

Harnessing Cultural Heritage for Locally Relevant Interior Design Solutions for New Apartments in Nairobi

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Abstract

Nairobi is currently experiencing a mushrooming of high-rise apartments in tandem with Kenya's growing economy and expanding middle class in the urban areas. This phenomenon is keenly evident in historically low-density residential areas in the western part of Nairobi. It is a transformation driven by a high demand for housing in a city with a rapidly growing population and rising incomes. While these apartments contribute to alleviating the need for housing, their interior designs represent a missed opportunity for innovative and culturally relevant spatial solutions. They are reflective of global North perspectives on apartment living and material finishes. This paper argues that there is a need to re-evaluate how we approach the interior design of these apartments since the new apartments provide an opportunity to develop innovative and culturally relevant spatial solutions for interior spaces that reflect the unique identity of the local African cultural context in the global South. **Relevance to innovation** The paper introduces the concept of appropriate local cultural heritage as an important factor for consideration, and incorporation in the design process, as an integral basis for the development of more creative and innovative interior design spaces for apartments in the global South. The issue is explored through the discussion of new apartments currently under development in a neighborhood in the western suburbs of Nairobi; the purpose being to provoke debate on ways in which the European-inspired apartment interior designs and finishes could be re-conceptualized to generate interior design solutions that are better suited for the African context of Nairobi.

Keywords. Apartments, Cultural Heritage, Design Practice, Interior Design, Kileleshwa

Introduction

Over the last decade, Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya, has experienced rapid population growth, high economic growth, and with it rising incomes and a growing middle class: Nairobi's population as at the last National census in 2009 was 3.1 million (KNBS, 2010).

By 2014, its population had increased, significantly, by 30 percent, to 4 million (World Bank, 2014). The rise of the middle class in Kenya, many of whom are domiciled in urban areas such as Nairobi, as is typical of many cosmopolitan cities, has been documented as rising steadily between 2006 and 2012, from an estimated 3 million to 5 million (Shah and Ruparel, 2016). (See Figure 2). The above factors have arguably driven the demand for housing, which in the western suburbs of the city, has resulted in the transformation of low-rise single family residential buildings such as bungalows into high-rise apartment type housing. Apartments are now the largest segment of the housing starts in this part of the city. In the latest report by the Kenya Bankers Association (KBA), apartments constituted 60 percent of residential sale transactions (KBA, 2017) thus making them the most significant type of residential building favoured by developers to meet the housing demand of the middle class.

While the new apartments are a welcome contribution to meeting the housing demand of the expanding middle class, defined as having incomes between 23, 670 and 199, 999 Kenyan shillings (Standard Digital, 2015), their interior designs, as currently manifested, do not represent an appropriate nor innovative spatial articulation of interiors within the local African cultural context of Nairobi. They represent a direct imitation of perspectives from the global North on apartment living and material finishes.

However, given the emergence of apartments as the predominant form of formal housing they do represent an opportunity to harness cultural heritage for the development of innovative, culturally relevant and appropriate solutions for interior spaces that reflect both the cultural African context of the global South and appropriate culturally defined aesthetic sensibilities and values.

The need to articulate ways in which cultural heritage can be harnessed for local interior design solutions for the upcoming apartments is the focus of the discussion in this paper as is the need for interior design professionals and educators to debate, articulate, and define what these cultural values are or ought to be and to encourage their incorporation in both professional practice and the training of interior design students.

Arguably, one can only be second best in emulating others but the best if one is original and innovative; and drawing from the local African cultural heritage affords local interior designers an opportunity to be relevantly creative, and to forge a unique design identity in their spatial solutions.

