

Beyond the Planned and the Unplanned:  
Architectural Identity Through Use in Post-Independence  
East Africa

Abigail Rotich

Mentors: Ernesto Bilbao, Matthew Hall

Buildings:

1. Kariakoo Market, Beda Amuli, Dar es Salaam,  
Tanzania
2. Umubano Primary School, Mass Design Group, Kigali,  
Rwanda
3. United Nations Offices, architect unknown, Gigiri,  
Kenya
4. Kenyatta International Conference Centre, Karl  
Henrik Nostvik and David Mutiso, Nairobi, Kenya

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## Biographical Sketch

**Abigail Rotich** is a third-year architecture student at Auburn University, pursuing a Bachelor of Architecture alongside a Bachelor in Interior Architecture, with a minor in Environmental Design. Her interests lie in environmental design



strategies, cultural representation, and the communicative power of space. A recipient of the Aydelott Travel Award and the Spring Book Award, Rotich conducted an independent field study across East Africa, including Kenya and Tanzania, investigating post-independence architectural projects and their evolving social and spatial authorship. Her work approaches architecture as a living process rather than a fixed object, emphasizing human-centered and environmentally responsive design strategies.

In parallel with her academic work, Rotich has completed recurring internships with Williams Blackstock Architects, returning 4 summers and 2 winters, where she gained experience in architectural documentation, visualization, and design development. She currently serves as a Volunteer Research Associate for the 2026 Pan-African Biennale, contributing to curatorial research and architectural discourse surrounding contemporary African design practices. Beyond African architectural research, Rotich is also interested in speculative design, environmental systems, and the communicative capacity of space to shape collective experience.

# **Beyond the Planned and the Unplanned:**

## **Architectural Identity Through Use in Post-Independence**

### **East Africa**

#### **Introduction**

In many African nations, the physical representation of state-building efforts in the post-independence era remains. The buildings, constructed initially with optimism and national pride, represented the translation of political freedoms and autonomous governments into a physical form. Over time, however, these structures have developed additional meanings and identities based on their many uses. The "quiet" and "unplanned" gestures of use have become how architecture lives in the present day, rather than the original intent of past designs. As I traveled throughout Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, and Kigali, I began to realize that it was not just how the buildings were planned that represented their identity; it was also how they were occupied and "re-authored." I came to realize that architecture acquires its identity not through the clarity of its design, but through its improvisational and adaptable nature. Therefore, this research began with the idea that architecture is subject to changes through use. However, as this essay argues, in East Africa, this process takes on cultural and historical meanings.

In this context, this essay explores how architectural identity in post-independence Africa arises through the tension between

the planned and the unplanned. The 'planned' being the architectural, political, and formal script, and the 'unplanned' as the social, improvised, and informal practices. Each of the buildings studied in this paper, Kariakoo Market, Umubano Primary School, the United Nations Offices in Nairobi, and the Kenyatta International Conference Center, demonstrates a unique position along this continuum. Through them, I started to understand that there is no competition, but rather an amplification of the relationship between formal intention and lived adaptation.

The continued dialogue between the unplanned and the planned, the intended and the spontaneous, demonstrates an evolving authorship that defines a significant portion of Africa's contemporary built environment. Research and scholarly references provide the archival and contextual history and the politics of each site; the governmental agendas; and the ideological weight of independence. However, through experience, I saw how those intentions were absorbed, adapted, or changed through use. For example, although I could not physically enter Kariakoo Market, due to restoration work, I experienced the informal economy that had spilled out of the market. I understood that the architecture of the market went far beyond the building itself. Similarly, when I visited Umubano School in Kigali, I observed how children and the community used the courtyard as spaces for rest and friendship, creating their own areas of care within the planned layout. Even the United Nations Office in Nairobi, a diplomatically controlled and ordered campus,

showed evidence of unplanned life and quiet contemplation in the shade of trees, challenging the site's official narrative of order. These experiences formed the experiential layer of my argument: that, below the planned order of modernism, lies a looser human authorship that continuously rewrites the architecture.

The buildings studied in this essay are positioned within a spectrum that ranges from state-aligned architectural intentions to the unplanned practices on each site. On this spectrum, Kariakoo Market illustrates the extreme of unplanned adaptation, where collective improvisation has created a new definition of a civic building. Umubano School is in the middle of the spectrum, a place where architecture was intentionally designed to heal and include others, but has since evolved and expanded through daily care. The UNON is positioned closer to the planned end of the spectrum, a site order and diplomacy are embedded in the architecture's image. Yet the informal rhythms of the staff's daily life loosen the site's order. While its design does not visually emphasize power and control, it remains the most resistant to human adaptation, through controlled access, rigid programming, etc. The KICC, a monumental representation of Kenya's post-independence ambitions, embodies a more rigid, planned identity, but has gradually opened to collective reinterpretation through public events. Together, these sites illustrate how planned modernist ideals have been retranslated through lived realities, thus defining a spectrum of evolving authorship across East Africa. To understand these conditions in

the buildings mentioned above, each section in this essay begins with a study of their historical context, the planned, followed by the evolving aspects studied through observations, the unplanned.

This study also illustrated some of the practical problems of doing architectural study in this case. Because documentation of buildings, such as drawings and archives, is missing or difficult to access throughout much of Africa, the study of architecture faces both logistical and cultural challenges. Architecture is commonly learned in Africa via use, oral memory, and adaptation rather than through formal documentation. For this reason, this study does not depend on technical analysis. Instead, it relied on my personal experience while visiting these buildings. This research perspective was necessary for my research and provided a way for me to see how architecture functions when no documentation is available. This approach allowed me to witness how daily life is organized around people coexisting between the intended and improvised spaces.

The research presented in this paper contends that African architecture cannot simply be explained by looking at either the designed aspect of its structures or its symbolic representation as a nation. Through the examination of these four case studies, the paper suggests that the strength of African architecture does not reside in the articulation of a single design intent, but in its ability to remain flexible and adaptable to the users who interact with it. At the time they were built as symbols of nationalistic

ambitions, these buildings are today communicating more clearly through their flexibility.

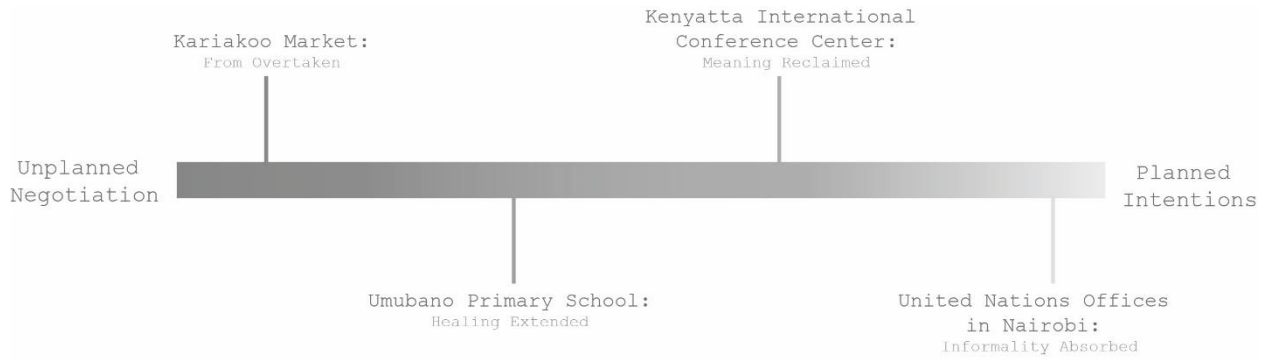


Figure 1 - Spectrum illustrating the range of relationships between planned architectural frameworks and unplanned practices of use across the four case studies. Diagram by author.

## **Kariakoo Market (1974) :**

### **The Rewritten Market**

The Kariakoo Market is one of the most well-known examples of the architectural and urban heritage of post-independence Tanzania. As a physical place and a district of Dar Es Salaam, Kariakoo illustrates the development of Dar Es Salaam's modern identity, from a racially segregated colonial marketplace to a dynamic, urban environment. When originally built as a separate market for Africans in the 1920s under British colonial rule, Kariakoo was designed to fit into a segregationist master plan for the city that separated commerce, housing, and races.<sup>1</sup> Once the country gained independence in 1961, the Tanzanian Government decided to reinvent its public buildings to reflect its newfound self-reliance and national pride. In response to this goal, architect Beda Amuli was hired to build a new market structure for the country. Completed in 1974, Amuli's design sought to provide functionality that served the needs of the growing city while also serving as a symbol of the nation's ability to create its own civic monuments of African authorship.<sup>2</sup> Through free-flowing and unregulated interactions, the market reinterprets the socialist ideals embedded in the design through everyday use. Kariakoo demonstrates how collective improvisation

can become the primary author of architectural identity, transforming a state-designed market into an urban system that exceeds its walls and its original intent.

### **Modernist Intentions: The Planned Framework**

The name "Kariakoo" comes from the British colonial administration's "Carrier Corps," a military logistics unit created in 1915 during World War I. This area of Dar es Salaam was transformed from a military base to a market by the British colonial government's urban planning initiative of the 1920s. The goal of the colonial government's urban planning initiative was to organize the city based on race and economics. The African market district was officially established in 1923 and was available for African traders and customers. There were other separate markets for Europeans, Indians, and Arabs.<sup>3</sup> Kariakoo, therefore, was a result of colonial segregation, both socially and physically.

African traders navigated colonial urban boundaries with unofficial practices that blurred official lines, shaping post-colonial Kariakoo. By the 1950s, it was a bustling, crowded area exceeding colonial expectations. The colonial market could not support Dar es Salaam's 1961 population of over 270,000, high-

lighting the city's contradictions of order and growth. As independence approached, Kariakoo symbolized colonial oppression and racial division, but also African resilience.

Independence in Tanzania in 1961 marked the start of a new period in which architecture and planning were intentionally employed to demonstrate the nation's sovereignty and development aspirations. Under the leadership of President Julius Nyerere, the government developed the concept of *Ujamaa*, a philosophy that emphasized community, self-sufficiency, and equality. In that regard, Nyerere's regime sought to visually demonstrate these concepts, especially in civic buildings designed to provide public spaces that reflected African authorship.

