

## The Evolution of the Kibuga into Kampala's City Centre – Analysis of the transformation of an African city

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**Abstract:** The Kibuga was the capital of the Buganda Kingdom at the time the British declared a protectorate over this very well organised kingdom in 1900. The Kibuga comprised of the king's palace at the centre of the settlement, surrounded by the villas of the chiefs and other members of the royal family. The Kibuga was very well structured, with radial and concentric streets in relation to the king's palace, all organically set in the natural environment. This paper seeks to disprove the common belief that African cities have developed as transplants of architectural and planning styles from Europe. The paper is based on a study that was carried out through the study of archival documents, literature reviews and physical observation involving photography and sketching. The study revealed the overwhelming influence of urban concepts from the Kibuga on the development of Kampala's city centre.

**Keywords:** Kampala; city centre; Kibuga; historical perspective; planning.

### INTRODUCTION

An erroneous assumption persists among many scholars of history that modern African cities are foreign objects, transplanted from Europe by colonial powers. These scholars argue that the colonizers found sub-Saharan Africa very much disorganised with no formal settlements. But this erroneous conception has been disproved by African historians, who have proved that cities flourished in sub-Saharan Africa, long before the onslaught of colonialism. "Kampala's origin dates back some 200 years ago when the first Buganda settlement was established on a number of the present city's hilltops. But a relatively sophisticated 'urban settlement, the Kibuga' or city was already in place when the colonial settlement called Kampala was established in 1890" (Alweny 2007).

The Kingdom of Buganda, dating from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, was a very well organized state. Because of persistent wars, the capital of the kingdom moved from one place to another with the installation of a new king. Upon the death of one king, his palace became his tomb and the new king had to establish capital elsewhere. The capital (*kibuga*) of the Buganda constantly changed from hill to hill and was divided into quarters corresponding to provinces. Each chief built a dwelling corresponding to the provinces, and with dwellings for wives, slaves, dependents, and visitors, and with plots of land available for planting fruit. Roads were wide and well maintained.

Kampala City, Uganda's capital, grew out of the last of the 'traditional' Buganda mobile capitals, located at Mengo, a suburb of modern day Kampala. The 'modern' city of Kampala developed next to that Kibuga and the result was two conspicuously different types of urban development: the traditional and the modern. Modern Kampala's city centre emerged as a hybrid of cultures from different ends of the globe, including Asian, Caribbean and European styles. But the dominance of the influence of indigenous vernacular was and has remained evident.

The persistent misconception that Kampala, like all other sub-Saharan cities, is a transplant of planning and architectural styles from Europe has prevented scholars in making a critical analysis of the evolution of the city, often assuming that the city was established after 1900. This misconception lead to erroneous analyses of Kampala's evolution, which makes it difficult for planners and policymakers to make the right contextually based

decisions regarding the city's development.

This paper adds to research that disproves the common belief that African cities have developed as transplants of architectural and planning styles from Europe. The paper further seeks to provide knowledge for use by architects, planners, sociologists and policy makers, which will aid them in making appropriate contextually based decisions for the future development of the city.

The paper is based on a study that referred to archival documents, literature reviews and physical observation involving photography and sketching. The study was limited to Kampala's city centre and the planning concepts that determined its development. Constraints in retrieving all relevant and useful information from archival documents could have a considerable, albeit not decisive effect on the conclusions drawn from the study, and should be augmented by future research.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Modern Kampala occupies more than 21 hills, an increase from the original seven by which the city was identified till the 1970's. Modern Kampala began her evolution at the Old Kampala Hill, where Captain Lugard established a fort in 1896 (Mukwaya 2004). However, the early beginnings of the city are based in the *Kibuga*, the last of the traditional capitals of the kings of Buganda (the largest and most powerful of the kingdoms found in modern day Uganda). The word *Kibuga* literally means city or urban settlement. The *Kibuga* was the urban settlement that developed around the king's palace and became the capital of the kingdom during the reign of a particular king. For security reasons, the capital of the kingdom moved with the installation of the new king. The palace of the dead king became his tomb. The last of such mobile capitals is the tomb of Kabaka Chwa found at Mengo. To date the area that was occupied by that capital is known as the *Kibuga* ('the city').