Method

A qualitative approach was adopted for this study. The methods employed in this investigation were a combination of both case study and document review: A case study of a fast transforming residential neighbourhood, Kileleshwa, situated in the western suburbs of Nairobi city was undertaken. Kileleshwa, located just 4 kilometres from Nairobi's Central Business District is an extreme example of rapid physical transformation from low-rise residential bungalows to high-rise apartment buildings currently taking place in the western residential zone of the city. It is the interiors of these apartments that formed the locus of the empirical study which included observation and photographic documentation of apartment interior spaces. A document review of relevant literature was

undertaken to augment the field observations made during several site visits to various apartment blocks in the neighbourhood. The focus was on the characteristics of the interior designs implemented in the various apartments as well as those featured in the promotional materials of these developments including brochures and project websites.

Results and discussion

Issues related to cultural heritage, apartment characteristics in the case study area, and possible means of developing the appropriate local cultural heritage are discussed in three separate thematic topics.

Value of cultural heritage

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations body charged with the conservation of world cultural heritage, recognizes the importance of cultural heritage as broadly conceptualized to encompass not only, cherished historic monuments and museums, but also, traditional practices and contemporary art forms (UNESCO, 2016). The organization also acknowledges the link between cultural heritage and creativity as encapsulated in this statement, “Both heritage and creativity lay the foundations for vibrant, innovative and prosperous knowledge societies.” (ibid). UNESCO has, over the years, developed a number of cultural conventions that pay homage to the importance of various dimensions of cultural heritage. The notable conventions include: The Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2015); The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003); The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001); and, The Convention for the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972). (ibid).

The 2015 and the 2003 conventions seek to promote the diversity of cultural expressions and safeguard the intangible cultural heritage respectively. Especially significant is the definition given by UNESCO for intangible cultural heritage, which it defines as: the practices representations, expressions, knowledge, skills as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. (UNESCO, 2016b).

UNESCO goes further to point out that the:

intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. (UNESCO, 2016b).

Thus, UNESCO clearly identifies the parameters for understanding a dimension of cultural heritage; intangible cultural heritage, and points out its relevance to creativity. Okumu notes further that the 2003 UNESCO convention, proposes five broad ‘domains’, that he identifies as, oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; performing arts; social practices, rituals and festive

events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; and traditional craftsmanship. (Okumu, 2016, p.45) This makes clear the richness of the concept of cultural heritage even when limited to the dimension of intangibility.

Legislation exists in Kenya on cultural heritage but as Kyule argues, it is, “outdated and unresponsive” and “inadequate to attract and sustain beneficial interest in cultural heritage” (Kyule, 2016, p. 30). However, contrarily, Okumu argues that the presence of policies such as, the National Policy on Traditional Knowledge, Genetic Resources and Traditional Cultural Expressions, the National Policy on Culture and Heritage, the Policy on Traditional Medicine and Medicinal Plants and the Constitution of Kenya (2010), are all evidence Kenya’s efforts to safeguard, “the wisdom in traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions.” (Okumu, 2016, p. 53). Nevertheless, the reality on the ground is that despite an acknowledgement on paper of the importance of cultural heritage, its lack of proper implementation results in its failure to be prioritized in areas of opportunity such as residential building construction. Okumu, acknowledging the significance of cultural heritage, notes that Intangible Cultural Heritage is important for not only, “present and future identities,” but also, “innovation and development.” (Okumu, 2016, p. 57)

New apartment characteristics

Kileleshwa, is a suburban residential neighborhood situated in the western suburbs of Nairobi. It is a neighbourhood that has experienced rapid transformation over the last decade. Kileleshwa is but an extreme case of the radical changes in housing occurring in this western zone of the city. From a leafy green suburb, dominated by single story, single family houses predominantly in the form of bungalows, it is fast transforming into a high-rise residential apartment zone. Whereas it historically had no skyline to speak of, it is now dominated by apartments with heights ranging from four floors to thirteen floors; this despite extant regulation limiting the height limit to four stories and mid-rise housing type to townhouses. The emergent apartments, despite issues related to inadequate infrastructure, will no doubt become the dominant housing type in the area as the bungalows are eventually replaced by apartments.

