

Symbolism, the ignored pillar of true architecture

We need a shift to **Afrocentric architecture** that places African ideals at the centre while also being conscious of the continent's finite resources, critics of Kenya's bland architectural offers argue. As things stand, the reasoning goes, all we have are just modern buildings that have very efficient functions and very expressive aesthetics, but do they express our culture?

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In its most basic definition, architecture should answer to the elements of function, aesthetics and symbolism, says University of Nairobi's Prof Robert Rukwaro. Function in this regard refers to a philosophy that a structure's arrangement or form should be determined by practical considerations, like use and available materials. Aesthetics, on the other hand, refers to the visual appeal of a building; its beauty.

While the first two are relatively easy to achieve, it is in the third pillar of symbolism that the equation becomes unbalanced as architects, through design or otherwise, fail to capture the spirit of the building; and thus fail to give it a soul, a personality.

Symbolism in architecture is an attempt to capture ideas, rituals, history, culture, philosophy, outlook, and notions, among others, of a people or an organisation and transferring these to a built form so that these structures bear meaning to the public or the user.

Natural features and culture are the most common source of symbols for architects. While culture may be abstract, the architect's job is to capture this, conceptualise it and then translate it into physical forms.

According to Prof Rukwaro, most of the architects in Kenya have failed to capture the true African culture in their designs, and cites their Westernised training that heavily imprints foreign design values. He adds that earlier buildings were done by foreign architects who would use symbols from their cultures, which they understood better.

Unfortunately, local architects continued with what the foreigners had started and have failed to capture the African essence in their designs, resulting in nearly identical box-shaped, steel,

glass and concrete structures. Most of the buildings in Nairobi, therefore, have no cultural value and could just as easily be transplanted

to myriad cities across the world. Kenyatta International Conference Centre (KICC), says the professor, is one of the very few buildings in the country that combine the three elements very well and truly captures the Kenyan culture. It is the best, he says, and that's why it is used by many people to advertise Nairobi. Even in big books of architecture, that is the one Kenyan structure that jumps at you.

And, writing in *Africa Habitat*, a journal for the School of Built Environment, University of Nairobi, Kenneth Birabi and Barnabas Nawangwe say that regional governments have opted to source for external architects who will rarely capture the African spirit. The Kenyan government has hundreds of buildings but most fail to express any cultural links, although they are properly functional.

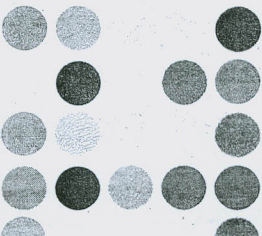
"Through the importation of this Euro-America-centric architecture of globalisation at Western prices, East African governments have side-stepped opportunities for commissioning their own architects to design Afrocentric architecture and hence mortgaged the needs of the majority," they say.

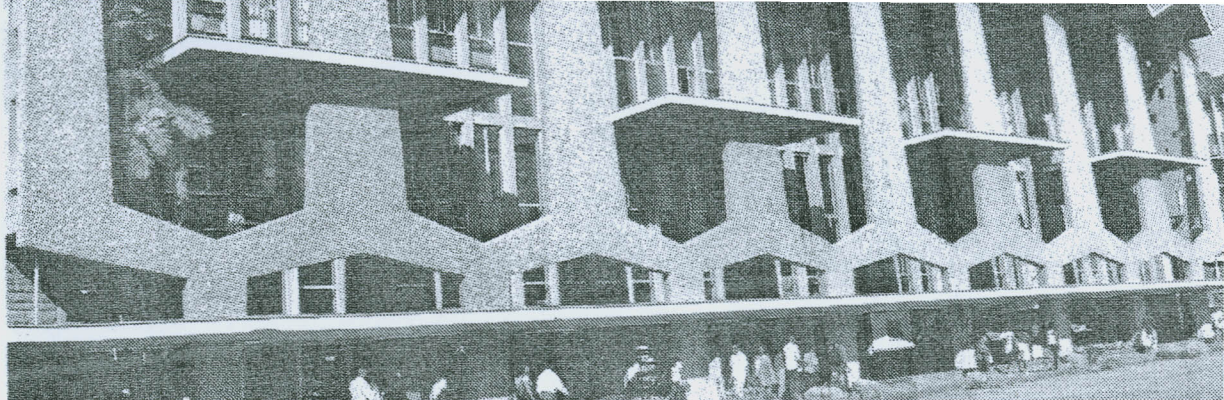
Imprinting culture

And that, says Francis Wambua, a designer, is where we have gone awfully wrong, for symbolism is a way of people imprinting their culture on a physical structure and may represent a certain time in history. The gigantic St Peter's Basilica at the Vatican, for instance, is an expression of the power that the Catholic Church held at that time in history. Indeed, a majority of the cathedrals built across Europe at that time were masterpieces whose complex design spelt the power of the church.

Birabi and Nawangwe advocate for a shift to Afrocentric architecture that "places African ideals at the centre" while also being conscious of the continent's finite resources. But this may prove quite difficult. In a survey seeking answers to reasons for the lack of African expression on local buildings, a majority of student and practising architects said they drew their inspiration from international peers (79 and 52 per cent respectively).

As many as 39 per cent of the architects blamed the education system for this state, but the government also came in for some criticism. Consumer respondents said the government had failed to give policy direction on architecture that reflects Kenyan heritage.





University of Nairobi Administration Block

One of the best designed buildings in the city, the structure that also houses the university's books was originally used as a library. Designed by Henning and Chitty, the building was put up in the 1960s and the "rubble-faced" structure in front had a metaphor of a giraffe," which expressed the idea that a library enabled the students to see far in the country's development vision if they properly equipped themselves with the knowledge," says the university's Prof Robert Rukwaro.

