

The Architectural Morphology: Narratives of the Elders of Dagoretti

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Architectural morphologies reflect the socio-political, cultural, and economic influences of their time and place. The illustration used is Dagoretti, Kenya, in the 1950s. This period, marked by the end of colonial rule, was traumatic for the people of Dagoretti, who suffered under the hegemony of the colonialists and their local collaborators. The painful experiences of this era remain largely unrecognized, hindering healing and reconciliation. The text raises questions about the nature of "official history" and whether an untold, unofficial history exists among the ordinary people of Dagoretti. It suggests that architectural expressions and human settlements, shaped by these socio-political forces, might provide insight into this counter-history. Through discussions with those who lived through the state of emergency, the paper seeks to understand how these individuals coped, whether they healed, and how their architectural expressions have evolved. It suggests that these counter-narratives might challenge official histories, which often reinforce subjugation and servitude, and could be key to achieving true liberation and positive change.

Shoes, Torch and Stove

‘My father’s new shoes, torch, and our precious pressure stove’ is how one of the elders began his narration, as the heavy rains drummed on the iron sheet roof of the house their mother had built several years after the Mau Mau uprising and state of emergency in Kenya. The elders narrated their experiences, perceptions, and perspectives to a group of scholars. The elders comprised a number of siblings led by their eldest sister, while the group of scholars comprised researchers from Kenya, India and the USA. The scholars were interested in elements of the philosophy, history and theory of architecture, especially the evolving of architectural and urban morphology in the area of Dagoretti in relation to Nairobi and Kenya in general; as it related to forms of knowledge production (creation), preservation, conveyance and dissemination, and more importantly alternative and subaltern narratives that are commonly subsumed, suppressed or overridden by the discursive power of hegemonic powers and their dominant narratives



I remember seeing, from the corner of my eye...I must have been around 6...those home-guards taking away my father's shoes, his torch, and the pump stove he had bought from Uganda.

From 1953 to 1955, the British colonial government employed armed Kikuyu Home Guards to police and surveil anyone they suspected to be fighting for Kenya's freedom.

We learn, through these stories, a past well remembered.

Official and unofficial Narratives

As Spivak (2023) puts it, 'the narrative of subalternity is always already subsumed by the discursive power of patriarchy, imperialism, and nationalism, which purport to both represent (in terms of politics) and represent (in terms of artistic renditions) the subaltern subject. More importantly the discussions with the Dagoretti elders followed a period of engagement with the conventional narratives garnered from visiting museums, archives, contemporary art galleries, and colonial, national and heritage sites such as the Karen Blixen Museum, Bomas of Kenya, and special exhibitions in the Nairobi National Museum. Therefore, it was envisioned that the discursive engagement with the elders would provide a backdrop for developing a deeper, richer and more nuanced understanding of morphology and knowledge creation in a combined, collaborative process and synergetic way, starting with the story of the shoes, torch, and the pressure stove.

Architectural Morphology

In discussing the architectural morphology of Dagoretti, the objective was to look at the evolution of form within the built environment including the changes in the formal syntax of the built form and layouts (e.g. courtyard homesteads, low rise and high rise structures etc) as their relationship to people evolved and changed. This includes the study of change of buildings and their use from a historical perspective. Architectural morphologies are reflective and indicative of political influences of their time and place. Since the inception of human settlements, the built form and their architecture may be seen to act as evolutionary open systems that are continually shaped and transformed by social and political events and by market forces. Hence, architectural morphology provides an understanding of the form, its establishment and reshaping processes, the spatial structure and the character of human settlements through an analysis of historical development processes and the constituent parts that compose settlements. This could assist in determining the transformation processes of urban fabrics by which the built environment acts as an element of a multidimensional form in a dynamic relationship where built structures shape and are shaped by the open spaces around them.

From the narratives and conversations with the elders concerning the evolution of architectural morphology in the area, six architectural archetypes become discernible over the decades:

- The pre-emergency traditional homesteads (pre 1950s)
- The emergency villages (1950s)
- The post emergency homesteads (1960s)
- The houses of independence/postcolonial homestead and tenements (1970s-1980s)
- The low rise apartments (1990-early 2000s)
- The (very) high rise apartments and tenements (2010 to date)

These radical and often traumatic phases form part of the elders lived experiences, from which we can reflect and glean the past.