It is noteworthy, however, that a number of the more significant apartments, both in terms of height and expansiveness, are either foreign owned or being developed by foreign contractors or a combination of both. A case in point is the apartment development called Signature Apartments (See Figure 1) that is both Turkish owned and developed. Of interest are the interior finishes of these apartments that number 110 units, on 12 floors, in 4 blocks, and on 1.3 acres of land. One of the promotional strategies for marketing the apartment units is the promise of a bonus of a fully furnished apartment if purchased in cash. In a recent advert on a local television channel, the apartments are being advertised as having European style furniture. That this should be an appealing marketing strategy is indicative of the values held by the targeted purchasers; the rapidly growing middle class of the city, who are driving the demand for apartment housing close to the Central Business District (CBD).

Signs of a growing middle class in Kenya, and primarily in urban centers are readily apparent: Shah and Ruparel have documented the steady rise of this middle-income group



Figure 1. Signature Apartment, a high-rise apartment block under construction in Kileleshwa (author, 2015)

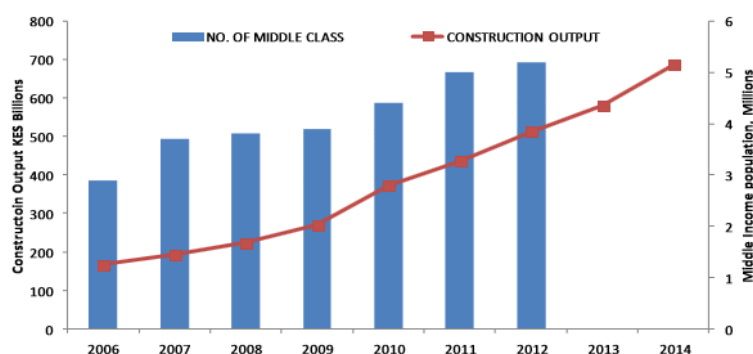


Figure 2. The rise of the middle class in Kenya in the new millenium. (Shah and Ruparel, 2016)

since 2006. (Shah and Ruparel, 2016). (See Figure 2). Other indicators of the growing opulence of this income group include: the rise in personal vehicle purchases, with new vehicle registrations averaging 14,195 between 2006 and 2016 (Trading Economics, 2017); the mushrooming of large malls (See Figure 3) boasting of foreign anchor tenants; as well as the increase in American international brands, on the local fast food scene, such as Domino's Pizza, KFC, Burger King, Cold Stone, and Subway. The indicators, it can be argued, symbolically suggest the desire of the upwardly mobile middle class, with increasing disposable incomes, to identify with the global North culture and values as indicative of their 'success'.

While the emergent apartments make a significant contribution towards meeting Kenya's housing deficit, estimated at 150,000 units (Mutai, 2016), and more so, for the urban residents who make up almost 30 per cent of Kenya's population (World Bank, 2015) the designs of these new apartments raises important questions regarding the appropriateness of their aesthetic expression in Kenya's local context.



Figure 3. The recently developed HUB Mall in the Karen suburb of Nairobi

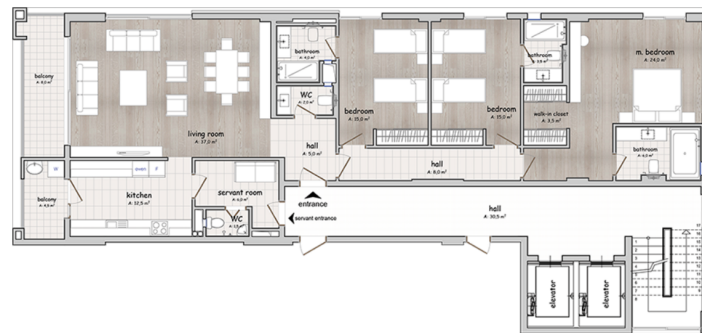


Figure 4. Signature Apartments standard floor type - 166.5 sq.m. (Signature of Kenya, 2017)