In this context, Beda J. Amuli emerged as a significant figure and, in the late 1960s, established one of the first African-owned architectural firms in East and Central Africa.<sup>4</sup> The Dar es Salaam City Council wished to design a building capable of meeting the economic requirements of the rapidly urbanizing city, while illustrating the optimism and independence of the newly independent nation. Amuli's design was burdened with both functional and ideological significance: it was to be a "market for the people", created and built by Tanzanians for Tanzanians.<sup>5</sup>

The Kariakoo Market was a place of commerce and a place to meet; a "public space" created within the large concrete canopies of the market. For Amuli, the Kariakoo Market was a social entity as well as a marketplace. Although Amuli attempted to provide a structured environment for trade and commerce, the design was unable to limit the spontaneity of the city's residents. Informal stalls and temporary vendors sprouted on the outskirts of the market and even outside of the original building boundaries; the Kariakoo Market became a living, breathing hybrid urban ecosystem. The original plan for the market became part of the market's ongoing evolution, and the planned and unplanned coexisted in a layered identity that continues to this day.

As of the early twenty-first century, the Kariakoo area represents a "hybrid urban ecosystem", where both formal and informal economic systems support one another. After a fire destroyed much of the structure in 2021, the Tanzanian Government chose to rebuild the market between 2024-2025 to preserve the original design while providing new infrastructure; an acknowledgment that the value is in the social life that evolves there..<sup>6</sup>

Kariakoo Market's history illustrates a larger paradox inherent in African post-colonial architecture: the need for the

nation to be represented in a planned, designed manner, utilizing design languages inherited from colonial modernism, while the actual lasting identity of such architecture comes about due to the unplanned, continuous adaptations of the people who use those spaces. The continued vitality of the Kariakoo Market is a testament to the original vision of Amuli, to some extent the vision of the socialist project initiated by Nyerere, and to the many individuals who continue to reimagine and repurpose space. Ultimately, the Kariakoo Market serves as a product of collective urban authorship and a producer, demonstrating how African architecture becomes strong and resilient through the interplay of historic intent and everyday transformation and reinvention.

### **An Architecture of Flexibility: Architectural Description**

The Kariakoo Market has been one of the most significant architectural undertakings of Tanzania's post-independence era. The market covers an entire city block in the Ilala District, the center of Dar es Salaam's commerce. It sits at the intersection of a dense urban grid, planned public infrastructure, and the city's uncontrolled organic growth.

The market has two floors above ground and a basement. This vertical organization of trade allows goods to be delivered and stored in the cooler basement, freeing the congested ground

level of the busy retail and wholesale area. The ground and upper floors are organized into large bays that vendors can easily rearrange to meet their needs, and access between levels is provided via ramps and stairways for people and goods. Amuli developed a structural system using reinforced concrete. The building is characterized by its unique series of funnel-shaped concrete columns arrayed in a grid pattern. The shape of the columns, resembling trees, is an ode to traditional markets under trees and is both structural and environmental. It supports the expansive concrete roof while also providing a shaded and ventilated space below. There are openings between the funnels that allow filtered natural light and air into the interior of the building,

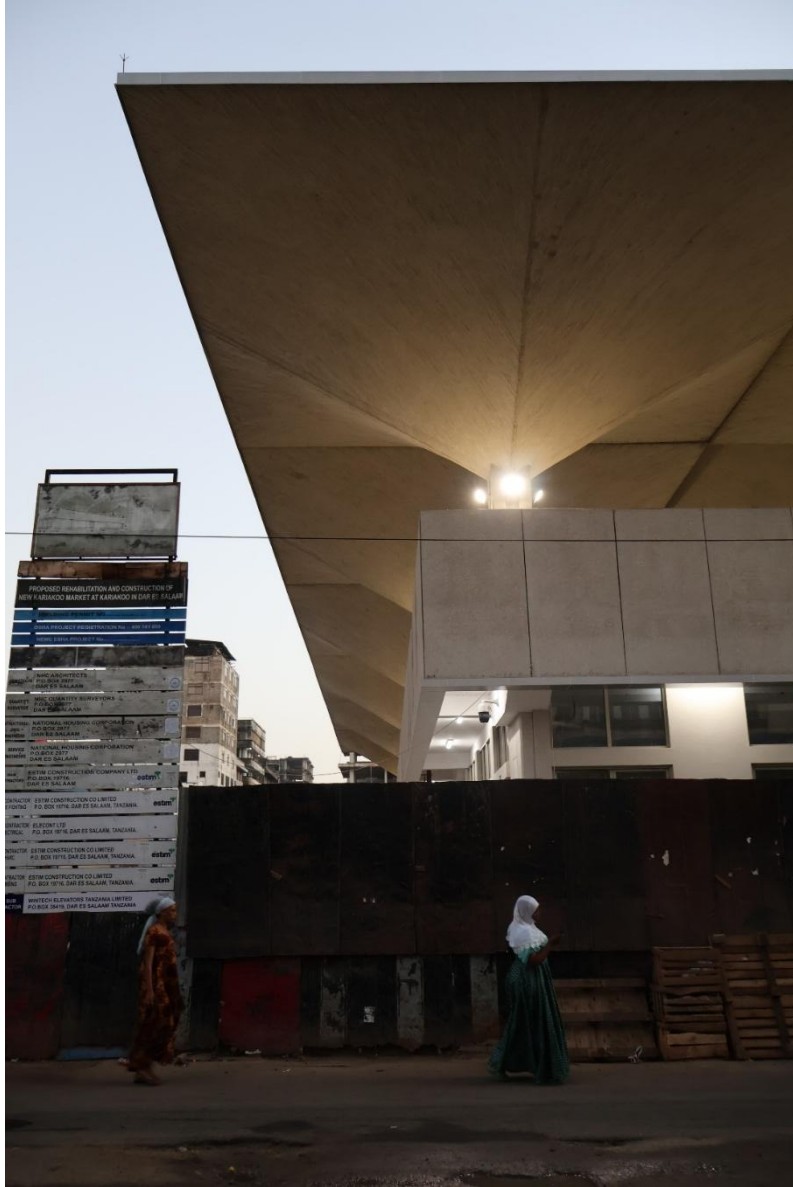


*Figure 1- Beda Amuli, View of Market, Kariakoo Market, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, July 2025. Photograph by author.*

eliminating the need for mechanical cooling systems and further defining this as an example of localized modernism adapting to the social and climatic conditions of Africa.<sup>7</sup> The functional definition of the space is reminiscent of typical East African markets, where shade and airflow determine comfort and social interaction. The result is an architectural language that is both modern and regional.

The plan allows vendors to tailor their stalls with temporary partitioning and/or tables to meet the varying needs of trade. Additionally, the circulation paths throughout the market are deliberately wide and open to facilitate high levels of pedestrian traffic and informal exchange. Natural light enters the market through the openings in the roof and clerestory windows, creating a diffuse, soft quality of illumination. In addition to providing daylight, the interplay of light and shadow creates a sense of depth to the interior while helping to maintain the cool temperatures necessary in a tropical climate. The primary entries to the market are located along Sikukuu and Nyamwezi Streets and are recessed to create.

Shaded areas before entering the building. These transitional spaces create ambiguity between the market's interior and the city's streets and represent an architectural gesture that invites both formal and informal commerce to coexist.



*Figure 2- Beda Amuli, View of the monumental scale of the market, Kariakoo Market, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, July 2025. Photograph by author.*

From the outside, the market is monumental in scale, characterized by its heavy concrete framework and repetitive funnel roof (Figure 2). The monumentality is offset by the openness of the perimeter walls, which connect the market to the activity of the surrounding streets. The rhythm of the roof, both sculptural

and functional, creates a distinct visual identity for the market in the Dar es Salaam skyline.

### **The Improvised Market: Unplanned Occupation**

The Kariakoo Market's early-morning bustle presented a picture of a city already wide-awake. The surrounding buildings were bustling with activity before sunrise, including vendors



*Figure 3-. Beda Amuli, View of adjacent streets in the Kariakoo District, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, July 2025. Photograph by author.*

unloading goods for sale, delivery workers moving carts filled with supplies, and *boda bodas*, motorcycles, and *bajajis*, small 3-wheel cars, whizzing past. The air was heavy with a mix of odors, trash, fried foods, and other scents typical of an East African urban environment. Everyone appeared to have developed an intuitive understanding of their role in the market's social dance; pedestrians, vendors, and drivers all moved purposefully, avoiding collisions in crowded conditions as if each person knew their position in the market's larger choreography. A woman weaving a path between rapidly moving **motorcyclists** while carrying a large load of luggage on her head illustrated one way in which people had learned to adapt to their environment, a continuous process of improvisation and negotiation.

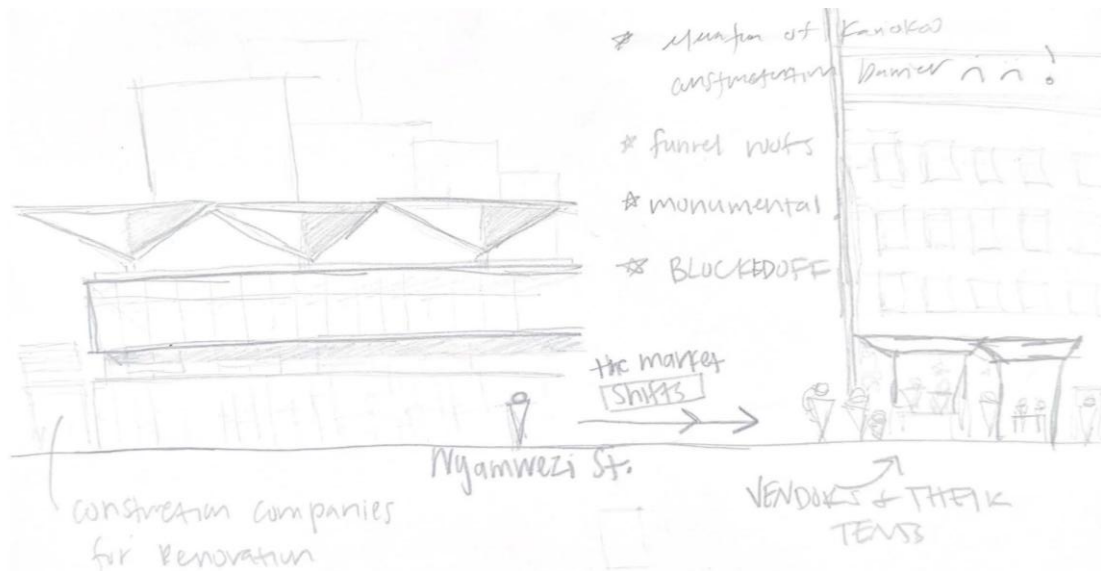


Figure 4- Street elevation showing market activity shifting from the closed Kariakoo Market building to adjacent streets. Sketch by author.

