

MODERNITY AND INFORMALITY – CONFLICTING FORCES SHAPING URBAN FORM IN KISUMU, KENYA

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ABSTRACT

The economy of Kenya has been steadily improving over the last few years and the outlook for the immediate future is promising. In 2006 the United Nations declared Kisumu the first UN Millennium City in the world, partly because a number of ambitious development strategies were in place, and also because of its considerable economic potential as well as its status as an emerging urban hub in the region. Founded as a colonial town in 1901, from which the white settlers departed long ago, it has since grown into Kenya's third largest city. However, with 60 per cent of its population of 500,000 living in dense, crude, informal settlements and relying on the informal sector for nearly all their essential needs, it is also the third poorest and reflects the realities facing the contemporary African city. Its growing prosperity and continuing informality are obviously paradoxical phenomena, with the modernity and progress being envisaged by the government unquestionably in conflict with increasing levels of informality. Recording one of the highest urban population densities in the country, Kisumu occupies an eight by four kilometer area. In contrast to the low density sprawl characteristic of many African cities, it is relatively compact and it is, therefore, somewhat easier to analyse the spatial and socio-economic attributes of its urban complexities and to explore the tension between the quest for modernity and the apparent inevitability of informality.

Key words: Kenya, Kisumu, Urban Development, Informality, Slums.

Introduction and background

Kisumu's distinction as the first United Nations Millennium City provided an opportunity for the implementation of a vision adopted by its city council, which comprised strategies to attract investment by, amongst other measures, responding to increased poverty, rapid urbanization and environmental degradation [1]. This paper compares that vision with the reality that has evolved since.

In 1895, the year present-day Kenya and Uganda were declared British East African Protectorates, construction started on a railway from Mombasa to Lake Victoria, a distance of 965 km. It reached what would soon become Nairobi, a convenient half-way centre with a good water supply in 1898, and Kisumu, originally named Port Florence, on the shore of Lake Victoria in 1901. The British colonial government encouraged white settlers to farm the Highlands along the railroad, and from 1908 settlers also began occupying the Central Highlands: Eldoret, 90 km from Kisumu, was its centre. Kisumu grew rapidly, and during the 1930s became a prominent commercial, administrative and military centre. After Kenya became independent in 1963 all the white settlers left.



Figure 1 : Sketch map of Kenya showing locality of Kisumu (drawing by the author)

Current socio-economic and spatial situation

Kisumu City is currently the main commercial and administrative centre in western Kenya. Located 265 km west of Nairobi on the shore of Lake Victoria, it is the third largest city in this country after Nairobi and Mombasa. Although it is one of the fastest growing cities in Kenya, the main industries are subsistence agriculture and fishery. It is also, in spite of its huge economic potential, known to be the poorest of the three with 48% of its population living in absolute poverty compared to the national average of 29% [2]. In addition, it is the capital of the Nyanza province, the poorest in Kenya, after the Western Province, 55-65% of its population being poor compared to 43% nationally.

Whereas in 2004 the Kisumu City Council reported that 52% of the working population were active in the informal sector, CORDAID [3], a development agency, seven years later reports a deteriorating situation with 60% depending on the informal sector. Kisumu's growing informality is not only due to increased unemployment in the city, but also to the influx of rural migrants from the Lake Basin. Most acquire rented accommodation in the slum belt, which is resulting in an intense concentration of impoverished households and what UN-HABITAT regularly refers to as the "urbanisation of poverty".

The town plan of 1908 is typically that of a colonial urban settlement, with functional zoning applied to achieve racial segregation, and the street grid responding to the topography [4]. The original plan is largely intact, but is now bounded by the "slum belt" which lies in a crescent shape roughly to the east of the city. Ring Road – the outer edge of the formal city – forms an informal market 2.5 km in length. Beyond this informal market strip lies Nyalenda, an informal settlement with approximately 67,000 inhabitants; Manyatta and its 86,000 inhabitants are a short distance away [5].

In spite of these ominous statistics Kisumu is patently not an imploding "informal city". It houses a world-class university and research establishments, a large provincial administrative establishment, a number of prominent commercial and financial institutions and three substantial shopping malls where food and wine, household utensils, furniture, electronics, clothes, sporting equipment, toys – in fact everything found in any First World shopping centre – can be found under one roof.

There are a number of expensive upmarket suburbs including Milimani, the leafy neighbourhood directly south of the city centre where the British Colonial officials used to live, as well as Kisumu's latest upmarket suburb, Riat Hills, 11 km northeast of the city centre, both containing 4,000 m² plots.