An analysis of the interior designs of the new apartments is indicative of the importation of foreign ideas without any consideration of the incorporation of Kenya's cultural heritage. The finishes are a direct copy of European design which has its own cultural premise. (See Figure 4): All the interior planes from the walls to the floors and ceiling do not echo any African theme; the furniture displayed is of the European modernist aesthetic; the curtains do not have any motifs that reflect the local African culture; and the light fixture represents a particularly European idea of abstract sculpture. (See Figure 5). The layout of the plan is based on the modernist approach to spatial articulation and the material finishes are imported rather than locally derived. The overall look is of very high quality but the space could fit appropriately anywhere in the global North. Nothing of it reflects the local context. The design can arguably be attributed to the effect of globalization where the values and culture of the global North predominate at the expense of local values.



Figure 5. Signature Apartments proposed European style interior finish (Signature of Kenya, 2017b)

Possible Directions

The new high end apartments coming up in Nairobi, as exemplified by the case of Kileleshwa are indicative of a prospering economy, rising incomes, and flows of global finance. While this is welcome for the development of the country's economy, there is a need to balance economic development with other important dimensions such as the cultural values of the country. In a world where sustainable development is the prevailing zeitgeist, the embrace of cultural heritage will go a long way in contributing to a sustainable future in which diversity in all its manifestation is valued.

Possible ways of promoting cultural heritage through the interior designs of the new apartments is to begin to grapple with what a locally appropriate aesthetic sensibility ought to be and how it may be made manifest in apartment interior design both in terms of layout, form, and material finishes. An appropriate aesthetic sensibility could be informed by an African design perspective which speculatively can be described as, 'one that privileges the African context with its inherent cultural, aesthetic, and social values[and] borrows from the principles of its traditionally ways of designing.' And further, that it should be, 'essentially about the appropriate orientation.' being locally appropriate and taking cognizance of cultural, social, aesthetic, and other indigenous resources and incorporating them in development approaches, in this case residential housing, to ensure that the outcome is sustainable development understood from the broader more holistic perspective of including the tripartite dimensions of the economic, social, and the environmental [as enunciated in WCED, 1987] 'held in their proper hierarchical relationship.' (Makunda and Hakan, 2016). The important point here being that the superficial approach to paying homage to African aesthetics as a merely decorative addition has to be replaced by an approach that fully integrates underlying principles in the entire interior design of the residential space. Some good examples exist in the Kenya's hotel industry where greater effort seems to be placed in striving towards a locally appropriate integrated design solution for interior spaces especially in terms of form and material finishes. (see Figure 6)

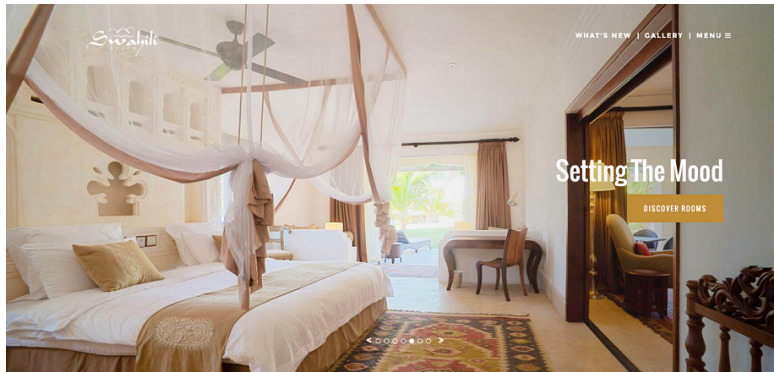


Figure 6. A room in Swahili Beach Hotel that appropriately echos the local coastal context (Swahili Beach, 2017)

On 4th June 2016, the Ngorongoro Declaration on Safeguarding African World Heritage as a driver of Sustainable Development, was made in Ngorongoro, Tanzania. The declaration recognized the value of Africa's intangible and tangible cultural and natural heritage, and declared, in part that: 'African heritage is central to preserving and promoting our cultures thereby uplifting identity and dignity for present and future generations in an increasingly globalized world.' (UNESCO, 2016c). This declaration marked an important milestone in highlighting the importance of African cultural heritage. The privileging of local cultural heritage in the African context in all aspects of development including the real estate development of apartments would be consistent with the declaration and therefore deserves to be part of the discourse of figuring out how precisely to do so.