Kampala was established when Lugard put up a flag and a fort at Old Kampala Hill. Existing already was the traditional Ganda capital – the Kibuga. The Municipality started by Lugard and the Kibuga existed together but with different characteristics. This resulted in a duality that has had ramifications for city development up to today. While the Municipality was well organised based on then modern urban principles, the Kibuga was based on rural administration modes, was poorly served with infrastructure and grew in a disorganised manner. African immigrants went to the Kibuga for cheap accommodation. (Sanya 2005)

The *Kibuga*, like all the preceding capitals of the Buganda kingdom, was built on a hill, the last one being Mengo Hill. The underlying reason for the choice of hills for the kingdom's capital was defence. The *Kabaka's* (king's) palace was situated at the top of the hill, surrounded by a natural hedge and bamboo fence. Surrounding the palace were the villas of the chiefs and close confidants of the *Kabaka*, set in concentric formation with radiant roads pointing to the centre of the formation (see Figure 1).

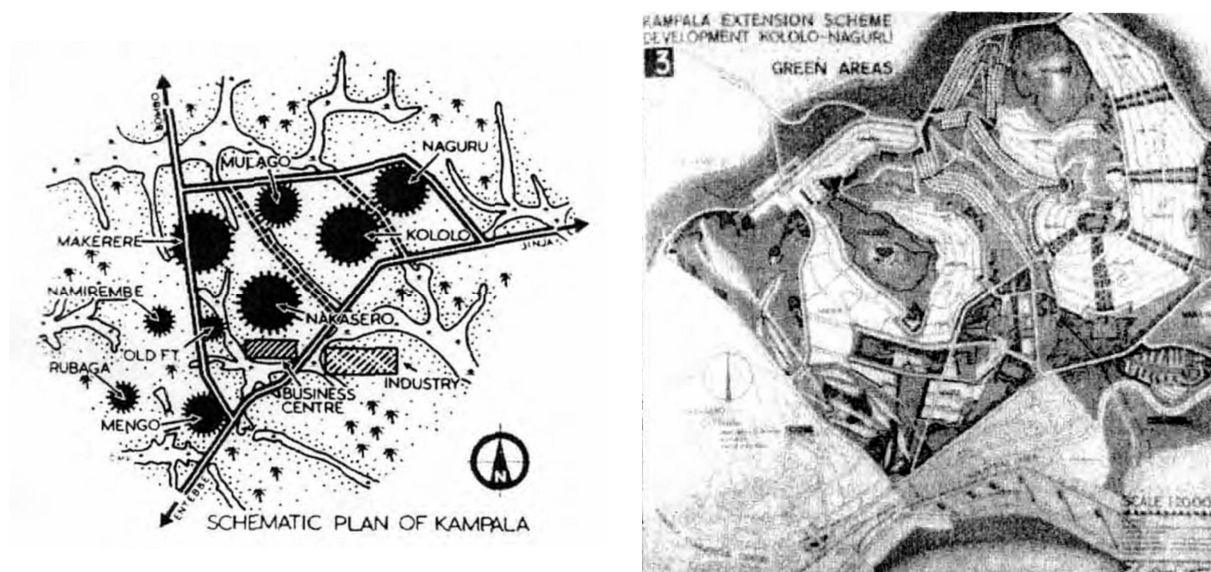


FIGURE 1: May's schematic presentation of Kampala as a city on hills (left) and a plan for extension (right). Source: Gutschow (2004).



**FIGURE 2:** Aerial photograph of present day Kibuga, showing the rural character of the area. Source: Author, 2009



**FIGURE 3:** View of Modern Kampala City Centre. Source: Author, 2009

As can be seen from Figure 1, the villas of the chiefs and the houses that followed them in the hierarchy were all built on plots with agricultural allotments. Indeed, the *Kabaka's* palace itself was set in a plantation, from which the royal family got their food. The setting was very organic.

Three important lessons can be drawn from the planning arrangements of the *Kibuga*. Firstly, the palace was situated at the top of the hill and in the centre of the whole settlement, hence giving the palace the central position in the power matrix and also effectively defending it from any hostile intruders. Secondly, the city fully embraced what we now refer to as urban agriculture. Urban agriculture was part of the urban fabric and it contributed to the city's essential infrastructure, playing the role of open spaces necessary for the environmental health of the city. Thirdly, the majority of the *Kabaka's* subjects lived on the lower ends of the hill, in the fertile valleys, where they cultivated most of the food required by the kingdom. In effect, zoning came into play. To date, the area occupied by the original *Kibuga* has retained the characteristics of a rural settlement, with houses organically set within farmland (see Figure 2).

