

Urban Open Spaces in Kampala, Uganda

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Introduction

, "... for magnificence, for variety of form and colour, for profusion of brilliant life – plant, bird, insect, reptile, beast – for vast scale... Uganda is truly the pearl of Africa." ... expressed in 1907 by a relatively unknown British Parliamentary Undersecretary of State for the Colonies – Winston Churchill. Was it not for the fact that Churchill became possibly Britain's most revered Prime Minister, these sentiments published in his travelogue; 'My African Journey' (Churchill, 1908) would have been consigned history. Today, 'Uganda, the Pearl of Africa' is found on virtually every advertising brochure for the country. Churchill was of course referring to Uganda's natural beauty, which one would be hard-pressed to find in the urban areas of the country today. Most are slowly being eroded by commercial enterprise that views them as prime development sites. This situation raises questions about the nature of these spaces and their designation in today's milieu. At the current rate, Kampala will be without any open space by 2020.

Open Space in Kampala

Kampala is one of the few cities in Africa arguably of African origin, having been the location of the capital of the Kingdom of Buganda - one of the largest and oldest kingdoms in the region - for close to a century before European influence. The duality is still evident in the modern City of Kampala, and part of the resulting challenges faced in the city today. Indigenous, open space in pre-colonial Uganda, were generally utilitarian in nature. These spaces served a variety of purposes: herding of livestock, plantations gathering spaces or as performance space, but rarely just for show or for leisure (Adule, 2001). In Buganda, the layout of settlements was governed by guidelines that dictated the arrangement of various activity spaces. The layout of the Lubiri (royal enclosure) for instance was always laid out with the Kabaka's (King) palace facing west – towards the rival Bunyoro Kingdom, considered a threat to Buganda. This guideline followed to this day, in the layout of the palace of the current Kabaka, although the threat from Bunyoro is non-existent today. Homesteads also incorporated within them large forecourts intended for gatherings and receptions, and in all cases, included a large banana plantation – the pride of every household in Buganda. A particular characteristic of the forecourts was the fact that they were neither paved or grasses, but bare earth. Being hilly, Kampala had numerous swampy valleys that were infested by malaria carrying mosquitoes and consequently avoided, essentially defining these as permanent open spaces.

Open spaces in the colonial settlements included some of the principles of open spaces in the indigenous settlements. In particular, the non habitation of the low-lying swampy grounds, although over the years, many of the swamps have been drained, and the spaces formalised as recreation areas. The low-lying areas were a crucial part of the water catchment area and were prone to flooding during the wet seasons. These areas include Kitante Valley Park (which includes the Kampala Golf Course), the Lugogo sports grounds, and the railway marshalling yards. An aspect of open space in the colonial settlement reminiscent of the traditional homestead was the single-family homes on a large lot surrounded by large lawns. This layout ensured that the residential areas of the colonial settlement were always green, giving Kampala

its nickname 'the garden city', which it was in its heydays. The extensive lawn gardens were akin to the gardens found in indigenous homestead - possibly an indication of the influence indigenous settlements had - although it could also allude to the status of the inhabitants, evidenced by early planning regulations that segregated residential areas for different racial groups.

Many of the colonial open spaces were of strategic importance. These included the Naguru and Kololo airfields - part of the military infrastructure of the city. These exist to this day, although part of the Kololo airfield has been converted for use as a cemetery – for national heroes. A particularly significant open space however was Government Square, now known as Constitution Square. Located at the centre of the city, this space was, and still is one of the few open spaces formally designated as a park, and still used as such to today. Originally, the two (2) hectare space was designated as the future home for the colonial government headquarters which was being moved from the original settlement on Kampala Hill. However, due to a lack of funds, a result of the onset of the World War I (WWI), the space remained as an open space. It was later gazetted as such, and remains to this day - the colonial government consigned to a sharing space in the municipal government offices.

The dual urban structure of Kampala - a result of the proximity of two urban settlements of the indigenous settlement – the Kibuga at Mengo, and the colonial town of Kampala, (later moved to Nakasero) provide a valuable study on the interaction of two urban traditions and the subsequent influence on the modern city of Kampala. This however is not the focus of this paper, which is concerned with the state of urban open spaces of Kampala. Changes to the make up of the open spaces of Kampala have largely been a result of; a) Africanisation of government and commercial enterprise particularly during the 1970s, and; b) Post-war rebuilding of the country following close to a decade of civil and military war during the 1980s, and more recently; c) pressure from commercial interests during the 1990s.