Upon approaching the market, the sheer size of the building was apparent. The heavy concrete frame of the building towered above the low-rise buildings surrounding the market, establishing it as a prominent public presence in the area. The series of repeating funnels formed by the columns provided a rhythmic quality visible from a great distance, and nearby buildings mirrored the same form at a reduced scale, reflecting the market's impact on the local architecture. However, even though the lower portion of the building has been enclosed for renovation purposes, which has altered the overall appearance of the building, the market does not appear to be closed. Vendors create temporary spaces by setting up tents and stalls against the walls of the surrounding buildings, thereby extending the market

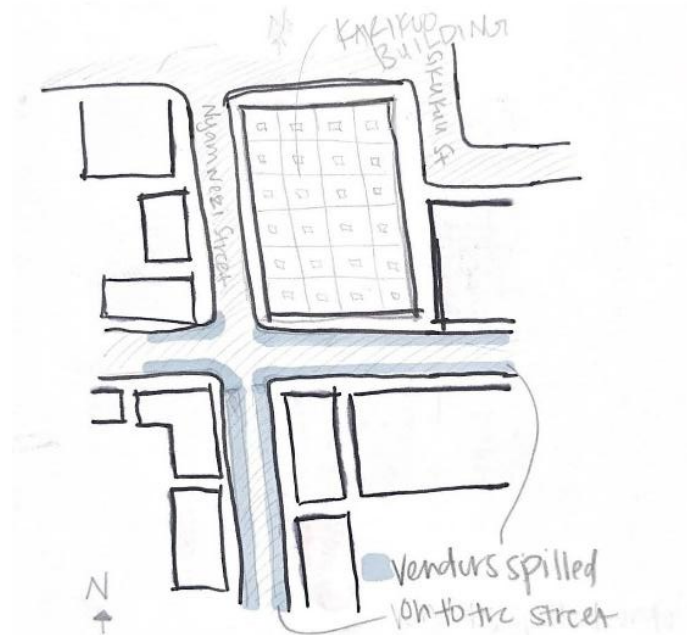


Figure 5- Site plan sketch of Kariakoo showing the nearby street where activity has spread to. Sketch by author.



*Figure 6- Beda Amuli, View of the market spilling onto the street lined with tents and stalls., Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, July 2025. Photograph by author.*

into the streets. As such, the unplanned activity clearly outweighs the planned usage; the architect designed the building with little to no anticipation for these daily improvisations. However, the continued presence of the unplanned usage has become a key component of the market's spatial life.

The ability to continue operating as a market during the renovation period reflects the principles of Ujamaa, in which the community collectively ensures that the market (and thus the social and economic systems it supports) remains operational. Therefore, market users become co-designers of architecture, creating and implementing a spatial organization that provides the same functionality as the original building, despite the building's physical absence. The market is not confined to the building's walls, facades, and doors; it is a living organism shaped equally by users' improvisations and the building's physical characteristics (Figure 6).

When the physical building housing the Kariakoo Market was closed for renovation, market activities continued on the adjacent streets, proving that patterns of trade, circulation, and negotiation create a lasting basis for urban existence. The users of the market exemplify a form of architectural authorship; they ensure circulation, arrange stalls, and recreate the market's spatial logic even when the building is absent. In this context, collective action is not limited to social behavior but is also spatial and architectural. The market forms a framework for human activity, where design and improvisation coexist to sustain the life of the space.

Therefore, Beda Amuli's design for the Kariakoo Market can be understood in this ideological framework. He opposed colonial

hierarchical systems and viewed architecture as a location of repossessed agency and authority. However, architecture's actual manifestation and vitality occur in use and are created by people who act as coauthors. Identity is not static; it develops through users' interactions and represents both the ideals of independence and the resilience of everyday life. As a result, both the planned and unplanned identities are equally important in developing a clear understanding of Tanzanian identity, one by the design of the building itself and the other by how people use it. In that regard, the study of the market requires an understanding of two simultaneous identities: one that the market is neither purely an architectural artifact nor solely an informal market system. The Kariakoo Market is a place where formal planning and informal adaptations interactively determine what it means to be modern and collective in Tanzania.

The Kariakoo Market illustrates that the value of post-independence African architecture lies in the participation, adaptation, and negotiation of its users, rather than in its physical form. The planned and the unplanned are not opposite states of the same identity-making process: the designer provides the structure, and the people bring it to life through their resilience and self-determination. The interactions between the planned design, the informal adaptations, and the underlying social philosophy of Ujamaa demonstrate that the Kariakoo Market

architecture functions as a framework for collective identity. Seen beyond the scale of the building, Kariakoo reveals how collective improvisation functions as an alternative form of urban organization, one capable of sustaining economic life and social order without reliance on fixed architectural control.

Kariakoo's strength extends beyond its market walls, with vendors, porters, and shoppers creating, negotiating, and adapting daily. After the 2021 fire, the community re-established the market by finding new pathways and trade methods, demonstrating that architectural identity can persist even in the absence of its formal structure. The physical market structure provides boundaries, but it is collective improvisation that sustains the market's order and meaning. In this way, Kariakoo demonstrates that unplanned social practices can overtake architectural intent and operate as the primary author of spatial organization. Ultimately, architecture should foster participation, creativity, and continuity, enabling users to co-create their own urban identity. Kariakoo sits at the unplanned extreme of the spectrum; its identity is produced through collective negotiation more than through formal design. This establishes a baseline for the following case, Umubano, where the planned framework is explicitly designed for care and healing, and the unplanned extends that intention rather than overtaking it.

## **Umubano Primary School (2011):**

### **Architecture of Healing**

Following the genocide in 1994, Rwanda had to rebuild not only its infrastructure but also redefine itself as a society. Education was one of the tools used to help rebuild and promote reconciliation, equality, and hope for the next generation. Therefore, the Umubano Primary School in Kigali is much more than just a building for learning; it is a deliberate architectural response to trauma. Completed in 2011 by MASS Design Group in partnership with A Partner in Education, the campus of the Umubano Primary School exemplifies architecture's potential to heal. The campus's cascading design down the hillside, the warm feel of the locally made bricks, were all intended to provide a foundation for Rwanda's future based upon compassion, accessibility, and community. Umubano was designed as an architecture of healing. Umubano Primary School reveals how architecture can be intentionally designed as a tool for healing, while allowing everyday practices to deepen, reinterpret, and eventually complete that intention over time. To provide a safe, caring environment, MASS Design employed local materials, natural ventilation, and an open circulatory system. Furthermore, the campus organization promotes transparency and interaction, reversing

the isolation and fear that defined the nation's social fabric before and during the genocide.

The layers of identity at Umubano go beyond the architect's plans. These uses show that healing architecture is experienced in both design and daily life. The school embodies a symbolic identity, reflecting Rwanda's recovery, and an inclusive identity, shaped by interactions among students, the community, and the architecture.

### **Rebuilding after Genocide: The Planned Framework**

The Rwandan government's history of brutal genocide and the impact of colonialism have influenced the country's view of identity, education, and architecture. During the colonial era, the educational system was structured along an ethnic hierarchy, with the Tutsi population given preference in education and government administrative positions. In contrast, the Hutu majority population had limited opportunities to access education and government. This ethnic division of institutions and spaces reinforced social inequality and segregation.<sup>8</sup> Between April and June of 1994, over 800,000 people (Tutsis and moderate Hutus) were killed during the one hundred days of the genocide. The genocide left Rwanda with a massive challenge to rebuild not only its physical infrastructure, but its social institutions and collective identity. The Rwandan government created new educational policies to address the challenges of building a new

nation. The policies were designed to eliminate discriminatory practices such as quotas based on ethnicity or geographic location, to improve access to education, particularly for disadvantaged groups, and to focus the curriculum on teaching peace, unity, and national reconciliation.<sup>9</sup>

While policymakers implemented the educational reforms, scholars began documenting Rwanda's efforts to utilize education as a mechanism for peacebuilding. A study conducted by Miho Taka shows how students have experienced the transformation of schools from institutions that historically excluded students to institutions that are intended to help build a sense of humanity and shared values.<sup>10</sup> And Jay Mathisen outlines how the educational delivery system changed structurally as part of the national reconstruction process, including the adoption of student-centered pedagogy and increased student enrollment.<sup>11</sup> Against this background, Umubano Primary School was conceived. In 2007, A Partner in Education (APIE) engaged MASS Design Group to design and build a replacement for dilapidated school structures located in the Kabeza neighborhood of Kigali. The project was consistent with Rwanda's post-genocide objectives: to rebuild identity through dignity, equity, and healing. The school campus was officially opened on July 21, 2011, and dedicated by President Paul Kagame.<sup>12</sup> Both the architectural and programming goals of Umubano align with Rwanda's educational reform agenda.

The design of Umubano reflects national policy initiatives aimed at expanding access to education, eliminating exclusionary barriers, and promoting community involvement. Educational policies focused on equity, specifically for children who were orphaned due to the genocide, for girls, and for marginalized populations, are reflected in the programming of Umubano.<sup>13</sup> The school offers adult evening classes and involves the local community, extending the project's scope beyond simply providing children with an education. This illustrates the "unplanned" responding to local needs that extend beyond what was originally specified by the architects, and creates identity through use, agency, and adaptation.

This focus on equity, reconciliation, and inclusion was realized through the school's design, promoting accessibility and community care. Umubano Primary School embodies Rwanda's vision of a healed, participatory society, reflecting national identity through its spatial organization and materials.