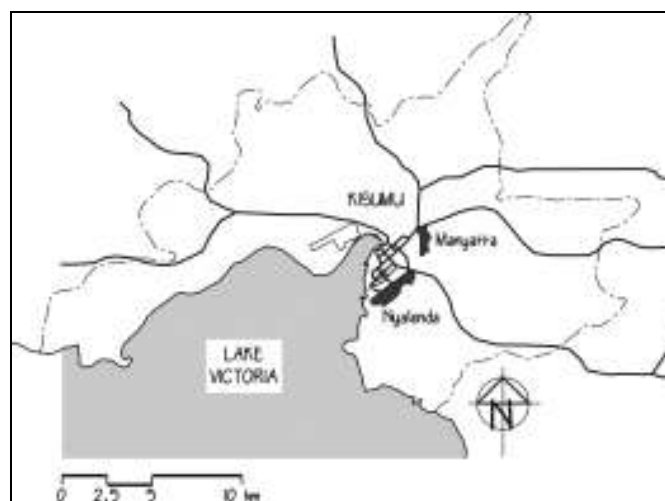


Figure 2 : Kisumu District (drawing by the author).

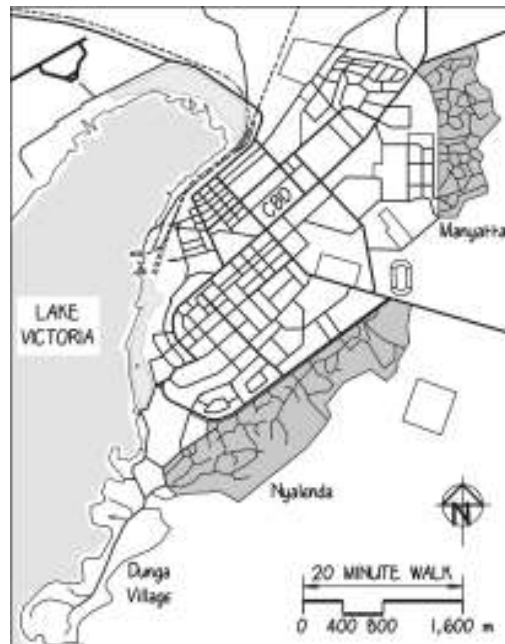


Figure 3 : Simplified street plan of Kisumu: the main informal settlements are hatched (drawing by Phillip Lourens for the author after Google Maps).

The vision

The Kisumu City Council acknowledges that it “lacks an investment plan, pertinent in attracting and guiding investors to the city”. In response it developed the City Development Strategy (CDS), expressing the vision of making Kisumu “A leading transportation, communication and commercial hub in the Great Lakes Region offering great tourism and agro-investment opportunities”. It contains seven “Action Plans”, of which summaries of three directly related to informality are quoted below:

1. Initiatives towards combating urban poverty. These include the Kisumu Slum Upgrading Project and Street Traders Relocation Programme. A water borehole and solid waste projects are being undertaken in the slum areas while suitable land where the hawkers will be relocated has been identified and is being upgraded.
2. Water and Sanitation Initiatives. The newly formed Kisumu Water and Sewerage Company is constructing a 30 kilometre water pipeline to the Manyatta area and has established community managed water connection selling points in Nyalenda.
3. Urban Transport. The council is implementing Sustainable Urban Mobility in collaboration with the University of Nairobi that will involve the promotion of non-motorized urban transport lanes for both pedestrians and cyclists. The council is also reviewing bylaws on commercialized and thriving bicycle taxis, locally known as boda boda.

The other four action plans focus on (1) solid waste management, (2) city planning initiatives, (3) improving governance initiatives and (4) health improvement.

Responses to the vision and informality

What has happened since 2004? In 2010 journalist Harold Ayodo [6] reported that the city council considered “the immediate rebuilding of the area ... an overriding prerequisite to attract investments in real estate”. In addition: “The ongoing developments on sewerage and water supply are set to encourage investors into real estate”. The new Kisumu International Airport is also expected to attract new businesses.

As far as the informal settlements and economy are concerned, progress is less evident. In 2008 Housing Assistant Minister Bishop Margaret Wanjiru was quoted as saying [6] that “Kisumu is under threat of being swallowed up by slums surrounding it, if no efforts are made to reverse the trend”, and “This is a serious concern since the slums are barely four kilometres from the city centre”.

Ayodo is clearly annoyed by the bicycle taxis (boda boda) clogging the streets and the hawkers who “litter the CBD with their wares”. While regulating the bicycle taxis is entrenched in the vision, it must be realised that they provide an essential, rapid and affordable link between the slums and urban nodes.