The newly developed curriculum for the new interior design degree, Bachelor of Interior Design (BID) that was approved in 2016 and is set to be implemented in May 2017 at the School of the Arts and Design, University of Nairobi, presents a welcome opportunity for the development of appropriate concepts in relation to the local cultural heritage in the development of appropriate interior design solutions for upcoming apartments. Students should be introduced to African themes and challenged to contemplate how the incorporation of aspects of the local African cultural heritage can foster the development of more creative and appropriate interior design solutions not only for new apartments but also for other commercial and institutional interior spaces. Interior design students challenged to incorporate African themes to solve interior design problems have been noted to be not only engaged in the problem-solving task but have also been found to come up with more creative solutions probably due to being forced to think outside the box, and to value their own cultural heritage. (Makunda, 2015). The students could also be encouraged to take advantage of locally available resources that would serve to expose them to the local African cultural heritage. This includes: The National Museums of Kenya and especially the Murumbi Collection at the The Nairobi Gallery; The National Archives of Kenya; Bomas of Kenya; and the African Heritage House and book by Alan Donovan that showcases elements of African cultural heritage, and especially its spatial expressions (Donovan, 2004).



Figure 7. Living room of African Heritage House, Nairobi

Interior design practitioners have a unique opportunity for experimenting and developing the appropriate aesthetic sensibilities anchored in local cultural heritage as they undertake their interior design projects. This would not only enable them to develop a unique identity as distinct from the global North, but also arm them with a well-spring of appropriate inspiration for creative solutions that are reflective of the local context. In other words, instead of copying the global North and coming up second best, they would be taking the leading in developing an original conceptual approach to interior design solutions that would result in an identifiable identity that not only conserves but celebrates their tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the neglect of local African cultural heritage in the development of spatial design solutions for interior spaces of new apartments in the western suburbs of Nairobi, drawing from an example from one of its residential neighbourhoods; Kileleshwa. The importance of cultural heritage and its value both for identity and creativity, and otherwise, as articulated by UNESCO in its various conventions, as well as by the Ngorongoro declaration that emphasises the value of African cultural heritage for development, has been brought to the foreground. The paper suggests the incorporation of local cultural heritage in the development of the interior design of new apartments. It proposes possible ways of doing so as including: the contemplation of ways in which this local cultural heritage can be integrated in interior design solutions for various interior spaces both residential and others such as commercial and institutional spaces; taking advantage of the new curriculum for the new interior design degree, Bachelor of Interior Design (BID), as an avenue for inculcating and exploring ways of incorporating local African cultural heritage in the development of spatial solutions for various interior design spaces; and, suggesting that interior design practitioners grapple with the meaning of

local African cultural heritage through experimentation in order to not only develop a unique identity but also generate locally appropriate creative solutions. Various cultural resources, such as those available through The National Museums of Kenya, The National Archives of Kenya, and African Heritage House have also been highlighted. It was not the intention of this paper to prescribe how local African cultural heritage ought to be understood and articulated nor to describe the appropriate aesthetic sensibilities for interior design in a country in the global South, but rather to provoke and stimulate a much needed discussion and debate on how to understand, interpret, and integrate local cultural heritage, and develop the appropriate aesthetic sensibilities, in creative and innovative interior design solutions, especially for the new apartments that are rapidly emerging in one of the suburbs of Nairobi city, and beyond that, also for other spatial interior spaces in an African city.

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