### **Designing for Care: Architectural Description**

Umubano Primary School in Kabeza, one of Kigali's lower-income neighborhoods, designed by MASS Design Group and finished in 2011, provides accessible schooling to children living in the area, many of whom have been orphaned due to the genocide. The

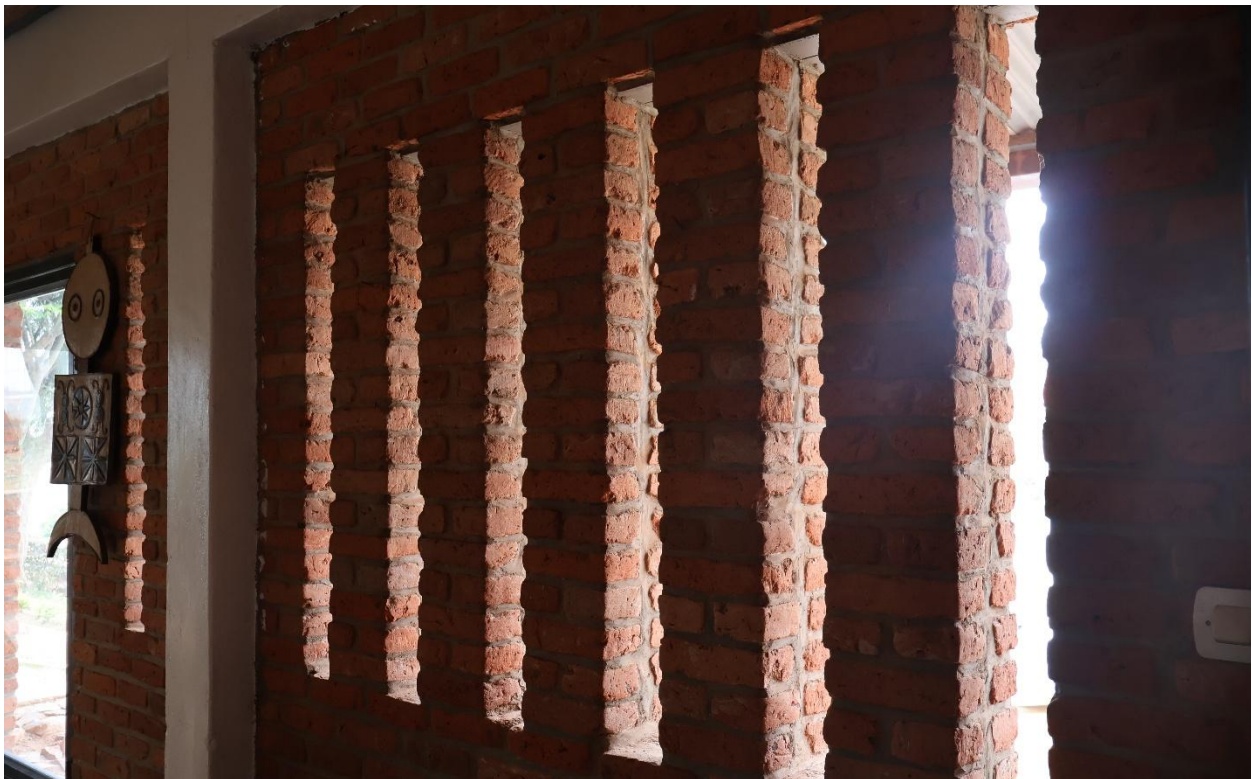
architectural design expresses openness, participation, and collective care, intentionally distancing itself from the hierarchical planning of Rwanda's colonial past.

Umubano consists of seven buildings, nine classrooms, a library, and both interior and exterior learning environments. Approximately three hundred vulnerable children attend the school. The designers incorporated the slope to create terraces, ramps, and exterior circulation to ensure accessibility. The steep slope of the land creates a series of cascading buildings along the terraced walkways; all connected via accessible ramps and pathways. Each classroom opens to the light, air, and views of the hills around the school, integrating inclusivity into the



*Figure 1- Mass Design Group, View of the cascading sloped of the Umubano campus, Umubano Primary School, Kigali, Rwanda, July 2025. Photograph by author.*

building's circulation and layout (Figure 1). The school uses a palette of warm, tactile materials, such as locally sourced clay brick and volcanic rock, laid out in varied ways to serve as ventilation screens. The clay brick was made on site using traditional methods by local craftsmen; this reflects MASS Design Group's goal of transferring skills to the local community and empowering them. Additional materials used include bamboo screens and papyrus reed panels to reduce heat gain while maintaining high permeability, supporting comfort and environmental responsiveness. Open clerestory windows create long spans that enable natural lighting and ventilation to reach the classrooms, minimizing dependence on mechanical systems.



*Figure 2- Mass Design Group, View of in-wall screen allowing for ventilation., Umubano Primary School, Kigali, Rwanda, July 2025. Photograph by author.*

Harvesting rainwater and developing integrated gardens support the schools' food program and educational activities and help distribute clean water to the rest of the neighborhood. Circulation routes and terraces are designed as transitional areas that blur the line between indoors and outdoors, encouraging students to engage in active learning and interact socially. Design decisions related to using natural light and ventilation, creating accessible pathways, and incorporating locally sourced materials can be interpreted as deliberate mechanisms for creating identity and facilitating healing. The creation of ramps and the incorporation of the sloping site demonstrate inclusivity.

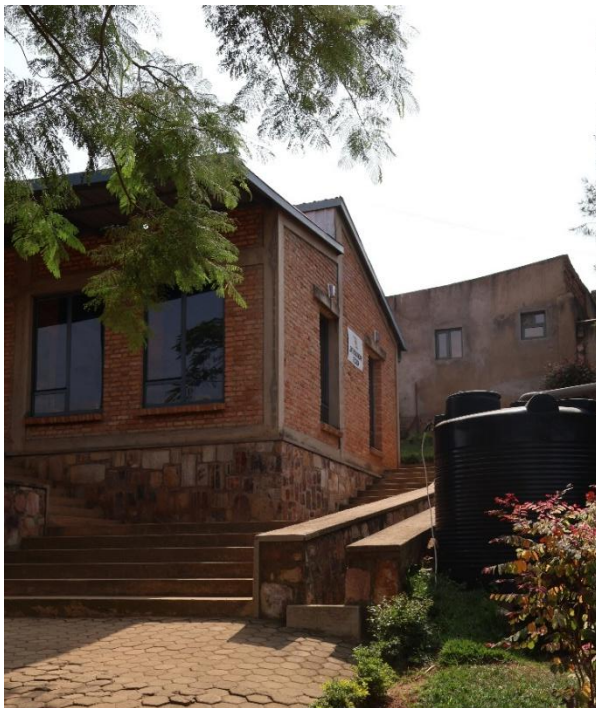


Figure 3- Mass Design Group, View of the campus rainwater system, Umubano Primary School, Kigali, Rwanda, July 2025. Photograph by author.



Figure 4- Mass Design Group, View of the campus drinking water dispenser, Umubano Primary School, Kigali, Rwanda, July 2025. Photograph by author.

And the use of materials and the human scale of the design demonstrate humility rather than monumentality.

### **The Lived School: Unplanned Occupation**

The school's small-scale campus was strategically located on a hillside, creating progressive levels of access and visual interest through sloping terraces that encouraged walking and exploration. Walking the terraced walkways, I observed how long-distance views of the surrounding hills were provided while also establishing intimate, shaded sitting areas that promoted pause and reflection. The school is proportionally sized to the neighborhood, neither overpowering it nor separating itself from it.

Although students were absent when I visited, the headmaster told me stories about their typical days: children were able



Figure 5- Sketch of schoolchildren running around the campus. Highlights the use of brick. Sketch by author.

to run freely throughout the terraces and courtyards, move between classrooms, playgrounds, and garden areas. By hearing these stories, I could envision how the architecture allowed students to engage in multiple activities without restrictions, thus transforming design into a lived experience.

The materiality and details of the buildings reinforced the idea of openness and care. The warm-toned bricks, bamboo screens, and natural ventilation work together to create a building that is responsive to its users. When I touched the textured brick walls and viewed the bamboo screening, I thought that the space responded to my presence rather than forcing me to react to it. The perceived warmth and clarity of humble materials communicate an invitation to participate and support the school's mission to help grow people, rather than control them. The "Peace Corner" is an example of a layer of identity that has been included in the space by its users rather than imposed by design. The Peace Corner is an informal area on the Umubano campus that is student created, for conflict resolution and reflection (Figure 6). In this corner, a humble bench, located directly in front of a mural illustrating peace, which encourages students to come and resolve their conflicts here through a peaceful and respectful conversation, as the headmaster outlines. The Peace Corner was not planned into the original architectural plan; however, it reinforces the broader aims of the



Figure 6- Mass Design Group, View of the Peace Corner., Umubano Primary School, Kigali, Rwanda, July 2025. Photograph by author.

school's care and healing intentions, showing how unplanned interventions can support as well as subvert the values inherent in the design. Similarly, the "girls' rest area" was created to meet the needs of female students who have their menstrual cycle (Figure 7). Unlike Kariakoo, where improvisation overtakes design, these unplanned spaces at Umubano reinforce a framework of care that the architecture intentionally anticipates. The campus becomes a "lived architecture" that supports healing, caring, and shared authorship. Beyond the students, the larger community is involved on campus: local women cook meals; gardens produce



*Figure 7- Mass Design Group, View of the Girls' space, during menstruation cycles, Umubano Primary School, Kigali, Rwanda, July 2025. Photograph by author.*

food; and the gym is used for public events, extending the campus into civic life. These examples demonstrate how the unplanned can complement the planned, enrich the architecture, and validate its role as a symbol of both inclusive (acceptance of many users and uses) and symbolic (memory of national recovery and shared history) identities.

My visit showed that Umubano is both a well-designed tool for post-genocide healing and a living structure for community-based engagement. Through the design of its terraces, ramps, and material selection, the campus establishes a sense of dignity, openness, and inclusivity, and students' daily practices complete and reinterpret the framework established by the design. The community-authored spaces and activities demonstrate how architecture acts as a framework for shared authorship and that identity is layered and continues to evolve through human actions. In addition, the campus illustrates that architectural identity is not solely contained within the drawings and materials used to build a place but arises from the continuous negotiation between the formal design and the lived experiences of users. Viewed institutionally, Umubano reframes post-genocide reconstruction by demonstrating how architecture can support long-term healing not through monumentality, but through sustained, care-based participation.

Umubano Primary School embodies a critical intersection between planned architecture as a vehicle for national healing and unplanned participation as an expression of lived identity. Its design reflects post-genocide Rwanda's efforts to rebuild not only physical infrastructure but also a collective sense of belonging after deep social violence. As a product of intentional, state-aligned reconstruction, the school was conceived within a

broader discourse of reconciliation and modernity. Yet its identity emerges through how students, teachers, and the surrounding community inhabit and adapt the campus.

Architecture at Umubano performs two complementary roles. On one level, the planned design communicates symbolic identity; it embodies Rwanda's post-genocide goals of dignity, equity, and inclusivity. The accessible circulation, terraced layout, warm locally sourced materials, and carefully integrated environmental strategies transform design into a visible instrument for social healing. By contrast, the school's inclusive identity emerges from everyday participation: the Peace Corner, girls' resting space, community meal preparation, gardens, and public use of the gym illustrate how the built environment accommodates practices beyond the architect's direct control. These layers show that architecture offers a framework for users to define and extend identity, rather than imposing a singular vision.