Local estate agents told me that their clients buying in Milimani and Riat Hills are mainly government officials, medical doctors, lawyers and academics. The latter are obviously keen to live near the Great Lakes University of Kisumu, Uzima University and the Ramogi Institute of Advanced Technology. Estate agents also mention that buyers are attracted by the views of Lake Victoria, the small-town ambience and tranquillity, and interestingly, the absence of hawkers, bicycle taxis and water vendors pulling carts.

These remarks are disturbing because they are somewhat insensitive, but truly alarming is an observation in Winsley Masese’s essay [6]: “Over 60% of Luos in Kisumu reside in extreme impoverished slums, while Asians and Kikuyus live in posh Milimani Estate.” This introduces ethnic, tribal and political dimensions to poverty and informality in Kisumu. A strategy document entitled Kenya Vision 2030 [8] underscores Masese’s concerns:

An increasing number of urban residents live in informal settlements that lack the most basic amenities. Such disparities which include issues of quality have been a major cause of social tensions in the country as was evident during the 2007 post-election crisis.

The dynamics of informality

In the central city

In my experience Oginga Odinga Road, the main street, was not as crowded with hawkers as Ayodo suggests (I was there a month before his newspaper article appeared), but some of the streets immediately parallel and perpendicular to it are absolutely crowded with vendors. A public square is dominated by second hand clothes stalls. On the western side of the CBD, towards the peer and railway station, every patch of open space is filled in by informal kiosks. Here the hawkers literally trade in the shadow of modern buildings. A few hundred metres further east, at the fish harbour, a dense swath of corrugated iron shacks serves as fish “restaurants” – a fascinating sight, but only visited by the most intrepid tourists.

What happened to the vision to relocate street traders? Journalist Angwanda Powerman [9] writes of a public notice that the municipality issued in December 2009 to all informal traders in Kisumu, ordering them to demolish their kiosks and vacate the streets within 21 days. This notice, however, generated so much resentment and outrage that it was quickly rescinded.



Figure 4 : Pockets claimed by hawkers (photo by the author)

In the slum

The rent for a slum house is about KES 1,000-2,500 (\$12-\$30) per month, while a bungalow or a flat in town can be rented for KES 25,000 (\$300). Many of the inhabitants clearly have no choice – they cannot afford to live anywhere else. There are some, though, who choose to live there, probably not only for financial reasons, but also because of the lively ambience and the sense of community.

The morphology is noteworthy. The thousands of vendors' kiosks are improvised from wood, plastic and iron sheeting. The vast majority of houses – I would estimate about 80% – consist of recycled corrugated iron roofs over mud brick or wattle-and-daub walls. To my surprise the remaining 20% comprise well-made houses, some double storied, boasting masonry walls. Quite a few have tile roofs. The slum consists of a maze of streets and lanes, with trading taking place inside the settlement too.

There were even a few small apartment blocks. The reason for this is simple – there are freehold titles to the land. Most of the mud houses and all the multi-storey apartments are rented out, while landowners occupy the bigger, more solid houses. This phenomenon reminds one of another concept often mentioned in UN-HABITAT literature – “the commodification of the slums”.

Services are gradually being provided, but progress is very, very slow. These homeowners are obviously not particularly squeamish about the lack of infrastructure since they profit from renting out the slum houses.



Figure 5 : A mansion in the slum (photo by the author)

Morphology and land-use

For one to really understand the morphology of Kisumu's informal settlement it must be compared to the polar opposite, the neighbourhood of Milimane. The figure ground diagrams reveal that the suburban villas have an average footprint of 301.3 m², each on a stand of nearly 0.4 hectares. The result is coverage of about eight per cent. The slum contains 46 single-storey structures in the 100 x 100 m fragment with an average floor area of 75.5 m² each, yielding coverage of 35 %.

What is particularly noteworthy is that, although 60% of the inhabitants live in slums, these areas comprise no more than 15% of Kisumu's built-up urban area, which includes low-density housing estates as well as the central business district.

Another interesting phenomenon is evident in the strange shapes of the property lots in Nyalenda A. This is because the land occupied by traditional villages was not confiscated by the British who, in this rare instance, respected customary land tenure practices. As freehold tenure became the norm the land was subdivided and distributed among family members [10], resulting in the organic cadastral pattern.