## MODERNIST PLANNING INFLUENCE

Most of present day Kampala City was planned in the 1920's – the plans were evidently influenced by the Modernist movement, which is characterized by the concept of the machine. Cities were designed to conform to modern principles that saw cities as machines that had to function efficiently. A view of present day Kampala city centre illustrates the attempt at planning the city based on Modernist principles (see Figure 3). The attempt to create a fine grid, characteristic of Modernist planning, is constrained by the topography of the land and by the multiple land tenure systems that are present within the city planning area. The attempt to introduce a grid system conflicts with the organic layout of the *Kibuga*, which followed the natural topography. Resistance to the introduction of the grid is manifested in the failure by developers to comply with the planning requirements of the authorities (Mukwaya 2004).

Figure 3 shows a photograph of the city centre of modern Kampala. From the distance, it looks like any other modern city anywhere in the world. However, the reality is different. The City is plagued by chronic traffic jams and persistent flooding, which are a result of the failed planning control. The Modernist grid could not be successfully adapted to Kampala's challenging topography and the existing planning tradition, which emphasized organic harmony of the built and the natural environments. A conflict arose between the Modernist planning and the traditional planning norms, resulting in a pseudo Modernist structure, but heavily influenced by the traditional planning norms.

The influence of tradition is not seen in the planning parameters only. We also find it in the architectural solutions of the early buildings. Many of the early buildings in Kampala's city centre can be classified within the Functionalist style. But here again we see a big influence of the vernacular on the architectural solutions of the buildings. There are very few buildings in Kampala's city centre that could be described as being wholly Functionalist or Modernist.

## VERNACULAR INFLUENCE

We have noted above the large influence the Modernist movement had on Kampala's planning and architectural solutions. But current Kampala is essentially a 'modern' city. Hence it is very appropriate to look at the movement from the other angle. Doing that brings us to the strong evidence of the influence of the vernacular on an otherwise Modernist planning tradition. The new areas that have developed very close to the city centre have defied the modernist grid as a tool for planning, and instead adopted the organic confluence of the built and natural environments. The reason for this could be found in the strong influence of traditional planning concepts on the population. The local inhabitants come from a background where affinity to nature is very high. Urban agriculture is a very strong characteristic of the city centre as may be seen in Figure 4. Modernist planning theories cannot therefore be imposed in a wholesale manner.



**FIGURE 4:** Detail of Urban Agriculture in the front yard. Source: <http://www.mcgill.ca/mchg/pastproject/edible-landscape/kampala/info/>

## POLICY FRAMEWORK

In a paper presented at the International Conference on Globalism and Urban Change in Chicago in 2004, Mukwaya asserts that:

From 1950s up to early 1980s, the development focus in many developing countries was based on rural areas. There was a presumption among the social policy architects, urban managers, and researchers that urban areas were better off in terms of social and economic infrastructure. The British colonial government regulated the planning and administration of almost all of the urban areas in Uganda under the Urban Authorities Act 1958, which was later, amended to Urban Authorities Act, 1964. During this era, the British virtually ignored the pre-existence of well established and sophisticated land settlement and local governance or urban administrative systems like the 'Kibuga' in Kampala, which had in many cases been in existence long before their arrival. (Mukwaya 2004:5 [citing Mlwe 2002])

Like many other scholars, Mukwaya further states:

Most of the planning policies and outline schemes had the effect of segregating income and racial groups and they gave preference to upper and middle-income groups. The implications of this colonial and post colonial policy framework was that the emerging urban authorities were empowered to initiate urban plans, "coordinate and facilitate construction of public utility services, transport, communications and other public services, as well as conserve and develop the resources of the area concerned. (Mukwaya 2004)

Segregation of inhabitants according to race and income contributed greatly to the duality of development of Kampala City. The overbearing rural character of Kampala's city centre can hence be attributed to this colonial policy, since the indigenous people who had been literally kept out of the modern city eventually had to occupy and manage it. Naturally, they had to carry out planning the way they had been forced to over several decades. Even after independence, all planning schemes continued to segregate inhabitants along income lines. Consequently, the challenges of planning the modern city persist.

## CONCLUSION

It is probably the policies guiding the planning and governance of Kampala City that have contributed, more than the (often insinuated) 'rural' character of the inhabitants, to the continued ruralisation of the city. Any future plans for the city must take into account the historic factors, if serious progress is to be made towards making Kampala a relevant modern city.

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