The coexistence of these identities demonstrates how African architectural authorship can operate across multiple temporal and social scales. The planned form establishes a scaffold, spaces that promote care, dignity, and transparency, while the unplanned activities overlay the architecture with meaning that is flexible, responsive, and socially negotiated. This dynamic mirrors the concept of "people as infrastructure," in

which human networks and informal practices become integral components of spatial systems.<sup>14</sup> At Umubano, architecture and community practices are inseparable; the building is realized entirely only when inhabited and adapted, revealing identity as a co-constructed process.

This framework highlights a larger principle in postcolonial African architecture: the quality of a space can be measured not solely by aesthetic or technical accomplishment, but by its capacity to frame multiple identities and enable collective authorship. The Peace Corner, for instance, represents this po-



Figure 8- Diagram of the unplanned and added elements to the campus. Diagram by author. Adapted from MASS Design Group, "Umubano Primary School," plan 2011.

tential. Not formally designed, it transforms the campus by embedding reconciliation into everyday practice, showing that architecture's influence lies as much in the opportunities it creates as in the gestures it directly enacts. Similarly, spaces like the gym and the gardens extend the architecture outward, connecting school and community, and reinforcing the idea that identity in African architecture is performative, relational, and adaptable.

Through this interplay of planned and unplanned, symbolic, and inclusive, Umubano exemplifies a dynamic, participatory model of architectural identity. It demonstrates that post-genocide Rwanda's goals of reconciliation and equity are not only communicated through design but also enacted through the collective use, adaptation, and care of those who inhabit the space. The school's architecture does not dictate identity; it provides a scaffold through which multiple actors can assert agency, experiment with meaning, and sustain a living culture of care. In this way, Umubano offers a broader lesson for African architecture: that its strength lies in enabling participation, layering identities, and embedding resilience in both form and human action. At a national scale, Umubano suggests that post-genocide architectural reconstruction can move beyond symbolic reconcili-

ation by embedding healing within everyday institutions, allowing architecture to support social repair through continuous use rather than fixed structure.

Umubano Primary School illustrates how an architectural project develops over time once construction is complete. This school was created through an intentional effort to help Rwanda heal and learn following the genocide. However, the addition of users to the architectural design makes Umubano so compelling. The school's daily life transforms this design into a living one. Laughter from students and the quiet times spent in the Peace Corner add warmth and meaning to the school. The girls' resting area demonstrates that the school staff and teachers cared about their students' well-being and comfort, and showed that their commitment went beyond the initial planning phase of the school. In addition, mothers providing meals for students transforms the school campus into a family-like home environment. The vegetable gardens provide food for the students, demonstrating that providing for the basic needs of the student body is an essential component of learning. The actions of the community members extend the purpose and meaning of the school. Instead, identity is created through an individual's actions and caring behaviors. The architectural design creates a framework of openness and dignity; however, it is the individuals who occupy the space who will determine the space's ultimate meaning.

Each time an individual tends to a garden, prepares a meal, or assists another classmate, they extend the meaning of the space.

While the architectural design provides a physical structure and form to the school, the community offers the memories and the purpose for the school. In doing so, both the architectural design and the community illustrate that architectural projects can assist the healing process not just by providing for users' needs, but also by allowing users to participate, act, and develop as a community. The power of architectural design lies in how it encourages individuals to utilize, modify, and take responsibility for space, transforming a pre-conceived plan into a collective identity. Positioned in the middle of the spectrum, leaning towards the unplanned end, Umubano demonstrates how architecture can intentionally structure healing while remaining open to unplanned practices that reinforce its purpose.

## **United Nations Offices in Nairobi (1970s):**

### **Rational Informality**

The United Nations Offices at Nairobi (UNON) is in Gigiri, Nairobi's diplomatic area, where many embassies and consulates reside, and borders the Karura Forest. It is the only United Nations headquarters located in the Global South. The complex, which houses UN-Habitat and UNEP, was established in the mid-1970s, shortly after Kenya gained independence. The complex was intended to serve as both a diplomatic center and a symbol of Africa's involvement in international development.

The UN-Habitat campus in Kenya is a deliberately designed, symbolic space reflecting Kenya's political presence and post-independence ambitions. While it maintains order, subtle routines of occupation, such as gardens, shaded walkways, and communal areas, demonstrate local interactions and climate adaptation. Unlike other sites such as Kariakoo and Umubano, where identity evolves out of necessity, the campus embodies a planned identity of authority. However, signs of adaptation exist within the controlled order. Studying it reveals how African identity can be expressed through both improvisation and deliberate representation, with UN-Habitat emphasizing restraint and institutional control. Through architecture that reflected its dual identity as globally connected and regionally grounded, Kenya

expressed its aspirations for leadership in the post-independence period. Positioned toward the extreme planned end of the spectrum, UNON illustrates how institutional architecture can permit use without enabling transformation.

### **The Rational Plan: The Planned Framework**

The United Nations Office at Nairobi represents a unique turning point in Kenya's post-colonial history. UN-Habitat was moved to Nairobi after the 1976 Vancouver Conference on Human Settlements, prompting the international community to focus on the challenges posed by rapid urbanization and the spatial inequalities it entails. At the same time, newly independent Kenya was establishing itself as an economic and diplomatic hub in East Africa. In 1975, the Kenyan government welcomed the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) 's move to Gigiri. Shortly after, the Government of Kenya established UN-Habitat. Both decisions signaled a significant turn in the geography of global governance: for the first time, an administrative center of the United Nations would be based on African soil. The presence of the UN in Nairobi confirmed Kenya's status as a regional voice in international affairs and gave physical manifestation to its emerging political and cultural autonomy.

Under the presidencies of Jomo Kenyatta and later Daniel arap Moi, architecture emerged as a critical tool for

representing national identity. Post-colonial Kenya sought to develop a modern identity that reconciled engagement with the world with African ownership. Architecture was not merely functional in buildings like the UNON campus; it symbolized the country's increasing political stability and growing stature.

Following the relocation of UNEP in 1975 and UN-Habitat in 1978, the phased development of the Gigiri campus began to take shape. Initially, construction included office blocks, meeting areas, the Conference Center, and expansion in the 1980s and 1990s. The New Office Facility (NOF), which opened in the 2000s, further reinforced Kenya's reputation as a leader in environmental policies by introducing sustainable systems, including rain-water harvesting, solar energy, and natural ventilation. UNON served as a location for global decision-making and as a declaration of Kenya's self-determination in the process.

In total, the campus embodied five primary identity-making objectives: legitimacy, autonomy, modernity, diplomacy, and environmental stewardship. As a result of this combination of objectives, UNON can be seen as an architecture of planned identity that communicates order and purpose at the global level while responding to local needs through climate, landscape, and usage. UNON's identity combines symbolic and performative as-

pects: it represents Kenya's power and relevance, and, performatively, through its design, which encourages participation, movement, and adaptation.

Therefore, UNON occupies a central position in the development of post-colonial African architecture. UNON exemplifies how global modernism may be localized without compromising institutional clarity, and how national identity may be expressed through form and occupation. The campus's integration of modernist design, ecological sensitivity, and political ambition illustrates an architecture that is neither completely foreign nor entirely indigenous, but rather a negotiation between the two that creates a unique representation of African modernity.

### **Controlled Design: Architectural Description**

Nairobi's United Nations Office sits on a 140-acre site in Gigiri. Gigiri is well-known for hosting many embassies and other international institutions. The UNON campus is in the Karura Forest, which creates a physical separation between the density of Nairobi's cityscape and the quiet, ordered nature of the diplomatic district. The UNON campus buildings' modernist aesthetic, characterized by clean concrete lines, symmetry, and formal order, which represented internationally common ideals of progress and transparency, was also specifically developed to respond to Nairobi's climate and topography and to demonstrate a

particular type of environmental awareness and local knowledge. Open courtyards, shaded pathways, and the inclusion of the Karura Forest provided an architectural response that negotiated between the universal language of modernism and the particularities of its African context. As a result, informal negotiation, central to African life and evident at Kariakoo, was somewhat minimized in favor of a controlled diplomatic image grounded in Western values. Instead of developing a vertical monument, the UNON campus extends horizontally throughout the entire site. The horizontal configuration reflects both modernist urban planning ideas and environmentally sensitive planning. The plan comprises a series of low-rise office buildings and courtyards linked by overhead walkways. Pedestrians access the complex beginning at the entrance and proceed along a flag-lined walkway that represents the diversity of the UN's member nations. The ceremony walkway leads pedestrians to the central courtyard and administrative structures. This reinforces the building's function as a diplomatic center for international cooperation. Once past the entrance, the walkway splits into smaller pathways leading to offices, meeting rooms, and outdoor landscaping. The pathways provide continual communication between indoors and outdoors. The pathways, which wind through shaded corridors and planted courtyards, take advantage of Nairobi's relatively mild climate

and the traditional Kenyan practice of combining workspaces, landscaped environments, and social interactions.

The design of the early buildings employs the vocabulary of international modernism, with reinforced-concrete frames and simple geometric proportions. While the buildings employ modernist architectural concepts, they also adapt them to the tropics through deep roof overhangs, cross-ventilation, and natural light. Concrete, brick, and wood are used consistently throughout the complex and connect the complex to the post-colonial construction practices of post-independent Kenya; thus, the authorship is tied to local labor and craftsmanship. The campus has undergone multiple phases of development since its establishment. The earliest phase included the completion of the original office buildings and the Conference Center, which took place in the 1970s and 1980s. Later additions were built in the 1990s, and the New Office Facility (NOF) was completed in 2011. The NOF employed new sustainable technologies, such as solar energy, rainwater collection, and natural ventilation, which reflect the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) mission to protect the environment. The NOF was designed to meet the standards required for LEED Gold certification and utilizes wide roof overhangs, operable windows, and shaded terraces to minimize energy usage. Yet, as our tour guide pointed out during my visit, "the newest building is already falling apart," which highlights the tension

between technological innovation and building maintenance in Nairobi's tropical environment.

In addition to the buildings, the landscape is an essential component in defining the campus's identity. The proximity of the Karura Forest gives the site an exceptional ecological character, and the use of native plants and shaded outdoor seating areas creates a visual and functional relationship between the institution and the environment (Figure 1). The most symbolic space is the tree-planting grove. Trees planted in the grove by visiting dignitaries and activists, including Wangari Maathai, a prominent Kenyan activist, represent various environmental milestones and accomplishments. (Figure 2&3) The grove serves as a



*Figure 1 - View of the integration of greenery in the main pathway of the campus, United Nations Offices in Nairobi, Gigiri, Kenya, June 2025. Photograph by author.*

living archive, documenting the campus's evolving identity as it grows and changes over time. The grove differs from monumental stone and steel structures in that the trees will grow and mature over time, transforming the landscape into a dynamic record of the campus' users and their engagement.