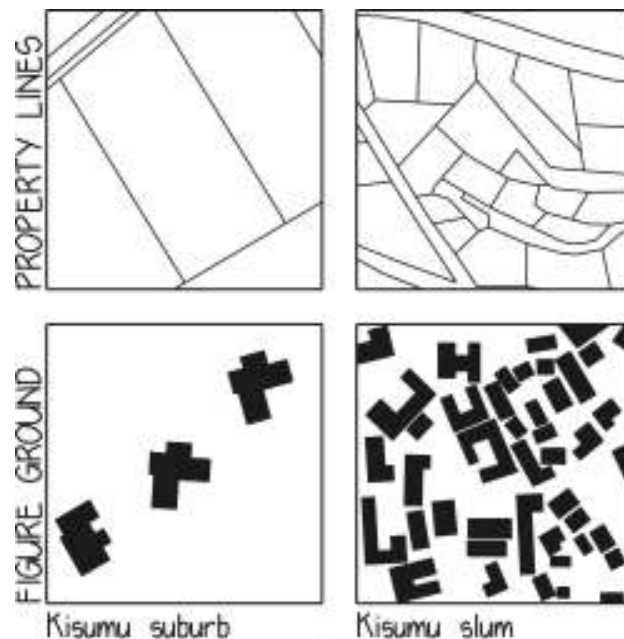


Figure 6 : Figure ground comparison (drawing by the author)

Future plans

One of the city's most ambitious projects is the envisaged Lake View Resort City. The Kenya Railways Corporation [11] is inviting investors to participate in the development of this on a 30 ha tract of land situated ideally between the centre of Kisumu City and the shores of Lake Victoria. The project will comprise luxury hotels, a conference centre, a 10-building office park and a shopping mall, as well as facilities for Lake Victoria cruise tourism and international water sports. An elevated railway will connect the hotels to Kisumu Airport. It is rumoured that Sir Richard Branson's airline, Virgin Atlantic, is prepared to invest more than \$300 million in the project.

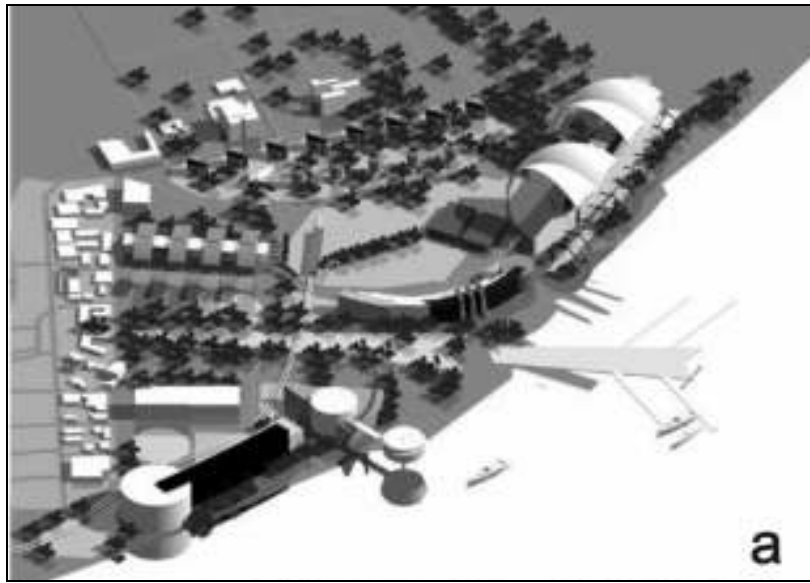


Figure 7a : The envisaged Kisumu Lake View Resort City
(reproduced with permission from the Kenya Railways Corporation)

Conclusion

Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch [12], the indomitable scholar, once famously remarked that “it is not the city that makes the African but the African who makes the city”. This statement is particularly apt in the case of Kisumu. Not only have informal traders taken possession of space in the inner city and totally transformed the public realm, but the organic layout of the informal settlements is also in stark contrast to that of the Western-inspired formal city adjacent to them. These differing geometries are the most tangible evidence of the conflicting forces shaping Kisumu City.

Informality, when intrinsically associated with poverty as in Kisumu, has a negative connotation too. The city council acknowledges: “Urban poverty in Kisumu manifests itself in reduced living standards, the increasing number of street children, increased informal trade activities of hawking and peddling, increase in commercial sex activities and crime.”

For anybody with a Eurocentric background it is naturally difficult to reconcile signature projects and a focus on modernity and progress with informality and poverty. Poverty and informality in sub-Saharan Africa may eventually be reduced by improved economics and governance, but they will probably never be eradicated. Kisumu is unquestionably mutating into the quintessential African city – two interactive and overlapping urban forms, each shaped by its own spatial, political, social, cultural, and above all, economic rules. However, the boundary between them is porous so that pockets of the one exist symbiotically in the physical and mental realm of the other.

The resulting morphology, dynamic and experience are totally removed from those of the Western city. Informality is an intrinsic and unavoidable African urban phenomenon, one that we have to accept perhaps as one defining the African City, rather than its first world expression. For these reasons it is essential that African governments pursue a modernist agenda without neglecting social programmes and infrastructure in slums.

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