Over the past four decades, Kampala tried to come to grips with its duality, influenced not only by the two urban traditions, but also by religion - Christianity (Anglican and Catholic) and Islam, a matter brought to light recently with the reconfiguration of the original historic settlement on Kampala hill to accommodate a new 'national mosque'. Nevertheless, virtually all open spaces in Kampala today were gazetted during or before the colonial era and remained largely intact until the 1990s, when a new set of forces has resulted in these spaces increasingly being threatened with destruction. (Alweny, 2008)

Contemporary Urban Spaces in Kampala

The years 1970s to the late 1990s were tumultuous years in Uganda, during which the rule of law was severely eroded due to a series of civil wars and military conflicts that served to bring the country's economy to a standstill. With no built environment professionals to oversee the planning process, decisions made were based on ad-hoc criteria. To add to the dire situation, Uganda did not have any Architecture, Planning or Landscape Architecture programme, with the first architecture programme initiated in 1989 and with planning in 1995, both at Makerere University. Consequently, developments have tended to encroach onto gazetted open spaces, reducing their area considerably over the last decade or so.

Without exception, all open spaces in Kampala have been the subject of development applications over the last decade. Although a few prominent proposals were halted, the majority have gone ahead, affecting the urban amenity of a city. Projects that were halted include a proposal for a petrol station within the grounds of the Kasubi Royal Tombs, - UNESCO World

Heritage Site. In another case, Constitution Square had been allocated to a local developer for the development of a shopping mall. The recently concluded Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) saw a rush to construct numerous hotels for the three-day event. Many, on land previously reserved as open space. These include the extension to Hotel Africana and the Golf Course Hotel. The associated shopping mall erroneously named ‘Garden City’ adjacent to the Golf Course Hotel is itself built on the Kitante wetland that occasionally floods after heavy downpours. Another, the Lugogo Shopping Centre constructed on the on the Lugogo sports grounds, also failed to account for the high water table. Schools have not been spared this trend, with all government schools within the city losing all or part of their sports grounds to so-called developers. The most controversial has been the demolition in 2006 of one of the oldest schools in Kampala, Shimoni Primary School, for the construction of a hotel – which has not been built to this day.

Defining Space and Place

Developments on green spaces have intensified over the last few years bring to the forefront a number of issues in regards to the open spaces, their intended use and their actual use both in the past and currently. Open spaces have traditionally been regarded as space that is utilitarian in nature and as such the concept of open space as a non-utilitarian – not being economically active is a concept that is not appreciated in Uganda. (Olweny, 2006; Buwembo, 2008) The existence of open spaces for leisure and relaxation was seen as an anomaly; consequently such spaces had to be put to economic use – economic in the traditional sense. While it could be argued that the changes being made to Kampala are a result of ‘Africanisation’ one is left to ponder this in light of the indigenous settlements, which did treasure open spaces, and protected them from encroachment. Is it actually ‘Africanisation’ causing the loss of the open spaces, or rather internationalisation? Internationalisation, often accompanied by an ‘outward-looking approach’ as described by (Morojele, 2003) presents a contextual problem, prioritising a global viewpoint that ensure the local condition is often ignored. In the case of Kampala, the wholesale application of international urbanism, without reference to the contextual issues of place is a major cause of the chaos. Influence from the Middle East for instance – importing desert or temperate typologies into a context where this is inappropriate.

The fast disappearing open spaces leave us with two questions to ponder; ‘why is this occurring?’ and ‘why is it allowed to happen?’ The answer may lie in the relationship Ugandans have with the land. Certain spaces have attached social and cultural significance, as was the case with Mabira Forest. A proposal to de-gazette part of this old growth forest for use as agricultural land met with stiff opposition and mass protests forcing the government to back down. The same cannot be said of the various open spaces in Kampala, which have been allocated for various commercial developments. One argument often cited is that these are colonial legacies that need to be erased. Urban cemeteries have been no exception; the last three within the city boundaries are already designated as future development sites. (Olweny, 2006) With over 50% of the open space already covered by concrete, we are left to wonder what can be done to reverse this trend. This question is particularly difficult to answer given the political involvement. The need for competent professionals is but part of the solutions, professionals who can assist in educating the public on these issues.

Conclusion

The importance of open spaces to the overall amenity and function of the city has for the most part been ignored. In this light, it may be time to rethinking the open spaces in Kampala, their place, function and design? How should we encourage people to appreciate their worth? These are two of many questions Built Environment professionals in Kampala are faced with, and

hopefully will have answers to before the last remaining green spaces are erased from the city. While the indigenous settlements do offer some clues as to the nature of traditional open spaces and the use of the same, greater effort has to be made to translate this into use patterns and in contemporary urban spaces. Regardless, the layers of influence cannot be ignored as they form a part of the urban fabric of the city. As we grapple with these issues, time is against us to make these spaces work for us and prevent the disappearance of what made Kampala liveable in the first place. The ball is in our court.

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Fig. the city of Kampala today