Light enters the interior of the buildings through lou-  
vered and clerestory glazing, producing a bright interior that



*Figure 2 -View of the Tree Grove, United Nations Offices in Nairobi, Gigiri, Kenya, June 2025. Photograph by author.*



*Figure 3- China's tree placard in the Tree Grove, United Nations Offices in Nairobi, Gigiri, Kenya, June 2025. Photograph by author.*

is in harmony with the shaded exterior walking paths. The buildings do not incorporate prominent vernacular motifs; instead,

their generous spatiality and responsiveness to the environment demonstrate Kenyan values of community and hospitality. Therefore, the UNON campus exhibits a hybrid identity: global in its institutional purpose, modernist in form, and local in its environmental and social context.

### **The Irrational Campus: Unplanned Occupation**

A stark contrast to the previous locations in this research was my visit to the United Nations Office at Nairobi. At Kariakoo and Umubano, identity was expressed through human density and adaptability, but at the UN-Habitat campus, identity was expressed through order and symbolism. The moment I entered the campus from Nairobi's main street into Gigiri, the feeling



*Figure 4 -View of flag-lined entry promenade, United Nations Offices in Nairobi, Gigiri, Kenya, June 2025. Photograph by author.*

changed immediately. Wide pathways, manicured greenery, and many embassies characterized the area. Upon entering the security gate, there is a long flag-lined promenade, rows of national flags lined either side of the walkway, evoking a sense of global unity (Figure 4). The experience of movement through the campus was one of fluidity rather than the monumental grid-patterned layout typical of much of the International Style of architecture. The pathways on the campus curved and flowed through shaded courtyards and open lawns, with minimal distinction between the formal and informal areas (Figure 5). Openness such as this is rare in diplomatic architecture, which is usually hierarchical and closed.



*Figure 5 -View of showing outdoor spaces and materiality, with the integration of greenery, United Nations Offices in Nairobi, Gigiri, Kenya, June 2025. Photograph by author.*

The materiality of the campus reinforced this relationship between formality and approachability. Concrete and brick used in the construction of the campus recalled the modernist legacy of post-independence architecture. At the same time, the wood paneling and shaded circulation routes added a visual dimension to the goals of sustainability. These materials together represent Kenya's developing identity as a regional leader in sustainable development policies.

Inside the conference rooms, the spaces were large and had low, even lighting, filtered through the timber ceiling structure, creating a sense of closeness regardless of size. It was a formal space without being spectacular (Figure 6). The architectural restraint appeared deliberate and reflected a mature national identity that did not rely on large symbolic gestures to assert its authority. As planned, the campus was still hosting informal scenes of life. Employees took their lunches outside; they met in shaded courtyards for informal discussions and walked between buildings along garden paths.



*Figure 6 - Interior view of main conference room, United Nations Offices in Nairobi, Gigiri, Kenya, June 2025. Photograph by author.*

These minor everyday occurrences provided the space with an unspoken rhythm, a quiet counterpoint to the formal diplomacy taking place in the conference rooms. When I left the campus, I thought about how calm it felt when compared to the frenetic activity of Nairobi's streets. The experience of the complex was one of diplomacy translated into space, with care, rationalism, and symbolism, and it embraced evidence of how people live and adapt. While Kariakoo and Umubano demonstrate architectural identity through the presence of people and their informal adaptations, gestures, and authorship, the UN-Habitat has evolved

through institutional authorship. The design of the campus reflected this goal of an assertive modern identity. A combination of a concrete and brick palette, well-manicured landscaping, and a sequence of formal spaces articulated the values of order, stability, and environmental awareness. The qualities that have granted the campus its authority thus far also tie it to a global aesthetic system based on colonial legacies. Unlike the localized expressions of Kariakoo and the community-built nature of Umubano, the UN-Habitat represents a hybrid identity: Kenyan in terms of place and symbolism; however, Western in terms of spatial organization and institutional framework.

This hybridity marks an evolutionary phase of African architectural identity, transitioning from colonial control to post-colonial authorship within a framework of global legitimacy. While UN-Habitat's architecture does not reject its colonial legacy, it transforms it into a new diplomatic form, linking modernity with international recognition. Unlike the human-driven dynamism of Kariakoo and Umubano, UN-Habitat offers little room for visible adaptation, with buildings maintained with institutional precision. Yet small human gestures, such as employees eating outside, spontaneous gatherings, and the tree-planting grove, soften its structured order, allowing for human and ecological presence in a diplomatic environment. But while

employees adapt the courtyards for lunch, this is authorized informality. The lived-authorship characteristic of the Kariakoo Market is almost impossible to find here. Here, the unplanned is present but constrained, positioning UNON as a case where rational design absorbs everyday practices without being transformed by them. But through this subtle coexistence of control and participation, the UN-Habitat illustrates how architecture can simultaneously embody multiple identities. The 'planned' is not merely a colonial authority; however, it is also a postcolonial assertion. The campus enabled Kenya to participate in the global sphere as a host and a participant in shaping urban futures. It resides in the environmental incorporation of Karura Forest, in the informal usage of the exterior and interior courtyards, and in the layered symbolism of the trees planted by local and global figures (Figure 7). Thus, the UN-Habitat exemplifies the ongoing dichotomy between planned authorship and lived authorship in African architecture. The UN-Habitat indicates that identity does not occur solely at the point of flexible or user-based form; however, it can arise in the moments of people's subtle inhabiting and re-interpreting more rigid systems. The UNON campus demonstrates a carefully controlled architecture in which unplanned events only happen within the boundaries set by the institution. And unlike the market or the



*Figure 7- View of interior garden pathway, United Nations Offices in Nairobi, Gigiri, Kenya, June 2025. Photograph by author.*

school, these acts of unplanned events merely occupy it within a system that remains unchanged.

The UNON complex sits at the most controlled point along the spectrum of identity. The space in Kariakoo is constantly negotiated by users because of both an informal economy and the need to improvise; the project remains institutionally sealed off from the informal changes. Rather than being adapted by users, the campus identity is shaped through diplomatic representation, environmental sensibility, and campus order. There are moments when the campus is occupied informally; however, these occupations have no impact on the structure of power inherent in

the campus. Therefore, the design illustrates how post-colonial architecture can create an identity through the continued management of visibility, access, and institutional control rather than through the negotiation of spatial identity. The UNON establishes a condition that exposes how rational architectural systems can absorb everyday activity while preserving institutional authority, producing identity through management rather than participation.

# **Kenyatta International Conference**

## **Centre (1973) :**

### **Monumentality in Use**

The Kenyatta International Conference Center (KICC), opened in 1973 in Nairobi, is one of the most significant architectural symbols of post-independence ambitions in Eastern Africa. Standing at the heart of Kenya's capital city, the cylindrical tower and surrounding amphitheater are both symbolic and monumental. Commissioned during a time of optimism when architecture across the continent served as a means of self-expression and determination. The KICC was an expression of a young nation positioned to be part of a worldwide network of modernity.

Commissioned by the President of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, and designed by Norwegian architect Karl Henrik Nostvik and prominent Kenyan architect David Mutiso, the KICC was an intentional effort to combine international modernist ideals with Kenyan symbolism. The sheer size demonstrated the confidence and authority of a newly formed government. Functioning as both a conference center and a civic monument, it is an example of architecture intentionally used as an instrument for identity development. Over the last fifty years, it has transitioned from an exclusive venue for elite political gatherings to one that hosts

public events, exhibitions, and festivals. Its large-scale presence has been reinterpreted by Nairobi residents every day, with the open plaza used, photographs taken of the skyline, and the roof climbed for panoramic views of the city. This movement from exclusivity to inclusiveness illustrates the broader changes in post-colonial identity from state-authored architecture to publicly inhabited space.

While the state planned the KICC to provide a physical manifestation of national identity and legitimacy, it has taken on new meanings through public use and tourism. The KICC, therefore, is not just a representation of Kenya's post-independence ambitions, but also a representation of how planned design can eventually become lived authorship as architecture continues to grow and develop with the people it was created to represent. It sits at a point on the spectrum where intended architecture is preserved yet renegotiated through public occupation and collective use.

### **The Monument to Nationhood: The Planned Framework**

There was considerable architectural activity in Kenya as the country sought to showcase its newly independent status to the world. The KICC, completed in 1973, was a product of this ambition, standing as a symbol of the nation's progress ten

years after gaining independence. The KICC represents the optimistic and contradictory nature of Kenya's early post-colonial era. After gaining independence from Britain in 1963, architecture and urban planning were significant tools for governments to define themselves politically and culturally, as discussed in the previous section. However, the use of modernist elements such as glass and steel contained remnants of the country's colonial past and created an intertwined and contested history of architecture in Africa.<sup>15</sup>

In Kenya, the first decade of independence was marked by the consolidation of power under the Kenya African National Union (KANU) and the rule of President Jomo Kenyatta. In addition to establishing a strong and stable state, the government initiated several civic and monumental projects intended to symbolize the emergence of a proud and modern republic. When the KICC was first commissioned, it was as the headquarters of KANU; however, its purpose quickly grew into a national conference and cultural center that signaled Kenya's ambition for domestic unity and international stature.<sup>16</sup> The monumental presence of the KICC is in the Central Business District of Nairobi, directly adjacent to Parliament, City Hall, and Uhuru Park. This positioning was deliberate. And post-colonial capitals have utilized their cities' visual landscape to solidify political authority.<sup>17</sup> By placing the KICC at the physical and symbolic heart of the city, Kenya

presented itself as a modern African state capable of hosting regional and international events, thereby demonstrating national sovereignty.

Mutiso and Nøstvik's collaboration is indicative of a common trend across the continent, characterized by a partnership between foreign expertise and emerging local professionals.<sup>18</sup> This reliance on foreign expertise also demonstrates the contradictions of post-colonial authorship. The KICC's design reflects a heavy influence of modernist rationalism, a style that represented efficiency, control, and order, values that were inherited from the colonial system. However, the design also contains subtle references to Kenyan vernacular forms, specifically in the cylindrical tower inspired by traditional huts and grain silos. Thus, it represents a hybrid modernism, neither completely Western nor completely indigenous. The project attempted to localize global modernity without abandoning it, resulting in a spatial language that paralleled Kenya's complex political development: outwardly committed to global progress, yet inwardly focused on national self-definition.