The pre-emergency traditional homesteads (pre 1950s)

The elder proceeds with his narrative, “As I lay down, pretending to be deep asleep, I remember seeing from the corner of my eye- I must have been 6- those home guards taking my father’s new shoes, torch, and our precious pressure stove.’ A few days before these home-guards had just taken their parents to detention on suspicion of being Mau Mau sympathisers, now they had come to ransack their house for valuables, and indeed the home guards looted their most precious items. A few days later the home-guards would return with the order to have their homestead, comprised of several houses, be destroyed and the family forcefully and brutally be moved to the emergency ‘village’. The original homestead ordered to be demolished comprised of the traditional Kikuyu homestead, organically growing, with the hut of the Grandfather and the huts of his wives (Grandmothers) comprising the main compound while those of his married sons (including the elder’s father) forming subsidiary homesteads attached to their father’s homestead and were counted as part of the main homestead. This was most likely not the original home of their forefathers. Their grandparents and their great grandparents, had most probably been forcefully moved to this place from the more productive areas by the colonial government to pave way for the ‘White settlements’. Their predecessors had settled in this designated native reserve and had recreated their traditional architectural philosophies, history and theory. While the homestead existed in a rapidly changing politico-cultural, and socio-economic milieu, it changed very little until its sudden death during the state of emergency.

Why and how was the traditional homestead able to persist through the first five decades of colonialism in Kenya till the late 1950s when it was forcefully eradicated? The movement from the homestead to the ‘village’ which was more or less a concentration camp, ushered in the architecture of violence and oppression. This form of violence would continue into the independence era, especially with the numerous forceful evictions that continue to be experienced in the county to date. Thus, even after over 60 years of ‘independence’, Nairobi remains a monument to the colonial project of discriminatory citizenship, inequality and structural violence. Recent evictions have been justified under the banner of cleaning-up, new infrastructure, and ‘saving’ people from floods. The loss of the homestead is profound and just as traumatizing as the loss of the shoes, torch, and pressure stove.

The emergency villages (1950s)

In 1952, the colonial government declared a State of Emergency in a bid to stamp out the Mau Mau rebellion. One of the measures included "villagization" intended to isolate Mau Mau fighters in the forests from material and food supplies from the village homesteads. According to the elders, the colonial government considered the villages a security measure, justifying the villages as protection for 'loyal natives' who could now be easily guarded in those fortified villages, as well as be centrally provided with educational, agricultural and health services.

Families that had formerly lived on isolated traditional homesteads with households of about twenty to thirty individuals, were to now move to villages of over 1200 residents (Thurston 1987). The villagers were allowed to go back to and cultivate their holdings at their former lands, on condition they went back to their village before curfew, being found outside the village after curfew hours had lethal consequences. "This was how our uncle and cousin, who were hurrying back to the village from the farm, were shot dead, by that 'European Askari', who enjoyed shooting Africans, for only being a few minutes late. These villages are the perfect exemplar of the Architecture of Violence and Oppression.

The villages, which were in fact concentration camps, comprised of a series of huts, organised with military and policing objectives, devoid of historical and socio-cultural considerations, thereby breaking extended family ties. The villages were surrounded by stockade walls coupled with deep and wide trenches with sharpened lethal spikes. These were meant to keep the Mau Mau out, and constrain the villagers in. This archetype is curiously similar to the emerging gated communities (estates) that would become fashionable in subsequent decades. Similar also to the Colonial Villages, many of these 'upmarket' communities comprise of just a row or series of villas, bungalows, mansionettes, or apartments arranged in a utilitarian manner, devoid of historical and socio-cultural considerations, many built mainly following commercial interests, mostly with western based imagery, and surrounded by a fortified wall. How did this Architecture of Violence and Fear become a desirable goal? What can be done to restore our socio-cultural and contextual issues in our housing? With even social housing following the trend, providing houses using this capitalistic and traumatic model. This model provides housing in an extremely utilitarian manner, without basic social and community services

and amenities, without open spaces or playground for children, where children are locked indoors since playing on the road is unsafe, and where the children spend over two hours on a school bus to and from school.

The elders of Dagoretti stories uncover the long-hidden or less written colonial crimes by the British in Kenya, especially during the brutal war between the colonial government and the insurrectionist Mau Mau between 1952 and 1960, the final bloody decade of imperialism in East Africa. How long have the repercussions and reverberations been felt, and in which ways have they continued to be exhibited or revealed through the ensuing architectural morphology? Anderson (2011), the 'Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire', portray a teetering colonial empire in its final phase; employing whatever military and propaganda methods it could to preserve a particular order and structure. On the other hand the natives were also fighting to preserve or restore an order and structure that could no longer hold. For both the colonizer and the colonized, the centre was not holding and things were falling apart rapidly. Whereas the events of the 1950s decade were quite drastic and traumatizing, they most probably were just setting the stage for the more tumultuous decades in terms of architectural morphology and how the affected people would react, relate and interact with land and the built form.

