East African. Self-independence ... is our aim."<sup>8</sup>

The World Wars, if anything served to show up the disparity between the immigrants and the indigenous peoples. While the Africans were sinking into utmost indigence, the settlers were attempting to build a white island, a state within a state. The 1949 publication of the Kenya Plan was preceded by a brochure entitled 'We are here to stay' alleging in the most unequivocal terms that European settlement in Kenya was a permanency.

It is hardly surprising that by 1951 Kenyatta's speeches were challenging European immigration and landholding. The momentum was growing towards inevitable political disagreements. On 20th October 1952, a state of emergency was

<sup>8</sup> Amin, M. & Moll, P., *Mzee Jomo Kenyatta*. Nairobi, Marketing and Publishing Ltd, 1978.



Photo 3 : The High Court (now Supreme Court) was built in 1932 to 1934. (source: kenyajudiciary.go.ke)

declared while British troops were flown in. London found it necessary to provide men and money on a large scale to curb the Mau Mau movement. The arrest of Kenyatta, and others, appears to have been taken by the Mau Mau as a declaration of war —a very expensive war for between 1952 and 1959, it cost the colonial government £ 55.5 million, and in political terms it cost the surrender of power to the indigenous peoples.

## Repossessing and Africanizing City Square

The 1948 town planners had made the High Court the centrepiece of City Square. But with indigenous political freedom, that 1963 momentous shift in governance, CBD's spatial symbols underwent a change. Kenyatta placed his sculpture in prominence to this High Court —an action that can be variously interpreted. Did it signify that he was above colonial law? Or that the indigenous people were beyond the reach of this law? Whatever the answer is, the sculpture alters the visual dynamics of the square by imposing a Kenyatta look. This sculpture is the visual-focal-point —it is what one sees when one looks into the square. It usurps the grand spectacle of the High Court building.

To City Hall and the High Court, Kenyatta added an imposing obelisk-like building —the Kenyatta International Conference Centre (KICC). The building is like a tower —of independence ? — or a spear planted in one's homestead. It has dominated Nairobi's skyline, both literally and culturally, for many years. KICC emerges

as a symbol of indigenous re-possession of CBD, a re-possession of Nairobi and of the country.

It is as curvilinear as the High Court and City Hall are rectilinear. And lacking the post-beam-pediment construction, it stands in stark contrast to classical colonial architecture. KICC's stylistic distinctiveness marks a clean break from previous government architecture.



Photo 4.2 : The Kenyatta International Conference Centre (KICC), the tallest building in Nairobi at the time (author).

## Conclusion

What philosophy is 'written' into Nairobi's spatial structure; with what aim? Can any anthropological or social significance be decoded from Nairobi's built form? In answer, this work, designed to capture historical fact through aesthetic lenses, is a demonstration of some of the overlooked opportunities that exist for learning about culture and life. It is an attempt to highlight the rich, yet untapped resource that exists in 'reading' visual images for academic inquiry. The approach aims at enriching our culture of knowledge and demonstrating that academicians can be intelligent viewers, perceptive critics and sensitive interpreters of visual data. It shows that Nairobi, like other cities, is a complex and shifting terrain; it is a complexity of ideas, interests and intentions, a myriad of norms, values and traditions, a continuous social change which language, in its naked simplicity, is unable to relate: the representation of a city is far beyond the grasp of language.



*Photo 4.1 : Mzee Kenyatta in city square. His back is to the High Court. (author)*

**Lydia W. Muthuma** is a PhD holder from Strathmore University, enrolled at Université Bordeaux III and holder of the French Embassy Scholarship, she has defended her thesis "The manifestation of political identity in historic Nairobi: an æsthetic critique". She now holds a Doctorate in Geography from the University of Bordeaux with First Class Honors (the highest grade).

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*Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of IFRA.*