Built during a time of Pan-African solidarity, it hosted significant events, such as the 1981 Organization of African Unity meeting, highlighting Kenya's role as a regional diplomatic center. And was one of many monuments of modernity being built across African capitals that would serve both as practical

infrastructure and ideological statements.<sup>19</sup> Like other monumental projects across Africa, such as the Independence Arch in Accra, the KICC represented an attempt to realize the ideals of political independence through monumental architecture that engaged in a global modernist discourse.

Although monumental forms may represent unity, they can mask social inequality and exclude those who are not members of the elite. For example, it was initially inaccessible to anyone except the political elite. Its grand plaza and controlled interior spaces reinforced the state's hierarchies and replicated the spatial legacy of colonial governance.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Monumental Form: Architectural Description**

Kenyatta International Conference Centre (KICC) stands out as a distinctively modern and uniquely Kenyan building in Nairobi's rapidly changing skyline. This tower's cylindrical form and 28-story design that subtly tapers to the top, along with its upper-level viewing platform, make it an instantly recognizable building from afar. The form of this tower was intended to be reminiscent of the grain silos found throughout Kenya and the circular shape of many traditional Kenyan homes, thus incorporating elements of local vernacular architecture into a distinctly modernist structure.

The space surrounding the tower is formed by a series of steps, including the amphitheater and podium, which create a



*Figure 1- Nostvik and Mutiso, View of cylindrical shape of the tower, Kenyatta International Conference Centre, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2025.*

horizontal space that contrasts with the tower's vertical aspect. The tower itself is primarily made of reinforced concrete. It features flat, smooth surfaces with subtle geometric ornamentation in some areas of the building. At the same time, windows are arranged in rhythmic vertical rows that reinforce the tower's visual height while allowing natural light into the building's interior. The building's overall floor plan follows a functionalist model that emphasizes the building's use as a conference centre, office space, and public area, all of which reflect the modernist ideals of efficiency and order. In contrast,

the building's overall massing and exterior design emphasize its status as a monument to state authority.

Movement within the building occurs in a central core, where elevators and stairwells provide access to different floors. In contrast, several public plazas and terrace spaces offer a connection between the building and the city at ground level and encourage pedestrian activity. Movement to the building's uppermost levels occurs via an elevator to a rooftop deck, where visitors can enjoy panoramic views of the city of Nairobi and the surrounding landscape, transforming the KICC into an observational and spectacular vantage point.



*Figure 2 - Nostvik and Mutiso, View of amphitheater, Kenyatta International Conference Centre, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2025.*

Inside the building, several large conference rooms and an amphitheater have been built, the latter used to host political meetings and other cultural events. Inside the building, several large open floor plans, exposed concrete surfaces, and limited ornamental details exist, emphasizing the building's function while maintaining an atmosphere of grandeur. Several subtle references to Kenyan culture, including circular motifs and proportional relationships inspired by traditional Kenyan forms, exist in the building's interior, even though the building is a modernist structure with a distinctly localized character. The building's form communicates both efficiency and authority, and its public plaza and terrace spaces create opportunities for social interaction, establishing the building as both a monument to state authority and a location increasingly claimed by people going about their daily lives.

### **Reclaiming the Monument: Unplanned Occupation**

My experience of accessing the Kenyatta International Conference Center (KICC) was challenging. Initially, I had difficulty gaining access to areas perceived as politically sensitive. At the time, there were frequent protests and political unrest in Nairobi, which created a dangerous and uncomfortable environment around the KICC. It was not until the fifth attempt that I had someone guide me through the complex.



*Figure 3 - Nostvik and Mutiso, street view of the tower, Kenyatta International Conference Centre, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2025.*

When approaching the KICC from each of the two possible entrance points, I experienced space differently. On the upper side of the KICC, the building appears vertically dominant over the rest of the city, and all else is small compared to the tower. In this way, the KICC exemplifies vertical authority. When viewed from the lower side, the KICC's horizontal and vertical elements form a visually striking, symmetrical shape.

While the indoor and outdoor plazas provide vibrant social spaces, such as schoolchildren taking their annual field trip, working professionals going about their day, street vendors selling goods, and pictures of tourists taken by professional

photographers, they also create a sense of separation between the state authority of the KICC and the daily lives of people in Nairobi.

Another example of the KICC being used to express the hierarchy of access and visibility is the vertical way visitors move through the building. Office spaces that run along the tower's perimeter offer panoramic views of the city, while interior spaces are generally hidden from view. The rooftop deck can only be accessed via an elevator and provides a complete view of Nairobi's urban grid, enabling visitors to see KICC's relationship to the city (Figure 4). This layering of access and view creates symbolic parallels to the hierarchical nature of politics. Some



*Figure 4 - Nostvik and Mutiso, schoolchildren on the rooftop deck looking out to the Nairobi Skyline, Kenyatta International Conference Centre, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2025.*

spaces are visible and accessible to everyone, while others are closed off to the public.

Inside the KICC, I saw examples of how the building uses a mix of formal and informal elements to create a welcoming atmosphere. The conference rooms are formal and feature large portrait paintings of national leaders, symbolizing the institution's authority. However, the Tsavo Ballroom is less intimidating and is suitable for conventions and other events. While concrete is the primary material used throughout the building, it features red, blue, and green accents and partially open first-floor windows that allow natural ventilation and light to enter, providing a softer, more welcoming feel.

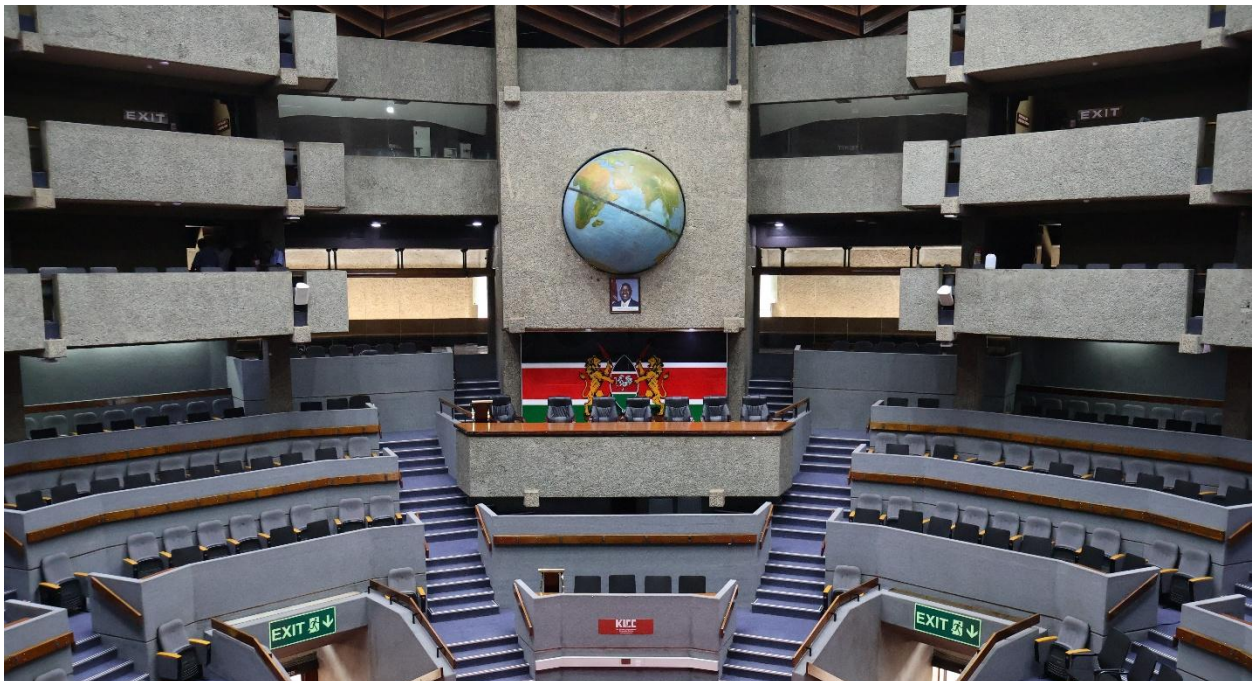


Figure 5 - Nostvik and Mutiso, Interior view of the amphitheater, with photograph of President William Ruto, Kenyatta International Conference Centre, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2025.

At ground level, I witnessed KICC's willingness to engage with the general public, as airline offices, the M-Pesa e-commerce office (the primary banking company among Kenyans), a restaurant, and various groups of school children contributed to the creation of social spaces within the primarily administrative complex (Figure 6). In this way, the public is creating a form of "lived authorship," a process by which it asserts its presence and interprets the KICC's use and meaning, despite the limitations of the building's design and political programming. However, at levels above the first floor, the KICC is primarily

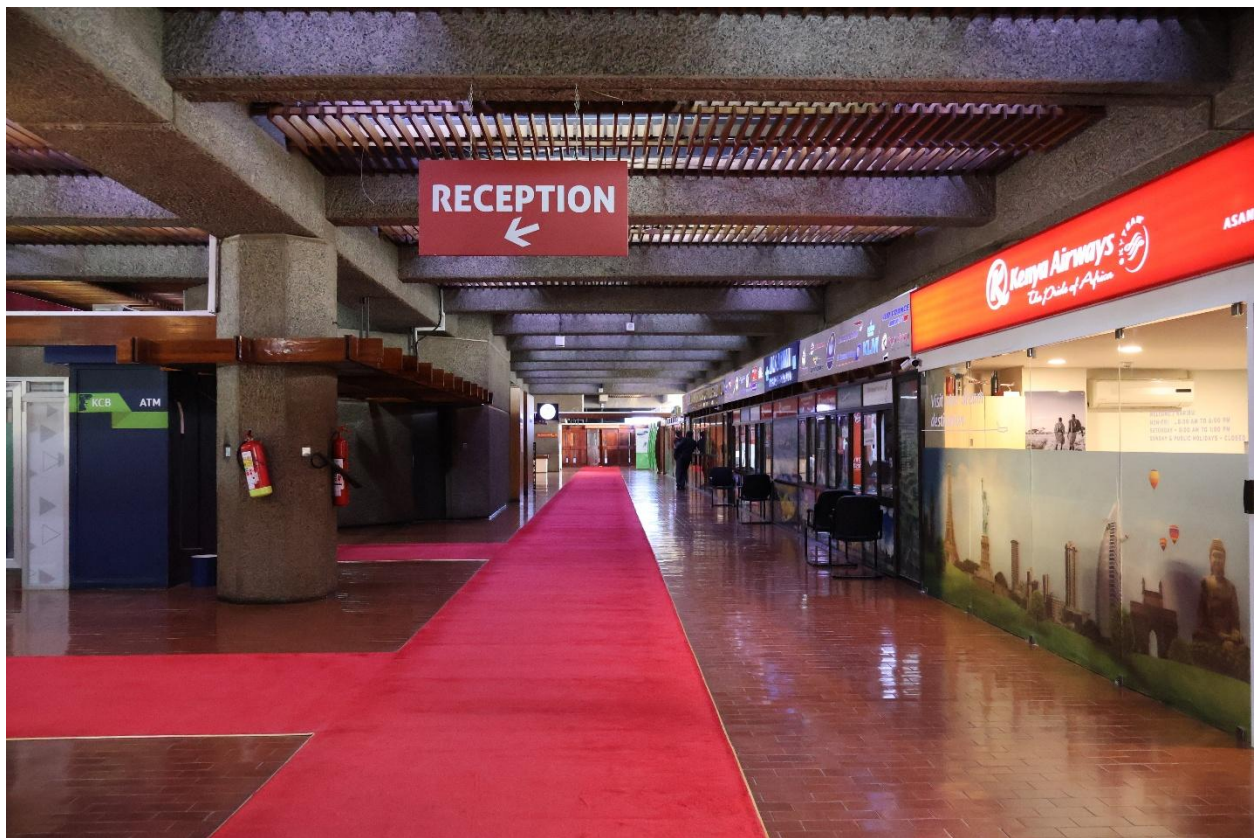


Figure 6 - Nostvik and Mutiso, interior hallway lined with public offices for Nairobi residents, Kenyatta International Conference Centre, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2025.