Change in land tenure to individual ownership in Kenya in the preceding years, had resulted in most households 'owning' several distinct and fragmented holdings or separate plots geographically scattered all over. The Colonial government deemed this detrimental to agricultural development in Kenya. Therefore in 1953, the Swynnerton land consolidation plan was enacted so that those small fragments would be combined to form larger holdings and given to one individual in exchange of the said individuals giving up their other fragments elsewhere. The Swynnerton plan became easy to implement since the people had already been moved to villages and the Administration could do the consolidation without having to deal with established homesteads. Secondly, consolidation became a mechanism for rewarding loyalists with economic patronage, while punishing those deemed to be members of Mau Mau or their sympathizers. One elder continues the narration "With our father being in detention on the suspicion of being a Mau Mau sympathizer, we lost over 90% of what we originally owned, we got less than a tenth of what we had before, while the colonial collaborators -- home guards and chiefs, got over one hundred fold. But what could we do? When the

emergency was lifted in 1960, we left the village and returned to our new, very small plot to start afresh, but it was much better than the village, which was actually a prison. Then our father came back having miraculously survived years of brutal detention and torture, he was a pale shadow of his past, he was only a tenth of who he had been, but we were thankful to have him back. For many families their fathers, brothers and even mothers and sisters never came back, we had lost our grandparents in the emergency village.”

The post emergency homesteads (1960s)

A somber mood enveloped the room as the narrations proceeded. The losses occasioned by the emergency were profound. The loss of the traditional homestead planning principles, and socio-cultural norms guiding how people lived were seemingly altered forever. The elder’s mother who had to be strong, commenced the building of a new homestead. The first houses were extremely utilitarian, built with meager resources, by a woman-led household. The new homestead was devoid of many useful traditional concepts and philosophies of ordering human settlements that had guided the people for many generations. More than ten traumatic years in detention and the villages had completely altered the course of people’s lives and their architectural expression. The homestead was transformed to just a number of huts in an ostensibly unstructured compound, in which most activities would be performed. More huts would be added as and when the need arose and resources were available. Structures were erected with little regard to traditional planning principles. The Emergency had in a way ushered in ‘Modern Architecture’ whose main tenet was stripping away historical and cultural ‘luggage’ from the built form towards pure utilitarianism of ‘Form Follows Function’ resulting in built forms without a soul. Indeed the traumatic experiences that the family had gone through had been aimed at de-souling them.

Furthermore, instead of the extended family based traditional homestead, the new post-emergency homestead became nuclear family based. The War for Independence had turned cousins into bitter foes, and many families had been split. According to the elders, The unfair land rewarding system through the Swynnerton plan had massively increased inequalities within extended families, with some households owning more than a thousand times what the others owned. This would have a big impact on subsequent land use, human settlement, and built form patterns. In the end,

most families left the villages for their new lands. However, some, especially the Mau Mau families, had nowhere to go, and more than half a century later, some generations of the displaced continue to live in Emergency era villages without any legal ownership documents. Some of these villages have become major town sections, while some have developed into ‘slum like’ settlements with residents living in grossly sordid conditions.



Outside the Saint John the Baptist Catholic Church, Riruta Nairobi
Photo: D. Wamugi

Therefore at independence, distinct economic cases emerged, with vast and rapidly growing socio-economic differences, with varied architectural expressions and human settlement patterns. The era of independence saw the explosive growth of slums in Nairobi including areas abutting Dagoretti, to house the poor, who in the main did not own the structures but rented them from the ‘land owners’ or quasi land owners who came to