ceremonial and administrative in nature, and the public's ability to adapt the building is limited by both the building's design and the intended political use of the building.

I experienced sensory reactions to the KICC, which deepened my understanding. The tower's size inspired awe, while plazas and terraces fostered social ties. Light through narrow windows cast patterns, contrasting with the background noise of cars and students outside the quiet interior.

While the Tsavo Ballroom is used for more public-facing events, it still maintains a level of formality. The few material gestures made towards comfort, such as colorful accent walls and partially open windows, do little to mitigate the overall feeling of control and stiffness. But despite the core's rigid nature, there are some examples of unplanned access. A significant finding regarding the KICC's permeability was that I was advised to try entering the amphitheater through a Christian church that holds regular worship services, after being denied entry many times. Access to the structure through religious services revealed an unplanned entrance to the monument. So, the KICC's identity also shifts over time. On weekdays, its spaces



*Figure 7 - Nostvik and Mutiso, interior view of the Tsavo Ballroom used for public events and conferences as shown, Kenyatta International Conference Centre, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2025.*

are dominated by administrative routines and political formality; on weekends and during public events, the plaza and amphitheater are reactivated as civic space, temporarily loosening institutional boundaries. This example of re-authorship clearly illustrates how a monument's functionality can be used to meet community needs. This moment demonstrates that while KICC's form remains fixed and symbolic, its meaning is continually renegotiated through everyday public use rather than architectural change. But this remains one of the few examples of human authorship.

Compared with other sites studied in this research, the KICC sits directly across from spaces such as Kariakoo Market and Umubano Primary School, where architecture is used to support human adaptation and participation, but is more negotiable than the UNON complex. Where those spaces support and enable flexible use and community authorship, the KICC limits and selectively allows user appropriation, reinforcing the notion that state-authored architecture will not easily adapt to the practices of everyday users. While the UNON complex exhibits institutional dominance throughout the campus, the KICC demonstrates a limited yet visible form of public reinterpretation at its edges. Even though the KICC has begun to incorporate more public-facing events and commercial activities into its program, these activities occur primarily on the ground floor, leaving most of the upper floors and the building core untouched by the public. In the post-independence context, KICC shows how civic participation can sustain national identity by inhabiting symbolic architecture rather than redesigning it.

## **Architecture after Completion**

As opposed to the common presumption that individuals produce meaning in architecture, this study presents evidence that in post-colonial East Africa, meaning-making is linked with the history of colonial town planning, national building, institutional authorities, etc.; in other words, it cannot be separated

from those historical processes. Architectural identity is not created by use alone but through a dynamic relationship between planned structures and unplanned uses. These are relationships that have significant cultural, political, and historical implications. The four case studies indicate that for East African architecture to reach its full potential, the planned and the unplanned need to coexist, with the objectives of design combined with the creative aspects of daily life, even if this binary is not perfectly balanced.

Through examination of four locations across Kenya, Tanzania, and Rwanda, this article will redefine architectural identity as a dynamic state produced by tension (not resolution). Each of the four locations examined represents a unique manner of authoring.

At Kariakoo Market, the unplanned improvisational uses of the community dominate the original formal design, creating an urban identity based on continuous negotiations and adaptability. At Umubano Primary School, informal practices of care extend and humanize a formally designed structure for healing and reinforce (do not displace) the architect's intended meaning. At the United Nations Office at Nairobi, everyday informality is allowed but is absorbed into the rational system, thereby maintaining institutional authority and preventing collective re-authorship. At the Kenyatta International Conference Center, the

public occupation of the center changes its symbolic meaning without altering the center's architectural form. As a result, civic life may interpret the state-led monument while maintaining the monument's physical authority.

In combination, these four sites demonstrate that the unplanned works differently depending on context: sometimes it dominates the formal design; sometimes it extends the formal design; sometimes it is contained by the formal design; and sometimes it changes the meaning of the space without changing its form. Recognizing this continuum has led me to understand that identity in African architecture is not fixed in design intent or material form, but is continually negotiated over time, through politics, and through human presence. Together, the four locations provide examples of how the future of African architecture will not depend on making the planned better or removing the unplanned, but on accepting the dialogue between the two. The unplanned should not be viewed simply as a residual aspect of disorganization or necessity, but as a means of reclaiming the community's ability to influence and take control of systems that have been historically determined by colonial planning.

Collectively, these differences indicate that architectural strength in African contexts does not arise from the articulation of a single vision or ideology, but from architecture's ability to remain open to negotiation over time. The unplanned

aspects identified in this study are neither a failure of modern architecture nor a divergence from intentional design. Instead, it is a continuation of traditional African spatial practices, which emphasize adaptability, collective authorship, and social responsiveness, all of which existed before colonial town planning and continue after colonialism.

When architecture provides space for such practices, it remains relevant, resilient, and rooted in everyday experiences.

In terms of future directions, this framework provides a basis for African architecture to move away from inherited Western standards that value fixity, control, and single authorship. Rather than regarding informality and adaptability as factors that need to be controlled or mitigated, architects and institutions should consider them to be important contributing elements to architectural identity. This does not mean giving up on design or planning, but rather rethinking architecture as a framework that encourages and supports transformation rather than resistance to it. Ultimately, architectural authorship would become distributed across time, among designers, users, institutions, and communities.

Overall, this research suggests that architecture in post-colonial Africa is strongest when viewed as an ongoing process rather than a completed object. Meaning is not located in form alone, nor is it generated through use alone, but is generated

through the continuous interplay between intention and occupation. If African architecture accepts this condition, it may once again be able to support collective life and allow buildings to evolve with the societies they serve, rather than existing independently of them.

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## Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> Beeckmans, Luce, and James R. Brennan. 2016. "In Between Improvisation, Compensation and Negotiation: A Socio-Spatial Analysis of Kariakoo Market (Dar Es Salaam) Dynamics under British Colonial Rule (1919-1961)." *History of Retailing and Consumption* 2, no. 1: 25-43
- <sup>2</sup> Mpembeni, C. E. M. 1975. "Construction of Kariakoo Market." *Tanzania Journal of Engineering and Technology* 2, no. 1 (1975).
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- <sup>4</sup> Matthew Maganga, "Socialising, Commerce and Trade: The African Market Hall in a Modernised World," *ArchDaily*, November 20, 2021, accessed September 11, 2025
- <sup>5</sup> Mpembeni, C. E. M. 1975. "Construction of Kariakoo Market." *Tanzania Journal of Engineering and Technology* 2, no. 1 (1975).
- <sup>6</sup> IPP Media (The Guardian, Dar es Salaam). 2025. Joseph Mwendapole (byline). "With Extensive Renovation Over, Kariakoo Market Reopens." February 3, 2025. (news report on 2024-25 reconstruction efforts following the 2021 fire).
- <sup>7</sup> Elleh, Nnamdi. 1997. *African Architecture: Evolution and Transformation*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- <sup>8</sup> Mathisen, Jay. 2012. "Education Reform in Rwanda: Impacts of Genocide and Reconstruction on School Systems." EdD diss., George Fox University. Digital Commons.
- <sup>9</sup> Miho Taka, "The Role of Education in Peacebuilding: Learner Narratives from Rwanda," *Journal of Peace Education* 17, no. 1 (2019): 107-122.
- <sup>10</sup> Miho Taka, "The Role of Education in Peacebuilding: Learner Narratives from Rwanda," *Journal of Peace Education* 17, no. 1 (2019): 107-122.
- <sup>11</sup> Mathisen, Jay. 2012. "Education Reform in Rwanda: Impacts of Genocide and Reconstruction on School Systems." EdD diss., George Fox University. Digital Commons.
- <sup>12</sup> ArchDaily. 2013. "Umubano Primary School / MASS Design Group." *ArchDaily*, May 19, 2013. Accessed September 20, 2025
- <sup>13</sup> Mathisen, Jay. 2012. "Education Reform in Rwanda: Impacts of Genocide and Reconstruction on School Systems." EdD diss., George Fox University. Digital Commons.
- <sup>14</sup> Simone, AbdouMaliq. 2004. "People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg." *Public Culture* 16, no. 3: 407-429.
- <sup>15</sup> Demissie, Fassil, ed. *Colonial Architecture and Urbanism in Africa: Intertwined and Contested Histories*. Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2012.
- <sup>16</sup> Manuel Herz, ed., *African Modernism: The Architecture of Independence, Ghana, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Zambia* (Zürich: Park Books AG, 2015).
- <sup>17</sup> Philipp Meuser and Adil Dalbai, eds., *Theorising Architecture in Sub-Saharan Africa: Perspectives, Questions, and Concepts* (Berlin: DOM Publishers, 2021).
- <sup>18</sup> Manuel Herz, ed., *African Modernism: The Architecture of Independence, Ghana, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Zambia* (Zürich: Park Books AG, 2015).
- <sup>19</sup> DOCOMOMO International, *Modernism in Africa: The Architecture of Angola, Ghana, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2024).

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<sup>20</sup> Demissie, Fassil, ed. *Colonial Architecture and Urbanism in Africa: Intertwined and Contested Histories*. Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2012.

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