be referred to as ‘Slum Lords’. The second category, of which our elder could fall into, steadily developed their homestead. With increasing income and sales of portions of their land, they were able to eventually build a large family iron roofed stone house. A dream come true for a middle income household. “This was like the “houses of the Europeans”, the toilets and the kitchen were inside the house, we did not need to go outside, when it was raining.” However all the bedrooms were inside the house and the boys wished they had their own huts for their own ‘independence’ like other boys. However their father who “valued the education of both his sons and daughters would have none of it, he argued that the lack of control and independence the children sought would be detrimental to their education and future. Having lost most of their land, their only hope was education. True to its intended purpose all the children successfully completed their education, and moved out when they were ‘financially independent’”. With the ‘children’ moving out ‘the house became too big’ and lonely for the parents, they would only use one or two rooms. The house would roar back to life only when the ‘children and the grandchildren’ came back. “I wish the house would have been more adaptable to the changing needs of the parents, sometimes the big house felt cold and depressing”. Eventually all the ‘children’ who were now grown ups moved out to build their own houses following the same model of the “houses of the Europeans” as the their parents had done. Some built bungalows while others built storeyed houses all with subsidiary support buildings such as stores, animal pens, and guest houses. An elder quipped “as all my children are leaving the home, I will move into the guest house and rent out the big house’. In addition, with increasing income their mother was able to build some tenement row housing comprising of two roomed units to rent out for income. The home became more cosmopolitan, and transformed from a rural to an urban outlook. Indeed the area’s population density had rapidly increased. With the increasing sales of land and the building of tenement houses, the area lost its rural character. Soon the number of the ‘new comers’ greatly exceeded that of the ‘original land owners’.

The houses of independence/postcolonial homestead and tenements (1970s-1980s)

Close by in Nairobi, ‘independence’ also saw an emerging African bourgeoisie, rapidly occupying the upper strata of society in the newly ‘independent’ country. Well aware of the pathos of their position, and at

the same time, now having almost boundless opportunities for wealth, power and fulfilment in the new neo-colonial state, they began amassing wealth at an amazing speed probably to ensure they put a vast distance between them and poverty. The emerging African bourgeoisie, rapidly occupied formally 'White locations' in Nairobi such as Kileleshwa, Kilimani, Lavington, Karen and Muthaiga, as the new upper class. The middle upper class moved into the formally 'Asian locations' such as Parklands, Westlands, and Ngara. Whereas the architectural morphology of these areas had steadily evolved over the decades, in the main it maintained a low population density, and its low rise structures character until the turn of the millennium, which saw their replacement with multi-storeyed apartment blocks, with over twenty residential units on at least an acre of land. While there was an outcry concerning 'overdevelopment' that had greatly outstripped the carrying capacity of existing infrastructure and services, this was a far cry from the over twenty to fifty storey buildings that would emerge in the 2020s. Other locations such as Huruma and Pipeline, already had these grossly overpopulated, squalid, and unventilated, poorly lit, extremely dense high rise blocks that were commonly referred to as 'vertical slums'. The main motivation of the owners seems to be to get maximum rent regardless of the conditions their tenants live in. By the 2010s, this high rise apartments epidemic was now threatening the upmarket areas of Kileleshwa, Kilimani, Lavington and Parklands. The residents have put up a seemingly futile resistance to this 'defilement', while other residents have moved out.

Could the same trend be threatening Dagoretti? Some of the elders exhibited concern over the new massive high-rise multi-storey developments taking place in their location, decrying the loss of their old homes, Sacred Mugumo trees, burial grounds, and socio-cultural historical heritage sites among others. Other elders posit that their days are almost over and land use should take into consideration current needs and demands. They argued that those upmarket developments would transform the area into another Lavington. However, other elders are appalled by the changes occurring in up market estates such as Lavington. As the sound of the rain on the roof got even louder one elder broke the silence with the remark "this reminds me of the 1961 rains and floods, beware of these rains, the floods could be worse". Indeed, floods were sweeping through Nairobi, engulfing several neighbourhoods including upmarket ones such as Runda, while in Huruma, Dagoretti and other low income areas some of the high rise buildings collapsed with colossal loss of life and property. Experts blame this on the changing architectural morphology and land use patterns.

Riparian reserves have been built upon, and rivers blocked. Increased densification, loss of open green spaces and trees, canalization of rivers and other forms of environmental degradation have led to reduced water absorption, increased surface water flow and flash floods.

However, an elder reminds the group “Nairobi was built on a wet land, the water just wants to go back home”. The elder is against the current trend of development that will only “result in ‘tears’, as we continue losing our people and hard-earned wealth, due to the unbridled and unscrupulous pursuit of wealth”. The elder who had been so quiet and pensive for some time asked the gathered group “is there any hope for a better and more appropriate and better guided housing development plan that respects and reminds the new generation of our culture and values, that is safe and sustainable, or all is gone with the wind? Is it possible like our father’s shoes, torch, and pressure stove’ they are gone forever?”

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